





A Fly in the Curtains

By Doug Larsen

Staggering numbers of huge sea-run brown trout await you at this storied lodge in Tierra del Fuego. And when you catch that big one, be sure to hook your lucky fly in the drapery.

Photography by Valentine Atkinson

Back in 1984 Ronald Reagan was President of the United States. Madonna was a controversial twenty-something pop star as she performed her hit, *Holiday*, on *American Bandstand*. The blockbuster movie of that year was *Ghostbusters*, and it was no big deal to drive to the theater to see it because gasoline was a buck a gallon.

Oblivious to the political and social activity over 6,000 miles away in the United States, a determined young woman in Tierra del Fuego, the tiny island separated from Argentina by the infamous Straits of Magellan, had been listening to the opinions of several respected Argentine anglers, and was in the final stages of completing an ambitious plan. She was about to build a fishing lodge, where she and her family owned land along the Rio Grande River. She intended to introduce the sportfishing world to the huge sea run trout of Tierra del Fuego.

While salmon angling trips to Iceland and trout fishing vacations in New Zealand are seen as commonplace among today's global anglers, fly-fishing travel was in its infancy in 1984.

Sea run trout were known only to the British, the Norwegians, and to a few knowledgeable *estancieros* in Tierra del Fuego. The few others who were aware of the fishery were the well-traveled fly-fishing illuminati of the time – men like Joe Brooks, Jorge Donovan and Juan “Bebe” Anchorena. They knew that brown trout planted there in 1935 by John Goodall had grown, gone to the sea, and were returning each year as brutish fish in the 10- to 15-pound range.

To lure sportsmen thousands of miles to fish largely untested waters seems, in hindsight, like a pipe dream. But Jacqueline de las Carreras had faced adversity in her life and she was the kind of individual who believed that most anything could be done if you worked at it hard enough.

Jacqueline had never wet a line in her life and had never set foot in a fishing lodge, yet she set out to build the most exotic fly fishing destination of the time. It was a brave plan.

Kau Tapen opened in 1984, with Jacqueline Carreras serving

as the hostess. She employed a chef and a waitress from nearby Chile, and brought in three guides. I came from Minneapolis by way of Alaska where I had been guiding for several years. I knew how to fish trout and pacific salmon, but knew nothing of sea trout. My only real qualification for being there was the fact that I had not slept through many high school Spanish classes.

The second guide was to be Jacqueline's son, Fernando, who had spent summers on the family ranch, so he was at least qualified to be there from a geographical and family, if not an angling, perspective.

Our third guide was Hector Mansilla, the only one of us with a Rio Grande address. A waiter in the dining room at the local hotel, Hector had poached along the Rio Grande for years.

That first season, clients were hard to come by, which was not surprising given the fact that Kau Tapen was a brand new operation, nobody knew about the fishery, and it was a million miles away from every world capital. Nevertheless, a few intrepid anglers made the journey.

In those days, flying from Buenos Aires to Rio Grande required a ten-hour trip with two connections, a rough enough day of air travel, considering it occurred after one had flown all night from Miami.

The lodge's very first clients were an aging Methodist minister and his brother. Fernando met the two anglers at the local airport and transported them back to the lodge where just after dusk they were treated to a candlelight dinner. While Fernando had been away, the newly wired generator shorted and caught fire. Fortunately, a perfectly timed cloudburst had doused the blaze and saved the generator hut, and the lodge, from total catastrophe.

That first official fishing day dawned clear and windy, and while the electricity was being repaired, the two brothers were driven to the river in little Fiat sedans that had been rented for the season. Accompanied in rotation by one of the guides, they fished portions of the river reachable by car. A grader had been previously employed to cut a road along the river, but due to the winding nature of the Rio Grande, in many places the road was hundreds of yards from the water.

The anglers and guides walked from pool to pool, carrying



their tackle while mingling with flocks of sheep. At the river's edge they would tie on a wooly bugger, or some dark salmon fly and then swing it into the current, hoping a big trout would gobble it up at the end of the swing.

On the third day of fishing at Kau Tapen, there came a miracle that would rival Maradona's World Cup soccer goal two years later: a sea run trout inhaled a Night Hawk fly tied by the Methodist minister. After a splashy fight, the guide knocked the fish on the head, then it was brought to the lodge and that evening it was cooked by the chef. Jacqueline rang a little silver bell at the dining table and the waitress served the trout with great ceremony.

The brothers celebrated their good fortune by burying the minister's fly, which was bestowed the name *la campeona*, or the champion, in the fabric of a dining room drapery, where it would hang for posterity. This would be the last fish to be purposefully killed at the lodge, and so began the era of catch-and-release fishing on the Rio Grande.

The season marched on, and while the guides, myself included, went to the river each day, determined to unlock the mysteries of the sea trout, Jacqueline busied herself by cleaning the lodge obsessively, and waiting. After each day's fishing, she would gaze out the lodge windows, anxiously waiting to greet the anglers at the lodge door, then inquire as to their success as they stowed their rods and wrung out their wet wading socks while huge moths danced around the porch light.

One of the biggest challenges in that first year, aside from not really knowing much about the fish themselves, was dealing with the relentless Fuegian winds. Often topping 60 miles-per-hour, the fierce gales lorded over the river valley like a bully. The prevailing winds had influenced where the lodge was built, dictated how and where the cars were parked (always into the wind, lest the doors be

sprung), and forced the guides and their anglers to fish early and late when casting would be least affected by the breeze. They even dictated where you hung your gear. Woe to the angler who left his lightweight waders on a hook outside the lodge. One angler draped his Red Ball Waders on an outside hook and went inside for lunch. They blew off, inflated like a balloon, and were found draped over a woven-wire fence four miles downriver.

Indeed, fishing on the Rio Grande was tough in those days. I recall many weeks when the catch rates worked out to about one-third of a fish per angler per day. The fish were so hard to come by that we were never able to establish any sort of pattern. This was well before the era of spey, or two-handed, rods, at least outside Scotland, and loose fly line snarled in the wind on every cast. It was hard to envision that one would ever catch a trout, since the angling process was so difficult.

The only thing we knew for certain was that during "the magic hour" – the hour preceding dusk – the river you'd fished all day and appeared devoid of trout, would often boil with brown trout as long as your arm – some as long as your leg. Daytime hook-ups were as rare as Argentina's anti-inflationary policies. But there were trout to be had in the darkness.

In the southern latitude, the sun didn't set until after 11 p.m.,

Above: Two souls from another age share a relaxing moment at Cabin Bluff along with a Winchester. Quite gun is still going right: photograph the author's hunt.



so if you wanted to catch a big brown, you had to be on your game and ready sometime around 9:00 with a fresh attitude and fresh barrel knots, for that when the wind would finally lie down and the big fish would leave the comfort of the sod cut-banks.

After a thousand casts with an 8-weight sinking tip, there was no better feeling than to find that your line had stopped swinging. Then you'd feel that dull, heavy headshake somewhere beneath the flow. The take of a big brown was electric, if for no other reason than you had been so desensitized by casting and casting. After traveling and then fishing hard for days, you were suddenly connected to your prize – a giant brown leaping high above the surface, its silver sides flashing in the moonlight.

The scene was always the same when fighting those big trout. You'd back up to a gravel bank and slide the fish onto shore or into a short-handled net. Then, as you made ready to release it, you would find yourself marveling at this amazing creature, a unique combination of trout and salmon that seemed so out of place in this desolate land of sheep and guanacos, condors and flamingoes.

With shaking hands you'd measure the fish and either sigh or gasp to find it was well over 30 inches, easily the biggest trout you'd ever seen, much less caught.

I caught my first big Rio Grande trout while I was fishing alone in a pool named Polo. I was casting a boron Fenwick 8-weight and some homemade sinking-tip contraption sometime after 10 p.m., almost black dark on the river. My fly swung under a jumble of sod clumps along the far bank. I felt it hang up, and when I gave the rod a quick flip to pull the fly off a grass snag, I felt a dull throbbing and the hair on my neck rise. Fly line slithered through my hands like a hot wire as the fish turned and headed downstream. He raced to mid-channel, and gained speed as I waded after him.

The trout didn't completely clear the water when he rolled, but he came out far enough that I could see his deep flanks and broad tail. Two hundred yards away, at the tail of the Polo pool, the river switched directions and ran much deeper. To land this fish, I would have to cross the river to beach him on a gravel bar. The problem was, I'd never crossed there. But faced with the prospect of losing the fish or drowning while trying to land him, I felt drowning was an acceptable risk.

I bounced along on my toes, keeping the rod high while tugging at the tops of my waders to keep them above the heavy current. After several more heart-wrenching runs, the trout



swam into the shallows and from there I slid him onto the beach. The length times girth math put him at 24 pounds.

I clearly remember seeing that trout work its steel- and turquoise-colored gill plates, and by the yellow glow of a penlight I watched him slip into the dark flow. Walking back to car, I stared into the nighttime sky while the lyrics of Crosby Stills & Nash echoed through head: "When you see the Southern Cross for the first time, you understand why you came this way," and I wanted to race back to the lodge to tell Jacqueline that I'd caught a big one, because I knew she'd be so happy that her brave plan was working.

KAU TAPEN TODAY

Following a rough beginning 30 years ago, Kau Tapen has had a storied record as one of the most exciting and interesting fishing destinations on the planet. Over the years it has been host to everyone from novice anglers to former Presidents.

Fishermen now travel to the lodge with the realistic hopes of meeting a big trout face to face on the Rio Grande. These days, your odds are far better than they were in 1984. The river is far more productive than it was years ago, in large part due to Kau

Tapen's catch-and-release program. (In 2012 catch-and-release fishing finally became law in Tierra del Fuego.)

The trout run, which has been studied over the last six years, currently numbers about 75,000 browns, with staggering numbers of fish per mile. Last year, and indeed over the last decade, most anglers have averaged two to three big trout per day. The average fish weighs about 11 pounds, and you will most likely hook a trout exceeding 15 pounds during your weeklong stay. Every week the anglers catch one or two fish weighing 20 pounds or more, and trout up to 35 pounds have been landed. Lodge guests have logged five IGFA world record catches.

There have been many changes at Kau Tapen. Jacqueline is now a 75-year-old grandmother who dotes on her grandchildren

Chama's Frank Simms and his good dog Crockett share a moment of introspection in the soaring northern New Mexico high country. Below: A fine young buck heads for his bedding area in a copse of flaming autumn oaks.



in Buenos Aires. Fernando is a married father of two who manages the Kau Tapen operation and serves as CEO of his fishing company, Nervous Waters.

The lodge has been improved and expanded; it's now about 10,000 square feet and complete with such amenities as wireless Internet and a sauna/spa. There are beautiful guest rooms, with stylish accommodations for up to 12 anglers, and meals are so amazing that guests photograph their plates with smartphones. The Fiats are gone; now four-door trucks whisk anglers to the river.

Each day fishermen visit many different pools – plenty of water means better odds at catching a big one, and better angles for casting in the wind. Casting is easier, too, because the team of international guides has introduced all kinds of new tactics and fishing gear. Today's spey and switch rods are the norm for the Rio Grande, enabling anglers to roll their lines across the river easily and to keep their flies in the best strike zones.

Something that has not changed at Kau Tapen is that electric feeling when a big trout takes your fly. It's as thrilling today as it was 30 years ago. One more thing: fishermen are still encouraged to leave a fly in the curtains. It's a tradition that has endured.

IF YOU WANT TO GO

Kau Tapen is booked by Nervous Waters, a Buenos Aires based company that also operates lodges in Argentina, Chile and the Bahamas. Bookings are taken for a week of fishing, which includes seven nights' accommodation and 6 1/2 days of guided fishing. Package prices vary with the seasons, ranging from \$4,550 per angler/per week in late March and April (towards the end of the run) to \$5950 for prime weeks. Prime time is Christmas to mid-March. Your book includes all meals and your stay at the lodge, with one guide per two anglers. It does not include flights to Buenos Aires or Rio Grande, nor en route expense such as hotels.

You'll find detailed information at www.nervouswaters.com or call (917) 338-7094. Complete pre-trip details will be provided at time of booking. Space in prime time at Kau Tapen can be difficult to come by, because many anglers return year after year in an effort to turn their big fish dreams into big fish reality.

Chama's Frank Simms and his good dog Crockett share a moment flaming autumn oaks.



