

Jaguars in Brazil: The cream of cats

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A new tourism venture in Brazil, offering 'guaranteed sightings' of the endangered jaguar, hopes to persuade the local people of the Pantanal that this luxuriantly liveried big cat is worth more alive than dead. Nigel Richardson sets out on its trail.

The walkie-talkie crackles. The boatman kills the engine and our own wash rocks the speedboat gently as Charles Munn listens in. "They have two jaguars at the mouth of the Three Brothers," he announces. "A male and a female. Hold on to your hats."

We turn around and zip back the way we have come. To left and right the boilerplate backs of caiman slip into the water as we pass. Beneath my binoculars my heart is racing in my chest - the jaguar is one of the world's most elusive animals and I may be on the verge of my first sighting.



"The male is the one the brain surgeon threw the piranha to," shouts Charlie, referring to a jaguar yarn he had spun the previous evening over high-octane rum cocktails called caipirinhas.

Bouncing across the corrugated waters of the Three Brothers river, we are in the heart of one of the wildest landscapes on the planet.

Hard against the border with Bolivia, in the bull's-eye of South America, is the region of Brazil known as the Pantanal -58,000 square miles of rivers and streams, seasonally flooded grasslands, riverine forests and bumpy airstrips, the runways marked out with old tyre halves painted white.

The Pantanal is home to between 4,000 and 7,000 jaguar. The presence of these amber-eyed, luxuriantly liveried creatures lends romance to a primordial landscape already brimming with biodiversity.

The pull of the jaguar is a powerful thing. In the northern Pantanal it has proved irresistible both to masters of the universe - a ranch was bought recently by the American owner of a Bolivian silver mine - and saviours of the planet. Charlie, despite being the scion of one of America's elite families, is firmly in the latter camp.

His grandfather was known as Mr Palm Beach but Charlie - who is a world famous bird biologist and conservationist, and has spent 25 years in the Peruvian and Brazilian jungles studying those big-beaked canopy clowns and generally trying to stop bad people burning, killing and corrupting planet Earth - is happy to be called the Real Macaw.

A persuasive and charismatic 52-year-old who loves to talk in movie analogies, he believes that "saving the world isn't heavy weather. It should be fun. That's the premise." Now he has turned his attention to "jag-wahs" because they make the perfect flagship species around which to rally conservation support.

Panthera onca, to use the scientific name of the world's third biggest cat, is listed in Appendix 1 of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), which means it is among the most threatened creatures on the planet (there are thought to be only 50,000 mature breeding cats left).

Through tourism he plans to demonstrate to the continent's cattle ranchers, farmers and loggers who continue to kill jaguars and destroy their habitat that they are worth more alive than dead.

This summer, he and his German-Peruvian wife, Mariana Valqui, set up the Jaguar Research Centre near the meeting point of the Cuiabá and Three Brothers rivers (visitors divide their stay between a tented camp in a forest clearing and an air-conditioned houseboat, the Pira Miuna).

He admits that "jaguar tourism" is untested but, like the Kevin Costner character in the baseball allegory, *Field of Dreams*, he is convinced that "if you build it they will come".

Describing his new set-up as "the world's first and only guaranteed destination" for jaguars, he claims that from July to mid-October you stand a 97 per cent probability, over three days, of viewing the largest cat in the Americas. And end-of-season figures look promising - 125 sightings in the course of 81 days of searching.

On the first morning, as we head back to the mouth of the river, there's more radio activity. "Francisco has them again," says Charlie. "This time they're lying down on the river bank."

Charlie's team of trackers are former jaguar hunters - that simple but brilliant trick of recycling poachers as gamekeepers.

We reach the scout boat driven by Francisco, and he and Charlie consult. The male cat has gone but the female remains.

"He says she's underneath the tree with the vines coming down...", reports Charlie, scoping the bank with powerful binoculars. The boatman turns off the engine and we drift slowly downstream towards the spot. "And he's right."

Charlie points. I stare through binoculars. I can't see a thing, but it's as if your mind, as well as your eyes, has to focus. Suddenly I am looking at my first ever jaguar. On the ridge of the bank, in the dappled under-tree light, a pale disc of head with triangular eye sockets and an interrogator's stare, relaxed but penetrating. She doesn't move.

We are about 60 feet away, not very close, but I feel an immediate, involuntary frisson of excitement and a desire to remember every moment. It is like finding yourself in a lift with someone who is both famous and attractive. Charlie reckons it's down to species respect.



"The jaguar is a very beautiful animal but there's a lot more to it than that," he says later. "I think we [humans] instinctively know we're both top of the pyramid. It's like two gang leaders facing off."

Soon, too soon, the capo di tutti capi of the Latin American animal kingdom is gone, melting back into the green and black.

That evening on the houseboat - over more caipirinhas, bowls of excellent Peruvian squash soup made by Maria from Lima, and a decent Argentinian red - we discuss my first sighting. How near did we get? How long did we stay? Did you see her eyes?

Already I'm spinning stories, succumbing to that grip on the human imagination exerted by jaguars that Charlie likens to gold fever.

"You know that movie, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*?" he says. "Jaguar searching brings out some of the best but a lot of the worst in human nature."

He's right. My ambition had simply been to set eyes on a jaguar - a privilege in itself, as Charlie says he'd be surprised if a thousand people a year manage to see one. But already I'm feeling dissatisfied. I want a better view. I also want quantity. A friend

was here three weeks ago and he saw seven. It's an unprecedented number in a two-day trip but I mean to better it. And I have an extra day.

Things are starting well. Our conversation that evening is interrupted by the crackle of two-way radio. Two jaguars on the Three Brothers again. It is after supper and fully dark but we mobilise a speedboat and scud upriver in an icy wind tunnel, Charlie strafing the riverbanks with a spotlight.

When the engine is cut we drift to within about 50 feet of where the cats lie in long grass next to a small tree. One soon slinks right and drops from view but the other stays, hidden by stalks of grass and its own markings, its face grainy and monochrome in the spotlight. Directly above it, as if mindful of symmetry, a full moon hangs in the Southern Hemisphere sky. A spectacled owl hoots. It is a mesmerising encounter.



One day, three sightings. Like Bogart in Mexico, I'm feeling lucky. The next morning dawns beautiful. Our houseboat is moored on the west bank of the Cuiabá. Water hyacinths float downriver in clumps. Amazon parrots are squawking on the far bank. A red-capped cardinal, bandbox smart in his military policeman's uniform, lands on the breakfast table of

the open deck and pecks at chocolate cake crumbs. Apart from Charlie, the crew, Isabel and Patty from Peru, and my partner, Miren, there is not another human being for many miles.

I run through the photographs I have taken on my digital camera, reflecting on the wildlife of the Pantanal that the jaguar has all but blotted from my mind - the birds, from comically huge jabiru storks to iridescent hummingbirds little bigger than bumblebees; snaggle-toothed caimans, which look like nursery-rhyme villains; blunt-snouted capybaras snoozing on the sandy beaches of the Three Brothers; and rare giant otters ("like aquatic Keystone Kops," says Charlie). Improbable and beautiful creatures all.