



# the line of beauty

The once-inaccessible Andean valleys of Chilean Patagonia are now a fly-fisherman's paradise, thanks to a handful of luxury fishing lodges. Words and photographs by Sebastian Hope.



**"T**here are," says Marcel Sijnesael between strokes as he rows across the lake, "still places. In Aysén. Where no one. Has ever. Cast a fly." He should know. He's just bought a large tract of land with a lake at its centre – only he couldn't find the lake.

"It was on the map, but we just couldn't find it. The forest is thick so we checked the map again, and that's when we heard the waterfall." They came out at the pool below the drop, and while his companion went round the falls to find the lake beyond, Marcel began casting. Without moving he caught 17 3lb trout in under an hour.

Trout, both brown and rainbow, were introduced into Chile in the early decades of the 20th century, and

adapted well to their new environment. While there are plentiful hatches of aquatic insects, trout here have added *pacora* crayfish, adult dragonflies and giant stag beetles to their diet. We saw one of these *cantaria* beetles earlier floating on its back, which is why I am fishing with a foam fly the size of a small child's flip-flop.

Marcel turns the boat into shore, and we continue on foot, moving quietly onto the apron of sandy sediment at the mouth of the stream. The bright sunlight reveals where the deep water begins. The current's influence creates a slowly turning eddy where all the debris brought down from the grassland upstream gathers. Trout patrol below the slick, looking for terrestrial insects. There is one cruising along the edge of the drop-off. I cast out into the current and let the big beetle float down

towards the lake. The fly passes over the drop-off and into the path of the trout. Its shape inclines upwards lazily. I can see its mouth open and take in the beetle. A pause for the fish to turn, and when I lift my rod, it is on: a 26in rainbow – the best fish I land all week.

Marcel had never so much as visited a fishing lodge before setting up the Patagonian Base Camp Lodge. Over the past 10 years he has made it a model operation, and in the hands of his partner, Carolina, the lodging and cuisine are more boutique hotel than fishing camp. Its programme offers real variety, such as the overnight camp on the Río Figueroa, which makes possible rafting an otherwise inaccessible part of the river, a gorge he calls The Temple.

It was Marcel and Kris Kennedy, the head guide, who pioneered this difficult section as

Top: Temple Gorge, Río Figueroa. Above: Sebastian's catch.



This is some of the most beautiful water I have ever fished, its smooth motion marked by currents and up-wellings.



a fishing trip. The gorge is guarded on the upstream side by a class-five rapid called El Diablo, and I am watching with Brett in the second raft as Kris takes the two other anglers through. The river runs head on into a low rock wall, turns sharp right and hits another wall which turns it left again, funnelling all its flow through a gap about five metres across. The trick, says Brett, is to ride up the shock wave that comes off the first wall in such a way as to roll round onto the second wave. He also shouts, "Hold on!" The river below is eerily quiet passing between sheer cliffs, but for a long way downstream the water fizzes with bubbles of air.

This is some of the most beautiful water I have ever fished, its smooth motion marked by currents and up-wellings, deep from bank to bank and often with sheer rock rising up on each side. The raft keeps pace with the current so that the water and my fly on it appear still, until interrupted by the fierce take of a rainbow trout. Its back is flushed with ultramarine.

I put a weighted nymph on a dropper below a Fat Albert, with the foam fly acting as a strike indicator, and cast into the foot of the cliff. The Fat Albert bobs and bumps along in the turbulence at the rock face, before it disappears. I strike and hook something larger than I have all day. It obliges us to follow it down the next bit of white water before we can land it: a big brown trout.

The Aysén region was the last area of Chile to be settled, and the journey south to Coyhaique, the region's capital, gives a strong sense of how hard it must have been in the early days. The forested mountains fall straight into the sea, and the road out of the port of Puyuhapi cuts into the mountainside just above the high water mark before turning inland through the Queulat National Park. This is the Carretera Austral, 1,200km of road that took 25 years to finish. We climb in switchbacks lined with the giant leaves of gunnera. The forest canopy rises unbroken to the tree line at 1,900m, and at 2,000m glaciers hang in the folds between the peaks from which waterfalls drop.

Sebastián Galilea's grandfather was among the first settlers. He moved inland from Puerto Aisén and took up land around Coyhaique. Sebastián has set up a hotel, the Cinco Ríos, on a bluff above the Río Simpson outside of town, which is run as a fishing lodge during



Clockwise from top: rafting through rapids on Rio Figueroa. Fat Albert foam flies. The Coyhaique River Lodge.

the season. His six-day programme comprises two days of wading, two of lake fishing and two days of river floats. My boat partner, Jim, and I are down to fish on Lago Elizalde.

The lake – or, rather, its eastern shore – is not far from Coyhaique, but Elizalde is 20km long and we want the other end. To get there we drive around a mountain, launch on the Río Paloma and run downstream till we meet the short river that flows out of the lake. Above the outflow, the lake is shallow and divided into channels by reeds, the water so clear the fish are hanging shadows and so still they spook when our flies land.

We move further into the lake, where the water is deep and the bottom a tangle of tree trunks and branches. The tactic, our guide Lalo, explains, is to slap a foam beetle on the water, let it sit for 10 seconds, twitch it maybe twice to send out rings of distress, before casting again. Occasionally we spot a cruising fish and cast into its path, and the suspense often ends in a lazy take and an explosive dash for the wood cover. I manage to hold on to four beefy browns all over 20in.

After two days I move to a different lodge, without seeing a tenth of what Cinco Ríos has to offer. The Coyhaique River Lodge is on the other side of town, another modern ranch-style building that has a spectacular outlook through a double-height glass wall. It grew out of the original guiding service, El Rumbo Patagón, which Gastón Urrejola started with his brother.

They also offer excursions on horseback, dirt bike or on foot, as well as river floats and trophy lakes. I talk over my options with head guide Alejandro, and choose a day of wading split between the Ríos Nirehuao and Emperador Guillermo.

We turn north at the Argentine border, and descend into a broad valley that marks the beginning of the pampas. Below us is the Upper Nirehuao, reminding me of peaty Irish burn, except there is an old gaucho and his dog riding down the dirt road ahead of us. It is the kind of river that brings you back to the essence of fly fishing, a stream that holds small brown trout with big appetites. The fishing is about precision and versatility; the difference between landing the small fly in just the right place, or in the tough grasses along the bank. The reward for getting it right is usually a fearless take. I don't count how many I catch, but I revel in the excitement of making fish rise.

We eat lunch standing at the truck's tailgate before cutting through on dirt tracks to the headwaters of the Emperador Guillermo, a beautiful freestone river that could have been in Montana. Alejandro produces nymphs he tied during the winter, classics made with hare's ear and pheasant tail. We put a foam bug on as an indicator and fish upstream, hooking greedy rainbows.

It is dark by the time we rejoin the Carretera Austral near Coyhaique. Our headlights flash on the sign listing points south, all the way to the last town in Aysén, Villa O'Higgins at the end of the road 570km away – or twice as far again as I have travelled in a week. Alejandro, who plays in a ski-resort cover band in the winter, starts singing *The Long and Winding Road*, and for once it doesn't sound like schmalz. ✦

#### A REEL GOOD TIME

High season is February, but fishing is good from mid-November to mid-April. Sebastián Hope was assisted by Chile's Servicio Nacional de Turismo, and stayed as the guest of **Cinco Ríos Lodge** ([www.cincorioschile.com](http://www.cincorioschile.com); seven-night package from \$3,995), **Coyhaique River Lodge** (+56-6721 9710; [www.coyhaiqueriverlodge.com](http://www.coyhaiqueriverlodge.com); from \$250 per day) and **Patagonian Base Camp Lodge** (+569-7999 6873; [www.patagonian-basecamp.com](http://www.patagonian-basecamp.com); seven-night package from \$3,995). **Aardvark McLeod** (01980-847 389; [www.aardvarkmcleod.com](http://www.aardvarkmcleod.com)) offers six-day trips, from £2,400, including accommodation, guiding and transfers. Flights to Balmaceda via Madrid and Santiago with LAN (+562-687 2400; [www.lan.com](http://www.lan.com)) from EL408 return.