

FISHING BY NUMBERS



IN THE KNOW

Owen River Lodge is located at Murchison, on the South Island, about a 90-minute drive from Nelson or about four hours, via a spectacularly scenic route, from Christchurch. Private transfers can be arranged. The lodge is open from October to April, with the trout (and prices) peaking in summer months. Rates from \$NZ2810 (\$2684) a person for a three-night minimum stay, including all meals and beverages, private fishing guide and required gear. For non-fishers, from \$NZ655 a person, a night. A fishing licence is required and can be organised through the lodge for an additional \$NZ180 a person.
owenriverlodge.co.nz

When my wife puts her Bushman insect spray on the bedside table, our host, the otherwise welcoming Felix, stops midway through his room introduction spiel and eyes the repellent with dread. “Could I ask you to use that outside? The last guest who sprayed it inside stripped paint off half the wall.”

His request, delivered with a dryness we’ll soon learn is typical, epitomises the ethos of Owen River Lodge, a property with a commitment to sustainability and non-chemical products that places it as one of New Zealand’s most environmentally savvy luxury fishing options.

I’m here to fish as an enthusiastic amateur. On a good day, I can identify one end of a rod from the other but mercifully there’s no judgment at Owen River Lodge. Although the property regularly hosts some of the most serious and experienced anglers from across the world, equally welcome are amateurs like me who may have watched an episode or two of the TV doco series *A River Somewhere* and declared: “I’d quite like to try that.”

After being fitted out in waders, my wife and I are teamed with Pete, a veteran fly-fishing guide famed, thankfully, for his gentle patience. The lodge is well positioned to access more than 30 stunning rivers in the Nelson-Marlborough region and Pete tells us he’s spent a charmed life fishing every stretch of those waterways. We begin on dry land, learning the art of casting. Tempting as it is to swing the rod in wild, flashy arcs, the trick is actually to keep things quite restrained. “Think of it as a clock face,” says Pete. “Your backswing doesn’t want to be going any further than 12 o’clock.”

Mine’s hitting four o’clock on a regular basis, and at one point I nearly jag a sheep that has unwisely crossed behind me. Pete takes that as his cue to move me into the water, where he feels there’s less risk of me sinking my hook into another living creature, fish included. We’re on the Matakaitaki River, one of many in a region celebrated for its gin-clear water. It’s a clarity that’s practically unseen anywhere else, which is why this area has a reputation as a “sight fishing” mecca. Unlike most forms of fishing, where you throw your line out blind and pray for the best, sight fishing involves a military-level strategy of patience and stealth. The idea is to inch very quietly upstream, often waist-deep in water, and hope to see a fish before it sees you. There’s very little room for error. One slip on a rock and you’ve spooked the fish and

The ins and outs of landing a trout

CHRIS TAYLOR



Fishing in the Nelson-Marlborough region, main, left and below; Owen River Lodge, top

the game is up. Having poor eyesight doesn’t help. Even having good eyesight doesn’t help. You essentially need the sight of a superhero to spot a brown trout from 20m away, and this is where expert guides are indispensable.

Correctly judging my wife requires less attention, Pete positions her downstream with a rod and invites her to amuse herself while he looks after me. Within minutes we hear a triumphant yelp, and turn around to see her with an impressively sized trout on the end of

her line. She flashes us a cocky smile. “Don’t worry about that,” Pete whispers. “We’ll soon be showing her.”

Pete pushes me farther upstream, stressing the need for gentle steps. I can tell that something’s caught his eye just ahead of us in the river. He confirms that it’s a fish, and he tells me it’s a big one. “Where?” I ask. “Right there,” he says pointing to a smudge, which, on the most generous reading, I could only identify as a nondescript shadow.

As I lift my rod and prepare to cast, we hear another scream behind us as my wife gleefully reels in a(nother) large fish. I am furious that her hooting may have spooked my big chance but Pete reassures me my fish is still there, and urges me to keep my cool and remember everything we’ve practised. I steady my arm, take a breath, and flick my rod forcefully through the air.

“Too far back!” Pete barks. I correct my swing. “Too far back!” he repeats. “Look where you are ... you’re at three o’clock!”

“I’d call that one o’clock!” I protest. “Half past one at the worst.”

I take another backswing, but feel a sharp resistance as I attempt to cast. My hook has got caught in a thistle bush behind me. We spend a good half-hour trying to untangle me from the thicket, as my wife meanwhile catches two more trout. “That’s 4-0 to her,” Pete reminds me, unnecessarily. “You’re never going to hear the end of this.”

Determined to get me on the scoreboard, Pete suggests we cross to the other side of the river where there’s no vegetation for me to snare. The current is strong and, as I commence my crossing, I slip on a stone and topple headfirst into the water. Pete can’t believe it. My waders quickly start filling with water, blowing me up like an inflatable beachball, a shape that makes it almost impossible to get upright. Helplessly bobbing, I start to take off with the current, and count myself lucky my wife is able to briefly suspend her laughter to intercept me downstream.

Back at the lodge, as fellow guests and guides congregate for drinks — a daily post-river ritual that speaks to the warm, collegial hospitality of Owen River Lodge — I can tell Pete looks concerned I didn’t have a good day. On the contrary, I assure him, I got to spend the day on one of the most beautiful, pristine rivers in the world, with endless bends we had all to ourselves, and with dancing rapids I never found anything less than mesmerising, even when face down in the water. Whoever said it was just about the fish?

“We spend a good half-hour trying to untangle me from the thicket, as my wife meanwhile catches two more trout”