

The 'other' New Zealand

(some parts of it aren't pretty but it will change your views on trout fishing one way or another)

Tim Rolston

I suppose that if you are a fly fisher, New Zealand represents something of a pilgrimage, a piscatorial Haj, which if one is serious about one's addiction, has to be made at least once in a lifetime.

For the trip to have near religious fervour attached, it should no doubt include South Island, land of distant rivers and massive trout, snow capped mountains and eagle eyed guides who will find you the only ten pound brown trout in a kilometre stretch of water. At least that is the picture painted in the magazines, and we have all seen the images of someone's defining moment, that cast to the trout of a lifetime in the blue green glacial flow of some remote water. But I was to find that fishing in New Zealand is more than that and the only thing that can be safely said about a trip down South is that you had better be prepared to be surprised. Fly fishing in the land of the long white cloud will, to use the corporate jargon of the boardroom, require a paradigm shift that will undoubtedly leave you changed forever.

So it was that, having placed second in the South African Flyfishing team trials and re-established my place in the Sybase Protea team for the World Championships in Rotorua, I was afforded the opportunity of making my own personal pilgrimage. Although it did not have the freedom that one might hope for and it lacked the flexibility of a purely recreational trip, it was at least a chance to experience what is arguably the best trout fishing in the world. Regrettably it wouldn't include the South Island - but beggars can't be choosers and, in the end, perhaps that restriction gave me a deeper understanding of what trout fishing really means in New Zealand.

There is of course a huge amount of preparation that goes into any such trip and, with the spectre of competition clouding one's thoughts, flies are tied by the hundreds, venues researched and plans put in place to be as best prepared as possible.

I was in constant e mail contact with Garth Plank, the SA team's guide for the trip. Garth is an ex-pat South African, based in Auckland, North Island and now fishing for the New Zealand Commonwealth Team, and our very early correspondence set the tone - if you are fishing in New Zealand, expect the unexpected.

Of course, when one thinks of New Zealand, one thinks for those broad rivers, backcountry hikes and massive fish sipping in giant cicadas. Not so, says Garth. By the time we get there, the cicada fishing will be all but over. The rivers we are to fish will, for the most part, be smaller than the Elandspad and the flies that Garth recommends are lead-wrapped nymphs with 4mm tungsten beads and as heavy as the proverbial ship's anchor. I have, from past experience, learned that no matter how bizarre the suggestion, one does well to listen carefully to the locals. It wasn't easy to keep the faith, surely we wouldn't require such patterns on such small trout streams? It was just the first of a number of

lessons that culminated in redefining everything I thought I knew about trout fishing. If you are heading South, as I mentioned, be prepared to be surprised.

The flights via Hong Kong are, to put it mildly, horrendous. Tedious, long distance confinement in a metal tube, suspended tenuously over the planet and defying gravity based on little more than the variation of air pressure over the wings. No amount of Jack Daniels and plastic food can overcome the monotony and, with a seven hour layover on the carpet in Hong Kong, the only positive was the thought that "surely such suffering must be rewarded in the end".

Arrival in Auckland, despite the sore eyes and brain numbing jet lag, is quite a thing, flying into a city that appears more water than land, peering out of the windows and trying to get some sort of bearing, wondering where there is a sufficiently large chunk of mainland to put down a plane.

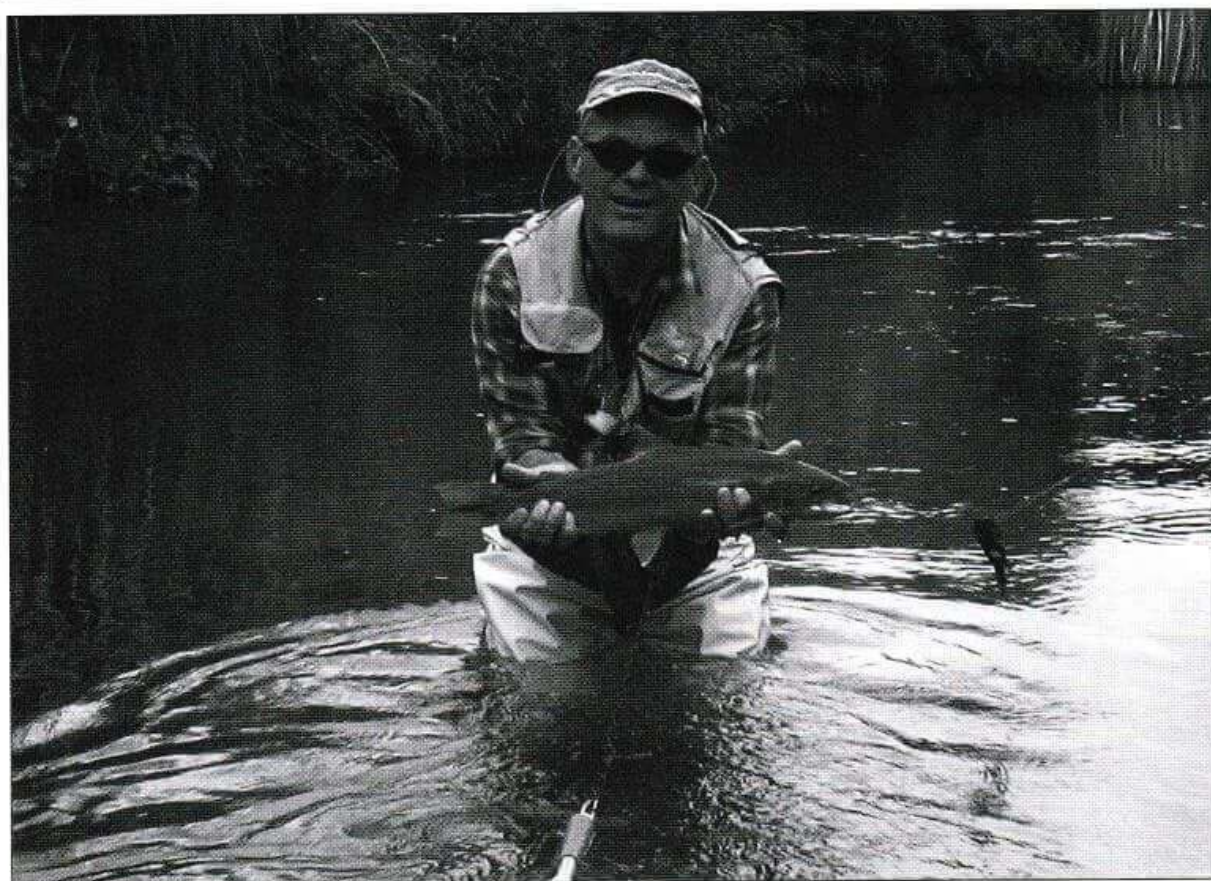
However, back on solid ground and having negotiated customs inspections of our gear, we found the Hyundai Vehicles waiting for us in the car park and we were at last heading towards the fishing.

Organising fishing down here is ridiculously simple, there are only two licences for the entire country, one for nearly everywhere and one for the rivers that flow into Lake Taupo, a Mecca within a Mecca, or that is what the guide books will tell you.

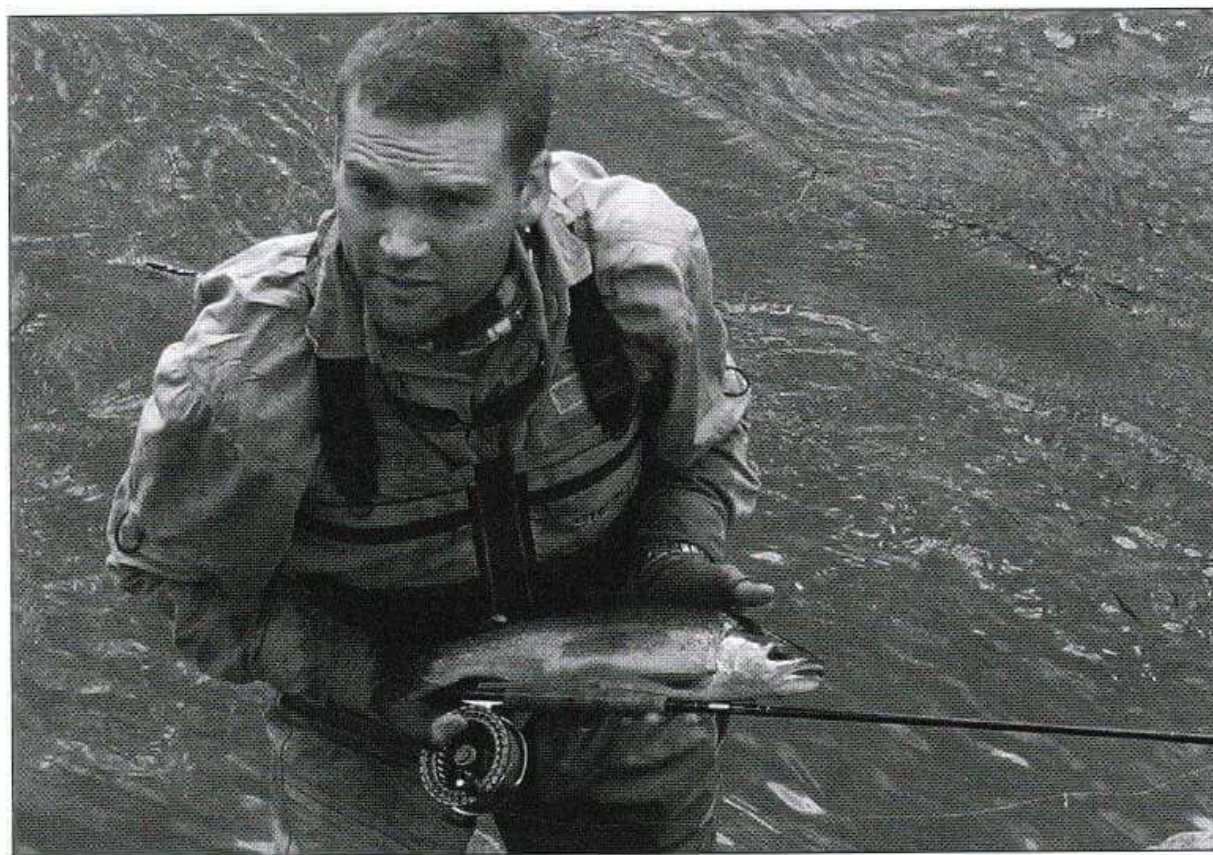
We set up base in the small town of Putaruru. With a great fish and chip shop across the road and comfortable accommodation in the local motel, we were well set. Research told us that there are over twenty trout streams within a twenty kilometre radius of this tiny hamlet. It takes some getting used to, but in New Zealand if it is damp it has trout in it and it is only a question of how large or how numerous they may be.

The local steel fabricators in Putaruru have, flowing through their junk yard, a small spring fed stream where in many places one could leap from on bank to the other. In that stream are brown and rainbow trout up to five or six pounds and those that inhabit the junk yard stretch have learned to eat the white bread tossed into the stream by Darryl, Darryl and his other brother Darryl who view feeding their 'pet' fish as a form of entertainment. Certainly entertainment in a place like Putaruru is hard to come by and alongside wild pig hunting and stock car racing, feeding trout is, I suppose, a reasonable alternative. It is just a bit of a shock to the system to see what we would consider the trout of a lifetime, rising freely to chunks of crust in what, to all intents and purposes, is the local industrial area.

We fished several of the streams in this region; some were designated competition waters, although, of course, we practised on different sections to the competition beats. These streams are, for the most part, spring creeks and despite the fact that they were rarely more than a couple of metre's wide and that the country was in the throes of one of the worst droughts in living memory, these tiny streams proved to be near un-wadable. The sheer volume and speed of the flows meant that anything over knee depth was likely to wash one away. Suddenly, those 4mm tungsten bead nymphs were looking a tad underdressed. They represented a starting point in the weighting game where near everything else would be swept downstream before getting anywhere near a trout.



Tim Rolston on the Ngongotaha (above) and Gary Glen-Young (below) on the Tongariro.



Our guide proceeded to winkle out fish from all over the place, fishing a pure mono rig with pink fluorescent main line and a clear leader adorned with two or three heavy tungsten flies. We tried upstream nymphing, dry fly and Czech nymphing methods, - surely fishing pure mono wasn't right? This was, after all, the home of nymph fishing, hallowed ground and it seemed sacrilegious to use such techniques. We kicked and screamed, and persisted with dry and dropper techniques and we did catch some fish. We were, however, being out-fished all ways from Sunday by our guide and we eventually came to the realisation that perhaps he did in fact know something we didn't, changed to mono and started "hammering them". Yet another of those annoying paradigm shifts that had us questioning if we actually knew anything about trout fishing at all.

On one occasion we took a trip nearer to the competition base of Rotorua and headed off to fish the Ngongotaha stream. This is one of the most heavily fished streams in all of New Zealand and, yet again, the entire experience was simply filled with strangeness that has one redefining all that you think that you know.

The stream sees thousands of trout move upstream from Rotorua lake to spawn, fish that grow to 20lbs - yes twenty pounds - that isn't a typo, although, for the most part, we were told that the bigger fish had yet to move in and it was unlikely we would see much in excess of 12lbs (of course we were bitterly disappointed, yeah right). The Ngongotaha stream is, in many places, little more than a steep-sided ditch and, in part, flows along the back garden fences of what in the UK would be referred to as a council housing estate. And yet, right outside those fences and in danger of catching one of the ubiquitous broken down cars that seem to form a garden feature in so many of these homes, there are trout. Trout as long as your leg, trout that will leave your knees wobbling, trout that actually make you jump out of the water in fright when they glide out from the undercut banks.

The stream is small and littered with broken trees, old stumps, logs, etc and, to be honest, I don't think that there is any real hope of landing a 20lb fish in there without some seriously overgeared tackle. The locals, many of whom primarily fish for the pot, use a standard rig of 20lb nylon and an egg pattern and still get bust up more often than not. This is bizarre fishing, Alice through the looking glass fishing and one isn't certain if it is in fact a dream or a nightmare.

On our initial foray, Gary Glen-Young and I headed upstream and, spooking a few "smaller" fish of about four or five pounds as we slid down the bank, proceeded to prepare for our first real 'big fish experience'. My first trial flip of a small pheasant tail and dry fly combination resulted in a fish of massive proportion appear under the dry. To my eternal disappointment I have to admit that the sheer size of that fish stopped all cogitative processes and I only managed to turn my head slightly and comment "F%&K Gary, did you see that?" His sobering response was "Yes, it probably ate your nymph." Well yes, it probably did eat the nymph but I was far too shell-shocked to even twitch the rod let alone actually strike or anything. I learned from further experience that my chances of landing that fish would have been near to zero anyway but it is one of those moments that will haunt a conscientious angler to his death bed.

On this section of the river, the flows were not overly strong and we fished with indicator dries and nymphs, small size 16 and 18 nymphs that these massive fish would happily eat.

The problem was in landing them and the best fish that reached the net was probably no more than four pounds. Over time, we began to understand that NZ fish are not only big, they are big and strong and the trouble really starts when you hook one.

We were to return to the Ngongotaha later on our trip and having become a little more used to things New Zealand style, I did manage to eventually net a couple of respectable fish up to about six lbs but, by local standards, those are still tiddlers.

We fished some more classical waters - my favourites were the Whakapapa and the Tongariro - although we had too little time to really see the best of them. They are clear, wide and fast flowing rivers more in line with what one imagines New Zealand rivers should look like.

Were I to return I would head for these beautiful waters but, if you are near Rotorua, you have to fish the Ngongotaha at least once, if only because it is probably the most bizarre trout fishing you will ever experience in your life. I am not sure that much of the Ngongotaha could be described as pretty - there are problems in getting access in parts and there is the ever present hazard of brush, tree stumps and the like that make landing your dream fish relatively unlikely. But, one way or another, it will change you, maybe for the better and perhaps for the worse, but you will not return unmoved. This will most likely remain the only wild trout stream where I have caught a five pound and a six pound trout on two successive casts, and hopefully the only one where the locals wouldn't consider that even unusual.

Perhaps as a result of the competition schedules, we didn't make as much of the fishing that North Island has to offer as one might, in fact we certainly didn't but, make no mistake, South Island may be famous and I have yet to fish there, but it is apparent that North Island offers plenty of fishing from the local ditch to remote mountain streams and all that you can really say is that it won't be what you are expecting.

All in all, despite disappointing results in the competition, mainly as a result of simply missing certain cues, and the dreadfully onerous travel arrangements, it was quite an experience, to say the least. As I have said, this might be "the other" New Zealand but it sure is an eye opener.

Some memorable quotes from our trip: Gary Glen-Young to Darryl: "You should really feed those trout whole-wheat bread." Darryl to GGY: "Tried it mate ... they won't bloody eat it."

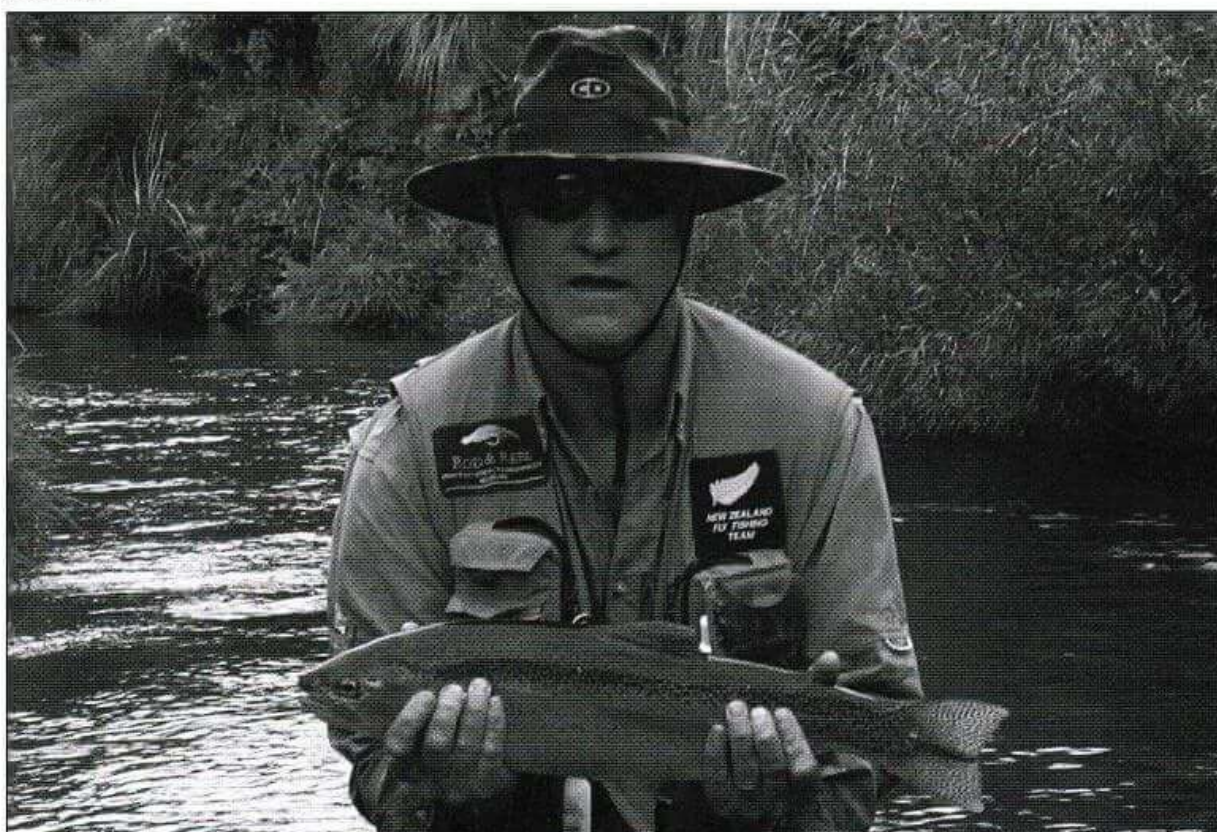
Large Maori gentleman in fish 'n chip shop to our guide: "No, you need to fish the spillway of the lake at night with a live field mouse if you are after big fish.."

Hong Kong Customs to Andre Steenkamp who insisted on carrying his Sage rods on the plane: "Not allowed, now official property of government of Hong Kong."

Tim Rolston on looking down at an 8lb trout feeding in the Tongariro during Easter Weekend: "Garth why are there so few local anglers fishing?" Garth Plank in response: "Well the big fish haven't really moved in yet."



The preferred weapon of the South African team in New Zealand – a Hares Ear Nymph with a peacock herl thorax and tail of pheasant tail fibres. The bead is 4mm tungsten. The hook, a Knappek, is hand made in Czechoslovakia and is favoured for competitive fly fishing.



Garth Plank, expatriate South African now living in Auckland who guided the SA fly fishing team during the World Fly Fishing Championships held in North Island, New Zealand. He is holding a typical Ngongotaha River rainbow trout.

*Editor's note: Tim Rolston is the CPS webmaster, a fly fishing guide (www.inkwazifyfishing.co.za) and his book, *Learn to Fly Cast in a Weekend* (Struik) is now being distributed internationally.*