

PATAGONIA . . . IN THREE PARTS

PATAGONIA - PART I

The question “what is Patagonia?” is one I hear often. Patagonia is a loosely defined general geographic area that encompasses the southern parts of Argentina and Chile. From the fly fisher’s viewpoint, it includes three different environments: the Chilean Fjords, the Chilean Andes, and, in Argentina, the pampas and eastern side of the Andes.

This is the first of three articles briefly defining those different sections of Patagonia. We’ll start with the western-most of the three, the Chilean Fjords. If you look at a map of Chile, you’ll see hundreds of small islands just off the coast. Those islands create the Fjords of Chile. Many of them have their own rivers and streams created by springs, rainfall, and, in some cases, glacier melt. While the fjords themselves are salt water, there is lots of fresh water entering them via the aforementioned waterways.

The fly fishing targets in the fjords consist of rainbows, browns, and silver salmon. These fish roam the fjords, entering fresh water from time to time. Several of the rivers have good numbers of trophy sized fish, but not all hold fish – and some only on certain days when the whim of the fish cause them to enter the fresh water. It’s this unpredictable nature of the fishery that is both exciting and frustrating. During our two weeks exploring the fjords and its streams, we found rainbows as large as the 8-10# range. We did take several browns also, but while I’m certain there are large browns in the fjords, we didn’t release anything over four pounds. Sometimes we found concentrations of large fish in a river and sometimes streams that looked like they would be sure to hold fish held nothing but pretty water. Fishing river mouths was often productive as were certain flats where giant rainbows could be fished like bonefish on the right tides.

A wonderful spot to base yourself for a fjord fishing adventure is the Puyuhuapi Hotel and Spa. A 3 or 4 day stay here is a terrific complement to a week at an Andes fly fishing lodge and a real hit with non-fishing spouses. The fishing program is limited to four anglers per week from Puyuhuapi so reservations usually need to be made far in advance during prime time. (DVD on the Puyuhuapi Hotel and Spa is available – just hit reply).

PATAGONIA - PART II THE CHILEAN ANDES

The Andes rise up from the edge of the Pacific. The glacier capped spine of the Andes in much of Patagonia is the border between Chile and Argentina. You may remember how skinny the country of Chile looked in your geography books. In some places, it’s less than 50 miles from the Argentina border to the Chilean coast. Packed into that narrow countryside is a dramatic array of peaks and valleys.

When Chile’s trout fishing was first discovered, it was the Lakes District in the general area of Puerto Montt and north that grabbed all the attention. Next, the center of interest moved south, using the town of Coyhaique (and the airport at Balmaceda) as the jump off point for a Chilean adventure. Soon, the waters in this area got a lot of attention and with the attention, came the people, mostly from the US. Our favorite area of Chile remains one of its most rural and least visited – the area between Puerto Montt and Coyhaique.

There are many lodges and ways to approach Chile. One of the special lodges rests in the Andes south of the village of Chaitan and offers a variety of Patagonian experiences. First, it’s a small personal operation that hosts a maximum of six fly fishers. Additionally, there is an eco-tour program for the non-fishing traveler. In addition to many rivers, streams, and lagoons they float and wade, they do horse back trips into the Andes, overnight float trips through the Andes, and have an outpost cabin on the Argentine border.

The main attraction is the rainbows and browns with an average size fish that exceeds the Argentine side of the Andes. There are many three to five pound fish taken in this area and a seven or eight pounder is a real possibility. It is an area of stunning beauty and a great backdrop to cast a fly.

PATAGONIA - PART III – THE ARGENTINE SIDE

The crest of the Andes marks the border between Chile and Argentina. To the west, the Chilean Andes drop into the fjords and the Pacific Ocean. To the east, the “backside” of the Andes level out onto the dry, grassy, plains of Argentina. In some places, if you venture 10 or 20 miles east of the Chilean border, you have two distinctly different views: if you look toward the Pacific, you see the spectacular peaks of the Andes and if you look east, you see the flat and mostly treeless plains of the Argentine pampas.

While there are some good waters near the Andes crest, one of the major attractions of fishing Argentina are the estancias. The Argentine estancias are large, privately owned ranches. Many of them have their own rivers and streams and, best of all, these are privately held waters and access is limited to guides who have arrangements with the land owners. Also, there are some waters which can host a wonderful three or four night float trip.

Patagonia’s Southern Hemisphere summertime provides wonderful options for a wintertime getaway when our skies are gray and cold.

TRIP REPORT
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