

Reflections on a dozen years of visiting New Zealand. ....

We're on the flight from Auckland to Fiji and I'm feeling melancholy about departing the land of the Kiwi's. This has been an annual adventure for us since 2002 when we fell in love with EVERYTHING that is NZ. What is included in EVERYTHING? Well.....everything – the people, the country, the world class accommodations/lodges and hosts/hostesses, the cuisine, and everything even includes the fishing! And, as an add on, for us this trip included our 8<sup>th</sup> visit to our favorite Fijian “second honeymoon type” hideaway for R & R (and a little Giant Trevally fishing).

This year's NZ trip included ten days of guided fishing and some touring in a total of two and a half weeks. We were joined about half way through our trip by two friends (Gary Neal and Mark Anderson) whose past angling experience has been mostly as “California trout fly fishermen.” This would be their first exposure to the challenging sight-casting for NZ's trophy trout, the exhilarating (and often frustrating) New Zealand fly fishing experience that is unique in all the world. Both would weather the challenges well and, while learning new skills and techniques, take several fish that would qualify as “fish of a lifetime” for a California trout fisherman.

“The Terry and Gary Butts Approach”: a highlight of our trip was meeting up with Terry and Gary Butts for a delightful dinner and evening at a place where our itineraries crossed paths. Terry and Gary were on their third NZ trip and have developed an approach, similar to other repeating NZ traveling couples, that mixes guided fly fishing with some of the finest Kiwi guides and touring/relaxing. On this trip, they had 9 guided fly fishing days in three stops and bracketed those fishing stays with unique visits at some of New Zealand's finest “off the beaten path” touring-type locations (many of which they researched and identified themselves).

Something New : As usual, we try to mix in some new experiences with our old time favorites on each trip. On two occasions, our route took us close to Lake Brunner, and on each occasion, we spent a few hours sampling this still water fishery. We had stayed at Brunner for a few nights years ago, but focused on streams in the area and not the lake. The first stop this year, we just fished from shore and took a beautiful golden brown trout of about 3#. Five days later, when passing through, I reserved a young man with a boat who had been recommended to me as knowing the lake well and providing a good experience. Our two hours with this Kiwi were in the mid afternoon with a front blowing in and the wind was howling. He tried to discourage us from fishing due to the winds, but said if we still wanted to, he could find us some sheltered water (he made it clear that his favorite spots would not be accessible due to the direction of the winds). Since this was the only time we had to sample the fishery, we insisted on pushing ahead. What I found was an electric sight fishing still-water opportunity, even with the restricted conditions. We had shots at over a dozen browns cruising near the shoreline, sometimes within a foot of shore, in very shallow water (fish were in the 3 – 6# class). We got three to take, two on dries and one on a woolly bugger and released one about 6#. All the Brunner fish have strong golden tones – just beautiful fish! He assured me he could show me 70-80 fish in a day with just

average conditions. Our pleasant Kiwi boat operator even has a long pole he uses to propel his craft.....very much like fishing the salt water flats. If you like sight fishing in still water, this is as good as it gets! This location is one that fits well for anyone whose itinerary takes them either over Arthur's Pass or down the West Coast. Also, it works in as a welcome respite for those with aging body parts who can use a break from the rigors of hiking the rivers and streams.

Personally, I'm already booked for knee replacement the end of 2013. I have been concerned about being able to return to NZ early in 2014.....don't think a heavy diet of hiking the rivers will fit in well with my recovery. I've already booked six days for me on Brunner with this delightful young man (not really a full fledged guide at this point, but he DOES know how to fish the lake as well as the river mouths of the waterways entering and exiting the lake). I know my gimpy knees can handle being poled gently around while I sight-cast to cruising browns in the lake and river mouths and I'm very excited about fully exploring this fishery.

Guides: nothing new here.....the best guides are world class gents, have superior technical skills, great eyes for spotting fish, and know how to set the angler up for the best opportunities. Also, they have a varied selection of waters that they know intimately. An important, and often overlooked aspect of water selection, is the great guides know how to maximize their waters by evaluating current conditions and deciding what sections of waters may fish best on that particular day. We experienced a meaningful example of this on a day when a famous fly fishing couple (who were staying at a nearby, well known, overly hyped, lodge) had a bum day – only 2 fish spotted and none taken. We had booked the two most experienced, expert guides in that same area (guys who are part of the "A TEAM" of NZ guides). Our guides selected the same river as the celebrity fly fishing couple, but they selected different sections to guide us on. Collectively, we saw 22 fish, got 11 to eat, and netted six. Our two novice NZ fly fishers took the majority with Gary taking a 5.5 pound fish and Mark a 6.5#. No guide makes the right decision on water for the day every time, but there is a significant difference in the percentage of "right calls" made by the "A TEAM" guides.

As always, our fishing results varied with the day and the conditions. We had two spectacular days, even by NZ standards. On the downside, we had a few days with a severe falling barometer that seemed to put the fish on the bottom – certainly they were less active on dry flies and more jumpy on those days. The rest of our days were fairly typical NZ days with a mixture of the good, bad, and ugly (ugly meaning mostly the bad casts).

Something else that doesn't change – the top guides and lodges book up very early for the prime time. Already, some of our favorite guides have many dates booked with their "regular" repeat clients. All is well in the land of the Kiwi's and we are anticipating our return next year.

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