

Patagonia Chile

Un Amigo Nuevo – A new friend

Eighteen hours after boarding the airplane, I am standing on Chilean ground looking for my host. He is nowhere in sight.

The trip's conception began two years earlier on the beaches of Varadero Cuba as my wife points out a lone fly angler on the beach. I guzzle my cerveza, snatch the 8wt leaning against my Palapa and walk toward the fellow angler. With a thick Spanish accent, but otherwise good English, he introduces himself as Francisco, and we are off to chase the small Jacks and Spanish mackerel that are bouncing along the water's surface. Between flurries of "Jumping Jacks", I introduce myself as a fly-fishing guide from Canada; Francisco tells me that he is from Chile, a guide as well - in Patagonia. Our short acquaintance ends with the obligatory "You should visit some time" to which I reply, "That will be awesome." As we exchange e-mail addresses, I secretly think we will never meet again.

Bienvenido a Chile – Welcome



How is it that I could be standing in an airport looking for someone that I fished with for a few hours thousands of miles from our homes two years ago? Minutes later a young couple in their late 20s bolts through the doors. Francisco and his girlfriend Karina feel like old friends at once.

Two years of planning gives you plenty of time to determine what to do, and what to see, and most importantly, what to photograph. I want a photo of a South Andean deer, called Huemul – of which there are but 1500 left on the planet. It is kind of a pipe dream, because deer back home count in the hundreds of thousands but are still tough to photograph – the deer here are near extinct and cover thousands of Kilometres.

Half way to Coyhaique "Pancho" (as Francisco insists upon) stops the truck abruptly. "I have never seen one so close, look there are three!" He yells.

With camera in hand, I run for the river where three Huemul does congregate. I tell Pancho that it is an omen; good things will come on this trip.

Trucha de Lago – Ardillas – Trout of the Lakes

Our host meets us at the Ardillas Lodge and we unpack. Half an hour later I am standing on the bank of a flat blue lake surrounded by rock cliffs that tower high above on three sides. The wind is brisk and the temperature is seven degrees at both ends of my trip so my clothes are perfect.

A six-weight rod loaded with a full sinking line and a streamer seems appropriate as Pancho points me to an inside corner where the shallow bank drops immediately into the abyss. Two casts later, a nice 21-inch rainbow trout comes to net. It amazes me as I have little experience with sinking lines and streamers. Two more casts give up a 22-inch Brown trout. I look at Francisco with a big “thumbs up”, and declare that our Karma is indeed intact. My heart is jumping through my chest.

Lake fishing does not excite me, but knowing that this lodge is in the lakes region I am not about to bring my preconceived notions to Chile especially after catching two trophies in four casts. I am a guest, and determined to go with the flow no matter what direction the flow leads.

I am just being a good sport when Francisco motions toward the lake. I have doubts about the possible success of an evening’s fish, in fact, I really do not want to go fishing as it is cold, damp and I am tired. After a drink and light munchies, we jump into a boat, motoring across the lake. The boat hums along the bank and around a point to a secluded beach; all the while my attention is half on the lake and half on the surrounding terrain that looks like great territory for a Puma – another of my possible camera targets.



Pesca con Mosca – Fishing with a fly



“OK you fish” they motion me to get out of the boat and wade along the beach. As I take a few steps a huge trout bolts from cover a few yards away. The message is; slow down and keep my eyes open. The fly of choice is a size 4, black bodied foam rubber ant called “Chala”. Chala in Spanish means Flip-Flop or Sandal. They joke that it is from the family Chloptera. Chala is nothing I would trust back home, but all I read on the internet states that they are quite successful flies in this part of the world. My excitement peaks as I take two nice trout in the eighteen-inch range. Pancho makes a half hearted attempt to cast to the fish at my insistence, but I know that he only wants to see me get into fish right away. A true “Guia des Pesca con Mosca” (guide of fishing with fly). It really does not dawn on me until later that this is the first time they have been to this lake this season. Sweet!

The next day we are bound for Coyhaique and the Salmo Patagonia Lodge, with a new host and new surroundings. I am looking forward to another crack at some of the big trout at closer to town.

The Lodge at Ardillas is modest but comfortable; the hospitality is fantastic and the fishing tremendous! Salmo Patagonia is a step above. It is definitely high-end and the photos of trophy fish on every wall increase my expectations; Equipped with 8 rooms and ten independent cottages for “Do-it-yourselfers”, full bar, living room for a few dozen, and dining room to seat fifty or so, this is no camp. It will serve as my home away from home for the next two weeks. As I stand on the side deck admiring the vista high above the town of Coyhaique, I am totally at peace... my hat blows off and jolts me back to reality.

Salmo Patagonia Lodge -

I am nervous as I meet Luis Antunez - owner of the lodge but he is gracious and apologetic because his lodge is one day from being prepared for the season. Paintings lay about the huge dining table awaiting frames to hang in the new cabins. The paintings are amazing, all of fish and fishing. I come to understand that Luis is in fact the creator of these beautiful works. I offer to help get things ready but Luis will have no part of it. I am his guest!



I become acquainted with Karina as Pancho runs errands in town. She gives me the quick tour of Coyhaique and familiarizes me with the town layout. Coyhaique (pronounced Koy ay kay) is the area capital, which houses roughly 50 thousand people. It is nearly as modern as any small town of similar size in North America but simple and as friendly. Karina has just finished university and planning a six-month European adventure. She is returning to Santiago de Chile in a few days. How ironic it is that I was in such a hurry to get into a career after finishing school, and now in my later years I find myself chasing such dreams? I grew up too fast, and now need to make up for lost time.

New guests arrive to the Salmo Patagonia seemingly, as the last painting finds its place. The rooms are fine and the food is amazing. I did not realize that Luis is not their true Chef because his food was fantastic and I can tell watching that Luis enjoys cooking. Any Lady will be lucky to snag Luis - Lodge owner, artist, guide, labourer and Chef - a true gentleman - and single! Well he was at the time of my writing...sorry women, I understand his status has changed of late.

Los Guías – the guides

I have an idea that today will not go well when I focus my Camera on the boat. Pancho is already removing fly line from around his own neck after only two strokes of his oars! By the end of the day the two anglers catch a dozen trout after having Pancho paddle (read trawl) them while dragging their streamers – A task guides perform only after all else fails! I caught the same number of fish as the two anglers but I have no boat and



perhaps a hundred yards of lake that I can reach without risk of drowning. I enjoy my day thoroughly, another day of new experiences.

Day two presents Pancho with more to work with, and it shows. The two anglers are much better at fly-fishing and have a great day. My afternoon of fishing is constantly punctuated with laughter and splashing coming from their boat. I make a decision to take a belly boat this day so I will have more access to the lake. It turns out to be a good choice and I manage a great day of many Browns and Rainbows all on

the surface. They are beautiful wild fish with spots patterns of Red, Orange Black and Brown, all in the 12 to 16 inch range.

Rio Schein – No man's Land

By day five, we have our first day all to ourselves and Pancho chooses the Schein River as our destination.

The Schein is a spring creek that flows through a large savannah between the borders of Chile and Argentina. They refer to it as "No man's Land". The wind is howling as it was when I first arrived in Chile, but instead of 7 degrees Celsius, it was now about 17. We leave our identification at the border and the guard asks us to return the chain that crosses the road. He and his wife continue their card game while their newborn coos contently. We have to return by 10 Pm as the border closes by then.

The Schein River averages about 4 feet in width and perhaps 3 feet in depth with many holes perhaps 5 to 7 feet deep! If not for the ripples on the water it is hard to tell where the air ends and water begins, it is just that clear. I motion to Pancho as I take a huge drink from the river just to prove I can and live to tell the tale. I have never fished a river like this, but I have seen pictures, which boast huge and secretive fish in such places - I am excited just looking at it. It is possible to fish both sides of each oxbow formed by the changing direction of the confused river.

I catch only one fish on the Schein but I consider it my trophy of the trip. The fish is gorgeous, and at 19 inches it is no slouch either. I break off a nice fish on 3x tippet, and a huge V that dissipates just before taking my fly adds to the mystique of the place. Photos I take of the Schein as the sun retreats make the place look surreal. We have to leave by 9:30 – Just as the huge browns begin sipping BWOs. It is all I can do not to stay and risk arrest.



A late start to summer meant that runoff from the mountains muddied up the local rivers (Coyhaique and Paloma) rendering them unfishable, so we begin a few days road trip to see where Pancho intends on creating a new fishing program over lesser-traveled waters. In Chile “lesser-travelled” means likely not fished yet. Up to this point we have only ever seen one person anywhere fishing and one guide and client couple during the entire week.

The Austral Highway –

Horses were the major way of traversing the country until 1987 when the 1240 Km long Austral Highway was finished. Until then this part of the country was not accessible except via Argentina, therefore more of the Patagonian culture of Southern Chile relates more to Argentina than Northern Chile – Even today once you are away from a town the “Highway” turns from Pavement to Rubble.



We make a stop at a along the highway see a trophy fish that Luis found. As it happened, in 1996 Luis found a similar trout in a lake that appeared to be a world record. Luis called ESPN and invited them to document its capture; the fish turned out to be 28 pounds. Someone recognized the location of the lake and later recaptured the fish and killed it to have it mounted.

Pancho and I park the truck beside the highway and walk to the edge of a cliff overlooking a lake of about 15 acres. Even at 70 feet above the lake there is no mistaking that I was truly observing the biggest fish I have ever seen. The mammoth fish is near motionless in the clear water. We look at each other in amazement and scan in vain for other forms of life in that lake. This fish is clearly 3 feet long, the sole survivor who must have eaten himself into loneliness. Two ducks share the lake, but suspiciously without chicks! This fish is at least as large as the record Luis caught in 96, but will not meet the same fate.

To catch that fish would be the dream of a lifetime but I cannot bring myself to it as I did not ask Luis for permission and we are out of cell coverage. Pancho and I just watch in amazement for a time then quietly head back to the truck and on down the Highway.



The secondary roads are of dirt and rubble where the conditions even during the summer can be unpredictable. Every mile or so we come against a gate which I have to exit the truck, open and then close in order to pass. This series of gates keep local farm animals close to home; though I can't imagine farmers have any idea how many animals they possess judging by the sheer number of animals that we observe throughout the country, and lack of people to do any counting.

El Gaucho – The Cowboy

The first afternoon of our two-day trip is on Lago Alto. I had asked a few days ago for Pancho to get me into a position to take a good photo of a genuine Chilean Gaucho. It was another of my dream shots. The problem with this request is that it is be extremely rude to just stop and start snapping photos without asking first. Pancho had a plan.

Our destination today was the homestead of a gaucho named Abel. According to Pancho, Abel is over 90 years old and lives alone far from civilization. That pretty much describes where we find ourselves today. It is amazingly beautiful and at the end of our road through the final gate is a two-room shack. Smoke hangs onto the tin roof not wanting to rise beyond the safety of home. Goats, chickens and two cows sun themselves leisurely about the yard. Pelts from foxes that Abel had trapped hang like clothes on some line from my childhood.



Pancho has a bag of a few groceries containing Chilean yerba Mate, and some canned food for our host. He hands me a can of fruit to give to my new acquaintance. We knock on the creaky door and Abel invites us into the dirt-floored shack, where three legged chairs lined with goat's hide await us and the sweet smell of the wood stove hangs in the air. The room is mostly dark, except for the shards of light that cut through the smoke betraying the integrity of the walls. The windows are made of plastic vapour barrier that appears to inhale and exhale as the wind decides which way to blow.

Abel is a tall thin man missing many teeth, face deeply lined and leathery with the hands of a worker. He is gracious and invites us to take Mate. Since we want to fish the lake, we politely postpone the visit until our return from the lake in an hour or so. Abel chops wood as we prepare our equipment.



It seems strange seeing our inner tubes, fins, fly rods and gear strewn about a place, which has never seen plastic, surrounded by chickens and the like. The view to the lake is to well up. Why wouldn't someone want to live here away from the hustle and hassle of "Civilized" life? I wonder if I could even last a winter. Pancho tells me that Abel owns 1200 Hectares of land here, to which I reply, "Who is rich?" I recall Pancho telling me earlier that Luis' father "hated civilization"; I imagine that Abel hates it as well.

Pancho and I hike the ¼-mile or so to the lake where we find the most beautiful beach. Never a campfire



was lit on this beach, never a footprint, never a worm container, never a picnic basket. Never a fishing rod! Pancho and I do not speak a word. It is perfect that a person whom I know for such a short time is comfortable enough that he could just walk and fish in his own direction while I do likewise without feeling it necessary to comment on everything. The whole place and situation captures us - discussion is not necessary.

Pancho fades into the scenery down the beach; I am hypnotized by a 20-inch brown trout gliding past. My rod will not go together fast enough, but when it does, an errant cast ensures this fish will never return. My wading into the shallow clear water of the beach sends another bolting for cover. A wall of weeds, which insulates the beach from the deeper water of the inner bay, is my next destination. The dark blue colour is evidence that the lake is deep as well as clear. I do not expect much on my streamer but as I send my first cast sailing out to the depths beyond the weeds, I hope for the best and a strong take is my reward.

The fish is strong, tangling the leader in the weed bed and eventually breaking off. By the time I get untangled Pancho arrives from his tour of the long shoreline. We are ready for some travel in the belly boats so we switch to sinking lines for the trip.



I kick my Buck's Bag into motion, dragging a huge streamer at the business end of a six-weight line. Pancho follows as we head toward another secluded beach on Abel's paradise. While negotiating a shallow point a serious fish yanks my arm. I yell to Pancho to catch up to get a photo. Though it fights like a trouper, the fish measures a mere 18 inches. The depth of the water accentuated the fish's ability and I am surprised with its lack of length - not that I am unappreciative – Just surprised.

A nap on the deserted beach brings our body temperatures back up after the long drift in a cold belly boat, and then we make our way back to Abel's home. This wind has kicked up pretty good, but we are travelling downwind; the return is uneventful and fishless.

The focal point of Abel's main living area is an ancient wood stove held above the dirt floor by four fire logs. According to Pancho the fire burns continuously even throughout the summer. I imagine that it is because Abel has no matches. Abel does not speak English but Pancho translates for my benefit. He communicates my admiration for Abel's ability to live in the fashion that he does. Pancho informs me that Abel will allow me to take photos during our visit. I contain my excitement and remain respectful. "What a gift" I think.

Gauchos are the Patagonia equivalent to Cowboys. The term Gaucho originally meant Vagabond or Orphan. They were at the bottom of Argentinean society as what they carried was all they owned, they were like gypsies. Gauchos worked for the Estancia (Elite ranchers) as cattle herders or lived as nomads on the Pampas (grasslands) living on the many cattle, deer, ostrich and horses that escaped and roamed freely on the Pampas.



As years passed, the Gauchos gained acceptance for their military aptitude, horsemanship and the fact that they opened trade routes through the mountains. Roads were only added to the area in the late 1970s! Gauchos characteristically invited weary travellers to their food, fire and yerba-mate. Today the Gaucho is a symbol of Patagonian freedom and they are highly respected.

Abel cannot recall when the last time he was ever into town - perhaps 15 years. His wife is in hospital and he has been completely alone for the last 4 years. He and his wife have a son who constructed a third building to hold the animals during the winter. I cannot see why Abel has not opted to move into the nice new building but I imagine some deeper reasoning stands. I pass the Mate gourd back to Abel and I never ask the question.

Abel hovers above us proudly, clad in traditional pleated dark pants with colourful bandana around his neck as he sips Mate. He blows into the wood stove to stoke the fire and the resulting smoke whirls around his head and into the dark rafters of the shack. Behind his back, a colourful sash, called a Tirador, tethers a large dagger (facon).

Mate is its own form of communication. Patagons will invite travellers into their homes as a courtesy and offer Mate; a tea-like drink contained by a small gourd and drank through a silver metal straw called a Bombilla. The host will pour the Mate and drink first because the first drink is bitter. The host will refill the mate gourd and offer it to the guest with the silver straw facing the guest. Mate is to be taken in the right hand, do not thank the host until finished. If the Mate is too hot or too cold then the host wishes your stay to be short. If the Mate is just right then all is well – our Mate is perfect and our stay is just long enough.

As Pancho and Abel speak, my eyes search for some secret of Abel's life, but his secrets do not give themselves easily. A single light bulb hangs from the ceiling tied by two bare wires clearly not built to any code of modernity. The wire runs across the ceiling down the wall into radio and to the dirt floor where a lone car battery stands. I cannot imagine him listening to radio nor can I imagine the blasphemy of such sound infecting the perfect serenity of his place.



The man is beautiful, the place is paradise and I am humbled. I feel strangely guilty that my own life requires so much “stuff”.

Rio Baker – The Baker River

We head out to the Austral Highway and toward the ocean. Each turn along the way opens up to yet another jaw-dropping view as mountains, lakes and streams drift past like a never-ending musical score.



Each place we approach was another postcard vista. At dusk we notice a small bay off the main river with a thousand rise forms from fish sipping midges on the surface. I cannot contain myself, and demand that Pancho stop the truck for closer inspection. I give him my word that we will be but ½ hour and leave - darkness is falling fast.

We catch perhaps 10 smallish rainbow trout in the half hour and we are again on our way. As darkness falls, we arrive at Tranquilo, a small town of 400 on

General Carrera Lake. We stay at a hostel that is modest and clean. The next morning we continue our journey to the Rio Baker.

The Rio Baker is deep, blue, wide and fast like the Niagara, but before the mountain runoff begins, the low water allows anglers to fish from the several gravel bars in the middle of the river. The manager at the Baker River Lodge lends us a guide for a few hours so that we can take a few casts while we are there. Gerardo escorts us up to a bare island of gravel in the center of the river.



Gerardo cannot speak any more English than I can speak Spanish, but fly-fishing is a universal language so I feel that I know what to do. He moves me to a deep hole between islands where the water flushes from my immediate right and 90 degrees upstream to create a vortex of dead water within a whirlpool just in front of me. I know just looking at it that it holds fish – I also know looking at it that it is near impossible to get a drag-free drift without some serious mending.

It is all I can do to get my indicator to drift along the current seam, and I think that I am doing well stack mending but without results. I ask Pancho to ask the guide if I am doing it correctly. Pancho replies, “He was just commenting that you are a very good mender and he wishes his last clients mended as well.” Shortly after the words leave his lips my float bolts into the blue. I hit it hard and immediately a large, angry brown busts a hole in the water and re-enters before the hole can close. Unfortunately my line goes limp shortly after the re-entry and I looking toward Gerardo in disbelief. Upon retrieving my hook, Gerardo shows me the scale that is stuck to my hook. I just shake my head.

I miss the next take because I have too much line on the water and cannot get a tight line on during the take but finally I hook up on a 20ish Rainbow that likes my #18 Copper John. Pancho is up next and it does not take long before a good fish takes my Copper John from Pancho. We have no others so we decide it is a good time to leave for our next adventure. After the 50-cent tour of the remarkable lodge, we tip Gerardo and head toward “home”.



It is difficult to tell whether the horses of Chile are wild or tame, as they are seemingly everywhere: They walk the roadways, climb the mountains, wade on the

shorelines and occasionally pass dragging a rope to remind us that at some point this animal at least once met a human. My camera records each new sight along the journey.



By mid-afternoon threatening clouds obstruct the sun. Pancho and I are heading back to Coyhaique and still a few hours out we pass a Lago far below the highway. Pancho comments that he had fished that lake several years ago but could not recall how to get to it. We turn around and drive the shoulder until we came upon three small “Roads”. One is no more than what mountain-bikers call a single track, the next is a fire road, and the third road at least had evidence of a visited once this season – we choose that one.

On the way down, I comment to Pancho that there is small chance of us getting out. We are traversing a mountain with a truck at such an angle that I am surprised the truck does not stall. Pancho is sure that he can get us out and I guess I have to trust his judgement about the abilities of a 4-wheel drive over my own back in Canada – especially since my 4x4 never had reason to climb more than a few yards at any given time back in Ontario.

A handmade bridge of logs stands at the bottom of the trail spanning a small creek. We must to cross it and I want to get a good shot of Pancho and the truck meeting their demise so I and my camera exit the truck and stand in wait for the debacle to unfold. Pancho crosses the bridge safely and without incident, nonetheless we are fishless at this place but my mind is not on the fishing, but rather on the building clouds, eventual nightfall, and our likeliness of getting out.



Huemul macho –South Andean Deer Buck

Heading back to lodge, Pancho comments that we are coming to the place where Huemul lives. Just as we corner the highway, Pancho yells and points to a male Huemul that was on the parking area walking alone.



Our Huemul crosses the road and climbs the hill as I shoot and he is gone as if it never happened. Back in the truck I curse as the first few shots are blurry, but I get two shots that are keepers – Pancho and I high-five and are on our way. It is an ideal finish to a memorable trip.

Returning home is bittersweet; I feel like I am leaving home but I am going home. It is strange that the place so quickly grows on me, and the memories and pictures run through my mind the entire trip home:

I think of the Gaucho Abel sipping mate on his paradise high over Lago Alto as wild brown trout left to flourish untroubled on the deserted shores.

I recall my first sight of the first Huemul on the way to Coyhaique, and the wild Parakeets at Ardillas Lodge. I grow to expect and appreciate the feel of the wind that persists for days, and I long for another windy opportunity on the Rio Schein.

I still see the Caracara soaring over the fields while the Ring neck Pheasant calls for companionship from the valley below the lodge. I imagine what would happen if I cast to the solitary monster brown in the Lago – I could see my face holding Luis' 28-pound monster.

Like the elusive Puma that skulks throughout the mountains unseen, Chile haunts me – I am changed. That fish still waits.