

SHEEP DUNG

AND

SEA TROUT



CHAD AGY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ZACH HEATH

BEFRIENDING THE WIND ON
PATAGONIA'S RIO PENITENTE
AND RIO GALLEGOS



THE FIRST DRAMATIC MOMENT OF MY TRIP TO EL RINCON LODGE STARTED AND ENDED IN A PILE OF SHEEP DROPPINGS. A rainstorm in the Andean headwaters of the Rio Gallegos rendered the river nearly unfishable. The ochre of the surrounding countryside even stained the normally pristine upper tributaries. I spent our first day coming up empty while exhausting almost all of the options in my fly box.

The water needed to come down. Until then, I decided that bigger was better as I knotted a Kreh loop through the eye of my favorite olive articulated streamer. My stealthy approach to the pool was probably unnecessary; the opaque water likely hid my presence from the fish anyway. My superfluous covert efforts were a comical sight for Fede, my guide that day. Sheep excrement smeared across my waders as I crawled down the bank and toward the river. Casting into the riffle at the head of the pool, the water erupted as an impressive sea trout struck the fly. I'm not sure if the reel or my voice squealed louder as the fish took my line and headed for the depths of the pool below.

Fede set down his cigarette on the back of his Toyota Hilux and reached for a net of the size normally found on deep sea fishing vessels. He excitedly coached me to direct the fish toward the shallows, and away from a log deeper in the pool, where he knew I'd

likely be ensnared. But I wasn't in charge of this battle. I was at the fish's mercy, it dragged me up and down the pool several times before it started to tire.

I carefully steered it toward the shore, and fish seemed calm as Fede and I strategized on how to land it. But with one more violent head shake, the hook was flying out of the water and over my casting shoulder. My body went as limp as my line, and I collapsed hopelessly into yet another pile of sheep dung. I laid there prostrate for minutes thereafter, as I contemplated the missed opportunity. The way things started, I wasn't sure how many more chances I would get. Luckily, conditions improved, and so did the fishing. But the feeling of hooking a sea trout never felt routine. My heart pounded with adrenaline every time I had one on the line.

SOUTHERN PATAGONIA AND THE RIO GALLEGOS

El Rincon Lodge is located in the far south of Argentina on a sprawling property that abuts the Chilean border near the southern tip of South America. It's just to the north of the island of Tierra del Fuego. The ranch resembles the desert steppe of Wyoming,

with sparse vegetation and rolling hills. Several prominent rock-strewn mesas dot the landscape. These mesas are known locally as morros, meaning "snouts" in Spanish, due to their shape resembling a porcine nose.

Although the snow-capped peaks of the Andes are visible in the distance, the area doesn't contain the grandiose mountain vistas envisioned by many people when they imagine Patagonia. Instead, the muted beauty of the area is delineated through earthy hues of the dry landscape, electric sunrises, abundant wildlife, and clear, crisp air through which the Southern Cross is one of many constellations that can be seen without obstruction.

Originally, only the indigenous Tehuelpe people inhabited the land presently known as the Santa Cruz Province of Argentina. First explored by Europeans during the Magellan circumnavigation in 1520, the Rio Gallegos received its contemporary name in homage to one of Magellan's navigators, Blasco Gallegos. Charles Darwin would later visit the area during his famous Beagle expedition. He sailed up the Rio Santa Cruz, which is the next major Atlantic drainage to the north of the Gallegos.

The area's population swelled in the late 19th century. The Argentine government invited settlers to the region as Argentina and Chile competed for land and resources in Patagonia. The government gifted massive plots of lands to these intrepid immigrants in exchange for loyalty to Argentina.

British settlers from the Falkland Islands arrived as the first inhabitants of European descent. They possessed great familiarity with the practice of sheep husbandry in similar harsh, windswept environments. These families established estancias, massive ranches containing thousands of acres of land. One of these estancias was El Rincon de los Morros, situated at the confluence of the Penitente and Rubens Rivers, which form the legendary Gallegos.

The rivers in this region remained nearly devoid of fish until humans intervened. Like many other denizens of the region, brown trout arrived as immigrants to the Rio Gallegos. Darwin wrote the following description of the nearby Rio Santa Cruz:

"The curse of sterility is on the land, and the water flowing over a bed of pebbles partakes of the same curse. Hence the number of waterfowl is very scanty; for there is nothing to support life in the stream of this barren river."

It has been said that God designed Patagonia for trout, but forgot to put the fish in the waterways. Estancia owners on the Gallegos stocked Scottish brown trout during the early 20th century to provide another food source for the families. The invasive salmonids brought life to the rivers and landscapes. The fish population exploded, as some of the trout became anadromous, while others stayed in the river all year. The anadromous sea trout returned to the river in great numbers, while the resident brown trout population also flourished. Although sea trout populations in the Gallegos have fluctuated over the years due to netting and exploitation by townspeople near the mouth of the river, stricter regulations during recent years has resulted in the healthiest fishery in the history of the river. Until eight years ago, all sea trout making it to El Rincon continued undisturbed all the way to the Chilean border as



The first official Argentine map, the Latzina map of 1882, was drawn by Francisco Latzina after the Boundary Treaty of 1881 by the order of Bernardo de Irigoyen. As Argentine Minister of the Interior Irigoyen presented the map for inclusion in an official publication in 1883 under the title "The Argentine Republic as a field for European Emigration" and was published in English, German, French, and Italian. The map was critical in the dispute between Argentina and Chile regarding the Beagle Channel islands, which lie just south of the island Tierra del Fuego at the southernmost reaches of Argentina. Obtained by the Norman B. Leventhal Map Center at the Boston Public Library.

they crossed the estancia. A lucky few have swung flies in front of the estancia's sea trout since the lodge opened here in 2015.

THE ESTANCIA

The fishing lodge is hosted out of the original and largest house on the estancia. Built in England in 1902, and completed when moved to the estancia in 1906, the lodge housed the owner's family. When other modern dwellings were built nearby, the house sat unoccupied for several decades before Diego Peralta and Paul Becher refurbished the building in preparation for the fishing program. Today, the lodge is a cozy, two-story edifice, with numerous bedrooms, a kitchen, a dining room, and an expansive common area. Photographs of impressive catches line the hallways, and a beau-



tiful illustrated map of the estancia hangs on a wall to highlight the auspicious fishing opportunities. Every angler has a private bedroom. This allowed me to invite my friends who have a snoring problem.

Some estancia owners in Patagonia shoot every predator and poison any critter that could take forage from the livestock. Fortunately, this is not the case at El Rincon de los Morros. Compared with my other trips to Patagonia, the wildlife viewing at the estancia is the best that I have seen. The flamingos are probably the most striking creatures on the estancia.

The only characteristic more remarkable than their fuschia tone is the way they take flight. With lanky legs, the flamingos literally run some distance across the water surface while becoming airborne. Rheas are strange, flightless birds resembling ostriches, with a maximum footspeed of 66 kilometers/hour. They are probably the most common wildlife on the estancia. Numerous Patagonian gray foxes moodily prowled the ranch. I imagine they are a menace during lambing season.

We witnessed a flock of condors consume the entirety of a dead sheep within the course of a morning fishing session. Multiple ea-

gle species examined us during their hunts for small mammals.

Caracaras—mischievous and colorful falcons—provided regular entertainment as they hopped across the estancia in search of carrion. Occasionally, llama-like guanacos would appear on a distant mesa.

Herds of wild horses majestically galloped away any time they saw the Hiluxes coming and were perhaps the only creatures more bashful than the flamingos.

A midday lunch and siesta divide the day into two fishing sessions. Guides generally stay on the same beat for days at a time, which allows them to develop intimate knowledge about current conditions on a given stretch of river. Anglers fish in pairs with a guide and return to the lodge for lunch in between the fishing sessions.

El Rincon takes lunch particularly seriously. While traveling through Buenos Aires, I ate a spectacular Argentine meal at Don Julio's, a world-famous steakhouse. I found the professionally prepared lunches at the lodge to rival anything I ate at Don Julio's. Highlights of the culinary experience included steak in various cuts, lamb asado, braised pork, and a variety of other dishes. The

attention lavished upon us by lodge staff was almost embarrassing, to the point where we needed to plead with them to stop filling our plates with food and our glasses with Malbec.

A quick siesta follows the enormous lunch, and most guests take a break from the biting Patagonia wind before heading back out for the afternoon session. However, I wanted to maximize my time on the water. Fortunately for me, the lodge is a quick five-minute walk from four or five great runs on the Rio Penitente, one of two rivers that come together to form the Rio Gallegos. My lunchtime efforts produced a glowing 15 pound sea trout and several resident brown trout.

While a rainstorm may cloud the Gallegos for days due to the muddy Rio Rubens, the freestone Penitente clears within hours. Accordingly, there is almost always fishable water at El Rincon.

The lodge allows for access to 35 kilometers of the Penitente. This mid-size river is easily wadeable and possesses a robust population of resident brown trout, which would be trophies in their own right on most of the world's brown trout rivers. Generally 16 to 24 inches





in length, these browns eagerly take the same flies intended for the sea trout. When conditions calmed, we witnessed numerous rising fish as small mayflies hatched. The resident browns keep the action flowing when their larger, moodier sea trout cousins decide to turn off. Any decent angler is nearly guaranteed to encounter resident browns during days on the Penitente.

But let's be honest. The Europeans and North Americans that make up the majority of El Rincon's clientele did not travel thousands of miles for resident brown trout. Anadromous sea trout are the main quarry, and fortunately, the vast majority of sea trout that proceed past the confluence take a hard left up the Penitente due to its abundance of quality spawning gravel. Our group caught just as many sea trout from the Penitente as we did from the Gallegos.

The Gallegos is one of the best and most famous sea trout rivers in the world, and El Rincon provides access to 18 named runs and 20 kilometers of this famous stream. Many of these runs surpass 100 meters in length and take an hour to cover properly with a Spey rod. The Gallegos is the preferred stream when the omnipresent west wind is really howling. The river flows to the southeast through the estancia, which allows for some gargantuan Spey casts when the wind picks up.

FISHING STRATEGIES

The Penitente and Gallegos can be fished in multiple ways, although the guides prefer the classic downstream and across approach used for many anadromous salmonids throughout the world. Generally, you cast the fly at a 45-degree angle downstream against the opposite bank, twitch it several times with a back-and-forth movement of the arm, and then slowly strip it back upstream as it swings through the current. Take two or three steps downstream, and repeat from the top to the bottom of the run. Moving the fly is critical for these fish; they want a taste of something that is alive. Single-hand rods in the 7- to 9-weight range are optimal for the Penitente. The larger and deeper Gallegos is usually approached with 13- or 14-foot 7- or 8-weight Spey rods.

With single-hand rods, a good double haul is essential to handle the wind. A strong backhand cast also proves advantageous on some of the Penitente's bends depending on wind direction. Spey casting is preferred to cover the voluminous runs of the Gallegos. Don't fret if you lack these skills. The guides are one of the best elements of El Rincon, as they are passionate and knowledgeable casting instructors.

My charismatic friend Jamal became a natural with the Spey rod. At 6'5" and with an athletic frame, Jamal made magic with 13 feet of graphite in his hands. His effortless snap T casts and double Speys put his fly inches from the opposite bank as he covered the runs of the legendary Gallegos with aplomb and precision. Throughout the week, Jamal and I made sure to capitalize on every opportunity to hit the Gallegos with the big sticks. As Spey neophytes, we wanted to absorb the entire catalog of knowledge

from our excellent guides. Jamal had more than his share of luck with the single-hand rods on the Penitente. But despite his rapid improvement with Spey casting, for him, the fish seemed harder to come by with that technique.

Near the week's end, Jamal and I shared a spectacular evening in the late-autumn sunshine at a run called Legs—one of the best beats on the Gallegos. Having already swung up a couple worthy sea trout that evening, I took a seat next to Diego on the back of the Hilux. Diego marveled at Jamal's casting as the golden hour came and went. Jamal reached the end of the quarter-mile long run and kept on marching downstream. He was fishing below where Diego normally stops his clients, but neither of us were going to call and end to the evening. Jamal was the only person in our trio who could call an end to this day.

His persistence was rewarded with an impressive specimen of a sea trout on what he planned as his last cast of the evening. The fish unleashed the usual barrage of sea trout tricks, including cartwheeling leaps, punishing runs, and vigorous head shakes. Deterred, Jamal expertly guided the fish toward shore, where Diego scooped it into the net. The Spey-caught sea trout put a trademark mile-wide smile on Jamal's face, and gifted him with a benchmark moment in his fly fishing career. *[Jamal Jones and his sea trout are shown on the cover of this magazine. THE EDITOR.]*

The guides use a variety of streamers and nymphs. The lower water typically encountered during the summer months of January and February supports the use of size 10 to 14 nymphs. Common patterns include Copper Johns, Pheasant Tails, and Girdle Bugs. Streamers take a prominent place on the menu when autumn rains cause the river to rise during March and April. A fly called the Rio Grande Queen is perhaps the most popular fly for these rivers. Larger, articulated streamers are preferred when the water takes on a dirtier, tannin-stained complexion. The best flies all have rubber legs to provide a bit more action. Rubber legs and moving the flies are the two major differences in fishing for these sea trout, compared to fishing to steelhead or Atlantic salmon.

During our week at El Rincon, the water eventually dropped and cleared, and the fishing improved. Several of the more experienced anglers stuck numerous sea trout. Some were dime-bright, almost translucent, and appeared as if they made the swim from the ocean just hours before the catch. Most of the trout displayed a proud bronze color developed after a bit of time in the freshwater as they prepared for the spawn. Others bore the scars from mating rituals already completed in previous years, but did not appear unhealthy in any way. Unlike Pacific salmon, sea trout may embark on up to six spawning journeys to the freshwater during their lifetimes.

THE LOG FISH

I have never had a fish turn into a log, but for a few minutes one day, that appeared to be the case. I found myself on one of the Penitente's prime runs midway through a surprisingly calm morn-

ing, hooked up to a beast of a sea trout. I knew this fish was a good one even before it took me to my backing. I witnessed its attempt to jump. I say attempt, because the fish simply couldn't clear the water. It was too big, too fat, and simply too heavy to clear the surface. Gravity was not its friend.

After several minutes of this absurd spectacle, the fish parked right in front of me, perhaps 20 feet from the tip of my rod. "Parked" is an understatement, as I simply could not move the thing. I was concerned that it had wrapped around a log.

Fede waded out into the stream to investigate. He gave the line a few tugs, but nothing budged. We shrugged as we contemplated our next move. But the fish took the initiative, as it slowly, almost ominously, started to move upstream, literally an inch at a time. After seeing a fish move with so much ferocity just minutes ago, it was even more startling to witness one move so slowly.

This fish had unmistakable power, and the tension in my line never wavered in the slightest. As the fish again went berserk, I realized that I was never hung up on a log, a weed, or any other inanimate object. The fish simply possessed the weight and power to make it feel that way. It felt like the fish played a cunning trick, as I nearly started yanking my rod as one does to free a fly from a snag. I was dumbstruck as I steered the weighty fish into Fede's net. I lacked the words to express my awe at the amazing creature, and could only articulate one stupid line. "I didn't know they came like that."

THE FISH CHOOSES YOU

Pete was celebrating his 70th birthday during our trip. Partly due to bad luck, he made it all the way to day five without landing a sea trout. Diego (the co-owner and head guide of the operation) took Pete under his wing on this day, and led him to multiple likely spots on the Penitente. As they walked up to a run called Chanos, Diego left Pete with some sage wisdom in an effort to mute the growing sense of defeat.

"Peter, you do not choose the fish. The fish chooses you.

We started calling him Sensei Diego for good reason. His words proved both soothing and prophetic, as Pete stepped up to one of the best beats on the river. He laid out a perfect 50-foot double haul, slicing through the wind and landing his streamer inches from the opposite cut bank. It happened two twitches later. Pete strip set on not only a sea trout, but perhaps the best fish of the entire trip. The water churned like the wake from a dreadnought as the fish fought a battle worthy of its reputation. But Pete was up to the task on this one, and soon landed the fish of a lifetime, a 20 pound vibrant buck of a sea trout. 🐟

Chad Agy is an avid fly fisher based out of Salt Lake City, Utah.

RECOMMENDED GEAR

Protective low-light lenses are essential for these fisheries as the best fishing is in the late evenings and early mornings, and the wind makes errant casts a very real possibility.

This is a caster's game, and a perfectly matched Spey rod and Skagit head will help you beat the wind and cover the water with as little fatigue as possible. Don't bring old lines, you want to start the week as clean and slick as possible.

SAGE / SONIC SPEY 13'6" 6-PIECE 7-WEIGHT / \$950

RIO PRODUCTS / SKAGIT MAX ELITE SHOOTING HEAD / \$65

RIO / SKAGIT MOW HEAVY TIPS / \$200

SCOTT / SECTOR 9' 8-WEIGHT / \$1,045

RIO / ELITE PREDATOR (FLOAT/INTERMEDIATE/SLOW SINK) / \$100

SAGE / SPECTRUM LT REEL / \$425

SIMMS / EXSTREAM BICOMP HOODY / \$280

ORVIS / PRO ZIPPER WADERS / \$750



BOOK YOUR DESTINATION

Hemispheres Unlimited is a U.S. booking agent for El Rincon. All the trips begin in Buenos Aires. Domestic flights to the town of Rio Gallegos depart from Jorge Newberry Airport, about an hour cab ride from Ezeiza, the international airport in Buenos Aires. Allow at least four hours between landing in Ezeiza and departure from the domestic airport. The smart move is to spend a night in Buenos Aires to take advantage of the incredible cultural and culinary opportunities in this great city. The flight to the town of Rio Gallegos from Buenos Aires takes three and a half hours. From there, El Rincon staff will meet anglers at the Rio Gallegos airport for the two and a half hour drive to the lodge.

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