

Postcard

Francois Botha



Amazing Amazon...

The Agua Boa snakes through the Amazon jungle and its hidden lagoons.



I punched out a low cast so that the fly brushed the water before the leader straightened out deep under the overhanging trees. It only took two strips before I saw three fish turn around the fly and felt the line go tight. I casually applied pressure until our guide Pedro tensed up and exclaimed "Big peacock, big peacock!" At that instant the fish erupted and made for the structure with such force that all I could utter was "Help me!"

I don't know if I was calling on my friend Paul to jump into the water and grab the fish or whether I wanted Pedro to jam his pole in front of it, but I felt completely helpless as the fish headed deeper and deeper into the structure with every stroke of its powerful tail. Pedro pushed the boat into the current and I clamped down on the line so hard that I felt like either my 50 lb leader

or the fish was going to break, and the former felt imminent. I finally managed to winch the fish from the structure and now I was fighting it in the channel. It boiled on the surface and Pedro exclaimed "Grande! Grande! Twenty pounds!"

The heat was on and landing this fish would certainly be the crowning achievement of my trip. I battled the fish to the boat but it was so big that we couldn't get the BogaGrip around its bottom lip! Every time the huge peacock bass saw the stainless steel implement reaching for its face it bolted for the depths beneath the boat. I heaved the rod up extra hard, there was a loud bang—the undeniable sound of a rod snapping—and fragments of graphite rained down on the deck. I threw down the remnants of the 9-weight rod and lunged at the leader. I was face to face with the fish before it made a final turn for the bottom and snapped the leader in my hands.

There was a moment of silence on the boat.

"It's ok guys," I said, "we'll get another one."

It has become a reality that if you want the best exotic fishing you have to travel far off the beaten track, and with all the logistics involved in getting there and having more than a can of bully beef on stale bread with a warm beer, you are going to have to fork out some cash and go fishing for more than a weekend. By noting all of this, we can almost create criteria for what our most desired fishing destination should hold. It must be remote, the climate must be bearable, there must be a wide variety of big aggressive fish, and little human impact. In fact, there should be no other people at all! Now the question remains, is there such a place?

Agua Boa Lodge, formerly the Royal Amazon Lodge, was established more than 12 years ago. It is situated on the

Agua Boa River, a tributary of the Rio Bronco, which in turn is a tributary of the Rio Negro. The Brazilian Government has since proclaimed the Agua Boa River and the surrounding area a federal nature reserve, with fishing and hunting banned and all public access denied. However, because Agua Boa Lodge was already in operation it was granted a special permit to continue under strictly controlled conditions. All fishing has to be catch-and-release, only fly fishing is permitted, and only barbless, single-hooked flies are allowed. It is therefore the only exclusive-access 'fly fishery' in the Amazon basin, with more than 250 km of private river access.

There is virtually no human impact, and the high acidity of the river is perfectly suited for peacock bass. There are very few biting insects that make life so unpleasant on nearby river systems. The recent addition of a houseboat 2½ hours upstream from the Lodge has added a whole new dimension to the fishing operation, particularly for those who demand good fishing and less luxury at a better price. The houseboat accommodates six anglers in single, air-conditioned en-suite cabins. There are three fishing tender boats with one dedicated guide to two anglers at all times.

The guides are true 'people of the river'. They have an unparalleled knowledge of their environment and are even able to interact with the various species of birds and black caiman (Amazonian crocodile) by mimicking their sounds.

The main targets on the Agua Boa are butterfly, barred and spotted peacock bass. The thousands of butterfly peacocks from 3 to 6 lb are mainly found in the many lagoons along the river, and they are so plentiful that sometimes you end up pulling your flies away from the small ones.

Then there is the barred peacock bass *Tucunare acu*. These range between 8 and 15 lb and specimens of 20 lb are not uncommon. The guides often refer to them as *Grande* although the word is used to describe anything big in the Amazon. These fish are immensely powerful for their size—not long screaming runs but rather dogged, close-combat battles as you try to keep them away from structure.

Finally there is the spotted peacock *Tucunare paca*. These fish are the most prized of all, not because of their size, which can easily achieve 12 lb or more, but because they fight almost twice as hard as the barred peacocks! They are commonly found in the main river system or around the mouths of the lagoons. When they are small you can easily identify them by their olive green backs and spotted bodies. However, when they reach 10 lb and more they bear a striking resemblance to the barred peacocks, with faint bars on their bodies and less defined spots.

Several other species of fish, such as the acrobatic arowana, also readily take flies. On one occasion my fly was stuck in a tree a few feet above the water. In



The peacocks deliver explosive strikes.

trying to yank it from the branches, I created enough interest amongst the schooling arowana below that one leapt clear of the water and snatched my fly from the tree! We also caught piranhas, oscar, bicudas, characin pike, dogfish, shovel-nosed catfish, red-tailed catfish and others, totalling 15 species of fish on fly. We also caught sight of a giant pirarucu as it surfaced right next to our boat. These magnificent fish can grow to nine feet in length and smaller ones have successfully been caught on fly.

The generally accepted method to catch peacock bass on the Agua Boa is with a floating line and flies weighted according to the depth you are fishing. Because of abnormally high water levels, we resorted to using intermediate and fast-sinking lines. In hindsight it didn't



Sight-fishing for barred peacocks in the lagoons produces some remarkable catches.



This jacuda is one of 18 or more species that will readily take a fly.

tures and I believe that the food in the system is so abundant that they won't risk a fight for a meal. But it is a large crocodile that can reach more than 18 feet in length and it's better to stay at a safe distance.

The bird life is astonishing and I regretted that I didn't have a comprehensive bird list for the area. There are wild macaws and all sorts of birds of prey that frequent the skies, and in the late afternoons the socialite vultures frequent their favourite sandbanks. The kingfishers in the Amazon are similar to ones in Africa, and the biggest looks almost identical to a giant kingfisher with a solid white ring around its neck. All in all we counted more than 40 species of birds that we had never seen or heard before. The plant and insect life was just as breathtaking. Luminous blue butterflies floated about, and



Patrick Sacco with a butterfly peacock bass.

bright pink orchids were visible in the treetops; we found a baby anaconda on the riverbank and we saw the giant river otter.

On the last day I heard something big surface behind me. I looked around and could see a large boil and a narrow spray of mist hanging over it. Then I saw the undeniable visage of the pink river dolphin. I was mesmerised by that creature as it swam around in strangely organised patterns before it surfaced with a big fish in its mouth and then disappeared from the lagoon without a trace.

At the end of our trip we relaxed for a last night at the Lodge before our departure next day. Everyone was overwhelmed by the pristine environment and the top-class management and service we received. We couldn't help making comparisons with other fishing destinations and experiences, but this was one trip that could never be measured adequately by the size and number of fish caught. **FI**

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really seem to matter as we caught fish whichever way we tried. We even caught fish on top-water flies and fast sinking lines, 'Booby style'. This actually achieved some interesting results.

Each lagoon has a different characteristic and as you travel north and deeper into the jungle, the variety of species increases. Some lagoons are so remote that you have to access them on foot

where another boat is normally waiting for you. One of the lagoons we visited had no such provision and we had to chop makeshift rollers to transport the boat. Marcello constructed an ingenious lever system by which we had to pull the boat through the jungle and eventually up a steep hill before we got to a magical lagoon that I will never forget.

As mentioned, most of the fish are found in the lagoons but after a few days of catching countless fish we started looking for sight-fishing opportunities. In the mornings there were a remarkable number of fish on the 'flats' as we called them. These are basically the sandbars on the inside of nearly every bend in the river. They made for awesome walk-and-stalk opportunities and a lot of value was attributed to catching a 10 lb or heavier spotted peacock in this way.

Large catfish also frequent these sandbars and they are easy to spot. On the last day, Patrick managed to catch a large red-tailed catfish after only a few drifts with the fly swinging right past its nose. These fish are fascinating: their heads are covered in armour plating with dimples like a golf ball. When you lift them they grunt a few times and then force air over these plates to make squealing sounds. One night we caught quite a big one and its squeals and grunts were answered by a large caiman, which started to close in on the sounds. These caiman pose little threat apart from snatching the occasional catch, although they look intimidating. They are intelligent crea-



Sometimes it's good to just relax and take it all in.

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