



# Chilean Patagonia

## Return to the River of Swans

Story and photos  
by  
King Montgomery

**N**o one is really sure where Patagonia begins or ends. It is neither a political unit nor a firmly defined geographic location, although it is generally considered to be the area of Chile and Argentina below the 40th degree of south latitude. But I am not sure defining boundaries really matters; for me Patagonia is more an experience than a locale—a wild, beautiful, almost pristine place where condors soar on the Andean thermals, pumas still roam, guanaco graze, wildflowers thrive, and brown trout jump.

Whoever said that brown trout

don't jump when hooked never fished in Chilean Patagonia. These descendants of early 20th-century transplants from Scotland would make a smallmouth bass or tarpon proud with their aerial antics. The trout's similarity to black bass doesn't end with jumping; I spent time, particularly when the catching was relatively slow, popping for browns in beautiful mountain and spring-fed lakes, on the wonderful Rio Cisnes, the fabled River of Swans, and on several other clean and clear streams such as the Rio Manuales and Rio Turbio.

### **The Towers**

Las Torres (the Towers) Lodge sits about 100 miles north of the growing town of Coihaique between the Rio Cisnes and Lago Las Torres. The Andean cordillera surrounds it all, providing travel-magazine beauty and grandeur. The towers that give the lake and lodge their names are two large, weathered rock pinnacles on a nearby mountain that rises above the lake. The lodge is small but very nicely kept, and it has a charm that reflects the surroundings where every view is close to breathtaking.

If you ever wondered where

Maine fishing guides go in the winter, wonder no more. The lodge and fishing operations are run efficiently by Michael Jones and Bob Dupont, two fine Maine guides who had the good fortune this early March to escape one of Maine's snowiest winters. Lefty Kreh and I had fished with Michael on Maine's Androscoggin River last September, and we found him to be affable and a knowledgeable angling guide. He's also the New England fly-casting champ and really knows his stuff. Bob is a full-time guide who plies several waters in Maine, including the famed Rapid River. At four inches over six feet tall, Bob was our osprey on the streams, often spotting fish when we couldn't. Both men are fine gentlemen, and I recommend them very highly—in Chile, Maine, or anywhere.

### Dances with Lapwings

The Rio Cisnes and its sister rivers flow out of the high glaciers and mountain streams of the Andes near the Argentine border and traverse the broken valley terrain. We fished the middle Cisnes in stretches of river that ranged in width from about 100 feet to more than 200 feet. The other streams were smaller and generally clearer. The freestone habitat, liberally laced with aquatic vegetation in the quieter shallows, is home to numerous wild brown trout; some streams carry rainbows as well. The browns can reach almost 30 inches in length and are the prettiest I've ever seen anywhere. These wonderful fish are at the top of the aquatic food chain, and readily attack anything that looks like a meal.

The high valley floors are largely comprised of ranches or estancias that raise mostly sheep and some cattle, with horses thrown in for good measure. The hillsides and lower parts of the mountains still carry the scars of wholesale burning over the past century of the once-lush forests to make room for the sheep to graze. Burned-out cypress and other hardwoods stand where they died or lie prostrate, felled by the Patagonian winds. These deadfalls and



Guide Bob Dupont (left) guides Charlie Wallshein to his first Chilean brown trout on the Turbio River—on a dry fly, too.

The Las Torres Lodge sits in a high valley in the Andes Mountains. This rustic lodge has all the amenities, including toilets, showers, good food and wine, and very nice people.



snags still provide good lumber, and Las Torres Lodge is made from rough-hewn cypress timbers.

Mike and Bob have permission to fish numerous stretches of prime trout waters. We would either wade and catch 13-inch to 17-inch trout in the traditional Halfordian upstream dry-fly presentation or float in a comfortable three-man raft. A

few fish rose now and then, probably to the occasional caddisfly or light Cahill-type mayfly, but most fish were caught prospecting in likely looking feeding and holding lies. Current seams, bubble lines, and any structure such as rocks or tree snags held fish.

Always one to get distracted, particularly when surrounded by the



**Aldro French, who runs the Rapid River Camp in Maine's Rangeley Lakes region, casts to another trout as guide Bob Duport looks on. Trout do indeed live in very beautiful places.**

splendor of the Andes, my gaze left the drifting fly to take in a high-mountain glacier to the northeast reminiscent of Alaska. A flock of olive green birds with colorful markings about their heads juked and jinked along the river. These wild parakeets and the ever-present flocks of ibis, some southern lapwings, and cara cara provide continuous avian entertainment.

The guides had given me several flies that looked more like bass flies than trout fare. The B-52 is a foam rendition of one of the huge black dragonflies that populate the air above the water, and the other was called the Tarbaby, a black foam beetle with orange or yellow rubber legs that mimicked a staghorn or other large beetle. I would soon learn to fish both the same way—cast across or a little downstream and allow the fly to dead drift as well as possible. Mend if possible but don't worry about line drag. Patagonian brown trout sometimes like dragging flies. When they do, it's just like smallmouth bass fishing

back on Virginia's Shenandoah River.

There were times when this approach didn't work. Then I popped, gurgled, and manipulated the flies like bass poppers or sliders. (Mr. Halford surely rolled over in his grave several times, and probably dug in a little deeper.) The browns would attack it from below, or they would porpoise out of the water and take the fly on the way down. I fished the smaller sizes like a normal dry fly, and used the larger ones as poppers. Woolly bugger-type streamers also were effective, and the Maine lads insisted on using one they called Tony the Tiger, which is a woolly bugger with the colors of a Bengal tiger.

Rain, wind, and cold plagued us on my first trip to Las Torres over six years ago, but this time the sun shone almost every day and the winds were generally calm; two conditions that can be rare in this wild land. The high blue skies interlaced with puffy white clouds were pretty, but not necessarily the best conditions for catching

fish. But it did allow for stunning photographs enticing me and my camera away from the fish.

### **Lake of the Towers**

Lago Las Torres, about a 20-minute drive south of the lodge, lies along the mostly asphalted road that is part of the 2,150 miles of Chile's portion of the Pan-American Highway originating in Alaska. On my previous visit the road was dirt and gravel, and I spent some time reflecting on whether the "progress" was good or bad. The lake, several hundred acres of deep, cold, and clear water born of glacial mountain streams and springs, held monster brown trout. The north end of the lake, where a gorgeous spring creek continued its journey to the Rio Cisnes, was covered in tules, supple reed-like plants that provided cover and groceries for big browns.

I fished the lake on two separate days, with Bob rowing the first time and Michael the second. I cast a B-52—a large

foam-beetle pattern tied by the guides, or a Hickey's Condor—a blue or orange foam-bodied impressionistic representation of the damselflies and dragonflies that flitted about the tules—to the edge of the reeds or into pockets. I then skated the fly a short distance along the surface by slowly raising the rod tip, then allowed it to sit as still as the wind would permit. At some point, usually when least expected, a nice brown would take the offering with great enthusiasm. The 30-inchers eluded us, but the fish we caught were all healthy, spunky and pretty.

I tried some streamers, from woolly buggers to Clousers, without much success. After experimentation we found the most effective way to catch browns on the lake was to slowly troll a Tony the Tiger streamer on a short leader tied to a sinking line. Strikes were subtle. The Lago browns could not compete with the beauty of the Rio Cisnes trout, whose form and color, particularly the prominent red spots, were gorgeous.

Patagonia is a wild place and the middle Cisnes region is relatively undeveloped. There is little running water, electricity or telephones. The lodge has electricity powered by a waterfall, plenty of hot or cold water from tanks on the roof, and a septic tank—so things are not as rustic as they could be. Susan, the Chilean manager and chef who lives on the grounds with her two sons, Gustavo and Boris, cooked on a giant antique wood-burning stove, miraculously producing gourmet quality meals. Chilean wines, particularly the deep-bodied reds, are very good and complemented Susan's fine cooking. One evening we dined on traditional Chilean asada, which is lamb grilled over an open wood fire by the male members of the Chilean families that lived and worked on the property and at the lodge.

The natural wonders of Patagonia and the inspiring Andes Mountains are magnificent. The wildflowers that take advantage of the short growing season—



Guide Michael Jones holds a typical Rio Cisnes brown trout for guest Dick Friis from Maryland.

A Lago Las Torres brown comes to net for Aldro French and Bob Duport. The fish, like many, took a beetle pattern fished close to the tules.



fuchsia, foxglove, lupine, and thistle—add to the grandeur and beauty of the time and the place. It is a wonderful location with very hospitable people, and waters filled with wild brown trout that leap like bass and show a power and wildness befitting their unique home.

#### **Chilean Patagonia Information**

Contacts: American Angling Adventures, Michael Jones (207) 491-9898, Bob Duport

(207) 235-2573, [www.lastorreslodge.com](http://www.lastorreslodge.com).  
Transportation: I flew American Airlines from Washington, D.C. to Miami and on to Santiago, Chile (800-433-7300, [www.aa.com](http://www.aa.com)).

\* I recommend you fly in a day early and spend an afternoon/evening in Santiago. Then continue south to Coihaique on Lan Chile Airlines in the morning (866) 435-9526



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### Equipment:

1. I took two Temple Fork Outfitters fly rods in a 5 weight and an 8 weight and used the latter more often than not. These are six-piece rods, so they fit nicely in my rolling duffle.

2. My reels were Ross Evolution 3 and 3.5 models spooled with Scientific Anglers' new Sharkskin trout lines that are absolutely wonderful. The new lines have less drag and probably extended my casts about 10 feet to 15 feet. Scientific Anglers Streamer Express lines took the flies deeper in the lakes, and Teeny MiniTips got me down in deeper water on the rivers

3. My old reliable Simms Guide Series Gore-Tex waist-high waders were anchored with Cabela's wading boots with Velcro straps instead of laces, a good combination.

4. I used exclusively nine-foot knotless

tapered leaders from FrogHair in both monofilament and fluorocarbon and added tippet material as needed. Shorter FrogHair leaders were used with the streamers.

5. The successful flies were B-52, Tarbaby foam beetles, Hickey's Condor, woolly bugger (Tony the Tiger), Prince Nymph, and Elk Hair Caddis.

Regular contributor King Montgomery is still pondering the effects of the asphalt road that has reached beyond the Las Torres Lodge and continues to march south. Will it bring too much progress and spoil the wilderness, or will it make it easier for a few more people to enjoy the natural bounties of this fine land? He hopes to visit again to find out for himself. King lives in Burke, Virginia and can be reached at kingfish@cox.net.

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