



When you hook a trout as nice as this on the first cast, you know it's going to be a good trip.

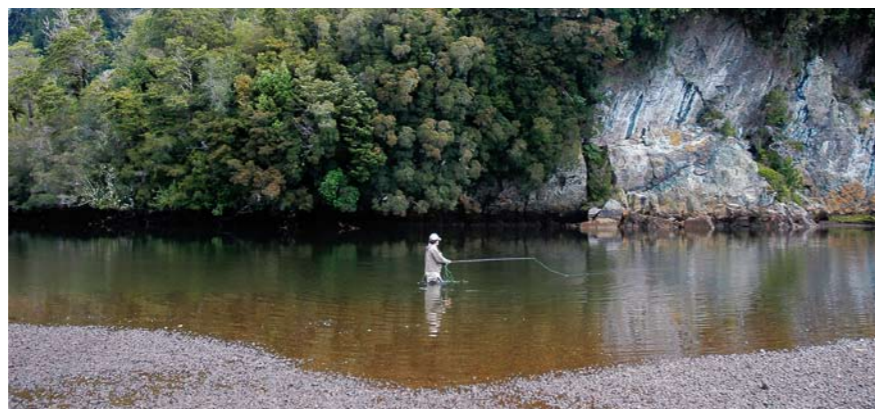
Chile

Rivers of the Fjords

Rob & Libby Sloane explore the southern coast of Chile.

It is fourteen years since we first ventured to Chile to fish with the Dufflocq brothers, Cristian and Marcelo, at their remote lodge Estancia de los Rios, set amidst the wild mountain plains of Patagonia (*FlyLife* #8). Back then, Balmaceda airport was a tin shed in the middle of nowhere, now it is a bustling modern terminus.

Many of our fellow passengers are travelling fly fishers. On the wrong side of fifty, if not sixty, they sport the



This tidal channel has a reputation for big browns.

trademark caps, rod tubes and travel bags we know so well. All are headed for Coyhaique, to be swallowed up by a new breed of outfitters, fly-trekkers, fishing guides and lodges. Back then it was an adventure, now it is a well-established destination.

But we are going further this time, beyond the coffee shops and bars and the American guides with their sweaty

caps, mobile phones and laptop computers. Having already met our travelling companions, Bill and Marcia, in transit, we are directed to two taxis and buckle up for the two-hour drive to the remote port of Chacabuco. A phone call from Cristian via our non-English-speaking driver confirms that the mothership is anchored in the bay and ready for an early departure.



Heading for the first river of the day.

We spend the night at a comfortable seaside hotel, the only guests, before setting sail at 9 a.m., bound for rivers unknown. Bill, from Colorado, has done the trip before—twice. One of the rivers—the Coulson—is named after him, an honour bestowed on the first to catch a trout there.

THE POSSIBILITIES

Cristian Dufflocq is a true fly-fishing entrepreneur. He began exploring the remote fjords of his homeland soon after our first visit to Chile. He now lives in Montana, enjoying two summers every year, with three months (January to March) aboard *Rio Azul*, his pride and joy, exploring the innumerable 'blue rivers' within the scenic grandeur of the fjords. Check out Google Earth around the Aisen coastal region and you will begin to comprehend the scope of our six-night voyage.

A maximum of four guests are housed in two cabins, each with private facilities. Freddie is the skipper, Cristian and Carlos the guides, and



Marcia and guide Carlos enjoy the moment.

Mario the chef. Four crew for four guests, aboard an immaculately maintained 53-foot Hatteras cabin cruiser—sound good?

Together we navigate safe waters between neighbouring fjords, passing through sheltered passages within a maze of coastal islands. Maze, as in

'ammaazzing', quickly becomes an overused word as we marvel at steep mountainsides cloaked in beech forest and glimpse the glacial peaks of dormant (hopefully) volcanoes, towering through clouds above.

Surrounding cliffs and rock faces bear the scars of recent earthquakes—some, we are told, with fatal consequences for workers on nearby salmon farms. It is an industry now in ruin after an outbreak of disease, transmitted via Atlantic salmon eggs from Norway. (Defending import bans and quarantine provisions in the early days of the Tasmanian industry was one of my, then thankless, roles at Inland Fisheries.)

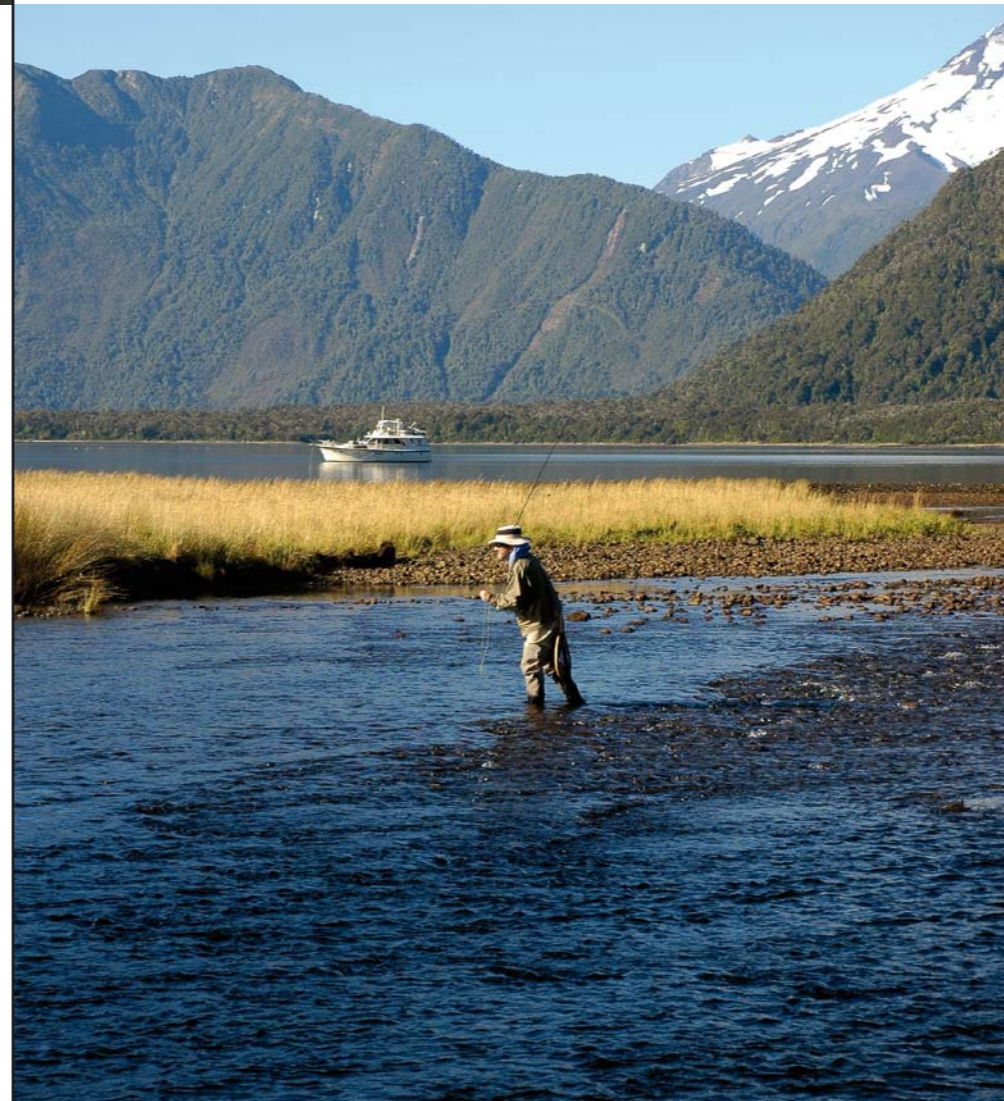
Wherever we motor or anchor, our lounge and dining seats have panoramic views. Our cruising range is 40 hours, the possibilities are endless.

FIRST CAST

At last on the water, with Cristian as my guide, almost immediately we polaroid a trout working the drop-off along the edge of a shallow bay, just where he said it would be. Two big browns moving together in fact, waiting to intercept baitfish forced out by the falling tide.

Cristian attaches a large marabou streamer to my line, complete with bead-chain eyes and striped rubber legs—it looks like a brown chook! I dutifully lob the thing up-current, in front of the trout. The fly is awkward to cast, more so the sink-tip line, but instinct takes over and the fly falls within range without spooking them.

There is barely time for two quick strips before the trout is on and crashing and leaping its way into the tidal



The mothership is never far away, with fishing focussed at the tidal river mouths.



Persisting late one wet afternoon produces a solid rivermouth brown.

we are 12 hours out of sync. The meals are all three-course epics, with tasty treats and Pisco Sours welcoming each return to the mothership.

The aim is to fish a different river each morning and afternoon, targeting the intertidal zone at the river mouths, an ever-changing mosh pit of activity, driven by tidal flow. This is where the food is concentrated—all manner of shellfish, baitfish, crabs and shrimps. This is also where the predators gather—sea lions, dolphins and sea otters—ever ready to sink their teeth into trout and salmon flesh.

Always a different river to come to grips with, always a different environment to comprehend, to absorb. Some rivers are big, some small, some clear, some glacial, others stained the colour of tea. We are always moving. There are no second chances. At high tide we push upstream, then fish back as the falling tide exposes runs and rapids, rock piles and log jams. This is where the trout assemble to feed, and to hide.

THE FISHING

For me the fishing is a hybrid between the estuaries of southern Tasmania, with their sea-run trout and white-bait runs, and the tropical rivers of Cape York with their fierce ambush predators and tidal flats. There are chinooks and silver salmon and some escaped Atlantics in the fjords too, but we target the sea-run browns and the rainbows—a mix of wild fish and those variously derived from hatcheries and sea pens. Many of the rainbows are tattooed by teeth marks and some have open gashes and bites.

Chile – Rivers of the Fjords . . . continued

flow, stripping line to the backing. The take is so sudden and violent that it takes me by surprise. These fish really do like chooks.

To be sure of capturing the closing stages of the battle on camera, I thrust the fly rod into Cristian's hands. His stunned expression changes to a broad grin as he appreciates the absurdity of a client relinquishing the rod with a 4-kilo sea-trout still ploughing through the water with a full head of steam. The fun, for both of us, is just beginning.

I'm glad the camera is in my hands because the fish is perfect in every way: sleek yet fat, small head and broad shoulders, clean sharp fins. Every spot is exquisitely painted, every scale flecked with a silvery sheen from the sea.

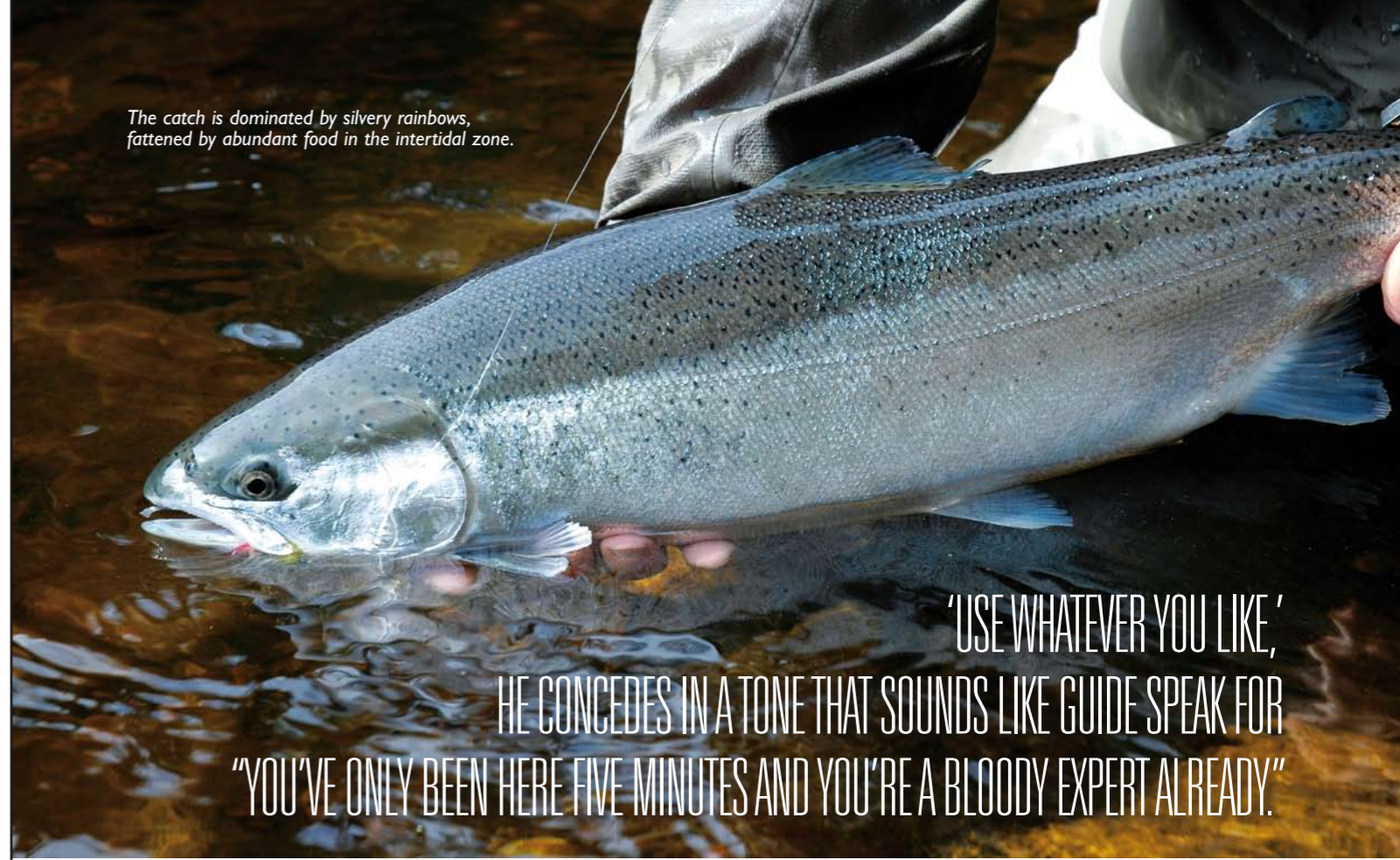
THE PROGRAM

The daily program is to eat, fish and move; then to eat, fish, eat again and

sleep. We do more eating and sleeping than fishing during the first two days of foul weather but the afternoon naps are welcome—coming from Australia,



In the smaller rivers, battles are short and fierce.



The catch is dominated by silvery rainbows, fattened by abundant food in the intertidal zone.

'USE WHATEVER YOU LIKE,' HE CONCEDES IN A TONE THAT SOUNDS LIKE GUIDE SPEAK FOR "YOU'VE ONLY BEEN HERE FIVE MINUTES AND YOU'RE A BLOODY EXPERT ALREADY."



Every river offers a different setting and a new fly fishing experience.

The intertidal flats are a blanket of barnacles and mussels, swarming with baitfish. We also catch robalo, a robust native fish that shares the trout lies and behaves and fights like a brown. The trout and robalo are on the move, in and out, hunting prey on the falling tide as the baitfish are forced into retreat, then moving up to avoid their own predators as the tide pushes in.

You might hook anything, of any size, at any moment. All the action is contracted into a few hundred metres and two or three key runs and pools. We rarely venture beyond sight of the mothership, anchored close by in the fathomless fjords.

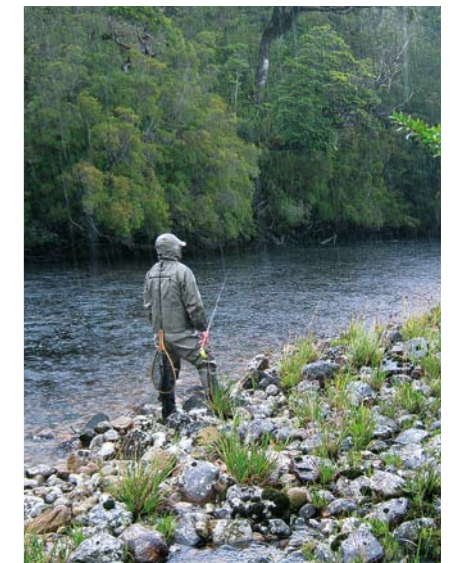
TASSIE DEVIL

The accepted approach is to swing large marabou 'chooks—size 4 & 6 streamers—often heavily weighted, on fast sink-tip lines. I hate it. Though I'm well prepared with new rods and reels and the latest slick lines loaded on spare spools, I struggle to present these flies with any sense of satisfaction on the 6-weights I'm using. After the first session I ditch the lot and seek approval to use my favourite estuary rig for sea-runners at home: a clear-tip intermediate line armed with a Yellow Rabbit fly. I'm well supplied with Rabbits, tied by Bruce Gibson, in size 8 and 6. They're dynamite on galaxiid feeders in the Tasmanian lakes and

estuaries, and the Chilean galaxiids look much the same—in fact the same common species, *G. maculatus*.

I show the fly to Cristian. "Use whatever you like," he concedes in a tone that sounds like guide speak for "you've only been here five minutes and you're a bloody expert already."

My old clear-tip line is sweet to cast, lands without crashing and gets down enough if you mend and give line when you should. Anything I lose in sink rate is gained in accuracy, by getting the fly further into the bank, steering it under overhangs and landing it deep between logs. The fly proves so successful it's christened



Don't forget your raincoat.



Cristian picks the perfect spot for Libby's first rainbow.

Chile – Rivers of the Fjords . . . continued



Exposed sandflats and shellfish beds at low tide. This beat yields several sea-run browns.

the 'Tassie Devil' and I'm soon handing them out to my fellow travellers and guides.

With the exception of a few small and clear streams and the occasional fish seen slashing at bait near the surface, it is largely impossible to see the trout (mainly rainbows) before casting, but the instant they break cover or lift from the depths to intercept the fly their aggressive movements and broad grey backs are unmistakable. It adds a visual excitement to the fishing. I find myself pre-empting every strike with words I should never shout out loud, and Cristian invariably yells "strike" in unison as I set the hook.



The shore patrol in transit.

He saves the ideal location for the final afternoon, a clear and intimate stream amidst picture-perfect surrounds, and insists that I take the photos while Libby catches the fish. Two fish in fact—two large rainbows—one on a dry fly, one on a streamer. Her casting is more than adequate and she plays the big rainbows as though she has actually been paying attention and not just photographing rocks and shells and plants and trees and footprints in recent days. As each grand trout is netted her appreciative smiles are priceless.



Not a bad fish, on a dry fly too!

I can only thank Cristian for the privilege of inviting us to share the secret rivers of his Chilean fjords. It will always rate amongst our greatest fly-fishing adventures, an amazing voyage to remote coastal rivers, shared in total comfort and safety. The setting is unique, the trout large and plentiful, the service impeccable. **RI**

Email cristian@dufflocq.com
www.andesjourneys.com

