



ALL PICTURES EXCEPT BELOW: MARGARITA STEINHARDT



MORE TO THE STORY

The jaguar is the largest apex carnivore in Latin America, ranging across 18 countries. However, 50 per cent of the species' original territory has been lost and jaguar populations are declining due to illegal poaching, human-jaguar conflict and loss and fragmentation of habitat. Last month leading international conservation organisations, high-profile NGOs and key jaguar "range states" joined to launch the Jaguar 2030 Conservation Roadmap for the Americas aimed at strengthening the Jaguar Corridor, which stretches from Mexico to Argentina. To be celebrated annually on November 29, a newly designated International Jaguar Day is set to raise awareness about threats facing the big cat, conservation efforts to ensure its survival and its role as a keystone species indicative of a healthy ecosystem.

DAYS OF THE JAGUAR

Wild at heart in Brazil's vast and untamed Pantanal

MARGARITA STEINHARDT

Two juvenile jaguar brothers are resting on the steep bank of the Cuiaba River, lying snugly side-by-side like two spotted sphinxes. They take almost no notice of us gawking from the boat below. There are far more interesting sights and sounds for them to investigate, such as a capybara barking on the opposite bank, a tiger heron suddenly taking off from its perch, a caiman splashing in a patch of lily pads.

This is the Pantanal, the world's largest tropical wetland and one of Brazil's best kept secrets. Sprawling over 210,000sq km across western Brazil and straddling the borders of Bolivia and Paraguay, the Pantanal supports the highest concentration of wildlife in South America. The remnant of an ancient inland sea, the vast wetland pulsates to the rhythm of the seasons. Each year, after the torrential rains, it floods for up to six months and then slowly dries under the beating sun as the water drains into the Paraguay River.

We visit in September, during the dry season, and spend the first two days admiring the mind-boggling abundance of wildlife along the dusty Transpantaneira highway. No more than a raised dirt road, this is the only route that traverses Brazil's northern Pantanal, connecting the city of Cuiaba with the small community of Porto Jofre on the bank of the Cuiaba River.

Within 20 minutes of hitting the red dirt of the highway from Cuiaba, we spot a giant anteater, one of South America's most bizarre creatures. With its tiny head, giant snout and massive bushy tail, it looks as if Mother Nature couldn't quite decide what animal to make. Further into the wetland, the roadside marshes are teeming with thousands of birds feasting on fish and snails left by the receding floodwaters. Among them, hundreds of caimans bake in the blistering sun.

Overnight along the way, we stay at the rustic Pouso Alegre, a cattle ranch turned eco-lodge, and watch a Brazilian tapir emerge for a drink at a pond. Above us, the bright band of the Milky Way arches over the dark savannah. Yet this is only the beginning. Our main destination is the small community of Porto Jofre, which lies on the bank of the Cuiaba River and is where the Transpantaneira abruptly ends. Wild and remote, this stretch



Clockwise from main: Keeping watch on the bank of the Cuiaba River; a jaguar gets its paws wet; giant anteater; blue and yellow macaws; Pantanal from the air

bond serves them well as they hone their hunting skills in preparation for lives on their own.

The river banks are teeming with life, yet as wild as the Pantanal is, most of it is privately owned. One day, we are invited to a family barbecue at the riverside farm of one of Julinho's friends, in the heart of jaguar country. Like most pantaneiros, as the locals are known, Carmindo Costa leads a simple lifestyle of cattle ranching and fishing. But his daughter's visit from the big city of Cuiaba deserves a rare celebration. By the time we arrive, there is a quarter of a cow sizzling on a stone barbecue.

Barefoot and quick to smile, Carmindo is slicing juicy pieces of meat from the carcass that hangs off a tree branch. Living so close to the big cats, he is lucky that jaguars don't take his cattle. Although he admits they have developed a taste for his dogs. "You have to keep replacing your dogs," says Julinho, "to keep your cattle safe." With a twinge in my heart, I share my meat-laden plate with a shy pup, fatefully named Pirulito. It means "lollipop".

Back on the river, we come across a family of endangered giant river otters, the most entertaining denizens of the Pantanal. Huffing and splashing, they chase each other among the branches of a sunken tree. Now and then, one catches a fish and pauses to eat it, chewing so loudly it can be heard from the opposite bank. When the sun moves lower in the sky, and fishing bats emerge to hunt over the river, we return to our base at the spacious grounds of the Hotel Porto Jofre Pantanal Norte, where flocks of the endangered hyacinth macaws are settling in for the night with raucous screeches from the treetops.

Before we leave the Pantanal, Julinho takes us on a scenic flight in a small four-seater plane from Pocone.

Heading towards the river, we watch the square patches of the surrounding farmland give way to a sea of green peppered with the twinkling blue of streams and ponds and sliced by the deep orange of the Transpantaneira. From our cruising altitude, the Pantanal seems to stretch on forever, and it fills me with hope for this unique land where wildlife and people still live side-by-side.

of the river is the best place in the world to see jaguars, the continent's only big cat.

"It looks like there is a lot of forest here, but behind the river bank, it's mostly dry savanna," says Pantanal Trackers founder Julio

IN THE KNOW

The best time for tracking jaguars in the Pantanal is from mid-June through October. Pantanal Trackers offers customised, all-inclusive wildlife watching packages including accommodation at lodges along the Transpantaneira and at Porto Jofre from about \$2000 a person twin-share; add flights.
■ pantanaltrackers.com.br
■ jaguar.org.br/en

Andre Monteiro. Locally known as Julinho, he has pioneered jaguar tourism at Porto Jofre. "The food is by the river, that's why there are so many jaguars here," he tells us.

For the next four days, we explore the network of small channels and ox-bow lakes and meet some of the resident river cats. There's Blind Eye, an old male that lost an eye and his territory in a fight. Ripped Mouth is the male that won the duel as well as the right to mate with all the females within his new home. At least two of those females are raising cubs.

We encounter one of the families during a swimming lesson and watch the mother dunk her cub repeatedly as the nervous youngster paddles furiously towards the bank. But it is the two young brothers that steal our hearts. They look almost fully grown, but their frequent yawns reveal rows of fine milk teeth and they are less than a year old. Their sibling