



# Chile, a hot spot for trout

The country is one of fly-fishing's last nirvanas, offering anglers truly wild fisheries and enormous trout, says **Nick Zoll**. Photographs by **Valentine Atkinson**

**R**ELATIONS between Chile and Argentina have always been tetchy, with disputes, claims and counter-claims over resources and land ownership, like petulant siblings arguing over playroom toys. Recently, an *entente cordiale* has been reached, but they are still discussing the boundary between the countries. Agreement

over most of the 3,000-mile border between Argentina and Chile rests on the ownership of the vast glacial lakes nestling in the valleys of the Andes and running along the frontier. Heated discussion over which way the lakes historically drained provoked bitter wrangling, which nearly resulted in war. In 1902, Edward VII mediated to avoid military conflict, and established the current border by

simply dividing the disputed lakes in half. To this day several shared lakes have two names.

Eighty-eight years after Edward's interventional masterstroke, I found myself in a small boat heading for Chile across the choppy waters of Lago Buenos Aires. My companions were a weather-beaten Argentinian boatman and Tony de Almeida, an equally rugged former jaguar hunter from Brazil. De Almeida

and I were nearing the end of a lengthy scouting tour of southern Argentina's finest fishing and shooting *estancias*. With two days left and much already accomplished, we had swapped countries. De Almeida had been given the nod by a fishing friend that there was a river on the Chilean side of the lake that might interest us.

As our boat approached the invisible division of the lake (beyond which we'd be

motoring over Lago General Carrera), we were met by an officious-looking naval-grey launch containing a Chilean border patrol unit. The officers on board wore dark-blue uniforms and side-arms that spoke of trouble if we didn't come quietly. Their blunt command to follow them left us in no doubt. We docked and were ushered into a tiny immigration office nearby. Perhaps it was the shock of having to deal with

**Above: casting on a tributary of the Rio Aisén, one of Chile's prolific trout rivers**

Argentinian, US and Brazilian passports all in one day, or perhaps we enlivened an otherwise dull morning, but, either way, three slow hours passed before we completed our paperwork and emerged into the light, blinking, from the little, dark room. ➤

I was itching to fish, and we hurried to the river to set up rods. Rio Ibañez is a thundering torrent of a river; it drains off the slopes of the volcanic Mount Hudson. The heavy current was laden with sediment and at first glance it seemed unlikely we'd catch anything. I strung a single-handed #8 with a fast-sinking line and a fly the size and colour of a small parakeet. According to de Almeida's tip-off, brown trout that have grown fat in the lake ascend the Ibañez in pursuit of spawning partners. As the minutes became hours, we began to doubt that.

"Well, look," I said, turning to de Almeida, "it's been a great adventure, this Chilean gig, but why don't we head back to Argentina tomorrow and bag a stag to round off the trip?" De Almeida, who'd been lazing on the grass under a wild fuchsia while I fished, was just about to respond when his gaze swivelled sharply towards the end of my line. I looked round just in time to see a huge, torpedo-like bow-wave accelerating towards the area of the river that contained my parakeet. There was an almighty swirl, like someone stirring an oar in a bathtub, and the trout crashed into the fly, tearing the line through my fingers and out of the rod rings. Some considerable time later, a reanimated de Almeida manoeuvred himself into position just downstream of the fish and ushered its bulk to the shore.

The trout weighed 12lb and was the finest of its kind I'd ever seen, superbly proportioned, with platinum flanks washed with eau de Nil. It was cold-blooded perfection, surely a one-off. Following the fish's release and mutual backslapping, we sat in post-piscatorial bliss,

**Take a selection of flies, such as Sculpzilla (below) from the Solitude Fly Company**



**The Rio Pico flows through both countries, and yields rainbow (left) and brown trout (above)**

smoking cigarettes and watching the river roll by as buff-necked ibises clanked noisily overhead. "Bueno, che," de Almeida quipped, "no vale la pena pescar más - nunca vas a ver un bicho como ese (Well, it's not worth fishing any longer - you're never going to see a bug [sic] like that again)." I had to agree.

The rod was packed and before supper we strolled down the river, as I wanted to see the *desambocadura*, where the river spilled into the lake. At the next bend below where we'd been fishing, we found a pair of yoked oxen standing in front of a wooden cart by the river's edge; beyond them and walking towards us was a local, his arms by his sides, apparently burdened by a great weight. He wore a coarse wool poncho, *bombachas* (baggy trousers), leather boots and a beret.

As he neared us, it became clear that he was holding three trout, monolithic examples of their species. He slung the fish into the cart and removed his beret, mopping his brow as he did so. We asked how he'd caught his haul; grinning toothlessly, he revealed his *caña chilena* (Chilean rod) - a tin can wound with a length of thick nylon, tied to a heavy metal spoon, on which was a treble hook the size of a grappling iron. We watched in silence as the cart clunked away on rough wooden wheels. Neither of us spoke. I felt like the alien I was.

By the mid-Nineties, my wife and I were working in Argentinian Patagonia, establishing a sea-trout fishery north of the Magellan Straits. Once or twice a season, I made sorties to Chile. I never travelled without a rod, each trip a quest for angling El Dorado. What became clear to me was the wealth of fishing

the Chileans enjoyed, how diverse and remote by comparison with even the farthest-flung Argentinian fishing I had seen. Just as in Argentina, European settlers arriving in Chile round about the turn of the 20th century were amazed to find an exuberance of *salmonid* habitat completely devoid of adipose-finned inhabitants. It took less than a generation for this evolutionary oversight to be rectified. Scots settlers famously brought fertilised ova from brown trout and Atlantic salmon to Argentina in the Twenties. Just across the snow-capped mountain range, German immigrants had already seeded Chilean waters with rainbow, brown and brook trout as well as Atlantic and Pacific salmon.

With the greatest precipitation falling to the west of the Andes, Chile had water in far greater abundance than Argentina. Brooks, streams, rivers, ponds and lakes appear on maps like an aquatic membrane stretched over the southern half of the country. The fish enjoyed the cooler systems on the western slopes of the mountains, adapting to their new homes with alacrity, and permeating every pore of Chile's watery filigree.

I've seen some extraordinary fisheries in the southern half of Chile - immaculate spring creeks woven into the grasslands of the foothills, home to brown trout of unfeasible proportions; perfect free-stone rivers of all sizes, where prolific hatches of flies and their nymphs sustain trout until they're big enough to start eating the freshwater pancora crabs and their own kind. In Chile's Region X, where my wife and I renovated and ran a lodge, there was a brawling river outside the door with a big, surging current. At the edges of the main flow, if you could hold your raft while anglers cast at the back eddies, shoals of flawless ➤



rainbows sipped tiny morsels from the film. Many times, as hooked fish ripped into the depths, I witnessed murderous hook-jawed browns coursing the handicapped rainbows back to the surface, intent on butchery.

The lakes, too, are full of legend: once I fished the Rio Cochrane well into the southern autumn and, after a fruitless morning searching for the steelhead-like rainbows that spawn in the river, we motored on to the lake of the same name to pursue them there. The lake has a smattering of islands; we moored our boat against one and ambushed a pair of spectacular rainbows that were making lazy feeding circuits of the lee shore. Magnificent beasts they were – lean, angry powerhouses, trouble as soon as they felt the steel.

Where the River Futaleufu empties into Lago Yelcho, extensive reed-beds fringe the shoreline. During the summer, when the adult dragonflies are laying eggs and their nymphs leave the mire to fledge, the dry-fly fishing is insane, with lots of big fish. Yelcho and other lakes are famous for their fry-feeding trout, too, but the dry-fly fish are the ones to catch.

From Chile's Lake District south to Tierra del Fuego and the myriad islands of the west coast, the country's fly-fishing is exceptionally

### HOW AND WHEN TO GO

The season runs from November to April. Focus on those operators or agents who offer multiple fishing options during your stay. Tackle should be tailored to your fishing preferences: for trout, single-handed 9ft rods in line weights from 4 to 8 floating to fast-sinking lines. Flies: imitative dries and nymphs between 16 and 8, terrestrial patterns such as grasshoppers and beetles, and streamers.

### THREE OF THE BEST

**ANDES JOURNEYS** The Dufflocq brothers operate three lodges and a live-aboard boat for remote coastal rivers; tel 001 (406) 241 8645; [www.andesjourneys.com](http://www.andesjourneys.com); or email [cdufflocq@andesjourneys.com](mailto:cdufflocq@andesjourneys.com)

**NERVOUS WATERS** Its Futa Lodge offers comfortable accommodation and remote stream, river and lake fishing; tel 01485 512046; [www.nervouswaters.com](http://www.nervouswaters.com); or email [nickmonica@nervouswaters.com](mailto:nickmonica@nervouswaters.com).

**NOMADS OF THE SEAS** provides luxury accommodation aboard a 150ft boat, travelling to to remote coastal rivers; tel 00 562 2414 4690; [www.nomads.cl](http://www.nomads.cl).

diverse and I haven't even mentioned the brookies, sea-run trout, salmon or steelhead. The Carretera Austral, Chile's Route 7, is the only main road south of Puerto Montt, with very few spurs off it. Much of the land south of Villa O'Higgins – where Route 7 terminates at Los Glaciares National Park – and the hinterland between the coast and Route 7 is unexplored country, prohibiting access other than by coastal boats, helicopters or sea-planes.

Experiences gleaned from a lifetime spent seeking out fly-fishing's last nirvanas suggest that most of the world's finest remaining wild fisheries are a bit farther away than at the end of the proverbial dirt track. Precious few offer anglers grand, uncharted wilderness, unlimited angling perspective and 19th-century charm. I can think of nowhere that does so more than Chile. ■

### Fishing in Chile

Scan the QR code with a smartphone to watch this blue, streamlined locomotive puff its way around the country: <http://bit.ly/1OIMDkm>

