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Patagonia Trip Report: Chile and Argentina Fly Fishing 2012
Montana Angler Fly Fishing

Overview:
After much research coordinating we set out for Patagonia on March 9th. We had some hectic last minute changes to our trip in the final weeks. Our first hiccup was an unexpected airport closure in Esquel which is just across the border from the Futa lodge in Chile. A volcanic eruption near Bariloche had rerouted jet traffic to this smaller airport and had generated wear and tear on the runways so when the Bariloche airport reopened the Argentine government closed Esquel for repair. After some deliberation with our team we decided to spend our entire trip in Patagonia and forgo the Goldern Dorado fishing in northern Argentina at the Pira Lodge. Just before we set out for our venture we got word that there had been seven straight days of hard rain in Chile and the Futaleufu had risen to flood stage after a season of low water conditions. Our partners at Nervous Waters did a great job at setting up an option for fishing at the Carrileufu lodge in Argentina as a fall back which we opted for on the last 3 nights of our trip just in case. On March 9th most of our group set out which included Anthony Rosini from Denver, Bryan Hunt from Fresno and Randy Buckley from Houston. I had a 4 hour delay on my international flight and missed my connection to Bariloche which resulted in missing the first day of fishing. The rest of the guys flew in a day early and spent the night in BA to enjoy this great city that is often described as the Paris of South America. Our concerns of unfishable waters were quickly dispelled as our crew experience great weather which allowed the waters on the Futaleufu to drop quickly and bring back good clarity to the river.

The Futa lodge is located in the spectacular Las Escalas valley along the Futaleufu river which. The Futaleufu is a massive river that runs between about 10,000 - 25,000 cfs during its fishable flows and goes much larger when it is at flood stage. The river originates in Argentina and most of the upper drainage is found within the spectacular Los Alerces National Park. Previous glacial activity has resulted in a chain of large lakes interconnected by rivers. The lakes filter out all sediments resulting in aquarium clear waters with a magical turquoise coloration. I estimated clarity to be 15-20 feet once the river had dropped at the end of the week. The Futa lodge is located in a magical remote valley. The small estancia includes an old restored ranch house that serves as the main lodge along with three newer and well appointed cabins with picture windows overlooking the windows. Two of the cabins have twin king size beds and the third has two queen size beds. Horses graze the property as well as a healthy flock of sheep. There is a massive garden of roses, lupine and other flowers as well as a large green house where all of the vegetables are grown. Most of our meals came right from the estancia including the fabulous lamb asado. Each morning coffee was delivered to our rooms and a fire lit in the wood burning stoves in each cabin. When we returned from fishing we were always greeted with a local cocktail and a blazing fire in the fire pit.

The lodge was originally developed as a destination location by the legendary Jim Repine who was a famous

alaskan fly fisherman. Well known anglers including Joan Wulff, Lefty Kreh and Mel Krieger have all made frequent trips to stay at Futa and it was a pleasure to visit such a fabled location. Nervous Waters took over the lodge in the mid 2000s and brought their trademark outstanding service to an already great lodge. Each day our host Brian McKnight and guide Royce Olney took us fishing on the many great floats near the lodge. This region of Chile receives very light fishing pressure and on all but one day of our trip we saw no other fly fishing boats and just the occasional local Chilean fishing from a bridge with their coffee can hand reels.

Day 1:
On the first day of fishing (the one I missed) Randy went with Brian McKnight to the Ramansco Poson de los Reias (the pool of kings). This massive eddy is about the size of three or four football fields and is in a spectacular setting where a tight canyon ends in a massive rapid that empties into this huge tranquil pool. Fishing the Poson is like floating on a lake with subtle currents. Trout magically seem to appear out of nowhere cruising just below the surface while sipping on midges and terrestrials. All of the rainbows in the Futaleufu seem to run between 17-19” with a few in the 20-24” class. Randy had a great day sight casting on the Poson which was a great place to be while the river was still very high and up in the willows along the banks.

Bryan and Anthony spent the day on the Limite float that begins at the Argentine border and terminates at the furious Inferno canyon class V whitewater run. The waters were very high and most of the fishing was limited to the eddies and backwaters where trout were cruising and sipping on dries. Even with the tough conditions the guys managed to boat about ten nice rainbows while sight fishing in the Aquarium and other large eddies.

Day 2:
This was my first day of fishing and I was excited to get out on this legendary river that I had heard so much about. I was encouraged by the clear waters, only a few days before the river was running milky white and was above the banks. I teamed up with Randy and Brian McKight to try our luck on the Limite float. The waters were already dropping but still very high. It reminded me of the Yellowstone at about 10,000 cfs when we first start fishing it (although it was probably closer to about 20,000cfs). We started in a wide riffle on the Argentine border. The guys dropped me off for some wade fishing which felt great after a few days of sitting on airplanes. This was one of the few places on the river where it allowed wading at these high flows and I was wading in waist deep water that just a week before was a high and dry gravel bar. I had several good hookups and managed to land for or 5 trout all on a large black beetle. Even in the faster water the rises were slow and deliberate. The ferocity of these trout on the reel was amazing - they are some of the hardest fighting trout in the world and even a 17” rainbow will make blistering runs on 3x tippet across the river.

Before lunch we floated down to the “aquarium” which is a large eddy/backwater where a smaller channel joins the main river. The big rainbows in the Futaleufu love this kind of water. It is hard to describe this type of habitat if you haven’t fished a really big volume trout river. The only other places I have seen trout behave this way is on the Yellowstone and Missouri in Montana and the Tongariro in New Zealand. These holes are often 15-30 feet deep and the fish are completely interacting exclusively with currents and not the bottom or shore. These current features pulsate and change and fish suddenly disappear and then show up 30 seconds later in a different location. They produce site fishing at its best and you must first get a visual on a trout and then make an accurate cast to lead the fish. The calmer the water the farther you need to lead the trout. In nervous water leading by 4 or 5 feet is enough but in glassy currents leading by 10 or more feet may be necessary. These trout seldom get hooked but the gin clear water results in spooky trout that are picky about presentation. If there is any drag they will nose the fly but not take which adds to the drama and excitement. When the fly is properly presented they almost always eat it even if it is a large terrestrial pattern. My favorite fly of the day was the gaucho which is a black beetle style attractor with an elk hair down wing for visibility. After lunch we hit one or two more productive eddies to site cast and then pulled streamers in the bigger water below. The river was still up so the water between the big eddies was tough to fish and mostly unproductive. By the end of the day Randy and I had netted about 15 trout between 15-20” - mostly high quality hookups on dries while sight fishing!

Bryan and Anthony stayed with Royce for day two. After a long night of strumming the guitar and enjoying the local brew “Escudo”, Bryan opted for a few extra zz’s in the morning while Bryan and Royce explored the upper reaches of the home waters. This float is completely isolated and the Futa guides have the only access. You start in front of the lodge and slowly eddy hop for about a mile up the river. Anthony had a great morning stripping streamers and site casting dries in had about ten trout to the net by lunch. Bryan joined in after lunch for the float down to the McKnights house on the other side of the river for the takeout. The lower waters were still high and produced slower fishing both guys got a few more fish into the net.

Day 3

All four of our Montana Angler team headed for the lower Futaleufu just above Lago Yelcho on day three for the “McCall” float. This is big water with big scenery. The climate quickly changes and the forests are lush temperate rain forests with towering mountains filled with hanging glaciers. Magical is the best word that comes to mind when attempting to describe the scenery. Most of the day our heads were on a swivel as we tried to take in the overwhelming beauty of our surroundings.

I teamed with Anthony and Royce and Bryan and Randy fished with Brian McKnight. This is streamer water at its best and we pulled out the seven weights with T-250 sink tips and lead eyed rubber legged streamers to go after the big boys. In the gin clear water you can see your fly to depths of 10 or 15 feet. I opted for a white version of my home cooked “Home Wrecker” which is a big rabbit fur concoction with lots lead and rubber legs. The white color helps to see the fly which allows you to guide it over logs and into troughs. The amazing facet of stripping streamers on the Futa is that you see the trout rocketing toward your fly from up to ten feet away. Sometimes they do figure eights around the fly then chase it and leave just to come back from 15 feet for a big eat. We had some hookups where the trout followed the fly for at least 25 feet before eating! On some instances they would grab and not get hooked and we would recast and seal the deal. After warming up on some nice 17” bows Anthony connected with a reel testing 20” brown that finally made its way to the net. Just before lunch I connected on something huge that schooled me in some big currents...exciting stuff!

Randy had the hot hand of the day and seemingly every time we looked over at our friends in the other boat his rod had a deep bend in it. Bryan and Randy stopped at a few inside corners on riffles to put a lot of fish in the net. After lunch we spent a half hour or so in our boat fishing a giant eddy where the El Malito joins the Futaleufu. We spotted about a dozen rainbows cruising in the foam and managed a few hookups on dries sight casting. Anthony also tagged a nice 15” colorful brook trout just above the confluence that probably came from the Malito. All in all a great day with some very nice trout to the net.

Day 4

This was Randy and Bryan’s day for the home waters in front of the lodge. Randy spent the morning solo and repeated Anthony’s success from the previous day with Royce on the upper waters eddy hopping. After lunch Bryan jumped on board and they floated the lower section of the home waters which produced a few more fish on streamers.

Anthony and I fished the very special Poson de los Reias on this day. The water had been dropping and the river was gin clear when we fished it. The drive in is worth the price of admission as we travelled overland across a private estancia across open fields. After dropping over a steep hill the river appears and you feel like you have been transported into a secret fly fishing haven. The massive rapid thunders at the head of the pool. This is by far the largest eddy that I have every seen in my angling career. The fishing was good from the beginning and we had a blue bird day which made locating the trout easier. Fishing the Poson is like a combination of bone fishing and stalking trout in New Zealand. The complicated currents slowly shift and trout suddenly appear moving just below the surface. In some ways it reminds me of fishing the gulpers at Hebgen lake except at in Montana you usually just see rises and not the hole trout. The waters are so clear on the Futa that it seems like these big rainbows are levitating in air. The midge hatch was on shortly after arriving and we

were rewarded when we made long and accurate casts with a delicate presentation. The key was to get enough lead time so the fish didn't spook and still have enough of a drag free drift when the trout arrived at the fly. Because of the subtle currents the trajectory of the trout was easier to predict than on a lake where cruising fish are more random. These fish are just like wild trout in New Zealand in that they are not too picky on the fly pattern as long as there is zero drag. They are also spooky like New Zealand trout and I had several big fish scurry off when they saw my bright green fly line in the air while false casting - I wished I had my drab olive spring creek lines for our day on the Poson. Even with the challenges we had plenty of hookups and average one or two eats per lap around the massive lake like backwater. We also had plenty of moments where are targeted fish moved for our fly just in time for ever so subtle drag to set in which produces a casual refusal at the last second. The great thing about these wild trout that rarely if ever see flies is that they seem to always give you another chance. Even if at trout eats and doesn't feel the sting of the hook you can almost always get them to eat again by making a better cast or changing a fly. What an amazing place! By the end of the day we put about 15-20 trout in the net - each a very high quality fish that was targeted in advance; by far the ultimate fly fishing experience in my book.

Day 5

Since the Limite float was so high the first two days we decided to try it again on our last day in Chile. We were also transferring to Carrileufu Valley Lodge in Argentina at the end of the day so logistically being close to the border made sense. It was amazing how much the waters receded over the course of 5 days and this seemed like a completely different float. Still high by March standards, but the river had dropped about 4 to 5 feet. One of the channels that was deep and swift on our first day was now a small shallow trickle. We had a great time in the morning sight casting to some fish in the aquarium and wading some riffles. Shortly after pulling in for lunch we heard a shout and turned in time to see Bryan with a deep bend in his rod and a huge trout tail walking across the surface. I collected some great photos of the fight as the drifted by a 200 foot waterfall before pulling up in front of us to net the monster. We didn't tape the big rainbow but I would safely put it at 23 or 24 inches - the biggest landed at Futa lodge for the season - nice work Bryan! The afternoon float was great and the fun faster water with giant boulders that was too high to fish on day one had dropped to fishable levels for pulling streamers and I had some great action on some nice browns on the last hour of the float. After pulling out Carlos and the crew at the lodge were waiting at the takeout with our luggage to transport us to the border where we met Jorge Miglias. Jorge is the spitting image of the "Most Interesting Man in the World" from the Dos Equis commercials and even more interesting! We drove the the spectacular Los Alceres National Park before arriving at the Carrileufu Valley Lodge where we were greated by our new host Pancho Panzer and a terrific dinner.

Day 6

We fished the legendary Rio Rividavia on day six. The rivers in this region all begin and end in lakes and are gin clear. They are smaller waters than the giant Futaleufu (where they later drain into). Prime time on the Rividavia is in December and the fish were exceptionally spooky. This might be the most beautiful river I have ever seen - on par with some of the smaller wade fishing waters in New Zealand that I fished but with more trout and larger. The water is emerald green and very clear. You have to be careful jumping out of the rafts because what seems like ankle deep water is often 3 or 4 feet deep. We spent the first hour or two at the exit of the lake site casting to big cruising rainbows. I had 2 hookups and one 19" bow to the net along with lots of refusals and spooked trout. The Rividavia sees more pressure than the Chilean waters and the trout were very selective. This was definitely the hardest day of "catching" with only a few eats. All in all it was well worth it to see this famed river and I hope to return some year when the dragon flies are hatching in December to see it when the trout are more willing. The highlight of the trip was watching our Argentine guide Facu hucking bread at lunch to giant 20" rainbows that bull rushed the bread but ignored our flies...talk about adding injury to insult. Our lunch on the Rivadavia was amazing as we sat under the shade of a large tree along the banks of the gorgeous river enjoying empanadas and some great Argentine wine.

Day 7

Both boats hit the Rio Carrileufu on our last day. This reminded me of a big version of the East Gallatin or Beaverhead with more down timber. It was also gin clear and we spent most of the day stripping big streamers on sink tips. The morning fishing was productive and I managed a few nice 17” bows and with a lot of chases from bigger fish and a lots of small fish chasing and tugging at the rubber legs. The streamer fishing turned off after lunch but we found some fish eating fat alberts and small parachute adams. It wasn’t a huge numbers day but a great float all in all and nice to put some more fish in the net after our tougher day on the Rivadavia. We never got to see some of the trophy streamer eating browns that the river is known for, but that will have to be for another trip!

Summary

What a great trip to Patagonia. The Futa lodge was definitely the highlight of our stay. There are larger and more opulent lodges in the world but Futa had a special charm that is hard to describe. There is something special about being in a valley that is so pristine and untouched by the modern world. The fishing on the Futaleufu is very special and of the highest quality. We were fortunate to experience nearly perfect weather during our trip and enjoyed the best of company with our motley crew. A big thanks to Bryan, Anthony and Randy for joining me on this adventure as well as to our great guides and hosts at both lodges. And a very big thanks to my beautiful wife Ann that gave me the green light to spend 12 days away from home while she tended to our lovely but energetic three children!

For trip photos visit http://www.facebook.com/montanaangler

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