

## WALSH FAMILY NZ TRIP REPORT

For Don Muelrath - Thank You!

Don,

Sorry this has taken several weeks to get to you, but I have summarized some of the highlights of our trip, below. We had a fantastic time, thanks to you and the great trip planning. For the whole family, it was a trip of a lifetime, and everyone had a great time. The scenery was spectacular, the fishing was truly exceptional, and everyone you put us in contact with made us feel welcome and ensured that we had a great experience. We would highly recommend everything you put together, particularly for families with children. The guides in particular were experienced, extremely patient, and made the New Zealand fishing experience something we will always remember. Thanks again, and you are welcome to use anything you like in your newsletter – we would be honored. Michael.

### Arrival Christchurch

After the difficulty in finding a car large enough for the Walsh family of 5 and our gear, we connected with a great guy who runs his own business out of Christchurch. An enthusiastic fly fisherman himself, Kevin of Overland Rentals met us at the gate and walked us out to our rig. All set up with GPS and cell phone, and another New Zealand road atlas. Most impressive, he let us drop the car in Nelson at no additional charge, and he flew to Nelson to pick it up and shuttle it back to Christchurch. Wow.

We drove around Christchurch then headed to Jan's place in Fairlie. Beautiful 2.5 hour countryside drive, arriving around 5pm. We were welcomed with a glass of wine, and then Jan's husband Naas (sp?) showed the kids around the farm, where they met Wally the family pet (sheep), played with the two beautiful German shepherds, fed the goats and the alpacas, and Brianna rode the pony. Off to a great start!

We met Jodi and Kevin Payne the following morning. Jodi was fantastic – and our stay in Fairlie was the highlight for the kids. Not only did they vote Kevin the best guide of all, Jodi was an incredible hostess. She took our three kids, and her two kids, and led the kids on all kind of adventures over the two days. They swam in the community pool and in the local river, toured a couple of museums to learn about the Maori culture, played mini-golf, went on a horseback ride including crossing a river, and even played cricket and rugby in their backyard with her kids. The coup de gras was at the end of the second day, Jodi presented us with a CD of the photos she had taken over the two days, and she had prepared a document with photos that chronicled their adventures together. Fantastic!

Christie and I headed to the river with Kevin. We had a great three days with Kevin, thanks for encouraging a third day fishing with him. First we hit the Opuha, and we both worked a lot of rust off trying to cast to sighted browns. Finally, we both started landing fish, and caught four or five 3.5 -5 pound fish that day while enjoying the beautiful countryside. We also got a good look at all too much Didymo in the river, and now fully understand the concerns about the potential spread of that particular cancer.

Day two started with Kevin giving some great casting lessons to Michael and Austin, in Jan's backyard. Then we hit the river, where we all went through some additional pre-fishing work, particularly the fine art of "God Save the Queen," setting of the hook. As we walked up the river – the Lower Opuha I believe – Kevin sighted a brown across from us. Austin was up first. A few well-placed casts, and bang! Hook set, and the fight was on! Austin landed a beautiful 3.5 pound brown, and the competition was underway. Kevin has a particularly uncanny talent for sighting fish, which rewarded us with opportunities all day. After I had landed a couple, it was Michael's turn in a particularly beautiful stretch of water. Michael laid a New Zealand blowfly out in front of another nice brown, and as Kevin yelled, "STRIKE!" he set the hook beautifully and then landed a beautiful 3.5 pound brown, same as Austin. Then Austin pulled ahead a few minutes later with another nice brown, so it ended 2:1 but both had big smiles on their faces. We spent the last 30 minutes of the day with me trying to

entice a nice fish in a beautiful aqua blue pool with a sandy bottom. Unfortunately, we never got that one, but as the rain began to fall, we headed home and left him for another day.

The third day of fishing was the most spectacular in terms of scenery, and between Christie and I we landed 10 fish. You will recognize the scenery from the photos – the blue chalky water running off the glacier, gorgeous snow covered peaks in the distance, and a set of beautiful clear braids to fish. At this point I feel I must brag just a little bit, because the rest of the bragging on the trip belonged, rightfully so to Christie. So with insufficient humility I hereby report that I bagged 7 to Christie's 3, and landed a nice 7 pound hen in a large pool, that to this point, was the best specimen of the trip. Awesome as well in terms of the alternative fishing technique and the clear water allowing us to take in the entire experience as it happened. The fish were tracking back and forth, 5 feet below the surface, across this large pool, perhaps 100 feet across by 200 feet long. With a nymph dropper, Kevin directed our casts to cross their cruising paths, and Christie and I both landed very nice fish, hers about 6 pounds!

I should also let you in on a little secret. Late in the afternoon, Kevin asked if I wanted to keep fishing. I said, are you kidding? Then he allowed that there was a bit of a selfish motive. Seems that in the 7 or 8 times that the great flyfishing legend Don Muelrath had fished with Kevin, they had never had a 10-fish day. And he informed me that we were at 9 at that point. So, THE HUNT was on for number 10!

Well, we landed the 10th fish, in your honor, sir. And Christie got a picture of Kevin and I shaking hands over our victory. Note the huge smile on his face – I think he really enjoyed that, and he was thinking of you!

Another great story from this day. After driving about 45 minutes to get to one of his favorite spots, as we finally approached the rivers to fish, we spotted a LandCruiser and two people standing next to it. A guide and a flyfisher. What a bummer, and they got here first. Kevin was noticeably perturbed by all this, but we drove out to see where they planned to fish. As we got closer, we realized that it was a man and a woman, and no fishing gear in sight. Kevin struck up a conversation, and Noah explained that he and his friend were just out here to enjoy the magnificent view. As there was no one around for tens of miles, save for the huge cabin which overlooked the Station, Kevin asked if Noah was from around the area. Much to our surprise, Noah answered rather matter of fact, "Well yes, I own it."

So we had a great conversation with Noah and Naomi, and learned that they had never experienced a day of fly fishing in their lives! And this fly fishing mecca was their front yard! Well we geared up and headed off to go fishing, and they rumbled away in their LandCruiser, back to their stately manor. We knew we had made new friends when we returned to Kevin's truck for lunch, and found Noah had driven back out to meet us and see how our day was going. We told him about the 7 pound brown, Christie's 6 pound brown, and the great day we were having, and he said, "one of these days I'll have to try this." So I encouraged him to give Kevin Payne a call if he ever wanted to give it a go, just to make sure it was the great experience that we had enjoyed.

Jan is a fantastic cook, and the taste and variety of the dishes she prepared was exceptional. She really made us all feel right at home. Hopefully our kids were better behaved than the earlier family that had visited, she had some good stories to tell. For the kids, with the surrounding farm and animals, the beautiful shepherds, this was a great place to start our New Zealand experience. Christie and Brianna enjoyed the Jacuzzi on their day off, and the highlight was a fantastic preparation of New Zealand lamb. We even got to try a little vegemite!

We then headed out the next morning and enjoyed our night in the Wilderness Lodge. Thank you for ensuring that we would see the sheep shearing exhibition, this was phenomenal. And, in addition to getting a full course on Merino wool, we also learned a new level of respect for the fantastic job that the dogs do in terms of controlling the herd with just a few whistle commands.

Then, on to the coast and up to the Lake Rotorua Lodge. Not to be confused with Rotorua on the North Island. We enjoyed the drive out to Greymouth, through the tropical forests and up the coast itself. Thanks for mapping out a route where we felt we got to see a lot of the natural beauty that is New Zealand, we took lots of pictures and enjoyed every minute of it.

At the Lake Rotoroa lodge, we were immediately greeted by the manager, Bill, and our hostess Melanie. This was perfect, Don. We had the whole place to ourselves on Christmas eve! Bill made sure that we were all settled in our three rooms (Brianna had a room fit for a princess!), and Melanie took over to make sure we were all set for dinner with an evening cocktail. We enjoyed a great dinner courtesy of the new chef Carl, who outdid himself with each meal over the next few days. The Christmas tree in the corner of the beautiful dining room made it a wonderful place for a Christmas celebration away from home. Santa Claus somehow found the Lake Rotoroa Lodge, and we all woke up with smiles and opened our presents. Later that day, we took the canoe out on the lake, and then Bill arranged for us to ride the four ATVs that were on the property. Don't tell anyone about that, however, I don't think that this is an amenity they make available to just anyone.

The next day, we met our guide Pete and headed off to the Matakaitaki River for what would be a once in a lifetime experience. Bill was an incredible host, and he took the three Walsh kids off to a great day of adventures, including riding in a jet boat, crossing a stream on a swing bridge suspended 100 feet above the river (the longest in New Zealand they say), flying across the river on a zip line, and an ATV tour of the surrounding ranch property. They had a great time, and Bill made us feel good with his complimentary comments about the Walsh kids. Somehow he lived through the day. And, he did everything the kids did! Well, except for the zip lining part. But he did say that never in a hundred years would he have done the swing bridge, but for the fact that he had the kids for the day, and felt responsible enough that he had to stay with them.

So back to the fishing. It was a drizzly, cloudy day and so we expected difficult conditions. And difficult it was. Relegated to nymph fishing, we worked different sections of this large, fast moving river. I was humbled by hooking up three very large browns over a couple of hours, each of which leapt from the water, and each time I failed to "bow to the queen" fast enough. Two spit the fly out, and one cleaned me off completely. I did manage to land a nice 5 pound brown. Christie was just getting warmed up, as she landed a beautiful 6 pound brown, which she finessed to the net after about 20 minutes of navigating among wet, slippery bowling ball-sized rocks at the river's edge.

We moved up river and Christie was up. She had a beautiful drift over a sighted fish, but it passed by without a take. She dutifully left the drift as it swept left to right downstream, and then she saw the indicator disappear. Instantly, she set. And instantly, she shouted, "I've got a fish!" Pete spun around, having kept his eyes on the upstream fish, looked at her 6-weight rod bent over almost in half, and said, "Yes, you sure do have a fish." And the fight was on. We were using 5-pound tippet, so Pete had told us that trying to horse one of these big browns in was going to be a losing proposition. Christie had learned the lesson well. We spent about 30 minutes, and probably covered a half-mile of the river, because this one was not about to give up easily. And throughout the fight, as we got better and better looks at it, Pete went from "nice fish" to "really nice fish" to "this one's a beauty."

But even he was surprised when he netted the fish. Christie and I were both incredibly relieved that in fact, it was in the net at long last, and not just a great fish that got away. As he lifted the net and let the built-in scale take the measure of this beauty, we were shocked to see the "12" flash up before our eyes, and the scale settled in between 12.25 and 12.5 pounds. Happiness and high-fives all around! Pete dug into his vest for a tape measure he said he hadn't used in a couple seasons, and we measured 28" in length, and 18" in girth. Some great pictures of Pete & Christie and the New Zealand fishing experience of a lifetime! And then, he was back in the river and off for some well-deserved rest. Later that day, I told Christie we could fish the rest of our lives and perhaps never catch one like that again. And Pete concurred, saying that in his 14 years of guiding 80-100 days a year, this was the biggest any of his clients had ever caught. We celebrated with champagne at the Lake Rotoroa Lodge, with Christie enjoying her newfound celebrity as the pictures circulated and we all told stories over another fantastic dinner.

The last day I got to spend fishing with my daughter Brianna. She had not yet gotten to go fishing, but now that both brothers had caught fish on fly rods in New Zealand, she was not going to be denied. Unfortunately,

it rained most of that night and was still raining as we headed out the next morning. Rivers were up and muddy, but Pete found us a spot and we gave it a go. He was incredibly patient and really taught her a lot about the sport, from casting techniques to setting the fly and landing the fish. She had a couple hook-ups, but alas no fish. I tried to console her in the fact that the entire day, I only caught one fish, and that was the only one I hooked. Sometimes the conditions make it especially tough, but she and I had a great time spending the day together in beautiful country.

Aside from the sand fly bites on the hands and legs, the area around the Lake Rotoroa lodge was beautiful with plenty of great fishing options. The staff was exceptional, and we all headed out with sadness that we were leaving, but great memories of our Christmas visit and Christie's trophy trout!

We headed north to the Nelson / Motueka region, and the brand new Stonefly Lodge. Heading down the farm road, through a couple gates, you have no idea what awaits. The beautiful Motueka River off to your right, however, gets you thinking again about the fly fishing. Then we climbed the hill to find a beautiful lodge set high up on a promontory, overlooking the vast valleys below and the Motueka River. Spectacular location, and great host and hostess. John and Kate (without the 8) greeted us and showed us to our rooms. It was early afternoon, and we knew the Abel Tasman National Park was only 45 minutes away. So John quickly organized one of the ferry tours for that afternoon and we were off. But not before I asked him to please try and check, even on this very late notice if it would be possible to find a guide and go fishing one last time. Brianna was not to be denied.

When we got back from Abel Tasman (a must see!) John had succeeded in landing Paul Van der Loo (sp?). A real pro. And, I later learned, is the person that Don Muelrath had been working with to set up the Walsh trip! When Paul was still guiding out of the Lake Rotoroa Lodge. Small world, eh? Paul was great, the conditions were not. We headed out after another full night of rain, Brianna and Dad, and gave it our best shot. Christie and the boys drove out to Motueka again to spend the day at the beach, and also drove through the town of Nelson to round out their day of sight seeing. Brianna and I had another great father-daughter day together, but again the conditions were not optimal for fishing. All day, we only saw (or I should say Paul saw – I have no idea how these guys do it!) 6 or 7 fish, and hooked a total of zero between the two of us. But, great exercise, beautiful country, and the sunshine returned as we headed back to the StoneFly Lodge. Kate and John are a great team, they are true professionals and take great pride in ensuring the comfort of their guests. And the food was fantastic – Kate is a great chef, and Paul is a regular sommelier!

One more story – this was truly a charmed trip. We drove from StoneFly Lodge to the airport in Nelson, arriving approximately 55 minutes prior to departure (to Christchurch, then to Auckland, then to Sydney for New Year's Eve).

I dropped Christie and kids off at the entrance of the airport, as we unloaded all the bags, except for my camera bag which I wanted to keep with me. Recall that I was planning to park the car in the lot, and Kevin would come to fetch it over the next few days. So I parked the car within the lot, made sure all the windows were closed and the keys safely in the glove box, and closed the final locked door. I walked to the terminal, went to assist Christie with the bags and the ticketing process, and then realized what I had done. Camera bag locked in Kevin's car, keys in the car, and now 50 minutes to departure.

So we asked for assistance at the Air New Zealand desk, and they sought out the airport security guys, who were more than happy to give it a shot. Two different guys with two different methods of trying to get the door open, slim-jim style. Although neither one actually had a slim-jim. While Christie monitored their progress and contemplated the cost of replacing a broken window, I had a thought. I wonder if they have a AAA? So I grabbed a yellow pages phone book, dialed the New Zealand AA number, and explained my predicament while providing my US AAA number. 30 minutes to departure. They quickly mustered one of their trucks, and rushed to the airport. 25 minutes to go. Fortunately, the airport security situation in New Zealand is refreshingly simple and straight forward, as you know. So we had a chance. 20 minutes to departure. There's the truck, as promised! A great guy jumps out, with a real slim-jim in hand, and within minutes, presto, the door is open, and the camera bag retrieved. 12 minutes to departure.

No windows broken, car is secured, keys back in the glove box, and the door is closed, this time with the camera bag over my shoulder. I ask the man what I owed him for rescuing me, and he said, "Not a thing, glad to help." I pulled a nice tip out of my wallet and gave it to him, and still, he wouldn't take it. So finally I shoved it in his open shirt pocket, shook his hand, and said thank you as I turned to race back to the airport. We boarded the plane, mission accomplished. I think you would be hard pressed to find the quality of people we met in New Zealand here in our country. Each and every one of them, it was truly a wonderful experience. And that last chapter was the icing on the cake. And we owe it all to you – you really made this the trip of a lifetime, and one the Walsh family will never forget. We can't wait to get back!

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