

# A TALE OF TWO COUNTRIES

PURSUING LARGE RAINBOWS AND BROWNS THROUGH THE WILDS OF CHILE AND ARGENTINA  
BY PETER KAMINSKY

*Chile and Argentina are as alike — and as different — as two brothers. Chilean Patagonia, in the remote south, is among Earth's greenest places. Rainforests cloak its mountains. Swift-flowing rivers and picturesque waterfalls course through every vista. Just over the Andes, the rivers of Argentine Patagonia tumble down rocky, less densely forested mountainsides and flow east, across the pampas where sheep and cattle graze the semiarid prairies. Within the*

*last century and a quarter, trout have been introduced to the rivers and lakes of both countries. The newcomers have flourished so well that nowhere will you find more of my favorite gamefish in more varied waters. Late last winter — which makes it the end of summer in the Southern Hemisphere — I visited both countries, a study in contrasts of landscapes, weather and food, but united by those of us who revere trout in wild places.*



ISAIAS MICIU



BRYAN GREGSON

*(Left) Windswept Lago Strobel in Argentina is home to the largest rainbows on Earth. (Above) In Chile, this spectacular canyon with jade-green water is known as "The Temple."*



The scenery and the fishing for rainbows and browns in Chilean Patagonia were spectacular. The author found pleasant surprises on streams and lakes.

## PART I Chile: The Patagonian BaseCamp Lodge

On the way back from catching the best brown trout of my life, we passed a portly gaucho on horseback. He greeted us with a wave and a beaming smile before returning to wrangling the sheep, cows, pigs and chickens that wandered around his corral. He wore a beret, a neck bandanna and sheepskin chaps that showed off the impressive expanse of his mid-section. If I'd given him a foaming beer stein, he'd have passed for one of the 16th-century revelers in a tavern scene by Frans Hals.

*Things are all right in my world*, he seemed to say with a friendly wave.

Things were all right in my world, too. A few hours earlier I had caught (and released) two browns: One was 24 inches, the other 21. It wasn't the first time I had taken trout of that length, but none were as muscular, as broad-shouldered or as big around as these fish on the Rio Palena. Because they were so robust and well proportioned, you would be forgiven if you thought they were a separate species, maybe LeBron trout.

For six days we were headquartered at The Patagonian BaseCamp Lodge, the life's work of Dutch-born Marcel Sijnesael, a man who built — and sold — a business in Holland before taking off around the world, fly rod in hand, in pursuit of trout. From Kathmandu to

Mongolia, across Europe and down through Central America, he had only one vision: trout on a fly (and, yes, there are, to my surprise, trout in Costa Rica and Nicaragua). When his wanderings took him to the Palena, a spirit that inhabits bright, flowing waters spoke to him: *This is where you belong*.

The main stem of the Rio Palena is not, by any measure, a classic trout stream. It bears no similarity to the Tanqueray clarity of a spring creek. Instead it flows milky green from glacial melt. There are few mayflies to speak of. The food chain is more a case of big-fish-eat-little-fish, occasionally seasoned with the odd stonefly, dragonfly or wayward beetle.

Before we hit the Palena, we fished Lago Rosselot, which feeds into a tributary of the Palena. "Lake fishing?" said my angling partner, Stephen Milliken, with a wince. His comment was tantamount to a heart-wrenching cry from the soul of a man whose bottomless well of good humor could carry him through an epidemic of bubonic plague.

Politely, if less than honestly, I said, "Sure, love it!" Although, like Steve, I have never cared much for trout fishing in lakes. Even if you see them feed, you never know where the god-damn fish are going to show next.

Happily, Rosselot proved us wrong. Our guide, Dave Neal, worked his way within casting distance of a scum line where the Figueroa River (another Palena tributary) flows into the lake. Although the cluttered look of a scum line — most often found in back eddies

— looks like nature's recycle bin, it can often make for good fishing. The food that collects there is mostly helpless terrestrials, still-born nymphs and spinners. All a fish has to do to chow down is open its mouth and sip. There's no particular rush needed to intercept a nymph as it shucks its case or a dun as it dries its wings. Food in this situation is, in a manner of speaking, sitting on the shelf, easy pickings for a browsing trout.

Like the lower Palena, Lago Rosselot's waters are glacial green with a tinge of blue. "Don't worry, you'll see the fish," Dave said as he rowed, barely disturbing the water. "I don't know any other way to explain it other than the trout seem to glow."

I was skeptical, but sure enough, we could make out the halo of a trout-shaped shadow that appeared in the cloudy water and cruised, ever so leisurely, under Steve's fly, a black and tan Fat Albert. You could see the action as clearly as a Missouri River fish feeding on Pale Morning Duns. A beautifully visual take and a well-played fight yielded an 18-inch rainbow, silver-sided (hence the glow) with a lipstick smear of pink running along its lateral line.

We spent the rest of the day on a circuit of the lake. Mountains vaulting up as steeply as skyscrapers, their flanks covered in every shade of green, a true alpine rainforest. And everywhere, flowing water born of white-plumed waterfalls tumbling straight down for hundreds of feet. In the outwash of every cascade was a patch of scum, each patch revealing



Anglers glide into "The Temple" after pinballing through two pulse-pounding Class 4 rapids, which required wearing a helmet.

a trout or two. They took up positions brazenly — more fearlessly than any trout I've ever seen (apart from the giant and slow-witted brook trout of Labrador). They have no fear of death from above because there are no birds of prey that might swoop down on them, no bears to scoop them out of riffles. Seeing the ghostly trout silhouettes peacefully feeding meant we were constantly engaged in sight fishing. By day's end we caught 10 fish and cast to 30 more, and we had changed our tune about "boring" lake fishing.

Back at the lodge we joined in the "How'd you do?" conversation that takes place at every fish camp at cocktail hour. "Best brown trout fishing I've ever had," said John Marmaduke, who produced a cellphone picture of a 25-inch brown he'd caught on the Rio Palena. Even correcting for the timeworn strategy of holding the fish close to the lens to make it appear bigger, this trout was a bruiser.

"What did he take?" Steve asked.

"A streamer. That's all we fished all day. I don't think I've ever cast so much."

In much the same way that I'd snobbishly turned up my nose at lake fishing, only to be proven wrong, I have long regarded streamer fishing — at least for trout — as a half step up from bait fishing. Within an hour of hit-

ting the Palena the next morning, I was once again disabused of an angling prejudice. Steve landed 24- and 22-inch fish. One minute we were staring into cloudy water, and the next we could see the big trout closing on the fly from three feet away, crushing it like an interior lineman pouncing on an undefended quarterback. The trick to getting a fish on and keeping it on in this situation is to continue stripping even when you see its mouth close on the fly. When you feel the line come taut, then — and only then — should you raise your rod and give the trout an extra jab.

"It's a numbers game," guide Greg Bricker explained. "The fish are there. You can't see them until they commit, but they are there. Your job is to maximize the number of casts and to make sure that the line lands without any slack and immediately lower the rod tip to the water. A big, aggressive first strip is key. That sudden movement right under their nose is what triggers the pursuit and the strike. If your cast is sloppy and you are not lined up to begin stripping, it doesn't matter how accurately you cast. The trout will ignore it."

John had already warned us that Greg's guiding had earned him the nickname "The Drill Sergeant," but I didn't mind his gruff style one bit. He was totally dialed in to the river and

the fish. If that's what was required to get into the game, I was fine with it. I worked on my cast and retrieve, and Greg kept correcting me. Some anglers might take offense at the constant advice, but the image of Steve's two fish was sufficient motivation to listen to the master.

Whenever we came to a back eddy, we picked up our dry fly rods, rigged with a hopper dropper setup, and boated a half-dozen rainbows between 16 and 21 inches, the river-borne cousins of the previous day's lake fish. They fed the same way in similar conditions. (An eddy in a river is like the soft current in a lake.)

That evening, Steve made full use of his bragging rights as our increasingly grizzled-looking group downed a few bottles (who's counting?) of wine — first a fine Chilean chardonnay, then some cabernets. Dinner began with the most delicious baby eels; they looked like crispy linguine with eyes. Also stone crabs, lots of them, followed by a filet mignon from a cow raised on the farm that comprised the front yard of the BaseCamp. Chileans love meat almost as much as Argentines do, but they also have the advantage of coastal waters teeming with seafood in great variety.

Cigars in hand, we adjourned to the deck outside the living room. The stars shone twice as bright as any I had ever seen, the moon twice

R. VALENTINE ATKINSON

Full Patagonia immersion: an enormous brown; friendly "wildlife" at The Patagonian BaseCamp Lodge; a nice rainbow. The lodge is the work of Marcel Sijnesael, who chased trout around the world before settling on the Rio Palena.

as silvery. Reflecting on the day, I would have been more than satisfied with the rainbows I'd caught, but I wanted a big brown — so much that I made sure I got another helping of Greg's tough love the next day.

"He'll wear you out," John said.

"If that's the price of a fish like yours, I'm cool with that," I replied.

Fourteen hours (and a few thousand casts) later, my line came taut at the juncture of two pools. At first I figured it was another rainbow chasing a streamer, nice-sized but no trophy. Then he sounded and shook his head pugnaciously, a telltale sign of *Salmo trutta*. After running here and there and trying to escape under a boulder, he relented, and I caught my first sight of him. Big fish! When he finally came to net, he measured 24 inches of rippling muscle with the fine kipe of a mature male.

My day was made with that trout, but within the hour, things got even better as another brown — a tad smaller but still big, strong and impressive — gobbled my Home Invader (taking it for a small brown trout imitation). It's funny how fishing fortune works. Yesterday, Steve took his two good fish in a few hours. Today angling luck broke my way.

Those two fish, on any other fishing trip, would have been the cherry on the sundae, but The Patagonian BaseCamp Lodge held one more unforgettable moment, and it wasn't only about the fish. The day after my brown trout afternoon, we fished out of a satellite camp high up on the Figueroa, almost to the Argentine border. You need to negotiate two Class 4 rapids — the kind of water in which you wear a helmet and there are grim warnings about drowning in the guide's warmup talk.

As promised, running the whitewater was pulse-pounding. The fishing was OK — nothing to write home about — with a half-dozen spooky rainbows on dry flies in calm eddies. But the real treat was the view. I share this thought as someone who has long passed the stage where you tell yourself, *It doesn't matter if the fishing wasn't on fire; the scenery was so beautiful*. That was before I saw the place they call "The Temple." We glided into it after pinballing through the rapids. The breathtaking tableau that lay before us was a lush canyon with walls of golden basalt that tower over a jade-green pool, the whole scene glimmering in the clear mountain sunlight.

Temple, I thought. *I guess you could call it that: damn near religious.*

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## PART II Argentina: Estancia Laguna Verde

“There are 5,000-year-old rock paintings here,” said Lucho Alba, gesturing to a featureless landscape that faded in the far distance to Chaitén, the “Smoking Mountain,” a glacier-covered but active volcano.

We climbed out of our 4x4 onto the brownish tufts of the grassy plain that stretched to the far-off mountains. It took some force to wrestle the door of our truck open and stand upright in the howling wind. We clambered down the hill to a cleft in the rocks.

“Look up,” Lucho said. “See the handprints? The Indians put them there thousands of years ago.”

I used the light on my iPhone to illuminate the rocky overhang. “Why on earth would they come here?” I asked. “The land is so harsh.”

“They hunted guanacos,” he answered, referring to the hardy relatives of the llama that one finds all over Patagonia. “Choiques, too.”

The ancient petroglyphs lay midway on the last bone-jarring leg of the trip. Our destination, Lago Strobel, is famed among anglers for its other name — Jurassic Lake, home to the largest, fattest, strongest rainbows on earth.

The lodge is nestled into a sheltering cove on the shores of Laguna Verde on the mesa above Strobel. It’s a simple building, not gussied up in fishing lodge chic with duck lamps and randomly chosen sporting art. It reminded me more of the simple and straightforward accommodations of Iceland, with one exception: a wall of the best-curated wines of Argentina. I have been fishing in Patagonia for most of my angling life, and I have never come across a wine list as extensive or as full of delicious surprises. This does tend to temper the speed with which I spring out of bed the morning after, but it’s a headache worth enduring.

Credit goes to Lucho, whose great loves — with the probable exception of his family — are fly-fishing and wine. That first night we dined on a risotto studded with wild hare and a brawny but not brutish malbec. We adjourned to a night that was punctuated, in my case, by dreams of rainbows as big as a German shepherd.

Next morning, we set out for the lake at the very civilized starting time of 9:30. “The fish like it when the water warms up a bit,” advised my guide, Nico Gomez Lengyel. We drove across the mesa before beginning a zigzag descent through a moonscape of basalt, which was brown near the top, then white and encrusted with millennia of layers of calcium carbonate (limestone) left behind by the algae that covers the lake’s submerged rocks. It is this lime that supports the prodigious amount of scud that is the basis of the Strobel trout’s diet. “So much



*From the basalt moonscape to the enormous rainbows, the scale at “Jurassic Lake” is otherworldly.*

food,” Nico tells me, “that the trout can eat as much as they want, whenever they want.”

Slowly, we snaked our way along the shore — bright sun, snow-white boulders ringing the lake up to the high-water mark of past centuries, clear blue-green water with sun-dappled wavelets creating gold-veined patterns of sunlight that moved across the rocks. We pulled into Sea Bay, one of the top-producing spots on the lake. In the absence of current, the trout tend to congregate along impact points where the fingers that define the bays reach out into the deeper water. Driven by the wind, the waves push up extra helpings of scud, making the job of trapping food that much easier for the trout.

We walked to a point where you could wade to the edge of the drop-off. When the wind slackened, I saw the clear outlines of big trout finning in place, barely moving as they fed. To an angler, it is indescribably seductive to watch fish going about the business of just being alive without any awareness that big two-legged creatures in waders are gawking at them as they move, eat and chase one another. I think of such haunting scenes as “witching water.” I have experienced them on a pass in the Florida Keys when the tarpon moved through, and from the white sandy coves of Monomoy, Massachusetts, and Montauk, New York, when — out of nowhere — 200 striped bass melted into





Weather on Lago Strobel can change from calm to a Force 7 gale in minutes. Blustery conditions can make things challenging when fish are just out of range.

view the way things just show up in a dream, and on the Delaware River in springtime when a school of shad invaded what, the minute before, had been a calm and fishless pool. I'm awestruck at such times, and then the adrenaline takes over and I have to get hold of myself before I lapse into a water-flailing frenzy that spooks every finned creature in sight.

Despite my super-charged anticipation, I cast lightly in front of one of the lurking trout shadows. One fish made right for the slow retrieve of my Prince Nymph — just like a swimming scud. He tore line and leaped, an immensely strong fish. When he came to net, Nico estimated him to be about 5 pounds, with a fat body and small head. He had the shape and girth of a football.

"Wow!" I exclaimed. Ten minutes later I repeated the episode with an even larger fish. I was impressed. *Just getting warmed up*, I thought. But great fish (and great fishing) are rarely that dependable, especially in a place where the weather can change from bright sun to wet snow, from summer to winter, from gentle zephyrs to Force 7 gales in the space of minutes (no exaggeration).

I was thrilled with those first fish, but one of the other anglers put them into perspective when he pulled in an 8-pounder and then a 10-pounder while Spey casting. Lucho would later explain to me that the rich food source, lack of predators and nonexistent competitors

explain the enormous size of Strobel trout. Because the lake is so isolated and cut off from other river systems and has no outlet to the ocean, there were no fish of any kind there before trout were introduced in the late 1980s. There is only one medium-sized spawning river feeding the lake, thereby limiting the number of fish born each year. Throw in the fact that in colder waters with short summers (think giant Labrador brook trout) fish tend to gorge themselves and put on weight in a hurry, and Strobel offers an unbeatable recipe for a self-sustaining population of Moby trout.

When things slowed down at the lake (as they did on that first day) or the winds were too much for my casting, we crept back up the switchbacks to the plateau, where trout had been planted in a number of sinkhole lagunas. (At least the geologist's best guess is that they are sinkholes.) No matter how cold or how windy, you could always cap the day with a 4- to 6-pound rainbow. No long casts required. This was fabulous fishing for fabulous fish, but all through my stay, the lure of a 20-pound rainbow danced in front of my eyes like a mirage of cool water in a desert. It kept pulling me back to the lake in the most challenging conditions.

Day two turned blustery, and the temperature dropped 20 degrees, which is always a fairly reliable guarantee of the fish turning off. I compensated by trying to cast even farther, across my body or backward or launching roll casts aimed

straight at the sky, where the wind would carry them — truly "moral" casts, if effort is any gauge of the purity in a fisherman's heart. Whatever justice there is in fishing, though, doesn't reward effort — only the right fly, presented in the right way, at the right time. Just like a pitcher whose game falls apart when he tries to overthrow a fastball, I muscled my casts like a rank beginner. "Where did Peter, the good caster from yesterday, go?" Nico mused as he obligingly undid a record number of wind knots.

I was tired, cold, sore and had missed the few strikes that snuck up on me when I wasn't paying attention. When we returned to the lodge, I poured myself a glass of wine and sat down to warm up by the wood stove. I was surprised to see Jimmy Fallon on the television; actually, I was surprised to see a television. Even at the ends of the earth, cable TV will find a way to seek you out. Mindlessly, I watched the amusing banter. Jimmy's guest — a young leading man in a suit that was no less than two sizes too small — asked whether it would be OK to wish his wife a happy Valentine's Day.

*Oh, Jesus!* I thought, I completely forgot. So, like any dutiful husband who wants to stay married, I texted my wife.

"Happy Valentine's Day. I love you." And for good measure I included my two daughters.

About a minute later the phone pinged, signaling a reply. "Is it Valentine's Day in Argentina or are you being ironic?"

"No, honey, I mean it. I love you."

And then her answer: "It's March 15!"

I had been watching a rerun. That's not the first time that I lost track of the day, week or month while on a fishing trip. The real world runs on one calendar, and the fishing world pays little attention. There's just today and the hopes for tomorrow. My daughters, of course, were delighted by my clueless text and piled on with a string of LOLs.

The winds abated the next morning, and the sun shone warm in a cloudless sky. We drove farther up the coast to the bay called Mosca Seca (Dry Fly). As we took up a position in the crook of a rocky outcrop, a herd of guanacos meandered along the shore, their long necks calling to mind camels, a related species. They all looked at us, their stares like whitetail, only not as skittish. A large male stood apart, mostly checking us out. When you look at a guanaco, its tan coat is distinctive, and although the lakeshore, with its lime-whitened boulders, provides a sharp contrast, somehow the coloring serves as quite good camouflage.

Nico walked to the other arm of the bay and signaled to me, unmistakably, that a fish was close inshore. I false-casted once and shot a good double haul with a Gypsy King (a large attractor dry fly). No sooner had it landed than it disappeared, and I was fast to a fish. I lifted my rod high, and it bent under the weight of the trout. I jabbed him good and he took off for deep water, breaching twice.

"Big!" Nico said.

"Si, hermano!" I said as I spanked the reel, figuring I'd tighten the drag, recover line and play him off the reel. Big mistake! Especially



The prodigious amount of scud in the lake is the key to the diet of these large fish.

with a barbless hook. You need to stay tight to the fish even if it means stripping in line. The rainbow leaped clear of the water — 10 pounds if he was an ounce — and shook free.

I was pissed off but undeterred. The wind was down, the sun was up, and as we worked our way into the next bay, we could see schools of huge trout porpoising as they fed on clouds of

helpless scud. Maddeningly, the fish, guided by some sixth sense evolved to taunt anglers, managed to stay 5 yards beyond my range. No doubt if I could have casted farther they would have retreated more, and with lesser casters, they would have come closer. *How do they know?* I wondered. *Oh well*, I thought, *the weather has turned in our favor, and I'm sure to tie into a big one.*

Wrong.

As we drove to the lake the next morning, Nico looked at the new-fallen snow on the flanks of Chaitén in the distant high Andes. "It's going to be cold and windy. Rain and hail, too."

I managed to get off a few casts to fish I could see in the still-calm water, but within minutes a huge gust blasted us, and with it came rain, then hail and a final insult, snow. The lousy weather settled in and stayed with us for two days. All I could muster were two strikes that I was late on — or maybe they weren't such assertive takes to begin with. I gave it my all and, at the end of each day, partially slaked my thirst for rainbows with a couple of 6-pounders at the lagoons. Pulling through in the bottom of the ninth, one in our group, wildlife biologist Greg Summers, landed an 18-pounder in the last light of the last day. To be honest, I was envious, but Greg's fish confirmed my faith in the silver-sided treasures of Strobel.

I definitely want a rematch. 🐟

### You can arrange a trip

to The Patagonian BaseCamp Lodge and Estancia Laguna Verde through The Fly Shop in Redding, California. There are lots of connections, and you'd be best advised to leave the details in expert hands; trying to plan for yourself online is tough. The Fly Shop will supply you with an orientation packet on tackle, clothing and other gear.

I fished with Orvis Helios 2 rods, a 6-weight and an 8-weight. A weight-forward floating line is fine on the 6-weight, but for the 8, I recommend two spools — one with a weight-forward 8 and the other with a 200-grain sink tip. Bring clothing layers to cover everything from summer to late autumn. If you don't want to lug boots and waders, the lodges have extras, but do check to confirm that before you go. English is spoken at both lodges.

The Fly Shop's telephone number is (800) 669-3474, and Patrick Pendergast is the director of travel. His email is [pat@theflyshop.com](mailto:pat@theflyshop.com), and there's tons of information at [flyshop.com](http://flyshop.com).



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