

Travel



Jaguar showroom

Spotting jaguars in the wild isn't easy, but one Brazilian safari company is so sure of success that its trips come with a guarantee. Gabriel O'Rorke puts it to the test

Jaguars are elusive. The third-largest cat, after the lion and tiger, they were once found across South America and in much of the southern US, but habitat loss and hunting have seen the global population dwindle to an estimated 15,000, concentrated near the Amazon basin.

They do not break cover and chase down prey like packs of lion. Instead jaguars silently stalk and ambush, pouncing out of the jungle from their prey's blind spot, then dragging the catch to somewhere secluded. All of which makes them hard to spot, and makes it all the more surprising to find a company offering wildlife safaris with "guaranteed" jaguar sightings.

"Only 2 per cent missed last year and I'm going for 100 per cent success this year," says Charles Munn, chief executive of SouthWild. If guests fail to see a jaguar, the company will offer another trip free. Whether after one failed mission you would actually want to travel all the way back to central Brazil for another go is a moot point, but it does show his confidence.

Munn's trips are based in Brazil's Pantanal, the world's largest freshwater wetland. His methods of jaguar-spotting don't include the use of any equipment apart from radios and small motor-powered boats. There are no infrared trackers, no lamps to stun the animals, as happens on some night safaris in Africa. As for GPS collaring, Munn not only shuns it but is vociferously against it: he believes the procedure harms jaguars and makes them more timid, thus reducing sightings.

Instead, guests and guides simply keep an eye out for cats as they glide along the waterways by boat. "The river bank is like a jaguar gallery," says Munn, though he admits that it sounds far-fetched. "In March 2005 when I was first told about jaguars in the Pantanal, I thought it was baloney."

We fly from Rio to Cuiabá, capital of the state of Mato Grosso, then drive 40 miles along the Transpantaneira highway to SouthWild's Santa Teresa Lodge. In the morning, we continue by 4x4 to Jofre, a

small fishing village on the Cuiabá River. The Transpantaneira cuts a straight line through the Pantanal's floodplains, with 126 wooden bridges straddling pools of water full of caimans and capybaras (the world's biggest rodent, it looks like a guinea pig but is the size of a sheep).

The highway makes for outstanding wildlife spotting: the open spaces around it make animals far more visible than in the Amazon, where dense foliage provides cover. Suddenly we pull to a halt and Fisher, one of the guides, jumps out and picks up a three-metre anaconda as though it were a stick on the road. Soon after, we find ourselves enveloped in a sea of cattle. We stop and ask the cowboys how many there are: "A thousand" comes the answer.

We reach Jofre (which seems to be inhabited by more toucans than people) in the late morning and transfer into boats to travel upstream to the floating hotel that is to be our home for the next three nights. It may not be the height of luxury (the equivalent of Africa's high-end safari lodges simply doesn't exist in the Pantanal yet), but the cabins are comfortable enough and there's a large deck with a bar and hammocks, as well as a very good chef.

Pictures of jaguar sightings from that morning are handed around over lunch. We finish our *pacu* (one of the Pantanal's tastiest fish) and head off, champing at the bit to get out and see our first cat.

Turning off the Cuiabá and travelling up smaller tributaries, we start to get a sense of the area's beauty and diversity: savannahs, scrublands, forests, endless ponds, lakes, rivers and islands make up what has been dubbed "South America's Wild West".

From January to March, much of the Pantanal's 54,000 square miles are flooded, so there are few people and no towns. From April onwards, the waters recede, leaving an enormously rich feeding ground for wildlife. Many animals come to drink from the ponds and eat the trapped fish.

With birds, monkeys, marsh deer and caimans, there is a lot to look at on these safaris besides cats. Flying fish jump to a soundtrack of birdsong, the rivers overflow with water hyacinths and flocks of white birds swoop around the boats like confetti.

"There are 400 species of birds here," says Munn, pointing out jabiru storks, herons, red-crested finches, hummingbirds, kingfishers as well as eagles, vultures and black-collared hawks. We also see howler and capuchin monkeys, giant otters and hyacinth macaws. These bright blue birds, the world's largest parrot, are on the endangered list but are a daily sight in the Pantanal, squawking overhead like gossip-



Splendid From main: a jaguar on the prowl in the Amazon; the Pantanal wetlands in Brazil
Oxford Scientific, Robert Harding

ing old women. But as the sun sets, and we return for supper, we have yet to get even a glimpse of the star attraction. Munn tells me my growing sense of anxiety is a common symptom of "jaguar fever".

As day two dawns, the long-awaited cry finally comes: "onça, onça!" A *panthera onca*, to use its scientific name, has been spotted. Peering into the knotted undergrowth on the high riverbank I make out a huge patterned head attached to a long velvet body.

Elation spreads through the boat, eyes light up, lenses focus and cameras click. Some say humans have a sense of mutual appreciation when seeing a jaguar, a feeling rooted in the fact that we're both at the top of the food chain. That is, until the "oohs and ahhs" are disturbed by a fishing boat that revs up to the scene. As the fishermen whoop and point, the glorious creature seeks cover in the undergrowth and disappears from sight.

The fishing boat zooms off, leaving us in glum silence. The comedown after the jaguar high sets in, but then, as if saying goodbye, deep barks come from the bushes as the jaguar slinks away. Reading our resentment, Munn shrugs and explains that the fishermen are to thank for the fact that the area is so good for jaguar-spotting. "Sport-fishing boats have gone up and down these waters for years, so the jaguars have grown accustomed to humans."

Day three brings a second sighting. Almost an hour of watching one splendid jaguar; at first he sits in a large clearing cleaning himself, before getting up and stalking along the top of the riverbank, stopping to eat grass, and finally swimming downstream and pouncing (unsuccessfully) on a caiman.

Our last morning brings a final sighting. It's the same jaguar as the day before and, by the size of his belly, he got his claws into a caiman after all. He lies in the shade flicking away flies with his tail, and I sit back and soak up the view of this superior animal. Finally we pull away, our guarantee well and truly fulfilled.

Details

Gabriel O'Rorke's trip was arranged by Abercrombie & Kent (www.abercrombiekent.co.uk) which offers a week's itinerary at Southwild Pantanal Lodge and Southwild Jaguar Camp (www.southwild.com) from £2,595 per person, including domestic flights from Rio with TAM Brazilian Airlines, guided excursions, transfers and meals.

Short cuts

Verbier Resorts across the Swiss Alps are bracing themselves for a difficult winter as the strong franc makes them more expensive than eurozone rivals. But tourism officials in Verbier have come up with an innovative solution. It will offer visitors an exchange rate up to 20 per cent better than the official rate of the day on accommodation and lift passes sold via the tourist board's new central reservations website, due to go live on November 1. Meanwhile tour operator Elemental Adventure has launched a similar offer on Canadian heli-ski holidays, aimed at British skiers put off by the poor exchange rate. On trips booked by October 15 to Bell 2 Lodge and Ripley Creek, British Columbia, it is offering to apply the December 2008 exchange rate. www.verbier-st-bernard.ch; www.eaheli.com

Birmingham Recent years have seen growing numbers of adventurers attempt to cycle round the world but now a British company is to offer the experience as a fully organised and supported holiday. The trip departs from London in September 2012 and arrives back nine months later, during which the 30 participants will have cycled more than 18,000 miles through 20 countries. The cyclists will be followed by a truck carrying tents, food, communications and bike repair equipment. A 24-hour headquarters in the UK will manage logistics, flight bookings and visas. As well as the core group of riders, others will be able to join up for sections of between nine and 60 days. The full trip costs £34,000, though a £4,500 discount is being offered to anyone who signs up at this weekend's Cycle Show at the NEC Birmingham, where the organisers are holding a series of talks. www.worldcyclechallenge.com; www.cycleshow.co.uk



High-flying The Four Seasons in Mumbai

Los Angeles If cycling round the world sounds too strenuous, the Four Seasons hotel group has announced an altogether more luxurious alternative. The 78 guests on its 22-day circumnavigation will travel by private jet, a specially configured Boeing 757. Departing from Los Angeles on October 29 2012, they will stay at Four Seasons properties in Hawaii, French Polynesia, Australia, Thailand, Bali, India, Egypt and the UK. Experts including Charles Doherty, author of *The Encyclopedia of Far Eastern Art*, and food historian Rachel Laudan will give in-flight talks to prepare guests for the next destination. The trip costs \$66,950 per person. www.luxuryworldjettravel.com

Chamonix Workers for the Chamonix cable car company have successfully slowed the melting of a glacier by covering it with a 750-metre square tarpaulin over the summer. The cover was placed on the Argentière glacier at the top of the Grands Montets ski area to prevent the ski run from becoming increasingly steep and crevassed. The technique has already been successfully employed in the Swiss resort of Andermatt and could become more common across the Alps. Chamonix has already confirmed that it will use the same method next year. www.chamonix.com

London Clever brand synergy, or a case of ill-advised corporate meddling? 51 Buckingham Gate, a boutique hotel owned by the Indian Tata group, has opened a suite themed on another of its companies, car manufacturer Jaguar. The two-bedroom suite has been "overseen" by Jaguar design director Ian Callum (responsible for cars including the XK, XF and XJ) and includes a futuristic fireplace that echoes the shape of the cars' rear windows, historic Jaguar photographs, and furnishings made from the same leather used for the cars. The rate of £5,100 per night includes breakfast, drinks, a butler and a chauffeured car (a Jaguar). www.51-buckinghamgate.com

Tom Robbins



Postcard from . . . Southwold

A wee dram of fine English whisky?

What picture does the affluent Suffolk coastal town of Southwold bring to mind?

For some visitors it might be the tastefully renovated pier with its self-consciously eccentric coin-operated amusements (have your picture taken at the Expressive Photobooth – "guaranteed to capture your natural beauty and develop your true personality"). For others it may be the famous multicoloured beach huts that line the seaford, eclectically decorated but with uniformly silly price tags (the last original hut went on the market for a guide price of £60,000 this summer).

What it does not bring to mind – at least not yet – is whisky-making. Yet Jonathan Adnams, chairman of the eponymous family brewery that has been based in the town since 1872, believes there is no reason why it shouldn't. From 2013, Adnams, renowned for making "beer from the coast" complete with robust naval monikers such as Explorer and Broadside, will sell whisky that comes not from the highlands of Scotland but

from the rather flatter environs of East Anglia.

In fact, beer is more integral to the whisky-making process than many realise, says Adnams. "People say, 'You can make spirits from beer?' And we say, 'Where do you think it comes from?'" he explains as if in disbelief, while I shake my head conspiratorially and furiously make a lot of notes.

To vastly oversimplify the process, the company's recently completed Copperhouse microdistillery brews what it calls a "distillery wash" – a beer made without hops, which contains a basic blend of flavours that form the basis of what will, during the distillation process, be turned into spirit.

Adnams is, however, not rash enough to think he can go head to head with the taste or mass appeal of those he refers to as "the Scotch whisky boys".

"You've got to bring your own style to it," he says, explaining that Adnams will mature its whisky in new barrels made from Russian oak. This is vastly more



expensive, he points out, "but our point of difference is that by mixing this oak with different grains it brings different flavours".

By 11 o'clock on a summer Sunday morning I have tasted several of these flavours, including a promising 100 per cent malted barley wash and a smoother, "tri-grain" wash (wheat, barley and oats) – straight from the barrel at a fairly

enlivening cask strength of 65 per cent alcohol by volume.

In the barrel since last November, they will not be ready to drink for a while yet – the laws on whisky-making dictate that it must be in the cask for three years and one day in order to be classified as such.

I also sample some excellent velvety oak-aged vodka which, along with gin, has marked the company's recent first foray into the world of alcoholic spirits.

I am on a private tour of the microdistillery with 54-year-old Adnams who has worked for the company, chiefly as a brewing engineer, since he was 18.

Such walk-rounds, he says, offer an insight into the "grain to glass" process, but are equally revealing as an illustration of the way the company helps drive local tourism. Certainly, wherever you are in Southwold, it's pretty difficult to avoid the brewer's influence.

At either end of the bookshop and boutique-lined main street are Adnams pubs, and in

the middle, just a few doors apart, are its two hotels, the majestic 350-year-old Swan and the smaller, more contemporary, Crown.

It also lends its name to many of the events that take place in and around the town, including a five-day literary festival, held in November (speakers this year include Melvyn Bragg, Tony Benn and Joanna Trollope), the Aldeburgh Food and Drink Festival and a bunch of select "wine lunches" and grand dinners, each effortlessly reinforcing the town's reputation for being the height of good

taste – as well, of course, as the home of Adnams.

Tours of the brewery and distillery are further encouragements to buy into a clearly defined sense of place. "Some of it is to allow people to see the whole process, to educate people a little. And some of it is to say, 'This is made by real people; come and see it, touch it, feel it – and talk to the people who made it'. So they can learn something of interest and, not to be too coy about it, hopefully buy the product."

He believes it won't be an impossible mission to convince

Measures

From far left: Southwold lighthouse; inside the Copperhouse Microdistillery
Holmes Garden Photos



fans of Adnams beers to buy whisky that is English rather than from Scotland. He points to other examples of English whisky producers such as the English Whisky Company, based up the road in the Breckland area of Norfolk, which encouraged him that he wasn't totally going out on a limb with the idea.

Even so, he concedes, you don't always know when the moment to launch something is right, particularly something like whisky, which requires a longer-term commitment.

"You just have to hold your nerve," he smiles.

Tours at the Adnams distillery (www.adnams.co.uk) cost £10 per person (over 18s only), take around an hour and are followed by a tutored tasting in the Adnams Cellar & Kitchen store. The Swan Hotel (same website) has double rooms from £163. The Southwold literary festival (www.waystowords.co.uk) runs from November 10 to 14.

Neil O'Sullivan