

Central Oregon's famed Deschutes River
hooks yet another angler

the reel deal

BY ANDREW EITELBACH  PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL HANSON

monday evening finds me restless and waiting. Seated at the bar in the Nines Hotel, in Portland, Ore., I order a glass of the hotel's artisanal whiskey. The bartender asks me why I'm in town. "Fishing," I tell him. He smiles, likely seeing the trout dancing in my eyes, and slides the whiskey over. I take a sip. The slow, cool burn of the drink bites nicely; it's the perfect start to my trip.

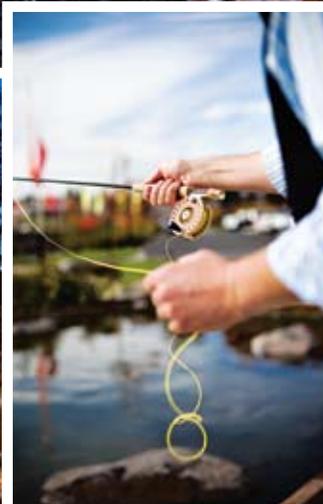
I've come to fly-fish the Deschutes River in Central Oregon, one of the great trout rivers of the Pacific Northwest. It is something I've wanted to do all my life, but I'm nervous. I've never gone river fishing before; angling in the fast-moving water is entirely new to me. The only fish I've ever gone after live quiet, restful lives in isolated ponds and can spot a fidgety line from a long way off. In still water a fisherman must remain fairly motionless or risk spooking the fish, but in rivers everything is moving – the fish, their food, even the rocks. While I'm looking forward to the challenge of catching the Deschutes' famed rainbow trout, known as redsides, I'm anxious to see if my experience in quiet waters translates in the torrents.

The next morning I drive the Mount Hood Highway to Bend, some three hours southeast of Portland. I pass through forests of larch and firs so thick they blot out the daylight, and then through spruce forests overlooking deep ridges of gray stone. As I get closer to Bend, the overcast alpine region gives way to the high desert of Central Oregon, with its wide-open pasturelands, exposed rimrock, and clear skies.

Bend sits among towering ponderosa pines on the bank of the Deschutes River. Originally a timber and ranching community, the city now relies as much on tourism as it does on logging and agriculture. Full of little shops, galleries, restaurants, and bars (Bend has seven microbreweries), the city is a rallying point for outdoor thrill seekers. Snowcapped peaks of the Cascade Mountains puncture the western skyline, and the largest juniper forest in the American West encroaches on the town from three sides. A look at a map reveals there are more than 2 million acres of public lands within a one-hour radius of Bend, with tiny tangled lines of water roaming through them all. Dominating everything is the thick blue path of the Deschutes.

I check in to the Oxford Hotel in downtown Bend, an eco-friendly luxury hotel that opened last year. (I'm here to fish, not to rough it.) Everything from the bedding to the food is organic — even the pens are made from recycled cardboard. In my room, I get the call I've been waiting for.

"I want to give you the best possible experience I can," says Damien Nurre, an Orvis-endorsed fishing guide and owner of Deep Canyon Outfitters, a fly-fishing guide service in Bend. "We can go after rainbow trout, or we can also go for steelhead."



This page, clockwise from top: McMenamins Kennedy School, a complex housing a trendy hotel, pub, movie theater, and soaking pool; casting at Orvis' fly-fishing obstacle course; downtown Bend's Tower movie theater at night. Facing page: Deep Canyon Outfitters guides Damien Nurre and Matt Shinderman on the banks of the Deschutes River.

He pauses, before adding, "I really think we should go for steelhead." I tell him I'm in.

After we hang up, I walk to Bend's Old Mill District to visit Orvis' one-of-a-kind casting course, consisting of 18 obstacles, that challenge an angler's casting and fly-placement skills. I practice casting to avoid obstructions, to reach a distant target, and to hit multiple targets in a minimum of tries. It starts raining when I reach the fifth obstacle, but I'm having too much fun to call it quits. I pull a rain jacket from my bag and keep moving.

Two kids riding by on bikes give me funny looks as I try to thread my line through an iron hoop and miss. This particular obstacle sits on a small lawn, not near the water.

“Catch anything?” one of the kids asks me, grinning. I jokingly tell her yes.

“You’re letting the rod drop too far behind you,” she informs me. “Keep your wrist tight.” I take her advice, and the line sails right through the iron hoop.

In Search of Redsides

I meet Nurre the next morning in Madras, an hour north of Bend. Wearing a weathered baseball hat and dark Oakley sunglasses, the thirtysomething guide is all smiles. His enthusiasm and deep respect for fishing — and for the Deschutes River — are admirable. “This is going to be fun,” he tells me.

THE WHOLE PACKAGE

For a Good Time Call

Ahead of my trip I received an email from guide Damien Nurre, owner of **Deep Canyon Outfitters** (541.323.3007, deschutesflyfish.com), telling me what to bring. To say the list was exhaustive wouldn’t do it justice. But the attention to detail illustrates the level of service Deep Canyon offers. From half-day to full-day to multi-day trips, Deep Canyon’s guides have you covered for fishing any time of year. Each guide with the outfit is trained in emergency backwoods first aid and is certified by Orvis, a leader in fly-fishing equipment, services, and expeditions that doesn’t give its endorsement lightly. And while Deep Canyon’s guides know how to keep you safe, they’ll keep you well fed too.

Lunch included organically grown, grass-fed Kobe beef burgers from Nurre’s own ranch, grilled riverside, with fresh, organic avocado, tomato, and lettuce, and chocolate chip cookies for dessert. And I can tell you that — sitting there in a comfy chair, still in my waders and tired from the day’s fishing — I have had few meals that match it. It’s this kind of all-around service that makes a good trip a great one, and admirable outfitters like Deep Canyon simply brilliant. — A.E.



The Deschutes River is more than 100 miles long, flowing east from its headwaters at Little Lava Lake in the Cascade Mountains, then south, and then north to the Columbia River. Locals segment the river into three parts: the Upper, Middle, and Lower. The Upper Deschutes stretches from the river’s headwaters toward Bend, where it becomes the Middle Deschutes. Here, the river volume drops precipitously due to irrigation, but as it moves north the volume returns, fed by tributaries. By the time it approaches Warm Springs, 20 minutes from Madras, the river is a swift, relentless force cutting low channels and wide canyons through the high desert’s basalt rock. This is the Lower Deschutes, the section I’ve come to fish.

A legend among trout streams, the Lower Deschutes holds 4,000 reddsides per mile. On top of that, there are numerous other fish, most notably steelhead trout, a massive sport fish that lures anglers from all over the world to the Lower Deschutes.

In no time we have donned our waders and are drifting down the river in an aluminum drift boat — a specialized rowboat built to survive river rapids. On our way toward the first fishing spot, we pass a small herd of wild horses playing in the desert dust and the occasional cow nibbling grass at the water’s edge. Nurre points out a great blue heron flying low across the water. It lands in a dead juniper tree overhanging the riverbank and stares us down as we pass. We aren’t the only anglers out here.

“We’re going for rainbows first,” Nurre tells me. I ask him to explain the difference between the dazzlingly beautiful rainbow trout and the Deschutes’ reddsides. Redsides, he says, are rainbow trout but genetically unique to the Deschutes. They have a fierce disposition. In fact, pound for pound, these trout fight harder than rainbows elsewhere and are more apt to throw the hook, making them hard to catch and fun to fight.

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I step out of the drift boat, in the shade of leafy alders. A small wall of water immediately starts to build behind my legs. The river is relentless. As I walk precariously over slippery rocks and into the current, my hands shake with excitement.

“Hit that spot,” Nurre says quietly, pointing 25 feet downriver to the edge of a small cascade of water where the river smooths back to an azure blue. I strip enough line from my reel to reach the target and start a roll cast, raising the rod tip straight above me before firing the line forward, which lifts the line out in a single loop. The fly lands right where Nurre pointed.

“Nope,” Nurre says, and I know what I’ve done wrong. “Cast out,” he says, pointing perpendicular to the shore. “Not downstream.” I’ve read about this and knew I made the mistake as soon as I let the line go. The fly should sweep down current and drift over the target, not plop directly onto the fish’s head. I recall my line and recast the dry fly — a mayfly. It drifts down the small waves with the current and sweeps onto the target.

Nurre watches me attentively from behind. Any time he sees a rise — a fish coming to the surface — he yells, “Set!” That’s my cue to raise the rod straight up, which sets the hook in the fish’s mouth. If I set it too soon, I will yank the fly from the fish’s mouth before it can bite hold; if I set it too slowly, the fish will realize it hasn’t chomped on a juicy fly and will spit it out.

“Set!” Nurre shouts. I bring the rod up expecting a tug from the other end. Nothing. “I thought I saw one,” he says. “Sorry. Recast.” I try a few more casts but get no bites. I don’t care. The water is crisply cold and the day much warmer than I anticipated — I can feel the tips of my ears burning in the sun. The way the light hits the water, with the alders and poplar trees shaking in the breeze and the beige hills behind them baking in the light, I could not ask for a better scene. I certainly didn’t realize the river would be this beautiful, or just how enjoyable fishing this stream could be. I’m having the time of my life.

“Set!” Nurre yells again. I pull up on the rod, but this time the line starts stripping from the reel. I’ve got one. “He’s running!” Nurre says, excitedly. As the rod slackens I reel in to keep the line taut; when the fish runs I let him take the line back off the reel. We’re dancing. Back and forth, back and forth.

Suddenly the fish jumps, and I see him: green, red-sided, and darkly speckled, wriggling in midair as he tries to spit the hook. It doesn’t work. He runs toward me and I reel furiously to keep the line tight. Nurre scoops him up in a net and takes the hook from his lip in a single motion. I wet my hands before taking him, to protect his scales from damage. Nurre asks me something about the fight but I’m not paying attention. I just grin at him dumbly, wondering at the trout I’m holding — a 13-inch rainbow. My first redside. I hold the fish in the water, pointing him upriver so the current can move through his gills and he can recover from our struggle. When he’s ready, he darts away, disappearing under the water’s glaze. For fear of embarrassing myself in front of Nurre, I resist the urge to wave goodbye.

ABOUT TOWN If You Go

STAY

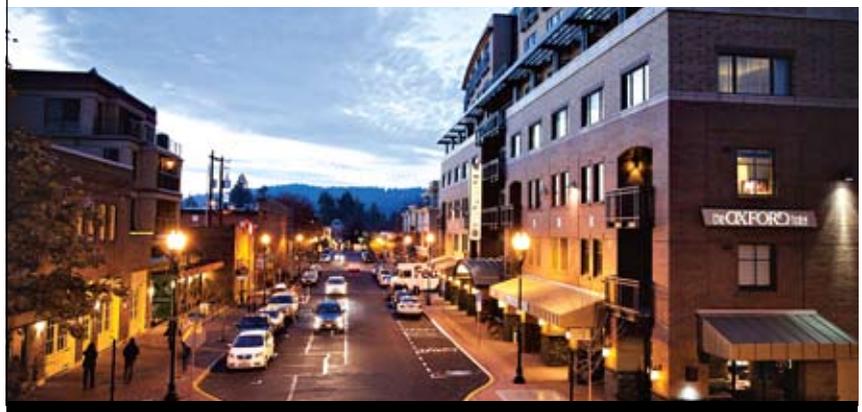
Portland

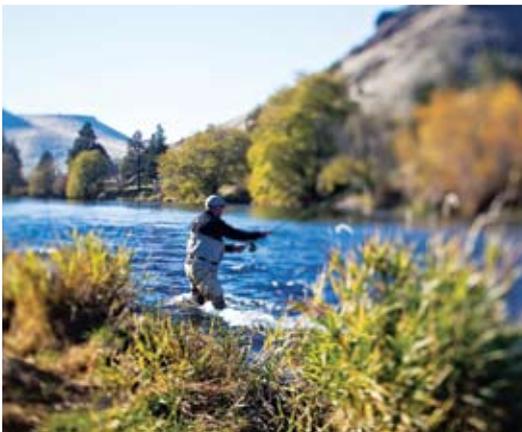
In Portland’s Downtown District, adjacent to Pioneer Square, the **Nines Hotel** sits comfortably in the center of the action. The century-old, 15-story, terra-cotta-veneered Meier & Frank building is an attraction in its own right. The Nines’ 331 rooms, each wrapped in opulent accoutrements, feature 42-inch flat-screen televisions, original works by local artists, rainforest showers, and high-thread-count bedding on plush, pillowtop beds, all amid Louis XV-meets-Andy Warhol style décor. The dining room/bar, Urban Farmer, serves locally sourced steaks in a classy but relaxed atmosphere. It also offers Oregon-made spirits in its cocktails — including a whiskey made specifically for the hotel. It would be a mistake to forgo the Urban Farmer’s weekend Bloody Mary bar. 877.229.9995, thenines.com

Bend

Opened in January 2010, the **Oxford Hotel** is a chic, eco-friendly property in Bend’s tidy downtown. Fifty-nine rooms and suites, ranging in size from 443 to nearly 800 square feet, are cleaned with an electrolyzed salt water, which leaves no harmful byproducts. The hotel is homey and sophisticated, with an exceptionally helpful and friendly staff. The Oxford’s restaurant, 10 Below, keeps many of Bend’s microbrews on tap or in stock and serves up some of the best buckwheat blueberry pancakes you’re likely to find anywhere. 303.628.5400, theoxfordhotelbend.com

— A.E.





This page, clockwise from top: a man fishes from the shore while another floats in a drift boat on the Deschutes River; a selection of fishing rods at the Orvis store in Bend; a fisherman uses a spey rod in hopes of catching steelhead. Facing page: Bend's luxurious Oxford Hotel.



Fish of a Thousand Casts

We fish through lunch, periodically moving downstream and regularly catching reddsides. Nurre picks up a spey rod, a hefty, two-handed fly rod used for larger fish, and tells me it's time to go after some steelhead. He demonstrates how to cast the rod. It's the heaviest rod I've ever handled, yet strangely easy to wield. The elaborate motions required for properly casting the spey rod feel a lot like tai chi. I continue to practice with the spey rod, hugging the bank in a swiftly moving stretch of river as the sun

drops below the canyon's basalt cliffs. We call it a day before anything bites.

Later, on the ride to the Imperial River Lodge in Maupin, a motel that caters mostly to anglers, Nurre talks to me about steelhead, a fish he loves dearly. "Genetically, steelhead and rainbows are identical," he points out. "The only difference is that steelhead have been to sea and returned to spawn. They're hard to catch," Nurre warns. "But once you get one, you're into them for life."

When we leave the following morning for the Deschutes, it's still dark out. Nurre navigates through a small set of rapids mostly by memory, feel, and sound. The morning is cold, and as I pull my coat tighter, I finally notice the air. It's thick with the scent of desert earth and sagebrush, so much so that I think I'm smelling a campfire. I take a deep breath.

"The sage?" Nurre asks. I nod, forgetting for a moment that he can't see me in the dark.

"Yes," I say.

The first light of morning splashes onto the west cliff of the Deschutes and slowly descends. We pull ashore on a bend in the river. Handing me the spey rod, Nurre sends me fishing. Scrambling over rocks to a spot to fish, I slip and fall in. I'm soaked. "That's a Deschutes baptism," Nurre laughs. I cast, hoping for a strike. After a few casts I feel a strong tug on the line, and the tip of the rod dips deeply. The silhouette of

a great head rises, followed by the swish of an enormous tail as the fish lets the hook go and disappears into a shadow in the river. It's a steelhead.

It's as close as I will get to catching one on this trip, but I'm hooked. The ponds of my home town may be too quiet for me now. With the adrenaline from the steelhead's initial jerk on the line running through me, I'm a convert. These fish — reddsides and steelhead alike — haven't seen the last of me. 🐟

Andrew Eitelbach, assistant editor of Continental magazine, is an avid fisherman previously loyal to the kettle ponds of his native Cape Cod.

Getting There: Continental offers nonstop service to Portland, Ore., from its hubs in Houston and New York/Newark.