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# Fly Fishing on New Zealand's South Island

*Stalking Trophy Trout Down Under*

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ERIC KALLEN





I felt the pressure increasing with each false cast.

Our guide, Alex Scott, had been clear: No more than two or three casts, or you will spook the fish.

This wasn't the kind of water that forgives.

On the third false cast, I carefully laid down my fly just above the smudge that our Kiwi guide assured me was a fish. The cast wasn't perfect, but it was close, and I held my breath as the fly drifted over the shadow holding steady against the current.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Scott, sensing my impatience, leaned in. "Wait."

Then the fish moved.

It was subtle — a flick of the head, a blur. Then the river erupted, and with it came the memory of Scott's first instruction, delivered hours earlier.

"When the fish strikes, you have to be patient. Don't set the hook until you can say, 'God Save the King.'"

The trout broke the surface, its mouth open, searching for my fly — a large cicada pattern. Without thinking, I raised the rod tip. I knew instantly that it was too soon.

The fly came free. The line went slack. And just like that, the fish — and the opportunity — vanished back into the gin-clear water.

My wife didn't say much. She didn't need to. "Oh, buddy."

The first fish of our trip to New Zealand's South Island would have to wait.

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There is something exotic about the unknown, and for many fly anglers, New Zealand's South Island is just that: remote, isolated and quite literally a world away. For those who make the trip, the reward is world-class fisheries, where four- and five-pound brown and rainbow trout are almost routine.

My wife and I had come at the invitation of close friends, Chad and Blake Pike, founders of The Eleven Experience. We had known them since our years in London, long before their lodges became premier destinations. Eleven Angling, the fly-fishing arm of The Eleven Experience, operates two South Island lodges. Cedar Lodge sits along the Makarora River in the heart of New Zealand's premier sight-fishing





water, while Owen River Lodge, farther north in the Tasman region, provides access to more than 30 rivers and streams within a 90-minute drive. We would fish both.

New Zealand, they told us, would test us.

“The fishing is some of the best on the planet,” Chad Pike said. “But it’s not easy. The fish are spooky. The water’s too clear to hide anything. You use long leaders, and you only cast to fish you see. Spot and stalk. That’s the program.”

Our trip from the United States was long but uneventful, and we weren’t wasting any time getting onto the river; after all, we were there to fish.

As the helicopter gained altitude, the world below began to unfold like a map in motion: dramatic, jagged peaks rising from the valley floor, the distant Southern Alps blanketed in snow, glacial rivers appearing like thin ribbons beneath us.

The pilot dropped us onto a gravel

bar along the Hunter River, the rotor wash flattening the grass and scattering the sound of the river in every direction. When the helicopter lifted away, the silence returned just as quickly.

Up close, the glacial river took on a milky, turquoise hue, in stark contrast to the white cobbles along the steep bank.

Scott didn’t waste time.

“There aren’t as many fish per mile as you’re used to,” he said. “But they’re big. And they’re smart. If they see us before we see them, we won’t be able to fish that stretch of water for a couple of days.”

That was the rhythm of the place. Every step mattered. Every shadow. Every false cast.

While my wife fished, I settled into the knee-high grass, taking comfort in the fact that New Zealand has no poisonous snakes. From that vantage point, the river looked empty — almost deliberately so—the landscape stripped down to rock, water and

a few sheep grazing on the far bank.

The large, open vistas were impossibly quiet. The only sound coming from the murmuring of the river and the faint whispers of the breeze as it moved the tops of the grass. You could see why Peter Jackson chose the South Island as the mythical Middle Earth in his “Lord of the Rings” movies.

Having missed my first fish, I vowed to make the next one count. Scott, standing at my side, directed my eyes to an area of slack water 20 feet in front of us.

“There,” Scott said, extending a hand toward a seam of slower water. “That shadow just below the boulder. That’s a good fish.”

I took a breath and began to cast.

One false cast. Then two.

On the third, I sent the fly above the boulder, dropping it into the current with just enough slack to let it drift naturally. No





correction. No second chance.

The trout rose.

Gold and olive flashed just beneath the surface, as a large brown trout moved on my fly.

Wait.

The word was there again. Not from Scott this time.

From memory.

Wait.

The fish took the fly.

“God Save the King,” I said under my breath.

Then I lifted the rod.

The line came tight, and the river changed.

What had been still became violent. The fish ran hard, pulling line from the reel in bursts that felt disproportionate to the size of the water. There was no easing into it — just pressure, immediate and sustained.

The fight wasn't long, but it was intense, and I only relaxed when the trout was safely in Scott's net.

The trout was larger than any I had ever caught before, golden brown with spots scattered like stars in a constellation. I admired the beautiful creature as it lay in the





net, pulsing with life, powerful even in its stillness.

I looked at my wife.

“This is why we came.”

Our day proceeded with more fish caught — not large numbers, but large fish. Each one was an experience that would stay with us long after we left New Zealand.

Later that evening, with a gourmet meal laid out before us, I raised a glass of New Zealand Pinot Noir, thanked our hosts at the Eleven Experience for their hospitality, shared my excitement for the days ahead and ended the toast the only way fitting:

“God Save the King.”

For more information on fishing New Zealand's South Island, contact Eleven Angling at [elevenexperience.com](http://elevenexperience.com) or (800) 903-7761. ↵

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