

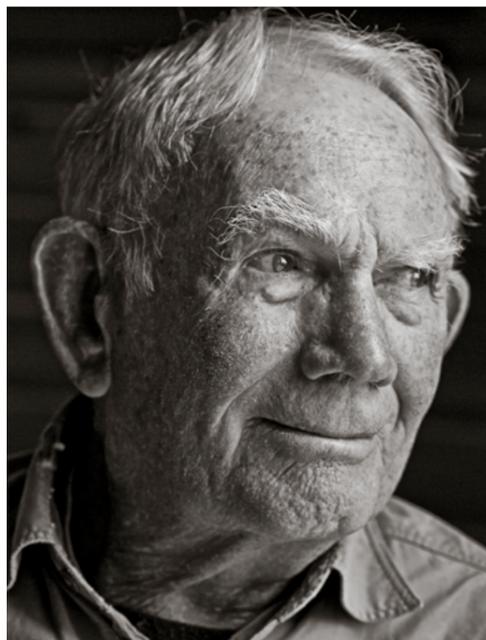
IN
THE
LAND
OF
FIRE

Matt Harris returns once again to the incomparable Rio Grande and is reminded why it remains one of his favourite places on earth.



Of all the waters that I've been lucky enough to cast my line over, Tierra del Fuego's legendary Rio Grande retains a very special place in my heart. It was the first "destination" fly fishery I visited, way back in 1999, and my first fish – a fabulous 22lb sea trout – will stay with me forever.

My second visit, in 2001, came just two months after my father died. It was the first time that I had lost someone close to me, and my emotions were still extremely raw. The fishing was absurdly good, but my most vivid memory doesn't involve any of those lithe, magnificent



fish. One afternoon, when the rest of the group were sleeping off lunch, I grabbed my cameras and climbed a high bluff. As the winds whistled around me, I finally felt the full force of my loss. I loved my father dearly, and he was the man I most admired in all the world. Until that instant, in a fog of grief and denial that perhaps only others who have lost a loved one will really understand, I had been unable to grasp the reality of what had happened. In a moment of savage and crystal clarity, I suddenly recognised that I would never again enjoy my father's warmth, humour or his wisdom. I knew finally that he was gone, and it was a bitter pill to swallow. I'm not ashamed to say that for long, long minutes, the tears streamed down my face in what I realise now was a true catharsis. Watching the river wind off into the blurry horizon, under the wide Patagonian skies, I finally said goodbye to my father. Then, feeling as if a great burden had lifted from my shoulders, I walked back down the hill. That moment too will stay with me forever.

Twelve years later, I finally returned to the Rio Grande. I was lucky enough to be staying at Kau Tapen: the most renowned lodge on the river. Kau Tapen celebrates its 30th anniversary this coming season, and over those long years it has become a legend in the fly fishing world.

Kau-Tapen was the first fishing lodge built



on the Rio Grande, established by Jaqueline de las Carreras and her family in 1984.

Despite a life blighted by polio, Jaqueline was the early life force of the lodge. On one occasion she famously caught multiple seatrout from her wheelchair in the back of a truck reversed into the river. Her youngest son Fernando, who guided the first guests at the tender age of 14 is the C.E.O of Nervous Waters - the company that owns Kau-Tapen today. The lodge still retains its reputation as one of fly-fishing's most inimitable experiences, with fabulous fishing and a warm informal charm that is singularly unique.



“TACKLE
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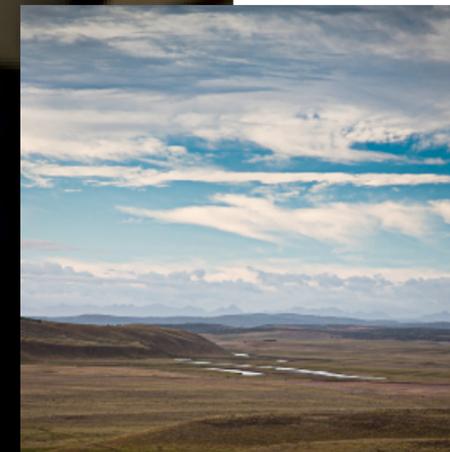
As I made my way through those hallowed portals, I was greeted by my old Russian friend Max Mamaev, Head Guide at the fabulous Ryabaga Camp on the Ponoï, genius spey-caster and a veteran guide at Kau Tapen during the Kola Peninsula's long winter. As we wrestled the cameras and the rod-tubes through the door, I saw another face I knew: Pat Butler, 83 years young, a passionate and intrepid fly fisherman and a true inspiration. As Pat did his best to wave away my hugs and my beseeching bombardment of “How are you, you old bugger? Can I fish with you? Oh, go on!! Please!!!”, I knew it would be a special week.

The schedule at Kau Tapen is exactly as I like it – punishingly long hours of excitement punctuated with regular restorative breaks for fabulous food and drink amongst great company.

The drill goes like this... You wake early, and after breakfast you hook up with your guide, leap into the truck and hit the river. Guanacos scatter as you leave the main track and bump

across the pampas to the first pool of the day; a long, gleaming glide, with a high cut-bank on the far side that just *must* hold fish.

Tackle the fish any way you like. While Pat likes to fish ‘properly’, casting a small streamer or nymph poker-straight at 45 degrees and swinging it carefully and precisely over the lies, I like to tie on a Sunray Shadow the size of a small rattlesnake and fizz it across the surface at a rate of knots. If the notorious wind drops, I love to fish a single-hander, just to make things difficult, and if I get his attention, I grin back at Pat as he rolls his eyes. He watches me with theatrical disapproval as I put the rod under my arm and fish hand over hand to rip the fly back even faster, and suddenly I'm laughing with glee, as a titanic combustion signals a take. I'm about to shout some abuse at my old friend when I see his line smack up hard against the rod and instantly, he too is playing a big, feisty fish. Double hook-ups happen at Kau Tapen – it's that kind of place.



Finally, I carefully draw the fish up onto the grass and gently ease out the hook. Where else would you not even bother to photograph a 14lb sea trout covered in sea-lice? Pat's fish is slightly bigger – 16lb. Our brilliant young Irish guide, Matt, carefully weighs the fish before we watch

it dash back off into the crystal-clear waters.

By noon, the sun is high over the water, and the wind is really starting to get up. We've had another couple of fish each, and now it's time to head back to the lodge for a delicious lunch of roast lamb and a big glass of that exquisite, plum-coloured Malbec. After a great lunch, a second glass of Malbec and a large snifter of Cognac, the crisp, white sheets and vast pillows are irresistible. Soon enough, head guide Jean Baptiste is banging on the door and it's four o'clock – time to wriggle back into those waders and head to the river for my favourite part of the day.

The wind is blowing hard, but our first spot is set up perfectly with the savage gale obligingly blowing across our right shoulders and over the pool. Big dark clouds are scudding across the sky and, as the wind intensifies, I reach the deepest gut in the heart of the pool. There's a big boil at the sunray, and I switch to the quintessential Rio Grande fly: the Yuk Bug, a daft-looking concoction of black chenille, grizzle hackle and white rubber legs. But don't be put off – just about every fish in Patagonia will go crazy for this thing. Sure enough, as I almost know it will, the line locks up hard, and another gorgeous silver sea trout takes to the air.

The afternoon drifts into early evening and the wind starts to die down. A big thunderhead drifts harmlessly off to the west, and the light softens. We change pools, and after a couple more beautiful fish around 10lb each, I switch again, to something more substantial – a big olive Woolly Bugger replete with those same rubber legs. Pat is in to a fish – a beauty that crashes around like a mad thing – and I rush down to get a picture of my old friend, but another spectacular leap and the hook wrenches out. Pat won't be too concerned, I muse – he's



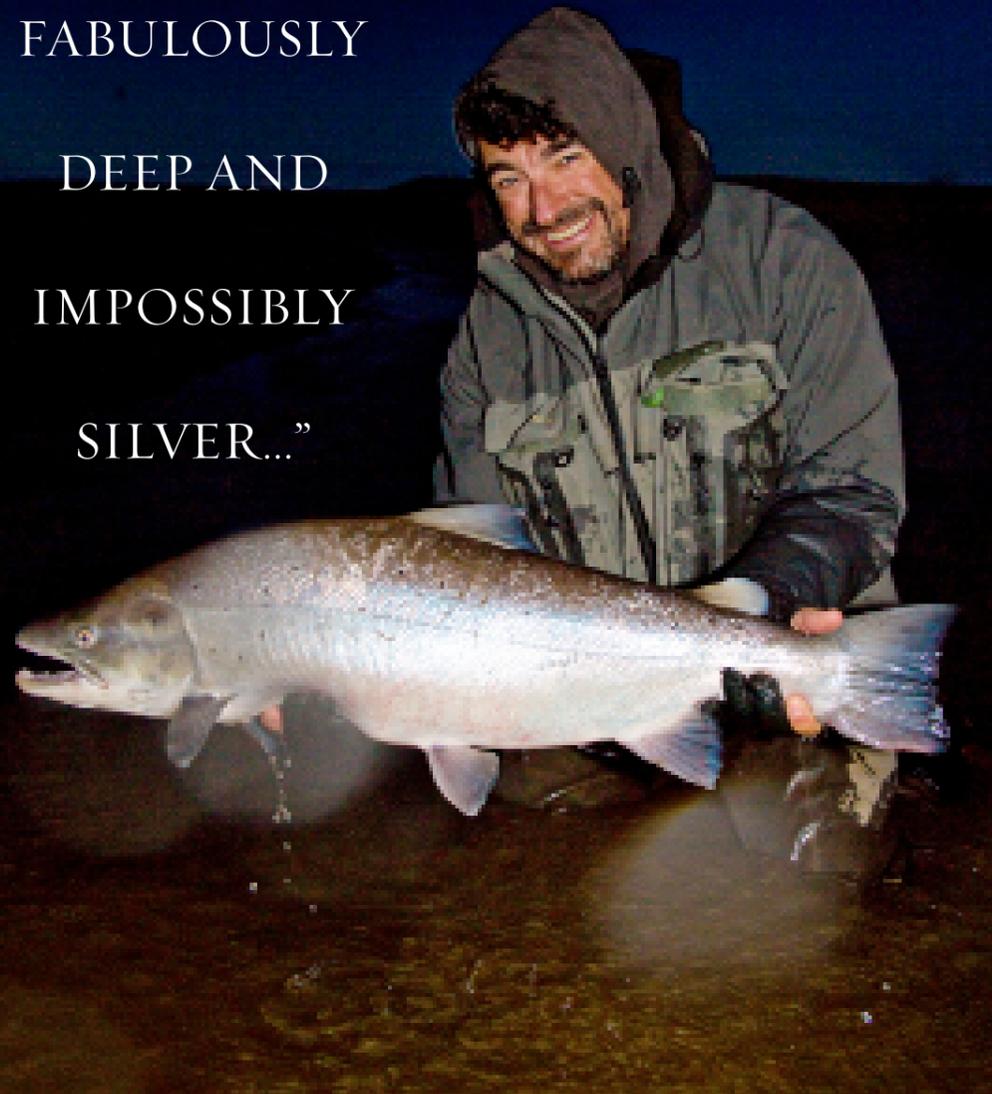
FOREIGN FORAYS

caught plenty of fish that would have dwarfed this one in the long years that he has been returning to Kau Tapen. He checks the hook diligently before sending another cast whistling across the river. I've barely turned around when he's into another, and as I watch, I realise that I was wrong – Pat's taught expression betrays the fact that he really *does* want to land every one of these big silver bars of treasure. The gloom is gathering now, and I dash back for my flashgun as my friend wrestles with the fish. By the time I've taken some pictures of Pat's third 16-pounder of the day, the light is leaching out of the sky. As I fumble for my headtorch from out of my jacket, and hastily tie on a big string leech, I know that the last and best part of the day is upon us.

This last hour on the Rio Grande – the magical time when the stars of the Southern Cross start to twinkle overhead, and the last dying embers of the sunset paint themselves across the western sky – is one of the most special experiences in all of fly fishing. Tie on something big and nasty and get fishing: this is the time when the big, burly sea trout that have made Kau Tapen rightly famous come out to play.

I stay out of the water, conscious that the fish are easily put down by a splash or a heavy footfall, and extend the line across the pool, carefully winding my shooting line back onto the spool so that I cannot overcast and snag the far bank once darkness is fully upon us. Twenty paces down the pool and there is a huge splash downstream. I can just make out the silvery ripples spreading out across the gleaming water, and I quicken my pace as I work towards the spot where the fish has shown. I check for wind knots and make sure that the fly is fishing properly, and then, turning off my head-torch, I send the big leech arcing out across the wide, dark waters of the pool.

“...THIS FISH –
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The fish comes out of nowhere. None of the plucks or jags that can bedevil the fisher during the day – just a savage, wrenching pull that has the loop dragged out of my hand and the big Mako reel fizzing before I've even had a chance to raise the rod. The fish is big, no question – it crashes across the river and as it bolts up into the night, I'm afforded an exquisite moment when its vast silhouette is etched against the fiery afterglow of the sunset. I race off after it and hearing my

shouts, young Max – our guide for the evening session – comes galloping downstream with the net. I'm just like my dear old friend Pat – I *want* this fish. For an instant, disaster – the line goes slack – but then, in that special moment that many Kau Tapen regulars will know all too well, there is a huge splash and the line comes up tight again. The tension was only out of the line while the fish was in the air, and now I realise with relief that it is still very much attached. We go at it some more, but slowly I feel the power of this

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big, silver brute start to wane, and finally, Max scoops up our prize.

I look at its deep shoulders and mean, powerful jaws. Broad silvery flanks, spattered with jet black spots and a vast spade of a tail. The scales flash an iridescent sapphire-blue in the torchlight, and the sea-lice betray the fact that this stunning colossus of a sea trout was almost certainly cavorting in the wild, wind-whipped waves of the Southern Atlantic while I was sipping my early-morning coffee. Twenty pounds? As near as damn it. I've been lucky – I've had a good number of 20lbplus sea trout from this magical river, but this fish – fabulously deep and impossibly silver, is up there with any of them. We ease out the hook and compose a quick photo before Max gently cradles the fish to release it on its way. With a huge and defiant flourish of its vast tail, it bursts out of Max's hands and is gone, back into the night.

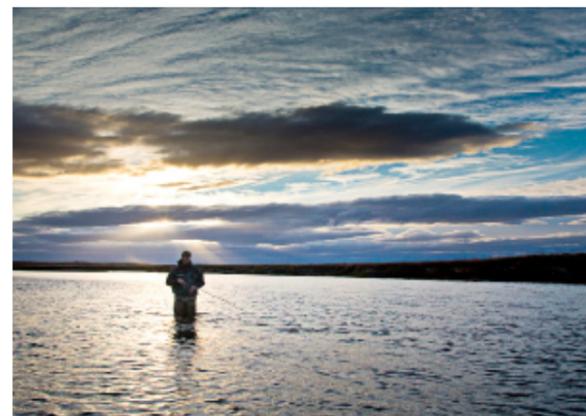
With a grin, I clap Max on the back and thank him for another magical day at Kau Tapen. Pat congratulates me and the three of us laugh all the way back to the lodge where the fire and an indecently large supper await us.

The next day is the last of the trip. I wake early, and the whole camp is still sleeping as I climb the low hill behind the lodge. At the top of the bluff, I stop and look out to the west, where the vast, jagged peaks of the southern Andes peep over the wide horizon. The wind whistles out of the west again, and the bleak cold light of the dawn plays across the vast, wild plains of Magellan's "Land of Fire" below. I attempt a photograph, but somehow I cannot resolve the spectacular view into a composition, and after a few changes of lens and viewpoint, I give up.

Instead, I sit down and gaze across the wild landscape below me, just as I did 12 years ago. The wild winds have my eyes watering again, and I realise with a smile how lucky I've been to visit this very special place once more.

And to have fished with my dear old friend, Pat Butler.

And to have known my father.



CONTACT

Kau Tapen Lodge celebrates its 30th birthday this year. It is the perfect fly fishing lodge – I cannot think of one way in which this unique and very special place could be improved. The delicious food, fabulous wine, warm and attentive service, big roaring fires, exquisitely appointed rooms and wide, wild views across the pampas are only part of the story. There is a special ambience about the place that makes you feel as if, for one special week, you are part of the family. I love to fish, and I'm happy to sleep in a tent and eat soup from a tin all week if the fishing merits it, but Kau Tapen is just a magical experience, and I was utterly seduced by the place. As for the fishing, well it is just off the charts. If your dream is to battle against double-figure sea trout that are as wild as the wind, with the very real chance of a 20 and perhaps even a 30-pounder, you simply must come here. My trip was seamlessly organised by Tarquin Millington Drake, who also arranged a further "add-on" week at Estancia Laguna Verde, fishing for the vast rainbows of Lake Strobel, another truly world-class fly fishing experience.
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