

On the Road, Alone.

A [Trout Underground](#) Essay ©2005 by Tom Chandler



The solo road trip may or may not be the adventure of a lifetime. But it probably will be one of the few times in your life when you get to do exactly what you want...

Most of the fly fishermen I talk to say that given the chance to fish anywhere, they'd fly someplace exotic like Labrador or New Zealand for a week, but offer them five days alone within driving distance of their home and they all get a sly look in their eyes -- probably because they know they've actually got a chance of pulling the trip off.

After all, a trip to Labrador for giant Brookies involves a lot of money, at least a couple plane flights, time spent sitting in airline terminals (places that are designed to make you want to get on a plane), airline food, schedules, deadlines, missed flights, and lost luggage. Admittedly, at the far end of that trip swim a lot of big, uneducated Brook trout, but even those who do this sort of thing a lot will admit there are a few cow pies scattered along the way.

On the other hand, the road trip -- in its simplest, purest form -- demands little more of you than the ability to fill your truck with gas.

Of course, this is not to say the solo road trip is without its own land mines. In fact, a thousand miles of freeways, dirt roads, and four-wheel drive tracks will have you hearing transmission noises you've never heard before -- and almost always when you're a long ways from any hope of repair -- and the next thing you know you're squeezing your steering wheel in that utterly useless, almost universal gesture of anxiety.

The real beauty of a solo road trip is that it reminds you just how off-center your life has become through daily exposure to rude drivers, lazy co-workers, moronic bosses, taxes -- the byproducts of what we amusingly call civilization. Given enough time to do the job right, a good trout stream will talk to you -- get you to slow down and appreciate things a bit more. If you don't listen, it simply lowers the boom.

On a road trip I took before moving to the Upper Sac, I ended the drive, threw on my waders, stepped out onto the river, and on the second cast caught a 12-inch rainbow. I should have recognized the setup, but because I was fresh from the hard-driving, kill-or-be-killed Silicon Valley, I actually believed I deserved to catch beautiful wild rainbow trout at will.

Naturally, the Sac made me pay for my conceit -- I released the fish, turned to take five brisk strides downstream like I was moving between cubicles at the office, and took a cooling little swim.

I don't know about you, but 50 degree water has a chilling affect on the ego and a relaxing affect on the mind. In fact, I relaxed so much I almost enjoyed the half hour it took to dry my fly boxes and clothing on a set of sun-warmed rocks.

Of course, the river didn't win immediately -- it takes more than a few hours to rid yourself of all the rubbish we accumulate in our everyday lives -- but given the kind of time (and freedom) you've usually got on a solo road trip the result is inevitable.

In that sense, the river takes, and the river gives. I wish we didn't ask so much of it on a regular basis -- namely absorb every kind of crap we can throw at it, including railroad tankers full of metam sodium -- but like an all-knowing parent, it tolerates our bad manners and occasional temper tantrum and still loves us. At least that's the kind of stuff you start thinking towards the end of a good road trip. It made perfect sense then and it sounds only a little corny now, so I'm sticking with it.

And, every once in a while, you stumble across something that reminds you that sometimes -- when left to your own devices -- you can get things exactly right.

For example, on one trip I was having a heck of a time -- I was catching wild rainbow trout on a beautiful freestone river on smallish flies I'd tied myself. And since I was fishing during the week, I had the place to myself.

Still, I had gotten the itch to catch a Brookie, so on the advice of a local fly shop owner, I took a day off to fish a small mountain lake known for holding smallish fish and not a lot of them. It might not have been the best idea, but it was the kind of decision you can make when there's only one person voting and you're not paying hundreds of dollars for the privilege of fishing.

Of course, like all good morality plays, this one ends with one of those life-affirming coincidences that happen a lot more often on television than they do in real life -- on this "mildly-productive" lake I caught between 30-40 fish (in keeping with the non-competitive nature of the solo road trip, I lost count at 5), and brought eight beautiful Brook trout to the net.

And I did so on dry flies -- on a mountain cirque bordered by sheer cliffs on one side and boulders the size of Volkswagens on the other... all on a windy gray day that made the whole experience seem that much more stark and beautiful.

Score one for intuition.

There are other advantages to fishing without a partner; you can wake up in a wild mood, fish a foam beetle right through a midge hatch, and never have to explain to your partner what the hell you thought you were doing. Or you can leave a good, regular hatch for something far more speculative and a little wild -- something that's really not possible when your partner is catching good fish and doesn't believe change is always for the best.

Traveling alone means you can fish as late as you want to, never worrying about how steamed your partner might be after waiting at the truck. One evening found me staying out far after it got dark -- well past the time when the prudent souls were hanging their waders up at the hotel. It was a long walk along the tracks back to the truck, not to mention the fact I had to find my way back across the river in the dark, but you see, there was this pod of fish that kept rising, though in the growing darkness I never really figured out to what.

Eventually, after 45 minutes of mediocre drifts and fly changes, I got one OK fish on a #20 Adams, and though I'm tempted to write a real pulp piece about the trip back to the truck, the truth is the river was in low flow so crossing was easy and the walk was just plain peaceful.

Of course, with any good there comes bad, and in this case the bad is that on a solo road trip you simply won't accumulate any memories involving fishing partners. It might be the road trip's biggest drawback. It's great being in complete command of your life, but some of my best fishing memories involve other people. And let's face it, should you

actually pull the perfect cast out of the hat, obtain that flawless drift, and then pause exactly the right amount of time before setting that size 22 hook on a 20-inch brown, it's not altogether unpleasant to have someone around to witness it. Or at least to brag to.

Cellular phones have helped some in that regard -- if you're interested in telling someone back in civilization about the neon-colored Brookie you just caught and released, you can. However, don't expect the person you called to automatically share your enthusiasm. Remember, they're stuck doing exactly the thing you've escaped, and they haven't had the benefit of a couple hours with a fly rod to decompress, so they're naturally going to be more surly than if they were standing next to you with your fish in their net.

A solo road trip is a rare enough thing that for most of us it's a completely different animal from the usual weekend fish run. For starters, many of us can take only one or two lengthy solo road trips per year -- they're normally the province of the single, the wealthy, or the trout bum.

Of course, they're not unique just because they're hard to come by. It's really that a solo road trip is one of the few times you're left to your own devices for a week at a time with no one looking over your shoulder. Honestly, when is the last time you got up when you wanted, ate what you wanted, and then went to bed when you wanted -- without so much as a staff meeting, deadline, or family obligation waved in your face?

In fact, pick the right accommodations (or simply camp out) and you can't even be reached. In truth, the list of things you won't confront on a solo road trip is a lot longer than the things you will. No screaming fights at the neighbor's house, no telemarketers, no list of things to fix around the house, no traffic jams... it goes on.

What you will get are some of the things in life that we should hold most dear but usually don't: solitude, a chance to unwind, a chance to think pointless thoughts, a chance to appreciate nature in an environment only partly screwed up, and -- most importantly -- a chance to do only those things we want to do, no more, no less. It might sound selfish but if you stop to think about it, it's something that might have happened to you a couple of times in your entire life.

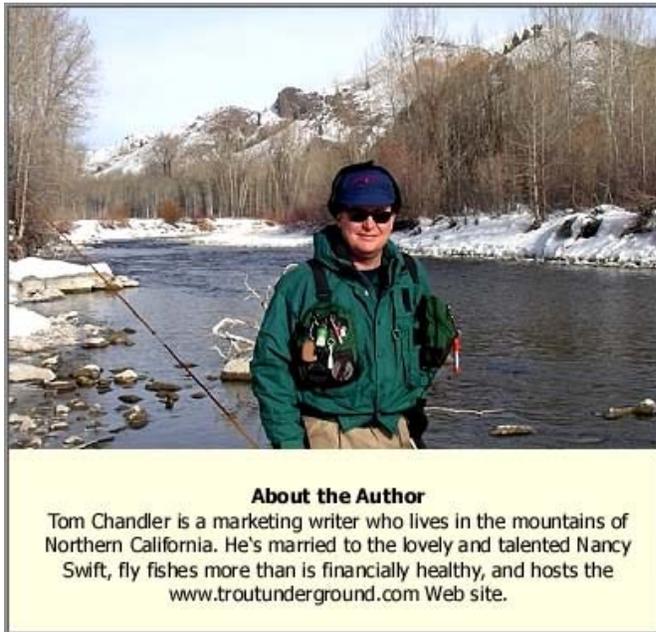
Of course, for some, the solo road trip might be nothing more than a temporary fantasy -- a chance to live the life that many of us secretly want but know we can't have. For a few days at least, you're not an office grunt with a mortgage and a monthly struggle to make ends meet -- you're a trout bum with a small trust fund, a great tan, and a wicked roll cast. Or you're a famous outdoor writer who fishes exotic locations all day, only to stagger back to camp at night to type stories on a manual typewriter by the light of a lantern, writing between slugs from a bottle of bourbon.

In the end, of course, you've gotta go home and face real life, although

no one's ever proven to my satisfaction that life on a trout stream is any less "real" than life in a cubicle (I'll leave that one for those with more philosophy textbooks than I've got).

Maybe the real beauty of the solo road trip is that it's everything I've described. Or more. Or less. Or perhaps -- if you're an existentialist -- it's even nothing. You're by yourself, and have only a final destination (home) and a monthly credit card bill to answer to, so you can make it anything you want it to be. Therein lies the charm.

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