



You're in Botswana in the 1920s; the Galapagos in 1947; you are somewhere before it all started happening,' says Charlie Munn, who runs Latin American adventure travel company SouthWild, along with his Peruvian-German wife Mariana.

We are in fact in the Brazilian Pantanal, the world's largest freshwater wetland, and Charlie is talking about how underdeveloped tourism is, given that we are surrounded by the highest concentration of fauna in the New World.

It is early days both for SouthWild's venture into the Pantanal, and for tourism in general in this area. There are no swanky lodges or busloads of tourists like there are in the Amazon, 155 miles to the north. Yet the Pantanal, sitting on Brazil's border with Bolivia, spans 54,000 square miles of rivers, forests and floodplains. And most importantly, for this trip at least, it is the prowling-ground of an estimated 5,000 jaguars.

JAGUAR-SPOTTING IS EXACTLY WHAT WE ARE HERE FOR, BUT THIS IS NOT JUST ANY jaguar-spotting: SouthWild guarantees all their guests will lay eyes on at least one big cat. 'We're the only company in the world to guarantee jaguar sightings and actually pull it off,' says Charlie.

'All you need are four days and three nights, and if you don't see a jaguar well enough to know you saw one, we'll give you two nights and three days free within 24 months.' Numbers, facts and figures reel off Charlie's tongue like gunfire, and it is enough to frazzle the hardiest of brains. 'I drive my wife crazy,' he says fondly.

We flew from Rio de Janeiro to Cuiabá, a small dusty town on the edge of the Transpantaneira Highway, a 150km dirt road that joins the city to the wetlands. Trundling along in a four-by-four, we stopped at some of the 126 wooden bridges to gawp at the black caimans – a kind of crocodile – lying in the pools below.

At one point, the car pulled to an abrupt halt as a black and yellow anaconda slithered across the road in front of us. Fisher, the guide, jumped out, picked it up and we all had a touch of its slimy scales before continuing on to SouthWild's Santa Teresa Lodge for sunset drinks and dinner.

'I can show you a jaguar much more easily than I can show you a yellow anaconda,' says Charlie, clearly undaunted by the fact that he is guaranteeing sightings of the world's third-largest cat (after the tiger and the lion), a predator at the top of the food chain with a bite so hard it crushes the back of its prey's skull.

Charlie admits that the prospect of seeing jaguars in broad daylight on the banks of a river seems unlikely to say the least. 'I was told there was a jaguar that sat under a bridge and ate fish that were tossed to it; I said that's balderdash!

'But you will see more wildlife on the Transpantaneira alone than you would in a whole week in the Amazon,' he continues, going on to explain that while the Amazon's dense foliage provides cover, the Pantanal's open spaces make wildlife much more visible.



THE JAGUAR – THE THIRD BIGGEST OF THE WILD GREAT CATS – IS A MOST ELUSIVE SPECIES, AND CAN BE FOUND ONLY IN THE REMOTEST PARTS OF ONE CONTINENT. BUT A FRIENDLY, INNOVATIVE ECOTOURISM COMPANY CAN ASSURE YOU OF AT LEAST ONE SIGHTING ON YOUR TRIP

THE VELVET HOUR

Words Gabriel O'Rorke
Photograph Kevin Bartlett



IMAGE: KEVIN BARRETT



HOWLER AND CAPUCHIN MONKEYS SIT HIGH IN THE TREES, AS DO FLOCKS OF BRIGHT BLUE HYACINTH MACAWS. MARSH DEER MEANDER ON THE OPEN PLAINS AND CAIMAN, GIANT OTTERS AND CAPYBARA DOMINATE THE RIVERBANKS



IMAGE: MARIO FREDEANORO

On day two, we have an early breakfast and set off for the fishing village of Jofre. Here, small boats wait to transfer us to our new lodgings, a 'flotel' (or floating hotel) on the banks of the Cuiabá River. Eventually, guests will sleep in an eco-camp within the jaguar habitation where SouthWild owns some land, but bureaucratic teething problems are delaying the building work.

Undeterred by Pantaneiran politics, SouthWild has hired a blue and white flotel with simple cabins, a large deck with a bar and a chef who keeps guests well fed with local dishes, including fish from the waters below (a white, meaty fish – pacu – is particularly good).

LIFE ON A FLOATING HOTEL HAS A CERTAIN FICTIONAL QUALITY TO IT. IT WOULD make a great setting for a novel – Poirot on the Pantanal, perhaps – and this is only intensified by our fellow guests. Professor Potts and his khaki-clad cronies have colonised, and big zooms, high-tech binoculars and sensible sunhats abound.

There are also two American students on board who are studying the 'jag-whars' over their 'summer break'. Most probably underage geniuses, they are geeky but fun, and one of them has managed to learn Portuguese in a week with the help of a liberal supply of caipirinhas (Brazil's national cocktail).

After lunch, we split into groups and the water safaris begin. Floating along is immensely relaxing, and the surroundings are so idyllic it is like being submerged in an advertisement for heaven. Howler and capuchin monkeys sit high in the trees, as do flocks of bright blue hyacinth macaws. Marsh deer meander on the open plains and caiman, giant otters and capybara (the world's largest rodent) dominate the riverbanks.

There are around 400 species of birds in the Pantanal, and within minutes we see jabiru storks, herons, red-crested finches, hummingbirds and kingfishers, as well as eagles, vultures and black-collared hawks. This is the Americas' biggest concentration of birdlife, and one of the world's most diverse avian communities.

Floating through the waterways, it is easy to forget we are here to see jaguars. That is, until Charlie starts reminiscing about previous sightings. 'Five times people have seen a jaguar eating a capybara, but more often they see them eating caiman,' he says. 'Six jaguars have been spotted up trees, but you can count the number of sightings with cubs on one partially amputated hand: four.'

We stare intently at the undergrowth. 'Jaguars like to sit in windows because they get a good view. You mainly see them when you're looking sideways,' says Charlie – but no spotted creatures emerge, and as the sun starts to set we head towards home.

ON DAY THREE, WE ARE OUT ON THE WATER AT 7AM AND OUR EFFORTS ARE rewarded as we come round a large bend to find a jaguar sitting on the bank. At first, it's hard for the untrained eye to spot this magnificent creature. When out of its natural habitat, a jaguar's brightly coloured patterned coat jumps out, but here among the shadows cast by the trees and the undergrowth, it takes a few moments to piece together this superior creature with his wide head and long, velvet body.

Sure enough, the jaguar is sitting in a 'window', looking out, enjoying the view. As we pull to a halt on the opposite bank of the river, he remains undisturbed, and has what I can only describe as a mixture of disdain and disinterest for its human admirers.

Several years ago I was lucky enough to see a jaguar in the Peruvian Amazon. It was an impressive, if somewhat short-lived, experience: the large cat appeared on the bank of a salt lick and held our gaze for a few moments before slinking off into the cover.

Part of the phenomenon in the Pantanal, on the other hand, is



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that SouthWild's guests can watch jaguars for as long as an hour, observing at a comfortable distance for both admirer and admired.

It is sport fishermen who are to thank for the unbelievably acclimatised state of these jaguars. For years they have steamed up and down the waterways, making noise aplenty and throwing the odd fish to the cats. The result is that they have become accustomed and desensitised to the human presence.

This means that SouthWild can take guests jag-spotting in the most organic way. The only equipment they use are radios and small motor-powered boats. There are no infrared trackers, no lamps and certainly no GPS collaring. Charlie believes that collaring is not only detrimental to the health of jaguars but it makes them more timid, thus reducing sightings.

'THE JAGUAR IS THE BIGGEST LEVER FOR CONSERVATION,' SAYS CHARLIE. ONE OF his aims is 'to show the local cattle ranchers, farmers and loggers who continue to kill jaguars and destroy their habitat that they are worth more alive than dead'. With such potential for growth in ecotourism in this area, the jaguars could, and should, prove lucrative for local people.

Charlie calls the moment you lay eyes on one a 'jaguar high', and sure enough, day three brought our second high. We spent almost an hour in the shade of a tree on the riverbank watching one jaguar. First he sat in a clearing cleaning himself, before getting up, stretching a little and stalking along the top of the riverbank, stopping to eat grass (a sight previously unseen by SouthWild guests), and finally swimming downstream and pouncing – unsuccessfully – on a caiman. Our final morning brought one last sighting. A large male lay in the shade, resting his belly and flicking away flies with his tail.

Jaguars are solitary creatures found only in Latin America. They have earned their reputation for being among the world's most elusive animals, but SouthWild has found the perfect circumstances that mean they can guarantee sightings of these endangered creatures in broad daylight in their natural environment. There is no malaria or yellow fever in the Pantanal, so all you need is a good pair of binoculars (7 by 42 are best), which leaves me with nothing to say but book a trip to the Pantanal as soon as possible. ■



IMAGE: MARIO FREDEANORO

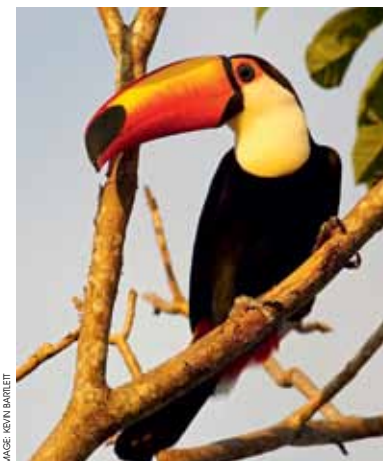


IMAGE: KEVIN BARRETT

For more information on SouthWild visit southwild.com, email sandra@southwild.com or call +55 65 3682 3175

British Airways (britishairways.com / 0844 493 0787) operates a London Heathrow to Rio de Janeiro service three times weekly. Prices start from £727.93 return including taxes, fees and charges. Once on the ground, internal flights from Rio de Janeiro to Cuiabá can be booked with TAM Brazilian Airlines (tam.com.br)