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# The Lure of the Fly

Like gourmet food or fine wine, fly-fishing is an experience to be savored.

**I**t used to be that when Jon Lutter took his boat into Everglades National Park, he would anchor next to a mangrove, throw live bait into the water and wait for fish to eat it. But now, Lutter says, he has become a hunter and a stalker who scans the water for any movement of a fish and then carefully casts his fly. That's when "you see the fish swim up to the fly and just explode on it," he says.

"It's one of the most exciting things I've ever done, and at that point the fight with the fish has just begun," says Lutter, the 54-year-old manager of two auto dealerships and one of the legions of anglers who have discovered the lure of fly-fishing.

Fly-fishers often tie their own flies rather than use commercial lures. And they work to perfect their casts, often creating an act of surprising

visual beauty. "As you move it back and forth in the air to make your cast, the fly line unrolls and carries the fly to the target," says Lefty Kreh, an acclaimed fly-fishing guru who has taught the pursuit to thousands of people. "You can see this happening, to the point that people enjoy just fly casting when they're not fishing."

Fly-fishing is not for everyone, but the sport has gained a following among those who enjoy the challenges it provides and the accompanying opportunities for travel and sharing experiences with like-minded people. At the center of the experience is the interaction with the fish — an exchange that Lutter describes as going far beyond throwing out a lure and waiting for a bite. "Most of all, it gives people a chance to forget business for a few days," Kreh says. "A lot of people live in a high-pressure environment, but this is low-

pressure and noncompetitive, where it's just between you and the fish."

Fly-fishing has grown from a niche leisure activity into a much more widespread sport. Kreh recalls that when he started teaching the sport in the early 1950s, his home state of Maryland had just a handful of fly-fishers. By 2005, 14.7 million Americans had participated in the sport, up from 13.4 million in 2001, according to the Outdoor Industry Association.

### **Pristine Beauty, Thrilling Experience**

Fishing trips to remote or pristine landscapes are part of the fly-fishing culture. Fly-fishing can provide an experience equivalent to drinking fine wine or driving exotic cars, and many fly-fishers seek out the finest fishing opportunities, says Bob Wiltshire, chief operating officer for the Federation of Fly Fishers, an international conservation-oriented fly-fishing organization.

Kreh adds, "They know if they go to a lodge in New Zealand, ... there will be good conversation, good guides and good food. You can go to a lodge in a remote area of Alaska and find food that rivals what you have in a restaurant in San Francisco."

In Patagonia, where trout are plentiful, a variety of lodges serve fly-fishers. One, the Heart of Patagonia lodge, is located on the banks of the Rio Aysen in the heart of Chilean Patagonia. It offers weeklong stays for prices that range between \$3,500 and \$4,500, depending on the season. Guests enjoy the lodge's intimate atmosphere, multi-course meals featuring fresh-caught seafood as well as chicken and beef, and a hand-picked

selection of Chilean wines. Generally, its guests are American doctors, lawyers and business people — or retirees from such fields — and include both men and women, says owner-operator Mariana Vera Fierro. They fish primarily for rainbow trout, but in season can catch salmon and other fish. "Our guests are people who enjoy fishing and like to do it in a small, intimate environment," Vera Fierro says. "A good percentage return every year, and many bring their families."

Traveling provides another draw. Some people "just want an opportunity to fish virgin waters for a fish that has never seen a fly — that's just a thrilling experience," Wiltshire says. "And then there are people who want to fish as many different fish or rivers as they can, just as there are people who want to climb as many peaks as they can."

### **The Appeal for Women**

Increasingly, women are joining the fly-fishing ranks. About 3.5 million women fly-fish in the United States, up nearly 200,000 since 2001. The International Women Fly Fishers (IWFF) organization, founded in 1996, reports an increasing interest in women's fly-fishing clubs. "Clubs are sprouting up all the time," says Yvonne Graham, an IWFF board member and past president. The group has 42 affiliate clubs, up from seven or eight of them a decade ago, and currently is fielding a dozen requests for help in setting up more clubs.

"It's really a sport that is more or less designed for women," says Graham, who with her husband, Gary, operates Escondido, Calif.-based Baja on the

Fly-fishing gives people a chance to forget about business for a few days ... it's just you and the fish.



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Fly, which offers fly-fishing trips. “It takes a lot of finesse; you don’t have to use brute strength to throw a fly or catch a fish. It takes patience, which women have,” she says.

Manufacturers now design clothing, tackle and gear for women. “In 1996, we were using men’s gear,” Graham says. Today, the clothing is better fitted, more fashionable and brighter, while rods have smaller handles and higher grips. Bass Pro Shops, which operates 38 stores, not only offers rods built for women’s hands but also has seen the percentage of women in its fly-fishing workshops rise to between 35% and 40%, up from about 10% five years ago, says spokesman Larry Whiteley.

### **Exercise Your Mind Through Sport**

Fly-fishing bears an intellectual component as well, with its own literature and even a bi-annual literary publication, the *Yale Anglers’ Journal*, which is edited and published by Yale University undergraduates and features prose, poetry and art from fishing writers and artists around the globe.

Fly-fishing lends itself to literature because it creates a contemplative time when “you think about the nature that’s around you, as well as your position in it and the world,” says Aaron Alter, a Yale sophomore who is editor of the *Yale Anglers’ Journal*. “It provides you with time

to think about things, and makes you think about things in a different way, and that carries over to writing.”

“Writing about fishing lets you express your thoughts about other things in the world and life in general,” Alter says. “I see that a lot in the stories. The events they describe are similar — you fish and you end up catching a fish — but the stories [result in] different lessons or morals; they show how stimulating and eye-opening fly-fishing can be.”

The sport also fosters relationships because there is such an abundance of knowledge to acquire and share. “Fly-fishing provides a medium — different than other parts of life — to share and to learn from other people,” says Alter.

Anglers such as Kreh, who have spent decades mastering the intricacies of fly-fishing, are applauded for their ability to pass on their knowledge. Kreh’s proficiency in this regard becomes clear when he describes the movements of nymphs — the larva of aquatic insects: “Trout take flies off the surface and nymphs under the surface. If you are experienced, you know the difference and know when to use an imitation surface fly and when to use an imitation nymph.”

That effort typifies “the myriad problems that have to be solved in fly-fishing and that are unlike those in any other type of fishing,” Kreh says. “It’s a sport you never really master.” ■