

# *Fish Tales and Luxury Lodges in New Zealand*

Text by Andy Yeo  
Photos by Owen River Lodge







*“Fly-fishers are usually brain-workers in society. Along the banks of purling streams, or in the secluded nooks of charming lakes, they have ever been found, giving rest and tone to over-taxed brains and wearied nerves while gracefully wielding the supple rod and the fairy-like fly.”*

*- James A Henshall, American doctor (1836 - 1925)*

**TO SOMEONE** from Asia's teeming cities, living in New Zealand can be a shock – like slamming on the brakes when going from motorway to side street. 35 years after I first visited New Zealand, I thought I was mentally prepared when I finally set up home in Christchurch, but it's been a tough adjustment process. The outdoors was my salvation; just minutes from my doorstep, the scenery is stunning, the air is clean and opportunities for outdoor activity abound. I've been a pretty decent photographer for years, so hiking and camping with my camera was a natural, then I thought I'd pick up something new to fill in the times I've been waiting for good light. Fly fishing looked fantastic in the movies so I thought I'd give it a try – and was immediately hooked!

Now you have to understand that New Zealand is to fly fishermen what the Himalayas is to mountaineers. Here water from the smallest spring creek is often so clear that bottled and sold on supermarket shelves it fetches a higher price than petrol. This often enables the fly fisherman to see the quarry – many wild trout, grown larger than almost anywhere else in the world – and then stalk it, like a hunter, prior to performing the seemingly impossible task of throwing an almost weightless “fly” to where it can see it. If the fish takes the bait, the fisherman must quickly strike to set the hook in the split second before it realises it has been fooled. Then comes the task of fighting the fish using the fine, almost invisible lines, with breaking strains usually a fraction of the fish's weight. Finally, if he does manage to land it, he releases it almost immediately.

If that doesn't sound like a fantastic way to pass time, it's entirely my fault. For some of us, fly fishing is not just a way we catch fish, a hobby or even a lifestyle. It's a compulsion, and it colours our decisions of what clothes we wear, what type of car we want, and where we want to live. Or maybe just where we want to holiday.



**Left** Fly fishing in the Owen River

**Above** Successfully pursuing a quarry – a large wild trout!

It's important to know that the places we go to catch trout are invariably beautiful. It's also important to know that some of the best boutique lodges in the world are found in there. Usually owner-operated, often spectacularly located and always taking great pride in their kitchens and wine cellars, these oases of luxury scattered around the country are the jewels in the crown of New Zealand tourism.

There are now lodges that cater to fly fishermen, and fly fishing lodges. Felix Borenstein, owner and manager of Owen River Lodge, was careful to make the distinction. An Australian, he started fly fishing in 1995 and became "absolutely addicted". After making 19 trips to South Island to fish, he found an old farming homestead in the Nelson Lakes region and embarked on his dream to develop a contemporary-styled luxury fishing lodge. The location was perfect: 3.5 hours' drive from Christchurch's International Airport, the Owen River on his doorstep, with another 25 of the best fishing rivers and streams within a 90-minute drive. The old homestead building became the main lodge building, and six purpose-built guest cottages (featuring fine artworks and recycled 100-year-old wooden beams) emphasise light and space, echoing the views of river, mountain and Kahurangi National Park.

For non-fishing guests, well, you could learn to cast from the deck overlooking the river. Unfortunately, the incentive to do this is reduced because Felix absolutely caters for activities other than fishing, with a spa, mountain biking, walking, riding and jet boating options close by. A little further afield, the vibrant town of Nelson is full of art galleries, museums, shopping, restaurants and craftspeople; while the Nelson and Marlborough regions, both about the same distance from the lodge, has some of the finest vineyards in New Zealand if you fancy a wine tour. Last, but certainly not least, the lodge's chef, Ryan, is a well-travelled master whose meals are complemented perfectly by Felix's choice of wines from the cellar.

Although almost unique in its focus on obsessive fly fishermen, the comfort, friendliness and pure fun of being at Owen River Lodge is repeated in New Zealand's other boutique lodges, at places like Wanaka, Fiordland and the Canterbury high country. For a mind and body in need of relaxation, refreshment and recharging, I can recommend no better places and no better activity than trying to fool a fish with an artificial fly. ■



Photo: Andy Yeo

**Top** One of the beautiful guest cottages in Owen River Lodge

**Bottom** A breathtaking view of Lake Wanaka

*(I fish) not because I regard fishing as being terribly important, but because I suspect that so many of the other concerns of men are equally unimportant, and not nearly so much fun.*

*- Robert Travers, American author (1903 - 1991)*



Andy has been an aircraft designer, management consultant, business school lecturer, scuba diving instructor and photojournalist - jobs which have taken him around the world. He ran his own boutique travel agency in Singapore before joining Country Holidays. To date, he has designed tours in over 30 different countries, personally leading groups to remote parts of China, India, Central Asia and the Middle East.

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