DEBONAIR DIRTBAG

Beyond the Valley of Argentine Super Trouts

STORY AND PHOTOS BY DAVE KARCZYNSKI

"YOU FLY ANGLERS all look alike."

If you fish, you hear this all the time from non-anglers, who in addition to leading sorrowful lives, all have terrible eyesight. "My beard has grey flecks on the left side of my chin," I'll explain, when one of these people wrongly tags me on social media. "Plus, my hat is digital camo, not analog. And if you zoom in, you can see that it's a really aggressive weight-forward taper that guy's casting. Everyone knows I'm a long-belly kind of guy." ➦

FLYFISHERS MAY ALL LOOK ALIKE. BUT FISHERIES DON'T. ARGENTINE PATAGONIA'S CHUBUT PROVINCE HAS A FLAVOR ALL ITS OWN.

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN THE WORLDS OF DEBONAIR AND DIRTBAG IS AN OLD GAUCHO TRAIL THAT LEADS TO GIANT BROOK TROUT.

Then one day, while waiting on a flight at the tiny airport in Esquel, Argentina, I finally got a taste of my own medicine. Amidst a hatch of traveling Patagons sat a sole, pensive gringo. He was typing on the same laptop I had, which furthermore had the same stickers, but in a different configuration. The shirt had on was the same as mine—or was it that mine was the same as his? Our respective fates, too, I would soon learn, were mirror reflections of the other. Me: awaiting arrival to Michigan to brag to friends about the huge Patagonian trout I'd just caught. Him: awaiting the arrival of clients he would take to huge Patagonian trout.

I walked over, pointed at him, then at me, then at him again. "Me," I said, like Tarzan talking to an ape. "Me, Friend."

"You speak English?" he asked.

Turns out his name was Justin Witt, a native Wisconsinite who'd been living in Patagonia for the last decade, fishing and hunting and guiding the backcountry through a destination-travel service called Hemispheres Unlimited. In the time before my flight came we talked about the fishing in Chile vs. Argentina, Jim Harrison vs. Ernest Hemingway, our favorite streamers, and whether there was any reason to visit Buenos Aires (there wasn't). When we parted he shook my hand and said, "Come back some day and I'll take you deep into the backcountry. We'll catch a world-record brook trout. They're out there."

I get fishing invites fairly often, but this one I filed away in the "You Goddamn Better Do This" drawer, for six reasons. Reasons 1-4: giant brook trout. Reason 5 was because Justin was the closest I'd ever come to meeting my Doppelgänger, and if there's anything literature has taught me over the years, it's that cool things happen when you roll with your 'Ganger. The sixth and final reason was my curiosity about the "Trout Bum" program Justin runs down there, which provides guides and other hardcore anglers the chance to experience ultra-fishy places without having to stay at ultra-spendy lodges. This appealed to me greatly because it represented a world of experience I had never thought existed, a mythical middle realm sandwiched between Camp Dirtbag and Camp Debonair—the two very different fishing worlds that I tend to find myself in.

> GOING HOME WITH A HOOK FOR A HAND WOULD WOULD BE TERRIBLE FOR ANY OUTFITTERS INSTAGRAM FEED....

To clarify: Camp Dirtbag is where you and your friends pour over topo maps and satellite images for months, then bushwack deep into the UP or Ontario to spend a week portaging beaver dams and sleeping in swamps and tweezering ticks out of buttholes, all in the hope of finding the next brook trout or muskie Vallhalla. Camp Debonair is where some fancy lodge run by people who take showers every day do all the work for you; all you have to do is get off the plane, hand your luggage to a porter, and sip duty-free Wild Turkey before falling asleep between 800-thread-count sheets.

Both modes of fishing have their perks. Camp Dirtbag is special because it offers the opportunity for the truest and most lasting type of fishing glory—because what greater angling accomplishment is there than solving a mysterious river on your own? It's also got the right mix of pain and danger—there's just something about the threat of a cougar gutting you like a wet burrito that makes the woods deeper, the night darker, and the trip cooler. As if all that weren't enough, cooking and sleeping and fishing in non-stop rain (which seems to happen often at Camp Dirtbag) builds character, and characters—handy if you're a writer.

But it's also pretty nice over at Camp Debonair, where the fishing is almost always good and occasionally mind-blowing. There, people you've never met cook your food for you, and it appears on your plate magically and in heaping quantities every morning, noon, and night. When you get your waders in the morning, they're not frozen stiff, but are soft and warm and smelling of cedar from the sauna room. There's very little danger of being maimed at Camp Debonair, since going home with a hook for a hand would be terrible for any outfitter's Instagram feed. The weather tends to be good, and any damp clothing you place next to your personal woodstove is warm and dry by morning.

So, those are the two cosmic fishing realms, forever split asunder, never touching. But what if you could have the best of both—the pride and glory and freedom of Camp Dirtbag alongside the ease, exoticness, and consistent fishing of Camp Debonair? What would this Middle Kingdom look like?

This year, the moons of Jupiter were all in a row. And come March, I found myself visiting Justin and his friend Chris at Debonair Dirtbag headquarters—a simple lodge in Argentine Patagonia's Chubut province, in the town of Rio Pico. The lodge is owned by Justin's friend, Paulino Arias, aka "The Godfather," revered far and wide for his decades of fighting to protect the province's fish and fisheries from all manner of threat and exploitation. An entire butterflied lamb was brought sizzlingly to a table already wincing with Malbec, followed by steaming mounds of blood sausage and various offals. On an adjacent table, an army of beer, onions, cilantro, and tomatoes stood at the ready. As Paulino carved the lamb, I sat salivating.

Justin spread a map near the fire and looked at Chris and me, dramatically. "You two are going to be part of a small handful of people who've ever fished this river," he said, indicating with a meaty rib bone the trail we'd take to the river. It entered the mountain as an old gaucho trail and passed through several estancias—sprawling, heavily forested cattle ranches. The drive into the bush would last two to four hours, depending on how many rivers we'd be able to ford in the Hilux. Then we'd hike through rough country for another two to four hours.

"This is my favorite place on earth," Justin said, as the last of the wine trinkled into my glass. This is saying quite a bit,

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since Justin has fished almost everywhere in the world, freshwater and salt, northern hemisphere and southern. He has eaten boiled bear's feet in Kamchatka and barbecued barracuda in the Bahamas. As if that weren't enough, when he's not fishing or guiding he's globe-trotting in a tricked-out RV with a pretty Russian wife he met in the Peruvian jungle, along with the world's best-traveled one year old. Justin's been around.

The next day we drove out of town, past mesas and mountains and horsebacked gauchos with their fleets of dusty dogs, all while listening to a genre of music Justin described as "Ojibway Squaredance." But below the music I noticed he was humming a very different tune. When I pressed him, he explained that it was something called an Icaro—not so much a song as a laser beam of sound waves designed to hack the universe at the molecular level—the shamans in the Peruvian jungle had taught him the art. Justin had Icaros for all kinds of occasions, fording rivers, finding mushrooms, seducing giant brook trout. Whenever we rolled the Hilux through a particularly nasty looking mud-field, I noticed that his Icaro got a little louder.

We finally arrived at an unpassable river crossing, and disembarked. The rest of the way would be on foot. "We are now a three-hour hike from basecamp," Justin said. Chris and I, being jacked on the most dangerous kind of adrenaline, made the unfortunate decision to consume a beer for every projected hour of the hike, and this has gone down as one of the great poor decisions of my life.

Not only is Justin fast, he's offensively tall in a way I hadn't fully appreciated. Chris and I struggled to keep up with his long, loping gate as the forest kept closing in from either side. I am decidedly not fast, hailing as I do from a long line of Polish and Ukrainian plodders, our genes honed by centuries of chasing stray goats while nursing potato-spirit hangovers. But my people always got their goat, and Chris and I managed to keep Justin just close enough.

Like the cattle we saw from time to time ghosting between the trees, we had to pick our own way through the woods, as pathless an expanse as I'd ever seen. After walking for what seemed like forever, we finally hit the river, located in a lush, densely wooded valley surrounded by high mountains. Farther downstream it would plummet through a series of massive waterfalls and high canyons as it made its way to the sea, but here it was all thick trees, sharp bends, deep holes and steep banks, clotted with great Grendels of timber that looked like they might come to life beneath a full moon. The solitude as we made camp was immense. Twice I thought I heard human voices coming from deep in the forest, but it turned out to be a trick of the wind and trees and river—there was nothing out here but our tribe of three. We made a fire, had dinner, and Justin taught me how to wash the plates not with camp soap and a brillo pad but with spongy lichens and fragrant herbs, which somehow still cut through the grease and left the plates smelling like orange and thyme. We drank with cupped hands straight from the river without the intermediary of a water filter, and as the night wore on I started to feel less like a modern hominid and more like an old-school australopithecine, one of those creatures with bulging foreheads and bad haircuts from the pages of my college anthropology book. When finally I lay back in my sleeping bag under an open sky, watching the embers from our campfire curl through the treetops and dissolve in the stars, I decided that all human civilization had been a colossal waste of time. This was the only way to live.

The next morning we found that the fishing, too, was wonderful. The river carried an infinite supply of large brook trout, and after two hours I caught the biggest brookie I'd ever seen in real life, edging out a Labrador specimen by about an inch and a half, though Justin said I should expect to break my personal best every day for the next week—and for several days I did. My tendency when fishing new water is to compare it with every other river I've ever fished, identifying similarities and differences to get a better understanding of how to approach it. But here in Chubut province, that only worked to a point. Yes, one beat of river might look like a bigger version of X Wisconsin River, and another might bear an uncanny resemblance to Y Michigan stream, but the fishing was on such a different plane that eventually I had to stop comparing altogether. It wasn't so much a matter of apples and oranges, it was that the brook trout factory flowing past my feet carried some other fruit altogether, something far more rare and delicious—an extra-terrestrial mango of sorts.

After a truly great fish comes a pleasant loosening of brain and body that makes you a better angler,

Each day we fished farther upstream or down, lengthening our forays to new water in both directions as our strength increased and our comfort with the terrain grew. This psychological component was important because the density of the brush challenged you both physically and mentally. Working your way through the understory felt like long division, only instead of holding the remainder in your head, you had to remember where you'd come from when you made your cut back to the river. Several times a day I felt like a cat at the top of the tree, knowing that somehow I had gotten here but had no idea how to get back.

By the third day I'd developed a few theories about what your catch-sequencing at any given hole suggested about the potential of hooking something exceptional. My best fish always seemed to be the fifth or six one out of a spot, with each fish bigger than the last. But at the hole where I would catch my largest fish, something else happened.

Fish one, two, and three followed the previous pattern, but four, five and six each got smaller. I scratched my head and rested the hole. Where was the pig? It was as perfect a hole as I'd seen over several days, with a straight tongue and a clean current edge that made for easy hunting. One edge ran straight across a gigantic deadfall, and below the surface I saw the curve of a boulder. It was a prime lie in a world of prime lies, and yet here were small brook trout feeling fearless enough to keep wacking my streamer. Could it be my instincts were wrong and they truly had no large neighbor to fear? Still, I kept flinging and reflinging my XL Murdich Minnow, the one I usually throw only at smallmouth in blown-out rivers.

Maybe Justin was humming an Icaro somewhere, but on the next cast my Murdich got crushed as I swung it across the face of the logjam. I'd already imagined how to play a bigger fish in this hole, so I executed my game plan, bending the rod immediately to the hilt and backing away from the logjam for extra leverage. To keep this fish out of the wood took all the seven-weight's strength and every bit of brawn in my 15-pound tippet —numbers I never before dreamed of associating with brook trout.

I needed a net man, fast. Since we were all fishing about 100 yards apart at any given moment, we had agreed to yell out the Spanish word "Barraco", which means "fat one," in the case of a good fish. But in the heat of the moment I got confused and instead screamed a similar-sounding Japanese word that means violently splashing soup. It worked anyway. Justin came tearing out of the brush, scooped the fish with the net, and I collapsed against the bank, thankful not to have lost the fight. Then we stood there in the sunlight marveling at this great fish's shoulders. After a decade of brook trout fishing, here was a fish that could have eaten the largest brookie I'd ever caught in the U.S.

After a truly great fish, there comes a pleasant loosening of brain and body that makes you a better angler. Your nerves are no longer on edge, you care a little less, and so your casts are better and hook-sets sounder. It also means that whatever happens in the hours and days that follow become a creamy blur compared to the crisp shape of the memorable trophy. And that's how I remember the rest of the trip: a soft shadow of trees and mountaintops. That is, until our sudden dramatic departure.

My friends know that I am a connoisseur of a certain kind of pain. In fact, great fish and biblical suffering are the only two things I'm able to remember with lasting clarity from any given fishing trip. It's for this reason that I'll never give up Camp

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Dirtbag, even if I end up winning the lottery someday: it gives you memories that no amount of money can buy. And that's exactly what leaving the river camp gave me: an eternal memory of sweet bushwacking pain.

The scene must be set: It was the night after what had been by far our longest day trip, during which we'd fished our way downstream to a massive waterfall and hiked miles of thick wood back. We were experiencing the kind of tired that prevents you from talking as you prepare and eat dinner. There was no discussion about the day's fishing or the next day's fishing, nor any pleasant "goodnights." Even farts took more energy than the body possessed, and had to be saved for morning. But for some reason, as utterly exhausted as I was, when I crawled into my sleeping bag, I couldn't fall asleep.

The minutes became hours, two hours became four, and still I lay staring at the unblinking stars. Sleep was the thing I needed most, since morning would bring our deepest hike yet, all the way to the headwaters. But sleep never came. I started to imagine each passing minute as a wolf that was eating into my future energy, bite by bite. By 4 a.m. the wolf was getting bigger and bigger, while I was getting smaller and smaller. Soon there would be none of me left.

Then, for the first time all week, it started to rain. Being wide-awake, I felt the first drops and quickly dragged my sleeping bag into the one-person bivvy I hadn't yet used. Once there, cozily cocooned and listening to the soft patter, I finally started to doze off. "Three hours," I told myself. That's how much sleep you can expect to get before breakfast." It just might be enough to get me through the day.

But just then a voice boomed in my ear. "Pack," Justin said firmly. "Pack right now. The rivers are rising and if we don't leave immediately, the truck won't make it out."

Thus began our Death March, in steady rain, in the sleepless dark, hour after hour, till my headlamp, much like the man wearing it, weakened to almost nothing. We had to backtrack three times, as not even Justin had made this hike out in the dark, and it was easy to get turned around. As we walked toward a dawn that seemed not to be coming, I started to feel the hot breath of the wolf behind me. He was back, stronger than ever. But finally came the roar of the Hilux. It was the most beautiful sound I'd ever heard. In the dull light of the cab, Justin and Chris and I shared a moment of profound silence. The first leg of the trip was over. We had fished hard and well. We had survived. Ours was the glory.

"I know where we can get warm," Justin said, as he eased the truck forward. "A fishing camp run by an old Russian with one kidney, one lung, and half a liver."

Chris turned wearily to Justin: "Do they make old Russians any other way?"

An hour later we pulled up to Nikita's place, a hobbity cottage in a forest clearing. Chris and I had to duck to enter; Justin bent almost to the waist. Nikita, wearing a brown tattered robe and slippers, introduced himself as the great grandson of Czar Nicholas II's personal doctor. He herded us toward the woodstove. From the next room I could hear the familiar tinkling of shotglasses being gathered, and a moment later Nikita's daughter emerged with a bottle of homemade vodka. Hot tea was placed in front of me, right next to my shotglass, which Nikita filled to the rim. A loaf of bread was laid out slice by slice, directly on the woodstove, and for the next hour the best toast I'd ever tasted was served in endless waves alongside butter, jam, honey, and ham. The vodka, spiced with local grasses, did not stop flowing until the bottle was empty. The wood stove kept eating more wood. I never wanted to leave.

But we did, of course. There was fishing to be done. In a fishing life, which is the one thing my maybe not-so-Doppelganger Doppleganger and I most definitely share, there is always more fishing to be done. I drowsed in the backseat as we headed back to Paulino's, listening to Justin talk about all the lakes we'd fish in the next week, the deep, cold, high-country lakes with only numbers for names. After a while the radio came on, but I knew enough by now to listen below the music, and in a moment found what I was trying to hear. Just under the electric guitar and just above the rush of highway, Justin was humming an Icaro. But it was a new one, with a different melody and a different pitch. Somewhere off in the distant mountains, in the lonely lakes where big trout sulk, the water started to quiver.

SHARP BENDS, DEEP HOLES, AND THICK GRENDELS OF TIMBER THAT MIGHT COME TO LIFE AND SNATCH YOUR BACKCAST.