

DREAMSCAPES

TRAVEL AND LIFESTYLE

SPRING/SUMMER 2021

CELEBRATING
OUR **25TH**
YEAR

**VIRGINIA
ROAD TRIPS**

**A PATAGONIAN
PARADISE**

**FAIRMONT
GEMS**

**NATURALLY
MANITOBA**

HOOKED IN PATAGONIA

ONE FLY, MANY LESSONS *By Nora Walsh*



It all started with a young Brad Pitt. When I first watched him gracefully cast his line in the poignant drama *A River Runs Through It*, I vowed someday to learn how to fly-fish.

Nearly three decades later I find myself in Patagonia floating down the Palena River in Chile's Lake District cursing the actor for making this sport look so endearingly easy. I, on the other hand, have an expensive flex-tip fishing rod crammed between my legs as I attempt to extricate myself from a long, tangled fishing line wrapped around me like a string of Christmas lights.

To be fair, it's a windy day—not exactly the ideal conditions to master the art of looping a featherweight fishing line above one's head.

"You have to be patient and gentle with yourself," says Fernando "Nano" Abarca, a mild-mannered fishing guide charged with teaching me how to fly-fish. Nano's one of several local guides at Rio Palena Lodge, a seven-room fly-fishing and heli-skiing outpost from adventure outfitter Eleven Experience that opened in November 2019.

"Don't hurry the line. Wait until you feel it pull, then cast it," he instructs. "Make the rod do the work, not the arm. Remember, it's like throwing paint on a canvas."

A PATAGONIAN PARADISE

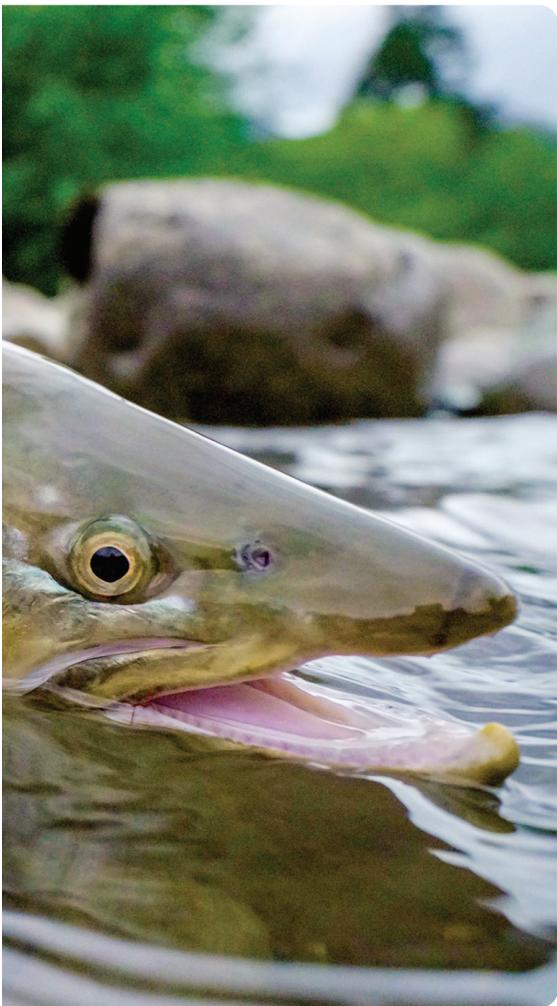
As Nano paddles through a patch of rapids, I secure my fly and take a seat in our four-



metre river raft. Looking up, I let out an audible gasp. There's a soaring waterfall pouring into the gin-clear Palena River. The riverbanks are lined with electric-green willows that give way to rocky cliffs laden with canopies of emerald coihue trees. It's plain to see why anglers the world over flock to fish this primeval landscape. It also helps

that the trout plying these waters are an average 20 inches long and roughly weigh four pounds—half the weight of a newborn.

It has taken me three flights, an Argentina-Chile border crossing, and a bumpy 3.5-hour drive to reach this unspoiled corner of the world legendary for its sky-high Andes Mountains, ancient forests and snow-



OPPOSITE: Anglers the world over flock to fly-fish in Chilean Patagonia lured by the promise of hooking a 20-inch trophy trout. **ABOVE:** A day of fly-fishing the gin-clear waters of Rio Palena in Chilean Patagonia to catch-and-release the region's famous brown and rainbow trout. **RIGHT:** A guest of Rio Palena Lodge in a helicopter on his way to angle brown and rainbow trout in a remote high-altitude lake in the Andes Mountains. Rio Palena Lodge

melt rivers and lakes teeming with hefty brown and rainbow trout. And it's here where this city girl gets lured into a fly-fishing quest like no other. (Note: there's a strict catch-and-release policy.)

I unexpectedly hook a hefty 16-inch brown trout, which my hurried reeling sends flying off the hook.

Exhilarated, I ask Nano to cancel tomorrow's whitewater rafting trip so we can spend the entire day angling.

THE ULTIMATE ECO-RETREAT

The Colorado-based company has made a name for itself with cushy hotels in remote locales that deliver off-grid adrenalin-spiking activities. Non-anglers can get their hearts pounding on epic guided adventures from river kayaking and mountain biking to waterfall treks and rafting Class V rapids.

The luxury ecolodge itself is fit for the gentleman-sportsman who basks in the ruggedness of the great outdoors. Wood-

panelled floors and ceilings in guest rooms and living spaces embrace richly-woven sofas, leather furnishings and Chilean textiles, while large picture windows frame postcard-perfect views of the river and mountains. Crackling stone fireplaces and cozy lounge areas lend a feeling of staying in a wealthy friend's home, complete with an amiable staff, personal chef and top-flight wine cellar.

The executive Chilean chef creates emblematic meals like beef Charquicán paired with Chilean Carménère in the dining room while beneath the stars prepare for authentic *asado* cookouts replete with oven-baked empanadas, Patagonian lamb, striploin beef, pork ribs, and perfectly grilled vegetables.

True to the brand's adventurous spirit, each guest stay comes with the bragging rights of a helicopter transfer to angle rarely-fished glacial lakes abundant with brawny trout. Home to snaking cyan rivers





LEFT: Fishing guide Fernando “Nano” Abarca teaches the writer how to fly-fish in the upper Palena River. **RIGHT:** Fishing guide Fernando “Nano” Abarca’s fly box with a colourful assortment of handmade “dries,” including a furry caddis collection, Fat Albert beetles and Chubby Chernobyl grasshoppers. **Nora Walsh** **BELOW:** A view from the bathroom of the junior master suite Azul. The perfect place to soak after a long day of fly-fishing. Rio Palena Lodge



and cobalt lakes, getting a condor’s-eye-view of the outsized peaks and verdant valleys is alone worth the trip to Patagonia.

A REEL GOOD TIME

On another day, a 20-minute helicopter journey has us touch down on the mountain-hemmed shores of Cofré Lake. I suit up for a quick stand-up paddle excursion with Missouri-bred activities guide Nate Rigsby followed by a gourmet picnic. As we feast, so do the trout bursting through the freshwater lake’s glassy surface.

Three days ago, words like roll cast, riffle, “tip down and strip!” held no meaning for me. Now, they get my blood buzzing with anticipation of landing my next big catch. Within minutes, Nate expertly hooks a beefy, 20-inch brown trout and my expectation doubles. Suddenly the wind picks up and I’m forced to cast across my body. My arm quickly tires. Nano senses my frustration and rows to the other side of the seemingly glassier inlet, but instead, the smooth surface shifts to a windy maelstrom.

Weary and discouraged in Mother Nature’s breezy battle, what is this city girl to do?

“You can’t catch anything without your fly in the water,” encourages Nano. So I soldier on.

My lure lands near the sea grass.

“Twitch it,” he directs.

Wham! A trout slams my fly and forcefully bends the rod.

I struggle to keep the monster fish on the line. Just when Nano is about to net the catch of the day, a rip-roaring fast current whips the fish underneath the raft. He pulls at the line. An oar accidentally bumps, knocking the fish free. Just like that.

My trophy trout is gone.

I now understand the old angler saying, “The one that got away.”

Yet throughout this experience I have learned some invaluable life lessons: Fishing mirrors life. You face the winds of change and the elements of nature. Through the constant knotting of your line, you learn the virtue of patience and the virtue of practice, feeling the flow, the need to let go, and the joy of sitting in the abundance of Mother Nature.

As we packed up our gear, I smiled knowing that 28 years ago Pitt cast a line—and I’m the one he hooked. **DS**

TRAVEL PLANNER

Eleven Experience: elevenexperience.com

Rio Palena Lodge: elevenexperience.com/eleven-rio-palena-lodge