



- Gerald lifts a rainbow trout from the stream at La Ferme.

FIVE-STAR BOUTIQUE FLYFISHING



A day outing at La Ferme, Franschhoek, unveils a new flyfishing destination, where the fishing is just one of the charms

GERALD PENKLER AND I TOOK A DRIVE OUT TO LA FERME, a flyfishing venue just outside Franschhoek that we'd been hearing a lot of good reports about. What we mainly heard was that the lakes were gin clear, there were plenty of trout and the scenery would knock our socks off.

I collected Gerald in Stellenbosch. He was taking the day off from minding the malaria parasites he's cultured in a laboratory for a project he hopes will earn him a PhD pretty soon. The day was bleak to begin with, thick clouds hanging low enough to cover mountain tops and a wind gusted this way and that as if it couldn't make up its mind where to come from. Twenty minutes later we were in Francois Labuschagne's farmhouse kitchen drinking coffee and learning a little bit about >>



□ Gerald on the stream at La Ferme fishing against an amazing backdrop.



>> La Ferme and the family that owns and runs it. Francois and his wife Mercedes are originally from Zululand. He grew up fishing the coastal waters around Port Shepstone, later took up flying and ended up as a commercial airline pilot. One of his last flights was bringing the Helderberg back to South Africa on the trip before the aircraft tragically went down in the Indian Ocean. Then he went into the animal feed business, living the hectic life of a Johannesburg entrepreneur until, as he puts it, they saw the light and moved to Cape Town. By this stage he was already a serious flyfisher, but once in the Cape he became a serious flyfisher with a special dream – to own a farm with enough water on it to offer some fishing. For two years he and Mercedes scoured the Cape, literally going from farmhouse to farmhouse trying to track down the perfect place.

They eventually found La Ferme, a big chunk of land with streams that flowed all year round and with lands bordering on a nature reserve. That was six years back and the problem then was that the farm was thick with alien vegetation. From what Francois described to us you'd have had to have been a gifted visionary to see the potential in the place – other than the potential for plenty of blood, sweat and tears.

There was plenty of work to be done, but within a few years Francois and Mercedes had transformed the farm. They'd cleared up the bulk of the alien vegetation, planted a magnificent garden, stuck in vines, built themselves a beautiful, cosy home and added three chalets for guests. But importantly, Francois had put in four dams and cleared up the banks of the stream. I got dizzy just listening to what they'd managed to get done in such a short space of time.

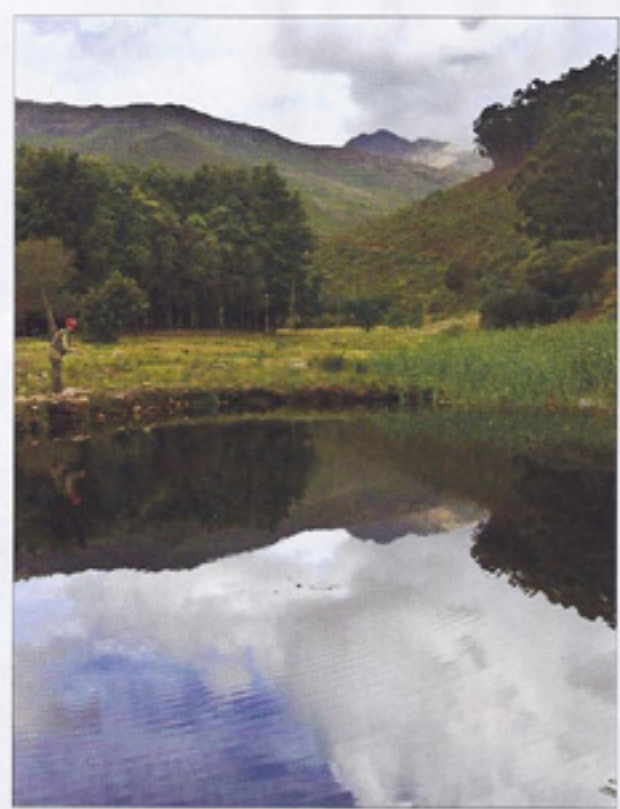
After the coffee Francois took us for a tour of the place in his old bakkie. We came across a few ostriches, a small family of springbok and a section of river that looked delightful. He also showed us a place where for one or other reason he'd once dug a deep hole in the ground only to have it fill with groundwater overnight. So he just made it bigger; dug a second hole and now some way from the house he has two additional dams, one a conventional bass hole and the other a small pond so full of flowering lilies it looks like something straight out of the Okavango. In the bass pond we spotted a couple of enormous fish. Francois said to try our luck on them if the trout weren't biting.

By the time Gerald and I got onto one of the main trout dams the weather was improving. There was a bright patch of blue sky and we would have bet a lot of money on landing a couple of trout. But the oracle had spoken. The oracle is Richard my



- A pond carpeted with lilies like something from the Okavango.
- Mercedes and Francois Labuschagne with Gia and Cade.
- Lovely reflections in the bass pond.

You'd have to say the fishing was mighty slow, which is flyfishing speak for we didn't catch anything



goldfish. When I go out first thing in the morning to feed him he'll either jump at the wafers as they drift down onto the water, sip them casually and daintily, or just lie motionless on the bottom of his pond and cock a beady eye at me. This particular day he was motionless and sure enough we didn't find many feeding fish. We saw plenty swimming by and the odd one came up to the dry fly, sipped it and got off, but generally you'd have to say the fishing was mighty slow, which is flyfishing speak for we didn't actually catch anything. So that bass pond Francois had showed us eventually earned a visit by default.

I slowly threaded my truck across the drift we'd gone through that morning, drove through a glade of wattle trees where the sound of chainsaws was deafening, but also comforting when we thought of yet more alien trees being felled, spooked three springbok lying in the long grass, then crept up on the bass pond. The big bass was there, right on the edge and being mid-November we figured he was probably watching over his nest of eggs. Gerald landed a fly in his range and the bass swatted it. For a few lovely moments the fish was on and jumping, then he shook off. This was a small pond, not much bigger than half a tennis court and we had seen two big fish. Either by extraordinary skill or phenomenal fortune, we weren't sure which, Gerald hooked the second bass on his next cast. We landed it, removed the fly and released the fish. It was a really handsome bass.

As we crossed the stream on the way out, we convinced ourselves that even if we'd come all the way over here to catch Francois's lake trout, the little river looked worth a try. Walking upstream, our backdrop was a craggy range of purple-blue mountains with peaks in swirling cloud and hillsides lit with the bright colours of flowering fynbos. I think we told each other how lucky we were to live in South Africa at least three times. And we caught a few trout on a dry fly.

When we stopped in Stellenbosch to transfer Gerald's gear into his car I suggested we go somewhere for a late afternoon coffee. Gerald politely declined – apparently it was feeding time for his malaria parasites – but as we shook hands we agreed the day had been a good one. As my old friend Mark Yelland says, "The fishing was great. Just the catching was poor." Richard the oracle had been right, but at least what we'd heard about La Ferme was also right – the lakes were clear, there were plenty of trout around – even if we couldn't catch them on the day – the scenery was surreal and we will be back. □

Map reference F2
see inside back cover



FLYFISHING
COUNTRY LIFE

La Ferme offers fishing for brown and rainbow trout and self-catering, four-star accommodation in three chalets that are each totally private.

Besides flyfishing there is also hiking and horse riding. It's a marvellous family venue. 021 867 0120, 082 555 2043, mercedes@laferme.co.za, www.laferme.co.za

Come flyfishing with Tom Sutcliffe

For more details on our Flyfishing Workshop with the author in June at Lourensford Estate, Somerset West, turn to page 6.

□ One of the chalets on La Ferme.