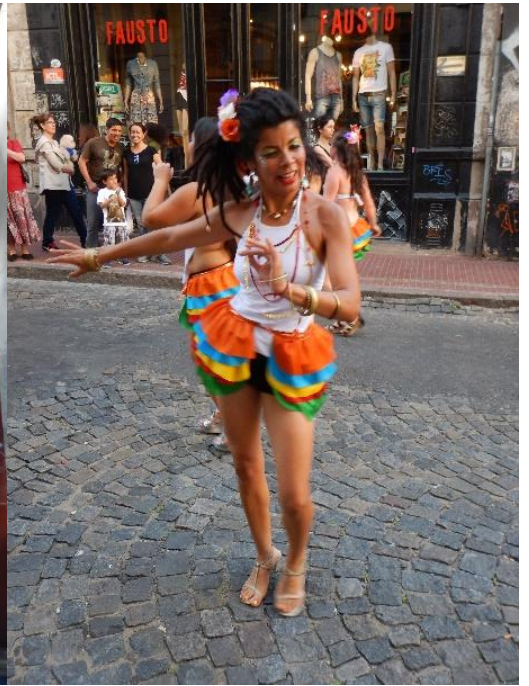


Fishing the rivers of Patagonia in Argentina

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By Stelios Comninos

After months of planning our fishing trip to Patagonia, we flew from Durban to Johannesburg to Sao Paulo and then to Buenos Aires for the first “wives diversion”. Our wives were keen to get going with their plans to run around Buenos Aires, do the tango and spend money on shoes and bags – “very good leather goods” there they said. However, due to unexplainable delays we were forced to stay the night in Sao Paulo and arrived in Buenos Aires a day later than planned and at the cost of forgoing the first night of our B&B there. (See more later about the unreliability of flight bookings for internal flights in South America!)



After three days of (no fishing) in Buenos Aires visiting museums, going to a Tango club, seeing pretty places and watching street celebrations, we flew on to Salta - the second “wives diversion”. Salta (no fishing there) is a city that is in the semi- desert Andes in the northeast of Argentina. From there we hired a car (at a very “eina” price) and drove to spend the night in Purmamarca where there are beautiful views of multi-coloured hills – and of course no fishing there either!



We returned to Salta and spent the day seeing museums and watching a public gathering of people who were mourning the socialist election loss. The next morning early we arrived at the airport to take our flight to fly to San Martine de los Andes in Patagonia (via Buenos Aires). By this time we two anglers were biting at the bit and anxious to get to the REAL purpose of our trip to Argentina. We had for the past few days (and preceding months) talking endlessly about fishing in Patagonia – and now the time was near, the next morning our guide was scheduled to take us on our first river drift.

Well, a cloud of gloom suddenly descended on us when checking in at the airport. We were told that our flight to Buenos Aires would arrive two hours later than scheduled which would mean that we would miss our connecting flight to St Martin de los Andes. We were also told that the connecting flight in any event had also been cancelled. This would mean would arrive 1 ½ days later than scheduled. To compound the gloom, our return flight to Buenos

from Patagonia had also been cancelled and we would have to leave Patagonia a day earlier. All of a sudden our dreams and expectations for 5 days fishing were now reduced to a miserable 2 ½ days!

We two fishermen resigned ourselves to this fate but were weeping internally and outwardly bemoaning our bad luck. While we were steeped in our grief, our wives (who sometimes can be smarter than us) took control of the crisis and worked with the very helpful woman at the check in counter. We were then rerouted us (at no extra cost) to San Carlos de Bariloche - a three hour drive away from St Martin de los Andes — all of a sudden the fishing returned to 5 days! We called Dario Damonte (our guide) who said that he would pick us up (although it meant a 3 hour drive there and three hours back for him – which he did at no cost to us). We would, at the end of our stay, have to drive a hired car back to San Carlos de Bariloche and pay an extra R1200 to have the car fetched at the airport. Although this introduction on flights may seem a bit boring, anyone wanting to go our route must be very careful of South American flight scheduling – it could really mess with fishing time and cost you a lot more!

In the planning stages, we had no idea where the best fishing in Patagonia could be found. We started off looking at San Carlos de Bariloche but soon found that there were not that many rivers to fish there. We then looked at the exclusive (and extremely expensive) river fishing lodges and found that they were mostly located in the St Martin de los Andes area. We took note of the rivers where the lodges were located and knowing that all waters are open to public use, we then started searching for a guide. Numerous emails were sent to guiding operations, and we found that most of them were USA based, very expensive (especially for South Africans) and linked to the exclusive lodges. Many were also very vague (maybe deliberately) in their responses and very coy about being forthright about pricing. Bear in mind that Patagonia (as with most nice places in South America) is the playground of the “gringos” who seemed to have skewed the prices of everything.

We then found a very responsive St Martin de los Andes based fly-fishing shop with guiding operations - Damonte Outfitters (www.damonteoutfitters.com.ar). Mario Damonte (the brother of our guide Dario) worked out a tailored 5 day fishing itinerary for us – and could arrange accommodation in a very reasonable hotel in town. They also offered an early payment discount of 5%. Going the hotel in town route was a wise choice because, when we got there, we realised that the exclusive lodges provided the exact same guiding services as Damonte on all the rivers – but were generally located way out of town – thus travelling to the rivers from lodges was no different to travelling to the rivers from town. The added benefits of staying in town was that the wives could do their own thing (using the very expensive hire car – hiring cars is NOT cheap in Argentina). It also meant that we could have dinner in a different restaurant every night and spend time in the festivities and concerts in the main square. By the way, meals are pretty pricy everywhere in Argentina). The cost of a hotel and dinners worked out at less than half of the cost of staying in an exclusive lodge.

Our initial fishing assumption was that we would be mostly wading streams (our usual mode in South Africa and other countries where we have fished like Alaska, USA, Norway, Ireland, UK, and Zimbabwe etc.). So we were a bit perplexed by Dario's emphasis on drift fishing. In our communications with him, we kept on saying that we were interested in wading – and his response was that we should be more interested in drift fishing. It was only once we got there that we realised that wading was really not an option in this part of Patagonia. The rivers are very big, deep and fast flowing – although we did (see later) wade one small river. Drift fishing is done in a McKenzie drift boat – a really fantastic fishing platform for these rivers. Drifting requires a very experienced and capable guide with strong arms – such as Dario Damonte our very excellent guide.

Now, the fishing report! We were two fly fishermen – and in the 5 days of fishing, we caught (by the count of Dario) over 150 fish – mainly rainbows but also a few large browns and a few Patagonian perch. The rainbows were not very big, mostly between 12 and 20 inches – according to Dario, rainbows larger than 20 inches are not very common in this area. However, these trout are incredibly strong being spawned in the wild and living in big and fast flowing water. We were both surprised by their feistiness and doggedness - landing them was often a challenge because they were fit and also took advantage of the fast flowing currents. These are some of the fish that we caught:



The fishing techniques were far from what we were used to. We used a large dry fly such as a Chubby Chernobyl, Fat Albert or a PMX – and added various nymph patterns as a dropper New Zealand style. Dario was very particular as to how we fished. He kept the boat drifting at the speed of the current and close enough to the bank for us to cast our flies. He made sure that we cast and kept out flies drifting as close to the banks as possible. Dario was a fishing machine and a one person powered motor. He kept the drift boat in perfect position at all times. The drift boat is a fly-fishing platform of note!



Driven by Mario from the centre of the boat using two long oars – he could move the boat any which way he wanted, forward, reverse, sideways....through rapids and complex fishing runs. He knew every bit of the river very well. As part of the fishing package, a sumptuous lunch include with a number of courses, desert and wine (neatly packed in the drift boat)



As we got into the routine of casting and drifting, Dario gave continual instructions to cast to the bank, willows, riffles, shadows, drop off, seam, log etc. His instructions and the routine was hypnotic but interspersed with fish taking our flies. It was uncanny how Dario knew where the fish were, what flies the trout were interested in and even when the fish was near to or about to take our flies.

We mostly had unfavourably strong cold winds (and sometimes drizzle) during the trip, but Dario adapted routines and methods to suit prevailing conditions. He would stick to wind protected banks and, when it became impossible to cast efficiently, he added a 2 meter length of fast sinking Spey line to our dry lines and we cast into the deep drop offs and riffles with large weighted streamers. When there was little or no winds, Dario found little inlets where we could cast small dry flies (mainly caddis flies) alongside and under the willow trees where we could see trout rising.

The description a (below) of the rivers we fished below have been culled and edited from internet searches).

Day One: Chimuine River

On the first day we drifted 45km on the Chimuine River which is one of the finest trout fisheries in the Americas and is known to produce some of the largest brown trout in Patagonia, From its fabled mouth at the base of Lake Heuchulafquen, (also known as the boca, where fisherman dream of hooking into a one meter brown trout), the river winds its way through beautiful ranch lands, including past the town of Junin de los Andes, to its confluence with the Collon Cura River.



The Chimuine is referred to as “the Cathedral of Patagonia Fly Fishing”, the river was made famous in the 1960’s by many fly fishing icons (Joe Brooks, Lefty Kreh, Mel Kreiger and Billy Pate), giving Argentina great notoriety as a world class fly-fishing destination. Known for its healthy populations of rainbow and German brown trout, a variety of willow-lined banks, incredible riffles, and deep pools offer the angler a variety of fishing conditions.



Housing the largest trout population in the region, the Chimehuin River is the icon of fly fishing in northern Patagonia. It is a classic large, free-flowing freestone river, with classic pools and runs. You could spend the entire season here and still not have enough time to discover all of its pools, runs and willow-lined banks. The tightly lined willow banks make the river feel smaller than its true size. The river is rich with great hatches of caddis, PMDs, large mayflies, and plenty of hoppers throughout the season.

Day Two: Nahuel Mapi River

The Nahuel Mapi is a tributary of the Alumine River. The stretch we fished was in a deep wind protected gorge on a private farm. Dario took us here because of our insistence that we wanted to wade a river. Our decision was probably a mistake because we caught few fish there – mainly because of the cold weather conditions – according to Dario. The river was fast but very wadeable.



However, I had bought new Patagonia rubber soled “sticky” boots and found them to be extremely “slippy”. I found it impossible to wade on the smooth rocks without leaning on Dario and using my wading stick. I bought them in Johannesburg where the salesman said that they were excellent boots – not! A few weeks later (when in the USA) I went to a Patagonia shop who exchanged them for felt soled boots and no questions asked! We waded up the river casting to all the obvious places but could not raise a fish. Dario then set up a French nymphing rig and we took turns in fishing the deeper channels where we managed to take a number of nice sized rainbows. After 4 hours of fishing, we were beaten back to the car because of rain, had a sumptuous lunch and went back to the hotel to surprise our wives with an early return – but they were out shopping and still looking for those quality leather goods.

Day three: Chimuine River

We returned to a different section of the Chimuine River instead of fishing the Malleo River – mainly because Dario had heard the Malleo would be infested with other drift boats. The Chimuine (as described in day one above) is an amazing river and I would be happy to fish it any day. We again drifted about 35 km and caught many fish. At one stage Dario entered a long deep and narrow pool on the side of the river where we caught many Patagonian perch and on large (but skinny) brown trout.

Day four and five: Collon Cura River

Descending from the Andean Range across the Patagonia Steppe, the Collon Cura, the largest river system in the region, is a mild gradient river born at the confluence of the Alumine and Catan Lil Rivers. The water conditions, willow-lined banks, lush vegetation and volcanic rock provide ideal habitat for the terrestrial insect life that supports this rivers’ abundant trout population, while also boasting some of the regions’ largest trout. Both rainbow and

brown trout are found with averages about 16 inches. The river cuts through the dry Patagonia steppe with a rocky and willow lined shores.



With its many different channels, broad gravel riffles, cut banks, and deep pools, the Collon Cura is a river full of possibilities where one can wade-fish pebble bottom stretches, drift through picturesque runs, and glide a streamer through a dark eddy line. It is said that the Collon Cura is home to some of the world's hardest fighting rainbows, and legendary brown trout. Beyond the river banks, the spectacular scenery is complimented by an abundance of waterfowl, wild boars, red stags, and guanaco.



We drifted nearly 75 km on the Collon Cura over two days, camping on an island. In the two days we saw no other anglers. The camping was comfortable but cold and the food was stunning – for the two of us, the guide and two camp attendants they braaied half a lamb Argentina style! The logistics of camping are significant – the two camp attendants drifted ahead in a rubber boat – packed full of equipment (including a fully stocked bar and generator) of us and had everything ready for when we arrived at sunset. As with the Chimuine, the fishing was excellent and we were a bit sad in the last hour as our drift approached the pickup point which heralded the end of our trip.