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ABOVE ALL, THE FISHING'S THE THING

At Poronui Ranch, there's every comfort on 16,000 acres. But the real lure is the fly-fishing.

In a lodge near Lake Taupo, the fish stories are usually true.

By RODES FISHBURNE

THE instructions were cryptic, and whispered, which made them impossible to ignore: "Little to the left, righto, righto . . .," followed by, "Cast again."

That was what our guide, Craig Aspinall, was telling us from his vantage on the bank of the Kaipo River in New Zealand as my wife, Lindy, and I stood midstream and cast to a trout as big as a piece of firewood. The fish was active and not yet "suspicious," as Craig would say of spooked fish.

The water was so clear that you could see it sucking stonefly nymphs off the bottom with the easy grace of a natural athlete. After several casts, I laid the fly in the right place and three runs, two jumps and one whoop later, we had landed and released our first New Zealand brown trout.

This was the first of several fishing expeditions we took during our one-week stay last December at Poronui Ranch, in the rugged center of New Zealand's North Island, a 45-minute drive from the resort town of Taupo. Over the last 10 years, this intimate lodge — surrounded by more than 16,000 acres of mountainous forests, grassy flatlands and trout-rich rivers — has developed something of a cult following among international anglers, including the late John Denver and Vice President Dick Cheney. The Lake Taupo region is the epicenter of fly-fishing in New Zealand. It was here, in 1883, that rainbow trout eggs from the Russian River Hatchery in California, were first planted.

We had arrived in Taupo the day before, on a one-and-a-half-hour flight from Auckland. The lodge's van picked us up from the small airport for the drive to Poronui, in the Taharua Valley. While staying at Poronui, there's no need to rent a car, since the guides provide all transportation.

Poronui (pronounced poor-NEW-ee) is a small affair, with lodging for 14 guests and 7 guides. The décor of the main lodge is neo-rustic, comfortable and well appointed, with wood-timbered ceilings, a large fireplace, intimate dining room table, and an open kitchen, where the lodge manager and chef, Eve Reilly, can be seen hard at work conjuring up the meals Poronui has become known for. We were treated to local fare like paradise duck, roast lamb, fresh fish, Sika venison and desserts ranging from bakewell tarte to almond chocolate cake.

The best thing about our spacious one-room cabin — besides the stone fireplace, the roomy



Photograph by R.V. Atkinson

Guests of the Poronui Ranch can fly-fish in a number of rivers, including the Puneketoro.



Photographs by Poronui Ranch

The cabins at Poronui are spacious and low tech.

bathroom, and quiet front porch overlooking the Taharua River — was the lack of television, VCR and telephone. It was quiet, low tech and light-filled, decorated in a tasteful, understated fashion with country furnishings, comfortable chairs and a wide window with a view of a meadow filled with wildflowers.

The first day we talked fishing with the guides

(the guest-to-guide ratio is 2 to 1), and learned about Poronui from Eve. Although the property had been a primitive fishing lodge for 10 years, it was not until 1998, when it was bought by Mark Blake, an American businessman based in San Francisco, that it was extensively renovated. With that transaction, Mr. Blake secured what surely must be one of the most enviable private proper-



Photographs by Poronui Ranch

ABOVE A brown trout. RIGHT Poronui Ranch lies in the Taharua Valley.

ties in angling: an area larger than Manhattan of old growth beech forest, wild-grass meadows and 25 miles of pristine trout fishing on the Taharua and Mohaka Rivers, as well as access to a dozen other rivers on adjacent properties.

The most recent additions to Poronui are a seventh and final cabin and a large recreation center housing stables, snooker tables and a 10,000-bottle wine cellar, and a new shooting range. Since these are the last developments planned for Poronui, thousands of acres of wilderness remain for guests for mountain biking, hiking (called tramping in New Zealand), riding, white-water rafting and, of course, fishing, which was our main focus.

For those who would rather not haul their fishing tackle, the lodge provides all necessary equipment, including waders, rods and flies.

Meals at the lodge are served at a long single table adjacent to the open kitchen. Guests and guides mingle and share fishing stories or learn about New Zealand's history from the staff. The lodge attracts an international crowd and we were pleased to find that our dinner companions included a family from Malaysia, a lawyer from Canada, and pair of geologists from Atlanta.

But all the muted elegance of the lodge, the stunning landscapes and Eve's delectable meals would have been for naught if the fishing were less than spectacular. And despite being on the receiving end of the wettest December in 20 years, our guide Craig gave us a taste of why Poronui is considered one of the best fly-fishing destinations in the world.

You don't so much fish for trout in New Zealand as hunt for them, walking quietly through fern forests trying to spot them from the banks before they spot you. Once a fish — usually a solitary leviathan hanging at the head of a clear pool — is located, guide and angler stand back and slip into a conversation filled with curious words like s-cast, upstream mend and royal wulff (a fly). After that, it's time to step into the river and put the talk to the test while the guide kneels on the bank and calls out the play by play.

Fishing starts around 9 a.m. and lasts as long as the anglers are willing and able. Guides pack lunches made from the tastiest parts of the previous night's dinner, which can be eaten at leisure by a rushing river or wolfed down, as we did, between backcasts when the fishing was good.

A good day usually involves a couple of miles of walking and scouting out fishing sites. December is the beginning of summer there and the weather was mild but wet, so our raingear came in handy.

BY our third day, Lindy and I had re-enacted this scenario a dozen times and caught some very large trout, including several 28-inch browns and an equally large



rainbow on a dry fly. Fish of this size can be 7 to 10 years old and Poronui prides itself for being strictly catch and release. Thanks to the vastness of the property, we fished a new beat of water every day and never saw another fisherman on the water.

So it was with a relaxed demeanor on the morning of our fourth day that we tramped off toward the Mohaka River, down an abandoned logging road, fly rods bobbing behind us, trying to identify the purple and red mushrooms beneath the beech trees. About halfway down, Craig's face cracked into a mischievous grin and he asked if we'd like a peek.

"At what?" I said.
"The Bivvy," he replied, and disappeared between two manuka bushes. A few steps later, we emerged on a rock ledge 30 feet above the river and into a scene straight from a Maxfield Parrish painting. High rock banks covered in mint-green lichen forced the river into a casual curve that formed the Bivvy Pool.

On every river I've ever fished, there is always something like this, the proverbial blue hole, where all the river's mystery lingers in a swirl before moving downstream. The Bivvy was no different, both enigmatic and supernaturally fishy.

Two feet off the ledge the water turned to topaz, then blue and, deeper still, an impenetrable blue green that appeared limitless. I looked upstream at the head of the pool where the current had deposited white pumice sand.

It took a few moments for my eyes to adjust, but the sand provided the necessary contrast and I finally made out in the deep water the black outline of a fish so large that at first it was oddly ominous. Scattered around the pool were the ghostly images of a few other fish, but none so large or well defined as this trout-shark.

I could hear Craig whispering under his breath as he counted out the fish he could find.



The wine cellar houses 10,000 bottles.

He stopped at five.

We climbed down from the ledge to the pool, and I stripped out several handfuls of line from my reel and cast. The fish in the tail end of the pool must have tolerated about 30 seconds of my attempts to seduce them before retreating into the blue-green depths because when Craig climbed atop a rock perch to take a look, they were gone.

But the trout-shark we had spotted from the ledge was still there, visible above the white sandy bottom, improbably arrogant, as big as a lawn gnome. After watching him for a bit, Craig pronounced it time for the BD Special.

An extra-large stonefly with a heavily weighted body, the BD Special looked to me like exactly the kind of thing that a trout-shark would eat. I made a cast to the spot where the fish lay and watched the quarter-inch-long fly descend 6, 8, 10 feet.

Suddenly, another enormous trout glided onto the scene, destroying both my serenity and sense of proportion. So entranced by his glide, and the sight of two of the biggest trout I'd ever seen swimming next to one another, the changing colors of the water and the clear contrast of the white pumice sand, that it was only very faintly that I heard Craig call out: "He's got it! Strike, Strike, Strike!"

The fight was long and strong and Craig's netting job superb, but long after we had photographed and released the monster, long after our last tramp through the beech forest and our last delectable meal at Eve's table, I could not help but wish to get back to that place of utter blue green solitude.