



A Owen River Adventure

*Trevor Hawkins has a memorable trip to
New Zealand's South Island.*

“I’ve got him!” Philip Weigall called excitedly from the other side of the pool. He’d been working on the fish for a good twenty minutes before I arrived. The trout had left it until the last rays of daylight before starting to feed on mayfly duns that were beginning to emerge and drift down the bubble line on Phil’s side of the river. I waited

around to see the landing of a lovely 5 pound brown trout before deciding that the precarious bank I was perched on was too steep to permit landing a fish of any size.

I headed back downstream in the fading light to the long, more accessible pool I had been fishing earlier, hoping its residents

might now be up and feeding. It proved to be the correct decision. The pool gave up my first trout for the trip and my first ever on the Owen River.

Darkness had finally arrived, the early start and excitement of the first day were beginning to take effect, and over my shoulder the lights of Owen River Lodge beckoned. Phil caught another fish before calling it quits and coming downstream to join me. In all, during that maiden evening session on the first day, three fish had come to hand, all round the 5 pound mark. They were thumpers by Australian standards and yet we were literally only a few minutes walk away from the lodge where a warm welcome, a cold beer and the evening meal awaited.

Over the next four days, after fishing on rivers further afield by day, Phil and I would round off with evenings on rivers not far from the lodge. In total we probably only fished five or six runs and pools, but on each visit we caught and released quality fish up to 6 pounds! It was amazing flyfishing, especially considering that we were rarely more than a few minutes walk or drive from base.

Getting There

On that first day, we flew out of Melbourne at 6 am on a direct flight to Christchurch, followed by a short connecting flight to Nelson on the northern tip of the South Island. It was five in the afternoon local

time when our host for the next four days, Felix Borenstein, stowed our gear into his car for the hour-long drive south to the lodge.

By then we were both getting itchy for a fish. The drive only made matters worse because along the way we could see inviting stretches of rivers whose names are etched into the minds of serious flyfishers the world over: the Motueka, the Gowan, and the Buller.

Arrival

Sympathetic to our situation, Felix's first priority on arrival was to issue both Phil and I with Simms wading boots. We had both brought our own breathable waders, but as an expat Australian, Felix knows only too well the dramas associated with travelling with fishing boots between countries, especially since the outbreak of Didymo algae in New Zealand. Besides, we didn't miss the added bulk and weight of wading boots in our luggage.

The availability of boots in all sizes was a small, yet thoughtful gesture which just made our travel that little bit easier. It was typical of the attention to detail throughout our stay, and in many ways summed up the whole Owen River Lodge experience. When staying at a five star fishing lodge you expect a certain level of quality and service, but it's the attention to the finer points that often sets one lodge apart from the next. In this respect Owen River Lodge went above and beyond what's expected.



Anyway, with boots under our arms we were quickly shown our rooms and told to make our way back from the evening rise at our leisure; dinner would be ready whenever we were.

As I've already reported, that first session was very worthwhile and did wonders for my confidence. I suggest all newcomers to Owen River Lodge take advantage of an evening session on the water close to the lodge early in their stay—just ask Felix to suggest suitable stretches of nearby rivers. Later on, after some time being guided, you may just want to kick back for a day or so and have a few hours on your own on water close by.

Local Knowledge

Over the next four days we went on to fish four other rivers and some high altitude stillwaters. We caught fish on every outing, all brown trout, the best pushing 8 pounds with virtually nothing under three. To top it all off, at least half were caught on dry flies. And this was in mid October!

We were guided for three days of our stay, each day by a

different guide working out of the lodge. I soon learned that without exception they had extraordinary fish spotting abilities: the guides knew not only what to look for, but also where to look, thereby decreasing time spent searching barren water.

So good were the guides that half way through the first day I gave up trying to spot my own fish and just trailed behind, waiting to be called up and have the fish pointed out to me. Philip, who is no slouch when it comes to spotting trout, was doing better than I was, sighting the occasional fish first. I'm sure Phil saw it as something of a quest to try and find the odd trout: the difference was that Phil and I had to slow down and methodically search, whereas the guides scanned the water intently where they expected fish to be holding, but moved quickly upriver if the water wasn't 'right'. I'm sure the guides did walk past fish that weren't holding where they would normally be expected, but the numbers spotted were such that time spent scanning less likely water wasn't really justified. This was extremely efficient fishing.

It was interesting how often I found myself searching water



that back in Australia would hold any number of good fish, and yet the guides would hardly give it a sideways glance. On the other hand, I was constantly shown fish feeding in areas that back home, I'd regard as well down on the scale of prime lies.

Using a Guide

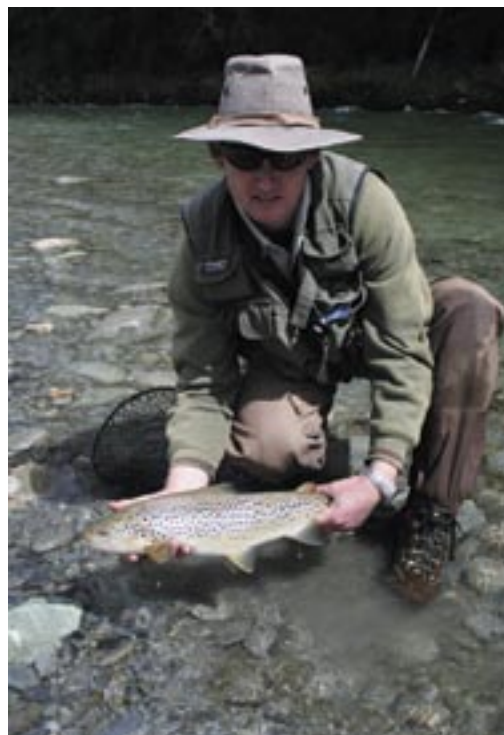
When staying at Owen River Lodge, or at any lodge in unfamiliar country, I suggest budgeting for a guide for as many days as you can comfortably afford. In other words, don't stretch the budget to the point where you find yourself calculating what each individual fish costs!

Using a good guide means you WILL catch more fish—or at least be given the chance to catch more—than you could ever manage on your own. You will most likely have a far more enjoyable time, and also see a far greater range of waters than you could ever expect to discover by yourself. If you can afford to be guided each day then my suggestion is that you do so. If not, at least use a guide for the first few days before doing your own thing. After a period being

guided, you will have at least been shown how to rig up for local conditions, what to look out for, and where to search.

While staying at Owen River Lodge, I was able to catch some fish when left to my own devices. But as I pointed out earlier, without any guiding I would probably have spent a considerable amount of precious holiday time fishing and searching water that was fairly barren. In short, it makes good sense to use a guide to get the most from your trip.

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The Lodge

Felix proudly points out that following recent accreditation by Qualmark, Owen River Lodge is New Zealand's newest 5 star flyfishing lodge. (Qualmark is New Zealand Tourism's official quality rating system for accommodation providers.) The lodge started operating in late 2003 and is situated on 16 acres of land, with a kilometre of absolute river frontage onto the Owen River. It's located just to the north of the Nelson Lakes region, and just to the east of Murchison. The lodge is within day-trip distance of (incredibly) over thirty streams by car, and countless others if your budget stretches to transport by helicopter.

The lodge complex comprises a main building where the dining room, lounges and bar are housed. Guests are accommodated in cottages situated a short walk away, as well as two rooms in the main building itself. The cottages are located in a garden setting with stunning views of the Owen River below and the spectacular Mount Owen ranges beyond. Each of the four cottages is extremely spacious, with an appealing light, contemporary feel. They are furnished with king-size beds that can be configured as full king-size or twin king-size singles. There's also reverse cycle air conditioning, ironing facilities, tea and coffee making facilities, plus a spacious en suite bathroom.

Running along the front of each cottage is a veranda where you can relax and take in the view. In case you forget this is, after all, a fishing lodge, located along the eaves of the veranda are hooks to hang vests and fly rods up out of harm's way. A nice touch!

While the lodge has an exclusive look and feel, it's not pretentious in any way.

An overall impression I was left with during my time there was one of friendliness, and an effort to make guests feel relaxed and at ease.

Although Owen River is first and foremost a flyfishing lodge, you never get the impression of it being a hardcore hunting/fishing establishment with an overkill (sorry!) of trophy mounts and fishing collectables displayed around the walls. The lodge would make a great base for a couple or group of friends who are simply interested in having a relaxing upmarket holiday, and spending time checking out all that the area has to offer besides fishing. Non anglers could easily spend five days exploring the region.

For those wanting to mix some fishing with other interests, hiring a car at Christchurch and driving up to Owen River Lodge would be a great option. You could check out the spectacular scenery and the many attractions along the way, as well as some magnificent trout water.

Not Just Fishing

Many fishing lodges I've visited aren't really suitable for couples. Lately however, I have been fortunate to stay at a few that definitely are couple-friendly, and Owen River Lodge is way up there on that list. At last, lodge owners in New Zealand and Australia are recognising that couples often like to holiday together and are willing to pay to get a higher level of quality and service during their stay.





Gone are the days where every fishing trip has to be a 'rough it', blokes-only affair, and all there is to do is fish and drink.

The area around Owen River Lodge offers any number of activities and attractions besides fishing. Breathtaking walking tracks abound in the area, and the lodge also has mountain bikes available to explore the quiet lanes and trails nearby. Just down the road, Murchison has a delightful nine hole course on the banks of the Buller River for the golf tragics. The area also features several leading wineries. In fact just over an hour's drive from the lodge is the world famous Marlborough wine district, noted especially for its Sauvignon Blancs.

For the more adventurous, Murchison is renowned as a white water rafting centre, and there is jet boating to be had in the Buller

Gorge. If like me, you're into sketching, painting and photography, the whole area has some fantastic possibilities. The only trouble is deciding when to put down the rod and pick up the brushes or camera!

What to Bring

Owen River Lodge is a fishing lodge, first and foremost. You won't be expected to wear collar and tie for dinner. It's definitely relaxed dining in a friendly atmosphere, so dress casually. The weather in the South Island is very changeable (I found it quite similar to Tasmania) and layering of clothing makes sense. Depending on altitude, you can be hot one minute and in a snow shower the next, so I carried a lightweight waterproof jacket in my vest if the weather looked at all like turning sour.

As for fishing gear, take breathable chest waders if you have them but use the lodge's boots. The tungsten-studded models are hard to beat—just make sure you take them off before you step inside! The guides will probably suggest you use their flies and tippet material—for rods, lines and fishing on your own, see the gear recommendations in Philip's *New Zealand's Early Season Secret* story. Fly-wise, for later in the season, add some beetle patterns, plus a few cicada patterns and attractors such as Wulffs and Humpys, and don't forget some Stimulators.

I can't stress enough the importance of:

- using tippet that's strong and reliable,
- checking your knots, and
- checking your leader regularly for nicks, abrasions and wind knots.

Remember, these are big fish, very often in big water, so don't leave anything to chance. The next fish you hook may be the largest you have ever encountered.

For further information check out www.owenriverlodge.co.nz