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IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME

FELIX BORENSTEIN'S JOURNEY TO CREATE
HIS MAGNUM OPUS: OWEN RIVER LODGE

APRIL VOKEY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BARRY & CATHY BECK, & OWEN RIVER LODGE





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E STANDS BESIDE A LARGE BRASS GONG AND PATIENTLY AWAITs THE CHEF'S DINNER ANNOUNCEMENT. Even in the silence, his presence fills the room—professional posture, polite smile, sparkling eyes.

His vocabulary is polished, humor subtle. If you're not listening carefully, it can be easy to miss it altogether.

I first met Felix Borenstein during my stay as a guest at his fishing lodge on New Zealand's South Island. The main lodge, a converted farmhouse, overlooks the pristine Owen River. Its six country cabins speckle the landscape like a watercolor painting. A much-loved garden and two equally loved Labs frame the lodge entrance. Red stags roar in the distance, and birds harmonize in the fruit trees. The setting rivals the best of *Country Living*, and Borenstein's hospitality only perfects an already outstanding experience.

It took me several years to truly grasp how inspirational Borenstein's story is. A gracious host, he has a knack for listening and is talented at keeping the focus away from himself. It wasn't until I sat down to interview him for my podcast *Anchored Outdoors* that I learned how he got into fishing and, later, how he got into the fishing industry.

Borenstein was born in Melbourne, Australia to immigrant parents. Both are now passed. His father was a mechanical engineer student from Poland, and his mother was from Yugoslavia. In 1942, his father was shipped to Auschwitz, where he survived due to his training as an engineer. When he was freed by Allied troops in 1945, he fled to Australia, where in 1956 he met Borenstein's mother. Four years later Borenstein was born.

Borenstein's face turns somber when he speaks about his parents' struggle to find freedom in Australia, where they went on to raise him and two brothers. In 1970, when he was only 10 years old, his mother was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. It was news that would inevitably fast-track the boys' maturation. They grew up in a practical household where fishing, especially catch-and-release fishing, wasn't a part of life. In fact, Borenstein didn't experience

his first fishing trip until he was in his 20s.

By the age of fifteen, he'd dropped out of school to dabble in various vocations including hairdressing, selling shoes, waitering, and eventually hotel management. In 1982, he was presented with an opportunity in IT. IBM had just launched the personal computer, and the future of technology was looking bright. He started there as a computer salesman before moving up the corporate ladder and eventually securing a role as corporate sales manager.

Eventually Borenstein started his own company, which quickly grew to accommodate 21 staff members, hundreds of contractors, and offices in Sydney, Melbourne, and Canberra. He was a finalist for the Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award and his company won the Victorian Government Small Business of the Year Award.

By 1995, however, Borenstein was showing signs of exhaustion and workaholicism. Two of his closest friends, Matt and Vinny, booked a fishing trip in an attempt to slow him down. Borenstein was reluctant, but agreed to the distraction. Together they booked two days at Millbrook Lakes in Victoria, Australia. The plan was to learn to fly fish, breathe fresh air, enjoy some camaraderie, and then get back to the grind at the office.

FRESH START

Millbrook Lakes (millbrooklakes.com.au) is a private Australian fishery with a rich history and reputation for hungry 2- to 4-pound brown trout. Most of the trout are caught by sight fishing, which means fly fishers must know how to wade stealthily, as well as how to deliver a natural presentation. At the time, accommodations at Millbrook Lakes were an old shearing shed. Borenstein was in a completely unfamiliar environment.

Their guide was a well-known Australian angler and instructor named Philip Weigall. Weigall has worked at Millbrook Lakes for more than 25 years—he continues to guide there to this day. He and Borenstein later went on to become friends, but Weigall vividly



NEW ZEALAND'S SOUTH ISLAND

JOSH HUTCHINS

If I had only one week to live, and could fish anywhere in the world, my choice—and the choice of most of the other fly fishers I know—would be the South Island (*Te Waipounamu*) of New Zealand. I'm happy I didn't get news like this during the last two years because New Zealand has been closed to the outside world due to the Covid-19 global pandemic. Now New Zealand's welcome mat is out again, and my guess is that many fly fishers will be eager to visit the South Island's legendary waters for the first time, and many others will be yearning to get back to a place they love.

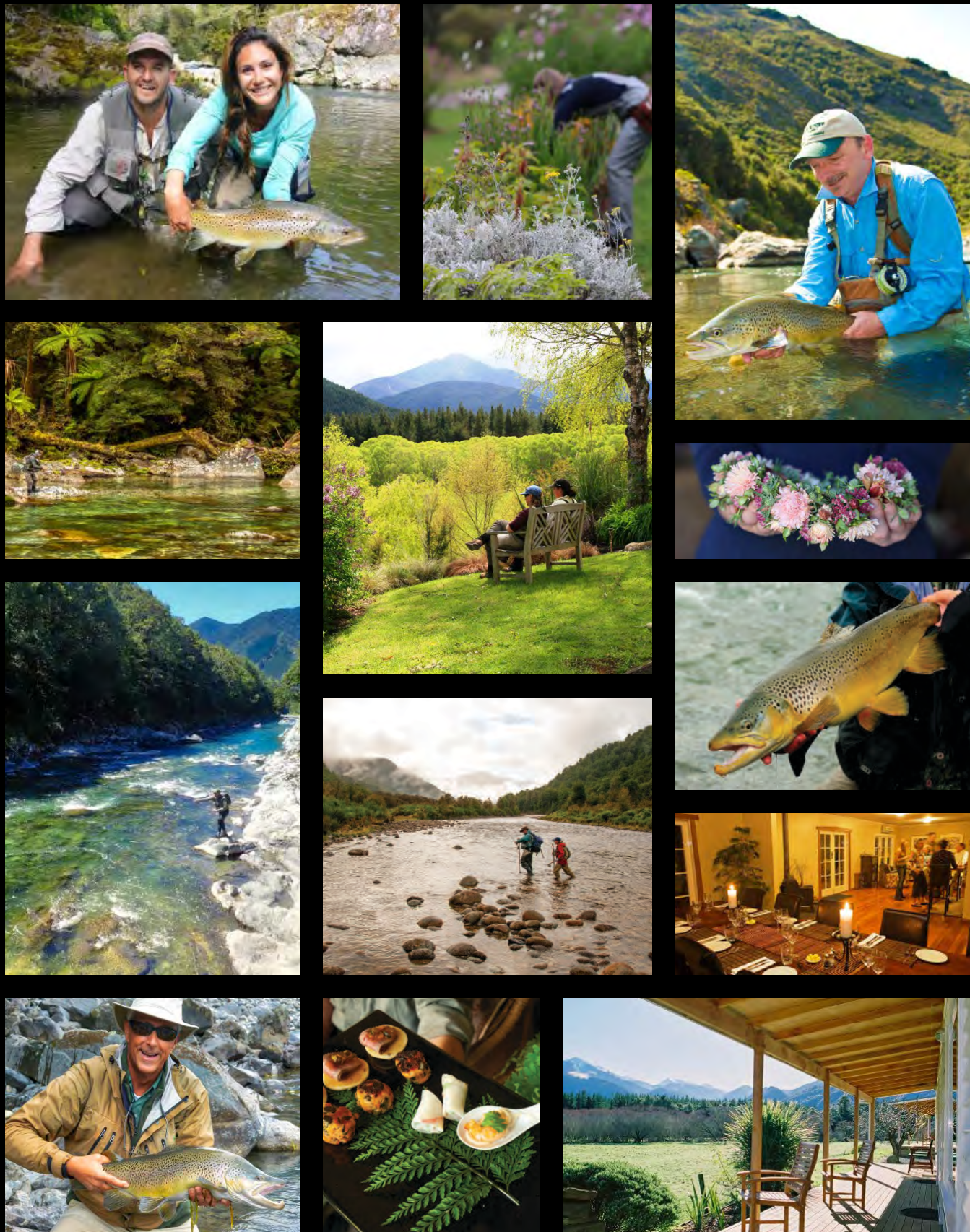
The South Island won't bring you easy trout, it won't bring you a comfortable day, sitting back watching a bobber, it won't even bring you large quantities of fish. But it will bring you gin-clear water, glacier-cut valleys, unblemished spring creeks, backcountry rivers lined in staggering beech forests, and giant brown trout. It is the ultimate trout adventure playground.

When tectonic plates collided 15 million years ago, they formed the Southern Alps. Rivers spilled off these rugged, snow-covered peaks that run to both the east and west. A fly-fishing mecca was born—springing up from the bottom of the ocean. With high mountains, heavy rainfall, and even glaciers, New Zealand is blessed with an abundance of waterways. And within those systems are lots of fish—big, healthy fish.

New Zealand prides itself on sight fishing. Accurate casts are rewarded, and preparation trumps luck. Successful fly fishers do not cast blindly in the South Island. It's a strategic hunt for each and every fish—spotting, planning, approaching, casting, hooking, and hopefully catching. Your fly choice, position, the cast and presentation are all crucial in this land of smart, big trout. But when you get it right, you'll be more than adequately rewarded.

No one asks you about the quantity of fish in New Zealand. It is all about the quality. Keep your tape measure at home, as these fish are measured by their weight in pounds, not inches. Anglers strive for 10-pound fish—double-digit trophies. You won't be asked how many you caught, instead "how big?"

With stunning mountain backdrops, clear water, and more sheep in the country than people (it's a ratio of six to one), you'll feel in your own version of Middle Earth—space to roam, fish to catch, and a never-ending sky, with no buildings in sight. It's how fly fishing is meant to be. Whether you hike or helicopter in, your journey to the best spots will be filled with beauty. And standing in the backcountry, surrounded by nothing but the noise of the river and the birds, and the solitude of that remote wilderness, you'll wish you came here sooner.



recalls that first weekend together.

“The guide in you can sometimes secretly wish the trout were just a little more naïve,” Weigall said. He describes Borenstein at that time as a novice angler, but a passionate one. “You wouldn’t know it by watching him expertly fish a river today, but Borenstein wasn’t a natural at fly fishing,” Weigall continued. “But he had optimism, enthusiasm, and determination from his first day on the water, and that has never wavered.”

Of the three friends, Borenstein admits to being the most hopeless with a fly rod. He was uncoordinated in the park during practice, and even worse when it came time to cast at a fish. He did manage a few rises—and even hooked a swallow on his backcast—but ultimately went home without ever landing a trout. Weigall remembers walking him back to the car in the twilight. He knew that fly fishing had hooked its claws into his student. Of the three friends, Borenstein was the only one who stuck with it.

Borenstein was soon thrown back into the turmoil of his hectic work schedule, but he couldn’t stop thinking about the impact his fishing trip had on him. A month later, he went back to Millbrook Lakes and caught his first trout—all by himself. As fate would have it, it was a 5-pounder that decided to take his dry fly right as the evening turned to dusk. The adrenaline of that moment left him with the shakes.

Borenstein continued to fish at Millbrook Lakes and, before long, he and Weigall had become friends. Weigall describes their time on Australia’s mountain streams as glorious.

“Up on those rivers, flowing swiftly through eucalyptus forests and green paddocks, every fish, no, every rise, was a victory to him.”

Yet even in the glory, Weigall caught glimpses of Borenstein’s professional life, “I mostly knew Borenstein as a cheerful, contented angler. However, occasional mobile phone calls with his office on long Friday night drives to the river gave glimpses of the stress and intensity of his other life.”

Borenstein continued to explore by tuning in to watch televised fishing programs, specifically Rob Sitch’s *A River Somewhere*. One episode in particular captured his attention. It was filmed in New Zealand and featured a 10-pound New Zealand brown trout. The imagery left its mark on him so profoundly that five days later he booked himself a solo trip to Lake Rotoroa Lodge on New Zealand’s South Island.

It was here where Borenstein truly changed. The sheer beauty of the landscape and its serene rivers left a positive impact on Borenstein that his job never could. He was lovestruck. The rivers were clear and pristine, free from pollution and people. The people he did run into were thoughtful and pleasant. On one of his first days fishing New Zealand, he landed a 12-pound wild brown trout on a dry fly. He quickly learned that New Zealand’s trout reach astounding weights, and that they demand skill and effort. He knew he was experiencing something truly special.

Fishing between Australia and New Zealand kept Borenstein balanced throughout the next few years—slowly, it began to consume his life. In a five-year span, he visited Lake Rotoroa Lodge 21 times, making him their most frequent guest. By the time the dot-com bubble burst in 2001, he had his mind on other things. When someone offered to buy him out the following year, he said yes.

Borenstein went back to the drawing board to determine which career he’d pursue. He’d been toying with the idea of running a unique, boutique fishing lodge with a modern spin. So at 42 years of age, Felix Borenstein bought a flight to New Zealand and began looking for a place to build his dream.

The career jump wasn’t easy. For so long he’d defined himself by the success of his company, and now he was back at the starting line trying to get his footing in a foreign country. For seven months, Borenstein traveled around the South Island seeking the ideal location to build his lodge.

The following year, he found a mid-1900s farmhouse nestled in the valley that surrounds the Owen River. The property was in an ideal location—directly on the river and only 90 minutes from Nelson. But there were obstacles to overcome. The farmhouse needed a major facelift, and the cabins had yet to be built.

And then there was his Australian citizenship. Australians have the legal right to live and work in New Zealand, but it can still be hard to find acceptance.

IF YOU BUILD IT

Borenstein had been very much an urban lad, so the move to rural New Zealand was a bigger challenge than he’d anticipated. Suddenly he needed to learn how to operate septic systems, water pumps, lawnmowers, and electric fences, and adapt to a much slower pace of life. He was terrified of the venture, but excited to finally pursue his dreams—risky and expensive as they were. The fear didn’t paralyze him, and he was determined to finally work in a field he was passionate about. Brave as he was, he admits that he severely underestimated how long it would take for him to make his business successful.

“I had this Kevin Costner notion that if I built it, they would come,” Borenstein told me.

It took seven years for the new Owen River Lodge to break even. It was difficult to even celebrate booked trips knowing they were ultimately losing him money, but Borenstein believed in his operation and kept at it. He was a regular at the drawing board, strategizing how to make it work.

“It took a while for me to work out that I needed to be the very best fishing lodge in New Zealand—not the cheapest, not the hippest—just the very best.”

So he became acquainted with the fisheries in his area, and worked hard to team up with some of the best chefs and fishing guides in the business.

The rivers surrounding Owen River Lodge range from small gin-clear creeks to milky glacial braids. The brown trout in this region are some of the biggest and most beautiful fish in the world, known for their size and healthy appetite. The fish readily take nymphs, dries, and streamers, and in some boom years, they even gorge on mice. Monsters up to 12 pounds aren’t abnormal, and river access is angler friendly. Truly, it’s the perfect paradise for a lodge to base itself—or at least it was until Covid-19 hit in early 2020.

The impact of the pandemic was sudden and, like so many other lodges and businesses impacted by New Zealand's lockdown, Borenstein was forced to close his doors during a fully booked season. No stranger to sudden changes, he chose to embrace the pivot, and turned his focus toward relationship building and improving his lodge's footprint and facilities. He focused on hosting local anglers and remained in communication with international travelers who were happy to maintain their deposits in anticipation of opened borders. With locals discovering their own backyards, and fewer than 1% of international anglers demanding their money back, Borenstein was able to keep his staff and guides working throughout the ordeal.

He used the opportunity to measure and improve Owen River Lodge's carbon footprint, working feverishly to become the only fishing lodge in the world to be certified as carbon positive. For two months, they measured the kilometers the guides drove to fish, weighed in and calculated all of their incoming goods, looked at their electricity, and bought carbon credits certified by the government toward native forest restoration, offsetting their footprint by 120%.

"The world is full of greenwashing, and I wanted to draw a line in the sand," Borenstein explained. "If I'm going to do something, I'll do it properly."

And properly he did. After the carbon certification, his next step was to certify the lodge with B-Corp. Attaining the certification was another first for the fishing industry, making Owen River Lodge the first B-Corp certified fishing lodge in the world.

When asked how he found the energy and optimism to keep pushing on through the trying times, he pauses to reflect.

"There were some tears. It was surreal, but I wanted to turn the negative into a positive."

Nineteen years after he established Owen River Lodge, Borenstein is more focused than ever to provide his guests the very best in fishing, service, and lodging. New Zealand is now open to North Americans again, and quarantine is no longer necessary for incoming fly fishers.

"The future is bright," he says. "In fact, the exchange rate between the U.S.A. and New Zealand hasn't been this good in over a decade."

Through all of his successes, Borenstein remains thankful for every single person who walks through his front door. When asked how he mustered the courage to start life over as a young man, push the lodge forward through the pandemic, or how he feels about being a man who "made it" in the fly-fishing world, he humbly accredits the lodge's success to his guests, or immediately draws the attention away from himself somehow. As much as Borenstein tries to avoid the accolades and hide from the limelight, however, there's a small group of people out there who know just how incredible his journey has been.

I think Phil Weigall says it best. "I look back on all the turns in the stream which led him to Owen River Lodge, beginning with a slightly frustrating caddis hatch on a small lake in southern Australia."

As those flies transformed on that frustrating spring morning, so too did Felix Borenstein. It's a truly fitting case of matching the hatch. ~

April Vokey is a former guide, FFI-certified casting instructor, fly-tying instructor, traveling speaker, and host of the podcast Anchored Outdoors.

BOOK YOUR DESTINATION

To get to Owen River Lodge, you'll need to fly to Christchurch, New Zealand. From there, it's a four-hour drive to the lodge, or you can shorten the drive by taking a short flight from Christchurch to Nelson.

Owen River Lodge – owenriverlodge.co.nz



RECOMMENDED GEAR

New Zealand has taken restrictive measures to protect native species and the pristine island environment. Your waders and boots should be brand new or else absolutely clean when you arrive. To reduce hassle, you can use tackle and outerwear provided by the lodge. Most guides eschew waders and wade wet, wearing tights and a pair of shorts to protect against thorns and insects.

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