



Matapiojo Lodge

IN THE HEART OF

CHILEAN PATAGONIA

Rio Palena below the El Tranquilo Ferry crossing
Photo by Jim Gebhart

BY JIM GEBHART
PHOTOS BY JIM GEBHART AND BRIAN CLARK

"Guys, I need you to put on life jackets for this next section. The rapids are tricky but not too treacherous. Jim, just before we enter the whitewater there's a perfect eddy to throw that large streamer. There is only time for one cast in this fast water. Make it good!"

Francisco maneuvered the cataraft to give me the best opportunity for the cast as I readied my line and fly. The rapids below us roared with fury.

"Get ready . . . now, Jim!" One backcast and I dropped the articulated streamer on the upstream edge of soft water. I let it sink for three-ish seconds, then began stripping it in. Francisco back-rowed hard to slow our drift. I came tight after a solid strike from an unseen fish. The healthy rainbow went airborne as we continued our drift towards the whitewater rodeo below

Early this spring, Brian Clark (OTFM's Executive Editor) and I traveled down south to Matapiojo Lodge in the Los Lagos Region of Chilean Patagonia, where it was late autumn. Francisco Rivera, the founder of Matapiojo, invited us down to experience the diverse fly fishing opportunities in this fabled region, and to get a first-hand look at the remarkable lodge he's built on the Futaleufú (pronounced *foo-tah-lay-oo-foo*) River. It's a spectacular location in a pristine region that's scenic, safe, remarkably accessible, and suitable for both practiced and beginning fly anglers.

Patagonia is a broad region of southern South America stretching over a thousand miles from north to south. From west to east, it starts with the coastal bays and estuaries on the Pacific side of Chile, straddles the Andes Mountains, and tumbles down across the pampas of Argentina. The landscape of Chilean Patagonia ranges from temperate rain forests in the north (near Puerto Montt on the coast) to the glaciers and unforgiving terrain of the Magallanes region in the deep south and the Tierra del Fuego. The entire territory seems to be latticed with lakes and lagoons fed by clear, cold streams flowing down from the Andes, many originating from the glaciers scattered among the peaks. Climbers and trekkers come to hike the remote backcountry, and fly anglers are lured by the promise of plentiful trout and salmon in the clear, emerald waters.

As recently as the 1980s, the Futaleufú River remained almost unknown on the adventure travel and ecotourism scene; the first successful descent by kayak was in 1985. During the 1990s and early 2000s, it became a legendary destination for adrenaline-fueled whitewater enthusiasts. Futaleufú means "big water" in the indigenous Mapuche language, and today it's known as one of the biggest, scariest, and wildest whitewater rivers on earth. Of its 65 miles (105km), some 20-30 miles (30-50km) are of prime interest to rafters and kayakers, boasting relentless rapids ranging from Class II to Class V+ depending on the flows. Fortunately, there are also quieter, less-fearsome stretches which offer spectacular fly fishing opportunities.

Matapiojo Lodge

Matapiojo Lodge sits on a high bank above Rio Futaleufú across from a truly stunning vertical cliff of black basalt rock which rises over 1,000ft (~300m) from the azure waters of the river and is home to a community of Andean condors. Each morning, we stepped out and craned our necks to look up at this cliff; awestruck is a fine way to start the day.

The main lodge building houses the combined open-air kitchen, dining room, and den. All meals are prepared and consumed in the main lodge. There are three separate semi-permanent walled tents with wooden floors, wood-burning stoves, a wardrobe and dresser, and beds so comfortable that they put the "glamp" in glamping. The tents have been erected at respectable distances from one another; they feel private, yet the property feels communal. Each tent has well-appointed bathroom facilities steps from the entrance, including a sink, toilet, and shower. Electrical outlets are readily available, and the entire property has impressively fast WiFi. Two hot tubs overlooking the river beckon weary fly anglers each night, and the Southern Cross is visible from the tubs most nights. The views in every direction are jaw-dropping, even if you're no stranger to mountain vistas.

Matapiojo Lodge may be stylish and professional, but it is no mere business for Francisco – it's a personal passion. He often uses the word "contexto" to describe the experience, and it fits. It's not just about the place, or even just about the fishing; it's about sustainable living in a region bursting with beauty, wildness, and eager trout and salmon. It's about the cuisine, the history and culture of Chile, and especially about the people. As a former political scientist, he's well-informed on all of these topics. You hear the fervor in his voice as he describes the process of finding the property and building the lodge in 2017. "This place was built *by* anglers *for* anglers," declares Francisco,

Getting There

The typical program at Matapiojo Lodge consists of six full days of fishing and is all-inclusive of food, beverages, guiding, airfare from Puerto Montt to Chaitén, airport transfers, and

one night's lodging in Puerto Varas, a lovely hamlet near Puerto Montt. Travelers can come in through Chile or Argentina, but we arrived via Santiago, where we spent a few days exploring the city. We took a short flight from Santiago to Puerto Montt, then spent the night in Puerto Varas. After a few days in the hot, parched urban landscape of Santiago in central Chile, transitioning to the lush green mountains, snow-capped volcanoes, rivers and forests – and decidedly cooler temperatures – was welcome and invigorating. Compared to Santiago, time slows down in Patagonia, and life seems simpler. It feels wild and remote, but it isn't empty; the region is sprinkled with prosperous estancias and small towns.

Francisco had arranged a room for us at the Hotel Bellavista in Puerto Varas, a small town on the southern shore of Llanquihue Lake which, when the clouds lift, offers stunning views of two snow-capped volcanoes: Volcán Calbuco and Volcán Osorno, both of which are well-known hiking destinations. Puerto Varas itself is exceptionally charming with a vaguely European feel, which turns out to be both historically accurate and quite interesting. It was founded in 1853 by German immigrants invited to Chile as part of a government-sponsored colonization project, one of numerous towns in Patagonia where modern residents can still trace their roots back to Germany, Wales, and elsewhere. Today it's a popular destination for travelers and ecotourists arriving to enjoy the trekking, whitewater, fly fishing, and other adventures offered by northern Patagonia. There are numerous shops, restaurants, and pubs in the town along with a great independent fly shop, Huellas (www.huellaschile.com).

The following morning, we caught another small prop-driven commuter plane going further south, this time shadowing the Pacific coast en route to Chaitén. This small town lies in the shadow of Volcán Chaitén, a volcano thought to have been dormant for 9,000 years until a violent eruption in 2008. A *lahar* (a dangerous slurry of mud, rocks, ash, and pyroclastic materials which moves like a flash flood) from the eruption effectively sliced the community in two, leaving a 650ft (200m) swath of destruction as it re-routed the Rio Chaitén through the middle of town. Formerly the capital of Palena Province, the capital was subsequently moved to the town of Futaleufú after the disaster.

The regional airport was also moved to a safer location north of town, and the new buildings are modern and striking. Brian and I were met at the Chaitén Airport by our driver Kevin, a wonderful young man originally from Argentina. Kevin would be our driver



Above: a rainbow over Lago Llanquihue near Puerto Varas (photo by Brian Clark)

throughout our stay at Matapiojo, and we appreciated his positivity and exceptional driving skills. His English was sparse, but we had a very enjoyable drive up the *Carretera Austral* ("the Southern Way", aka CH-7 or Route 7) from Chaitén to Matapiojo, stopping for photos of the incredible views along the way. The drive is astonishingly scenic; every turn offers views of volcanoes, snow-capped mountains, roaring streams, lakes, sheer cliffs, and innumerable waterfalls. The trip takes around an hour and a half, including those stops for photos and refreshments.

Upon arrival at the lodge, after introductions and gear stowage, Brian and I experienced our first culinary delight of the trip: Chef Paola Leon Lopez served us a delicious meal of Chilean sea bass steaks, lightly breaded and pan fried, along with green salad and a side of cold peas, onions, and diced tomatoes used as a dressing somewhat similar to a salsa. Naturally, no lunch or dinner is served without a fine Chilean red wine, and we'd work through a number of excellent bottles during the week.

Below: the main Matapiojo Lodge building



Going Fishing

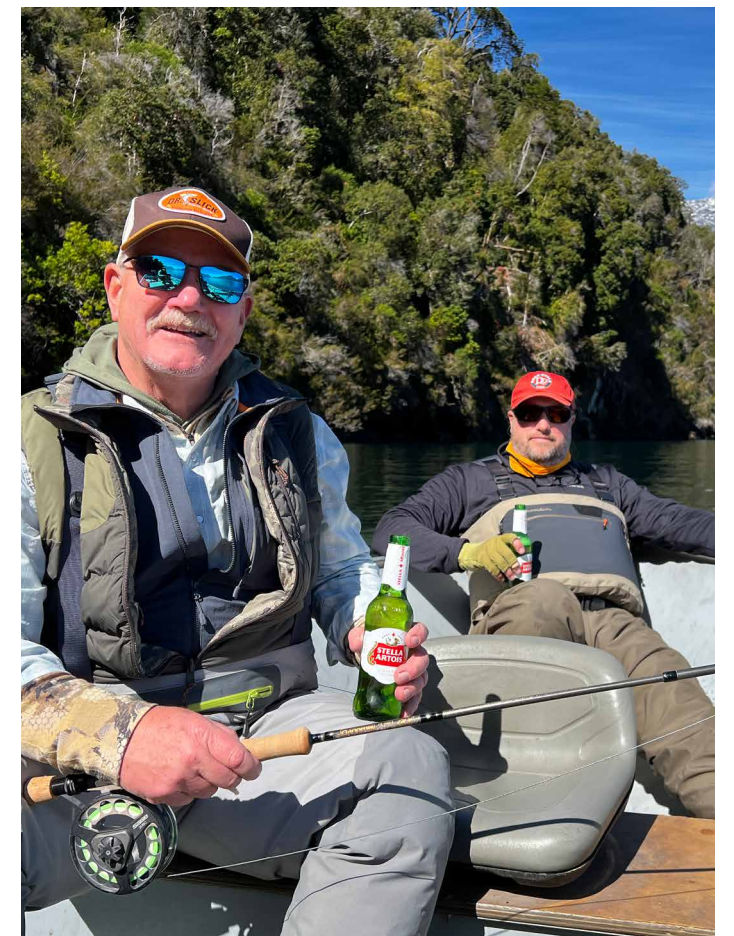
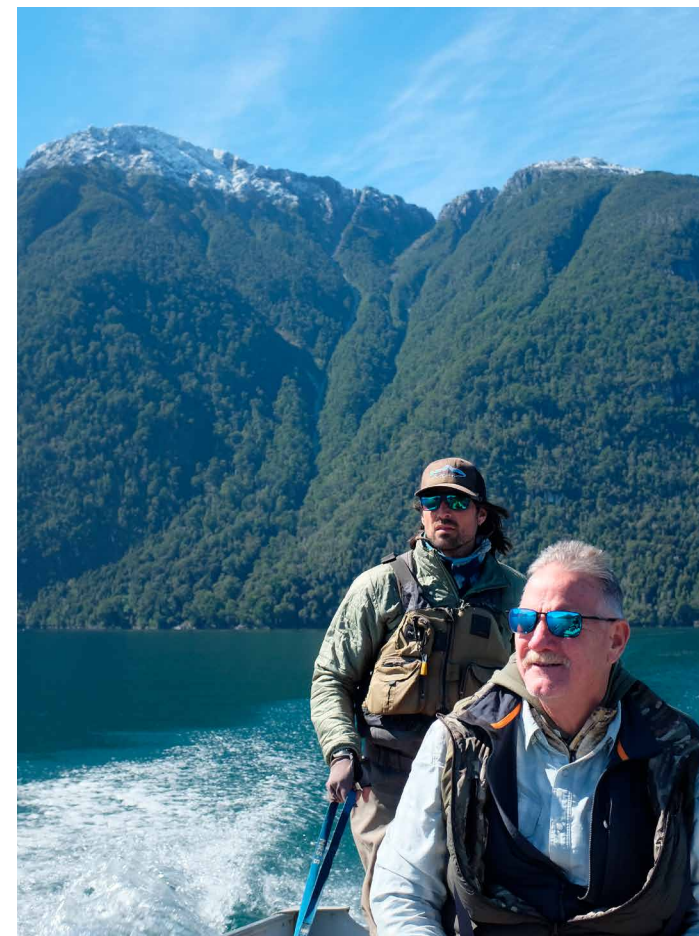
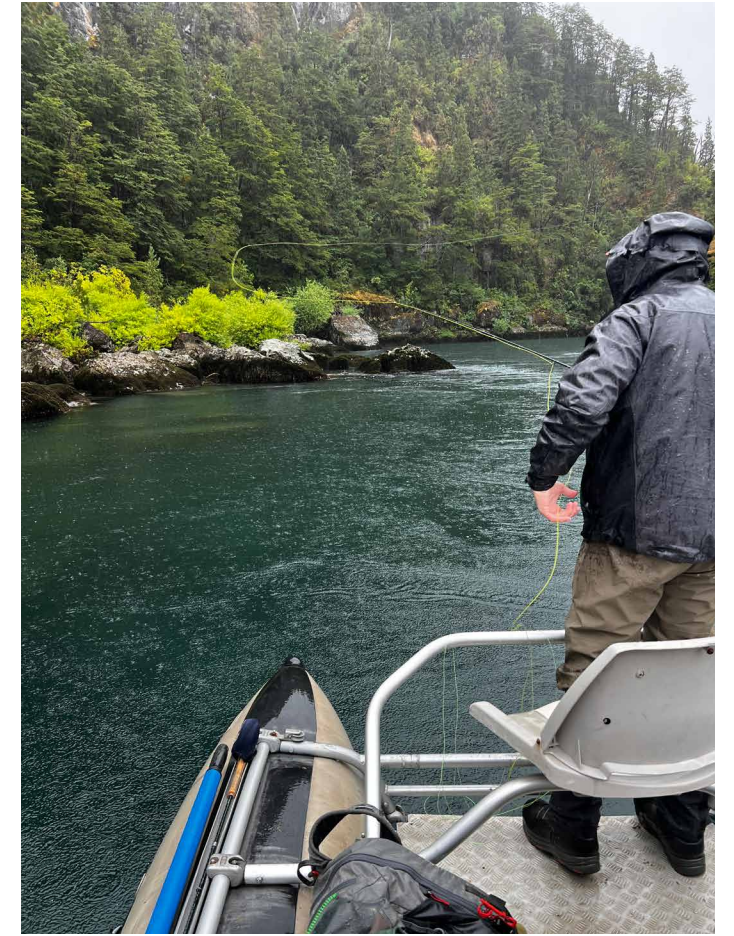
Immediately after lunch we rigged two fly rods each, one with streamer on a sinking line, and one with a dry fly. The Futaleufú River is mere steps from the cabins, and Francisco maintains a small fleet of fishing vessels on the lodge's private beach. We boarded one of the two aluminum boats outfitted with an outboard motor and oars, then made a brief upstream run to a submerged gravel bar running out from the shore. Francisco took the oars, and we began probing the drop off and sunken log structures as we worked back downstream. The emerald-hued water was crystal clear, perfect for throwing streamers to willing trout. The first hit was a fat 17in brown that slammed an olive green zonker, and I quickly brought the handsome fish to the boat. We proceeded to catch numerous brown trout and a few rainbows as we fished our way back to the lodge, wrapping up a perfect half-day of fishing. We felt like we'd been properly introduced to the river, and the upcoming days held great promise.

A weather system was rapidly moving in from the south, bringing rain and colder weather, but upon our return to the lodge we discovered that our tent's wood-burning stove had already been stoked, providing a toasty retreat from the dropping temps. In terms of latitude (43.45° South), elevation (just above sea level, although the imposing cliffs rise nearly vertically), and distance from the Pacific coast, the lodge's location in the southern hemisphere is roughly equivalent to Eugene, Oregon. Seasonally, in Eugene terms, we'd arrived somewhere akin to mid-October.

We stripped off our waders, stowed our gear, and headed up to the lodge for dinner. We were pleased to meet a retired couple visiting from the area just south of Santiago, down to the Los Lagos region for a bit of rafting and hiking. We shared a delicious gourmet dinner, a few bottles of wine, and some rousing multilingual conversation; one of the delights of visiting the Matapiojo Lodge is meeting other guests, as visitors from all over the Americas and Europe are common.

The cold front intensified; rain started in the evening and continued throughout the night, and it presented challenges for the next day. Undaunted, after breakfast we loaded up the SUV with the cataraft on the trailer and headed upriver on the Futaleufú. We launched into a wide, gentle stretch of the famous *las escalas* ("The Stairs") section, just below the *cañón del infierno* ("Inferno Canyon"). *Las Escalas* is best known in whitewater circles as home to two of the biggest rapids on the whole river, Zeta and Throne Room, both Class V/V+ depending on the flows. We launched just below that stretch, armed again with two rods each: a streamer on a sinking line and a dry + dropper rig.

Even with the constant rain and rising river levels, the water remained clear enough that we were able to target individual fish feeding on the surface with long casts. The trout were picky, but not impossible; I caught a nice brown that took a PMD. Brian did likewise. Francisco did battle with the current and managed to row us upriver into a narrow canyon dotted with rocky coves that presented perfect lairs for trout to ambush bait fish, and occasionally



Opposite: the stunning cliff across the Futaleufú River from Matapiojo Lodge
This Page: scenes from Rio Futaleufú (top) and Lago Yelcho (bottom)

one of our flies. We worked these areas repeatedly, thanks to Francisco's efforts on the oars, and we caught nice trout on both dries and streamers. Of all the beautiful areas that we fished, this was my favorite. The steep canyon walls upstream were shrouded in fog and low slung clouds, bringing the sky right down into the gorge. Even if the incessant rain made us look like we swam up the river, we still enjoyed some fine fishing.

We headed downriver to new water, eventually stopping to lunch in a picturesque, yurt-shaped wooden structure perched on the river bank. The shelter was most welcome; we were drenched, chilled, and ready for both a bite to eat and a break from the weather. Francisco fired up a stove and heated our lunch of *pastel de choclo*, a corncake filled with beef, eggs, and onions. This dish would have been good in a restaurant, but in a yurt on the side of the Rio Futaleufú on a chilly, rain-drenched day? Even more delicious. We ate with gusto and chased the meal with another robust Carménère before continuing downriver.

It never stopped raining, and the temperatures continued to drop. If finding a roaring fire in our tent's stove the previous night had been pleasant, tonight it felt heavenly – even essential. We used every hanger to dangle our wet clothes from the rafters, then arranged our waders

and boots and sodden gear in a circle around the stove; the resulting scene made Brian imagine pagan worshipers prostrating themselves before a fiery idol at a very fishy garage sale. Despite – or rather because of – the torturous weather, we'll tell this day's story for years to come.

The deluge continued through the night, and we awakened to the roar of water. Initially we thought perhaps the Futaleufú itself was encroaching on our tent, but no need to worry: the dry streambed on the southern border of the lodge's parcel had come alive overnight and become a raging torrent, doing its part to drain the mountains to the east. The morning had dawned clear and cold with temperatures hovering just above freezing; as we walked to breakfast in the lodge, we noticed that the surrounding mountain peaks were now capped in white, making the striking scene somehow even more arresting.

Lago Yelcho and the Secret Lagoon

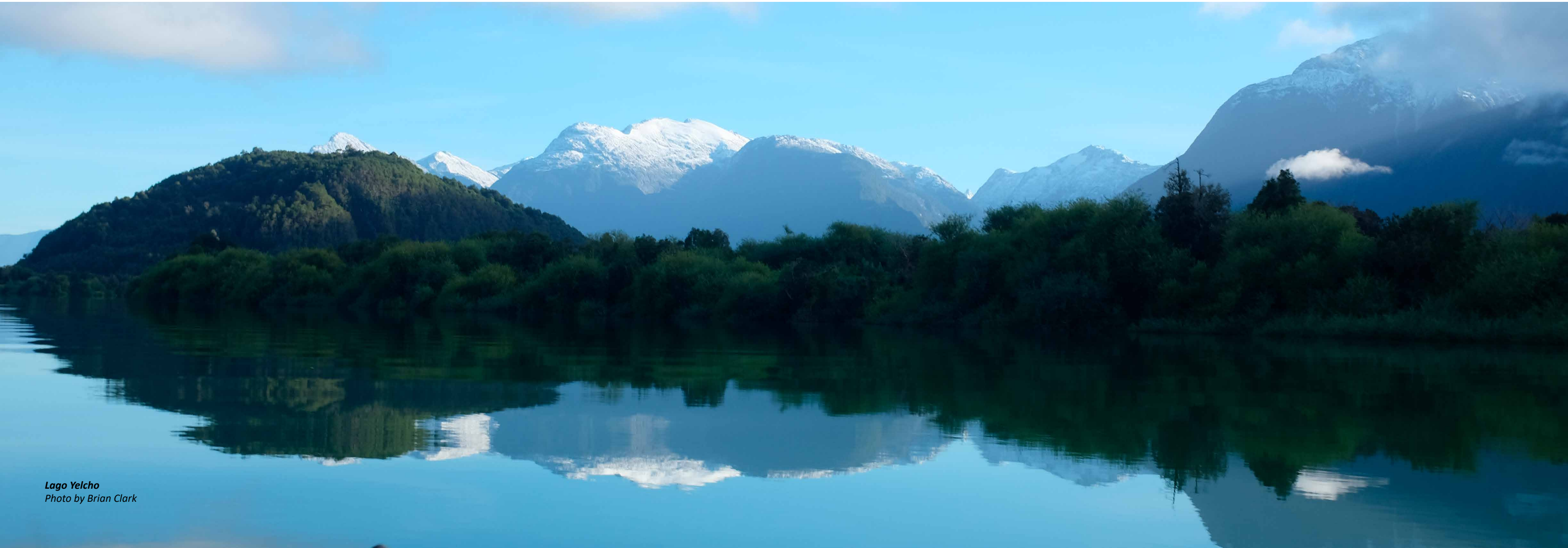
With the rivers running high, the day's plan called for a short run downstream from the lodge to Yelcho Lake where we'd find clean water and a whole different set of fishing conditions. Lago Yelcho is large and deep, covering 45mi² (116km²) with an average depth of over 400ft (~120m). Surrounded by shockingly sheer snow-covered peaks, the

lake's scenery almost makes it difficult to focus on the fishing. We fished large dries in the turbulent flow under an angry waterfall, then ran streamers on sinking lines along rocky drop-offs near the shore, and then below yet another picturesque cascade. We moved fish in every spot, some of them quite large.

After another delicious shore lunch of grilled salmon on a luscious bed of risotto (and another fine red wine), we began our journey to one of the places that makes Matapiojo special: a "secret" lagoon accessible only via a short stroll through the forest and a slog through a minor swamp. By now the temperature had warmed to shirt-sleeve weather, and we worked up a sweat finding our way through the bog. Eventually the trees opened, and Francisco pumped up the small raft he keeps hidden on the edge of this secluded lagoon of clear, tannic water. As we paddled out into the pond, a few dragonflies and damsels fluttered about, holdovers from late summer. In this region, "matapiojo" means "dragonfly", and Francisco used this name for his lodge since many of the waters he fishes offer a rare treat: the opportunity to catch large trout on the surface using dragonfly patterns. Early and mid-summer are prime times for this game, and we intend to visit the lodge again during the prime season for dragons.

Today however, we were throwing different patterns. The trout were feeding mostly on the edges of thick vegetation growing along the edges of the lagoon, and the style of fishing reminded me of chasing snook or bass. We both had success throwing dries and streamers at solitary brown trout cruising among submerged deadfall; late in the afternoon, Francisco slowly rowed our small raft towards a jumble of downed trees and tangles of reeds near the back edge of the lagoon. Backcast placement became just as important as the delivery, and our retrieval speeds had to take underwater hazards into account.

Brian tied on a mouse fly while I continued plying the depths for aggressive brown trout. My streamer retrieve was halted by a hard strike, and I had to maintain constant pressure to keep the strong trout away from the tangled cover. I glanced up to see Brian drop his mouse fly into a narrow opening beneath an overhanging tree. A few short strips later, the water exploded as a large brown trout savagely engulfed the mouse fly. Brian fought the fish out of the tangles as I brought my trout into Francisco's net, and Brian netted his fish a moment later. The pair of hefty browns, similar in size but with very distinctive colorations, was a beautiful sight – a perfect end to another exceptional day of fishing with Francisco.



Lago Yelcho
Photo by Brian Clark



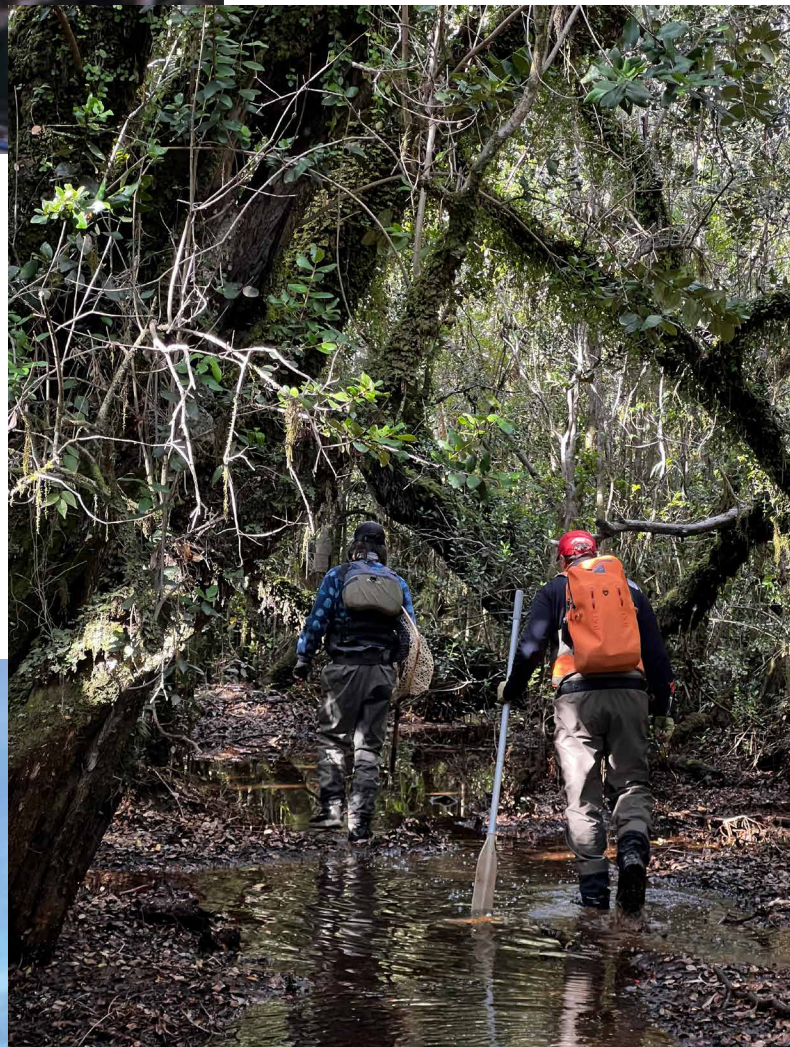
Above: Brian with a nice brown caught on a mouse fly

Right: Francisco and Brian slogging through the swamp to the lagoon

Bottom: Jim with another colorful brown from the secret lagoon

Opposite Top: shore lunch appetizer of empanadas on Yelcho Lake

Opposite Bottom: assistant cook Sennia pouring wine before dinner

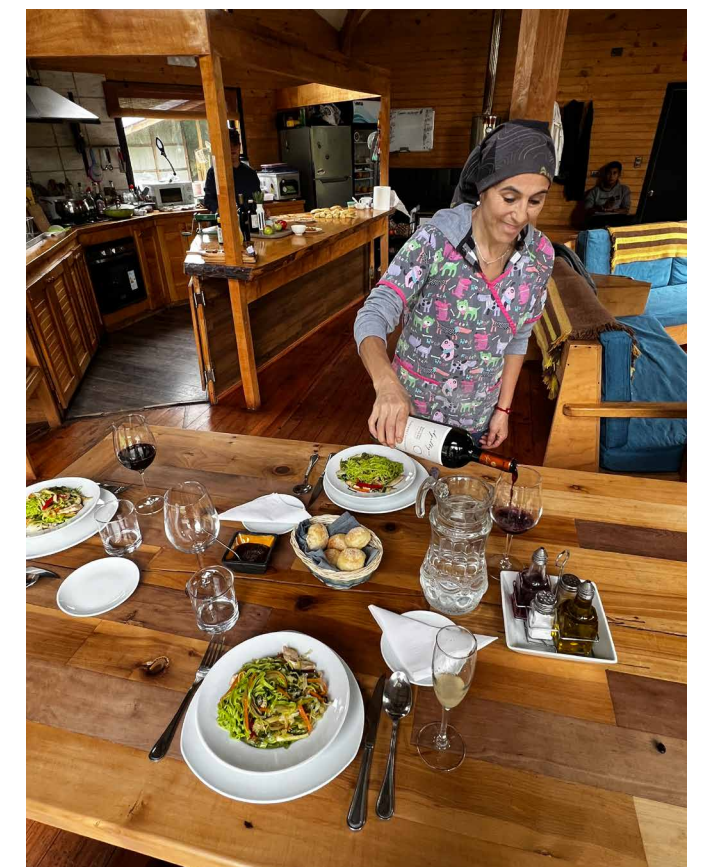


Built by anglers, for anglers

Matapiojo Lodge provides an exceptionally diverse range of fishing options for visiting fly anglers. Few lodges in Patagonia (or anywhere else) offer as many choices of water, from rivers to lakes to lagoons to small spring creeks, and with as many styles: traditional dry flies, dry + dropper rigs, nymphs, big articulated streamers, and, of course, mouse flies and the eponymous dragonflies.

This diversity can not only accommodate an angler's preferred fishing style, it also provides numerous contingency options in the case of inclement weather. In addition to the Rio Futaleufú, Francisco and his guiding team also regularly run the Palena and Tigre Rivers. In addition to Lago Yelcho, Lago Espolón and Lago Locanao are also options, and they rotate through a number of secret lagoons like the one we visited. Guests may choose from wade fishing and float fishing, and it's also possible to swing flies using single or double-handed rods. Horseback trips are possible, too. In some seasons, it's possible to catch salmon in the rivers, and Francisco is just beginning to offer optional tuna trips in the coastal bays. There's much, much more on offer at Matapiojo than can be experienced in a single trip.

Remember that idea of "context" mentioned earlier? The food and culture of Chile are both central to Francisco's philosophy of hosting and guiding. The lodge staff made us feel more like friends than paying guests, and Chef Paola brings creativity and class to every meal served at the lodge, even the lunches served on remote shores. Breakfasts are fresh and filling, typically consisting of fresh fruit, yogurt, breads, cereal, eggs, and meats. Coffee is always available. Shore lunches are downright indulgent; they're served warm with panache on a proper table with chairs brought along in the boat. Grilled salmon, meaty empanadas, freshly baked rolls, and green salads, all accompanied by wine, beer or water – these are standard fare for lunches. But the true masterpieces are served each night. Dinner is always preceded by tasty appetizers and cocktails or wine, and Chef Paola's from-scratch pastas are not only scrumptious – they're works of art. Her steaks are cooked perfectly, and the side dishes are always matched to the main dish, usually a starch and fresh vegetables. Every meal has Chilean flair, and we always found room for her delectable desserts – even if we'd already eaten too much of the plentiful dinner portions.



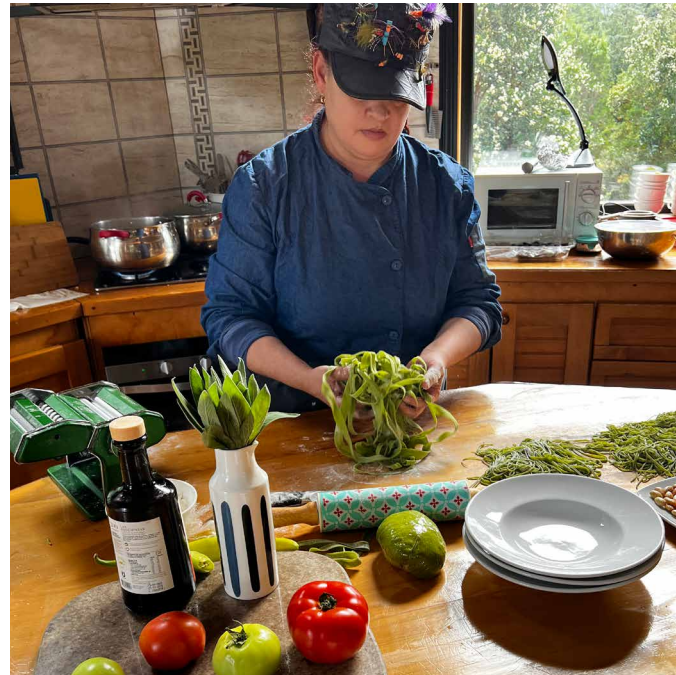


Left: one of the semi-permanent glamping wall tents with attached restroom and rigging area

Middle Left: Chef Paola making fresh spinach fettuccine

Middle Right: the chef's amazing homemade ravioli creations

Bottom: one of two wood-fired hot tubs overlooking the river



Dinner on the last night of our trip was very special: a traditional Patagonian lamb *asado*. A whole lamb was grilled over an open flame in a hut build explicitly for this purpose. The *asado* is a social event; music played in the background as the guests and guides talked and joked with neighbors and drank more good Chilean wine. Warmed by the fire and new friendships kindled during the week's adventures, the *asado* was the perfect ending to our visit. 🐦

Matapiojo Lodge is now an official Orvis-endorsed fly fishing lodge. Notes on seasonal variations:

- November and December: higher water and easier fishing, in general
- January and February: best time for dry flies, including the famous dragonfly madness
- March and April: generally more technical, but bigger fish are available, including some salmon species; tuna fishing may be possible on the Pacific coast

The standard Matapiojo program starts at \$4,900 per week, all inclusive (including the one-night hotel stay in Puerto Varas, the flight from Puerto Montt to Chaitén, and airport transfers in Puerto Montt and from / to Chaitén), plus tips.

Check the website for more information:

www.matapiojolodge.com



Cordero patagónico al asador
(lamb asado) on the fire (above)
and on the plate (right)

