



Heaven on the river of rhapsodies

On the second half of his piscatorial tour of New Zealand, our correspondent ventures to the Taupo region of the North Island

HE'S high in the water, looking for hooks,' murmured my guide Marc encouragingly. Through the amber lenses of my swish new Tonic sunglasses ('They're as good as gold,' the salesman on the South Island had assured me), I could make out a hefty brown trout tucked strategically below a fallen tree. 'Let's see if we can get introduced,' said Marc.

Mrs Reel Life and I were on the second leg of our three-week New Zealand tour and were now in the volcanic Taupo region of the North Island, where the great lake—240sq miles and known to Maoris as the 'sea of Taupo'—is a centre for Antipodean anglers. We were guests of Eve Reilly, the dynamic Irish lady who manages Poronui Lodge, a wonderfully high-end establishment set in a private 16,000-acre estate to the east of the lake. Our suite of rooms sported leather library chairs, stuffed game trophies and its own verandah overlooking the home pool. Perfection!

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Most visitors are American, many of them repeat customers (one couple had recently celebrated their 200th night staying there). Most opt for the daily heli-fishing fly-outs, which are pricey, but ensure you access to stretches of various rivers that have been rested for at least a fortnight. You won't find their



The Prof strikes gold with an illusive brownie from the Taharua river

like anywhere in the UK. A double-digit specimen is always a possibility and, over the Pinot Noir, I gathered that it was cicada breeding season and sport to the surface fly was hot. I slept but fitfully.

My allotted day was, in fact, far away from the hurly-burly of back-country streams: I had a long beat of the Taharua to myself, a spring creek unfurling through gentle pastures lined with aromatic eucalyptus from which the busy cicadas were emitting their lawn-sprinkler crackle.

Marc began me with a tandem dry-fly rig and we soon had that first brownie up and sipping at the size-18 Black Ant. The fish here are handsome and red-stippled and each little pool harboured a single denizen. Some log-jams had accumulated a bouncy castle of floating pumice stone, beneath which a trout's dark snout could just be seen protruding.

Every cast was a real challenge—you have to be delicate and precise or, after a couple of throws, the fish will bolt for cover. I was too quick on the

trigger with the large, leggy cicadas—you must let them turn down on the artificial, as with dapping—but we finished the day with six trout around the 3lb mark and I can't wait to revisit Poronui to try some of those further-flung waters.

The fabled Tongariro river debouches into the southern end of Lake Taupo near Turangi and was famously fished by Zane Grey during his El Dorado voyage of the islands. Today, the Tongariro Lodge where we stayed may boast the decor of a 1970s Berni Inn, but there's nothing shabby about the wild-rainbow-trout fishing in what was once known as 'the river of rhapsodies'.

Head guide Tim McCarthy recommended we arrange a bespoke whitewater-rafting trip for my first day and, although this is all public water, we never saw another angler in more than nine miles of river. Guide Dan steered us through some bouncy rock gardens, although no rapids were steeper than class three and there were frequent stops to fish likely pools.

The towering Jurassic canyon walls were swagged in ferns, like some Doré engraving. Helmeted, life-jacketed and frequently drenched, Mrs Reel Life hung gamely on, buoyed up by the prospect of days still to come on the sultry Pacific beaches of the Coromandel peninsula.

The fishing was sensational, although spotting trout in the slightly cloudy, deep-jade pools was a problem. Instead, Tim had me explore the runs with a duo nymph rig under a tuft of floating yarn—plenty of judicious mends, a long drag-free drift and, if the indicator dithers, you hookset smartly. The rainbows (averaging better than 2lb) were all carmine-striped beauties, although they fought like All Blacks. We landed more than a dozen and it was an intensely memorable expedition.

As spawning season approaches (in the austral winter), the lake trout migrate up Taupo's various tributaries, but—like our salmon—they become difficult to tempt. For my last day, Tim took me downstream and there my Copper John nymph was taken by a good brownie. My rod tip broke on the strike but at last my prize lay in the shallows—nudging 5lb, this was the fish for which I had made a 20,000-mile round trip, gleaming in the morning sun. Good as gold, in fact. 🐟

The author's fishing in New Zealand was organised by Mat McHugh of Fly Odyssey (www.flyodyssey.co.uk; 01621 743711)

David Profumo caught his first fish at the age of five and is still trying to get the hang of it. When he's not travelling with rod and reel, he lives up a Perthshire glen with Pompey, a spaniel that only speaks dog Latin