

BRAZIL – Jaguars, Jabirus & other Jewels of Pantanal’s Wildlife
Unique itinerary with a full circle cruise in the Pantanal
TRIP REPORT - September 2015



Brazil and within that **the Pantanal** is surely a dream destination for any nature enthusiast. There are more and more people who would like to visit, there are a few specialised tour companies who offer it, but, most of them we would not recommend. They offer to see jaguars, some of them not even expensive, but here is why: because most of the companies aim to rush to the nearest habituated jaguars, where you can end up with dozens of boats and more than 100 people in it. We have done that before, but this is not the wildlife experience we all dream about. Only a handful options to make a full circle on the huge river systems in the Southern Pantanal. Our tour is one of those. With this itinerary our main idea was to avoid all the other tour companies and the crowd, which is always at the closest point to Porto Joffre.

In our itinerary with the full circle on the rivers we visited the followings nature parks:

Parque Estadual Encontro da Aguas, Parque Nacional Mato Grosso & Reserva Ecologia Taïama.

Please check out details below..!

All pictures in this material were made during this tour.

Fact File

- 12 wildlife watching days in the world-famous Pantanal area, total 14 days + overnight flight
- start and finish in Cuiaba, Brazil
- using one of the best Pantanal Lodges for 5 nights with excellent on site bird- & wildlife-watching possibilities & a spacious floating hotel with panoramic restaurant & bar for 8 nights



Highlights

- **Jaguars, Giant River Otters** & other mammals, several unique bird species in good numbers like **Hiacynth Macaw, Jabiru, Sunbittern**

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- thousands of Caimans, **amazing landscape, days without roads & settlements**
wide variety of birds, mammals, reptiles, butterflies and habitats

Accommodation

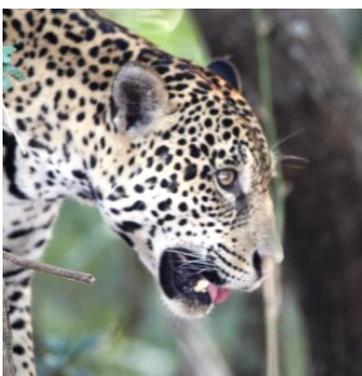
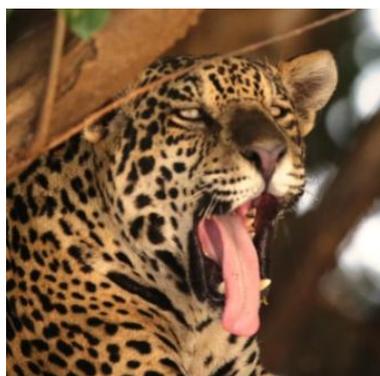
5 nights at Piuval Lodge & 8 nights on the floating hotel, 1 in Cuiaba



Activities and activity level, weather

we had easy to moderate walks; sometimes it was hot and humid, however mornings and evenings were nice; we got light and short rain once or twice.

From the lodge we went out by 4x4 to discover the famous Transpantaneira road and once on horseback and from the houseboat we went out daily on small motorboats to search wildlife in the morning & afternoons.



Itinerary

Day1 12th September, 2015

We arrived to **Cuiaba airport** and had a 1,5-2hours transfer on the **Transpantaneira road to Piuval Lodge** where arrived late in the evening. We got our rooms, had dinner and then we went to sleep early, since we had a long traveling day and we wanted to be well prepared for next day by being fresh as early as possible.

Day2 13th September, 2015

Today we spent the full day in the garden of the Piuval lodge and the surrounding area. Early morning was surprisingly cool, because we got there at the end of a cold front, which are possible in this period of time. The first birds we had:

Guira Cuckoo, Rufous Hornero, Grey-crested Cacholote, both Yellow-billed & Red-crested Cardinal, Baywing, Cattle Tyrant, Green-barred Woodpecker, Bare-faced Ibis, Wattled Jacana. We had then a lovely breakfast. Then we went out again and we found a beautiful Mango tree with loads of fruits, which attracted: **Thrush-like Wren, Blue-crowned & Yellow-chevroned Parakeet, Purplish Jay, Crested Oropendola & Chestnut-eared Aracari.** We walked a little bit further and at some ponds and wet areas we encountered **Woodstork, Jabiru, Plumbeous-, Bare-faced-, Buff-necked & Green Ibis, Amazon kingfisher, Striated & Whistling Heron, Limpkin, Brazilian Teal & Muscovy Duck.**

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After a nice morning walk we returned again for the lunch, in meantime weather started to get back to normal, so we started to feel the heat of the Sun. We didn't take a long siesta, just a bit, and then we did another short walk in the drier grassland with patches of woods resulted **Campo Flicker, White Woodpecker, Epaulet Oriole, Great Rufous Woodcreeper, Fork-tailed Flycatcher, Saffron Finch** and a number of raptors such as **Southern Crested Caracara, Savanna Hawk, Black-collared Hawk, Plumbeous Kite & Crane Hawk**.

At one of the nearby forest patches we found **Black-tailed Marmosets** as well.

What a great start at a beautiful area. We ended the day with a nice list of birds. A tasty well-deserved dinner waited as at the end of the day followed by a good-night sleep.

Day3 14th September, 2015

This morning we had a pre-breakfast walk again in the garden of the hotel and around.

We found the huge flightless **Greater Rea**, which actually we could admire every day. On a nearby tree, we had also a **Rufous-browed Peppershrike**.

We could also add to the list **Solitary Cacique, Grayish Saltator, Fork-tailed Woodnymph & Picui Ground Dove** among others.

Even **Hyacinth Macaws** flew across not too far. We also had **Peach-fronted & Monk Parakeet**. We also found a nearby **Capped heron**, which is one of the most beautiful herons.

We returned for our lunch and went again for a bit of siesta.

During the afternoon we decide to do an easy horseback riding tour into the marshier areas.

We heard from a large distance **Southern Screamers** and on horseback we could get quite close to them. On the way we had a huge **caiman** on the road, we stopped to see it better and took some pictures.

Raptors included **Black-collared Hawks and Black Vultures**.

We found a small group of **Red-legged Seriamas** as well. Further on at a much more wet area we had huge group of **Jabirus** and **Woodstorks**. On a nearby tree we also found a **Black-fronted Nunbird** and also a few **coatis** crossed on the road in front of us. But our main goal was with the horses to reach a reliable place for **Hyacinth Macaws** near a giant **Jabiru** nest.

Soon we could enjoy an amazing view of these amazingly coloured, endangered species.

Then we returned for our dinner and after that we had a night drive! :-)

During this night tour we saw **Crab-eating Foxes, Southern Tamandua, South American Coati** and we also flashed a **Sunbittern** in the dark.

We returned to our rooms for a good sleep with a lot of nice experiences during this day as well and for next day we planned to start early again!

Day4 15th September, 2015

As planned we went out early morning for a drive on the Transpantaneira Road.

We encountered **Sunbittern** almost everywhere and there were huge amount of **Jabirus** and **Woodstorks** as well. A **Green Ibis** was flashed by a **Crab-eating Fox** before we returned to have our breakfast.

After breakfast the first birds were: **Road-side Hawk** and **Chaco Chachalaca, Fork-tailed Woodnymph & Picui Ground Dove, Solitary Cacique** and **Grayish Saltator**.

Later on we saw a hunting juvenile **Snail Kite** and also a lovely coloured **Savannah Hawk**.

We returned again for our lunch, relaxed a bit and then in the afternoon we went out again.

This time we decided to go out on a Safari Truck till a point from where we returned through the forest on foot. In this local forest we found **Ferruginous Pygmy Owl, Scaled Dove, Bare-faced Curassow** and also **Black-tailed Marmoset, South American Coati & Red Howler Monkey**.

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After dinner we went out again for a night safari, which was really successful. We saw the followings: several **Crab-eating Foxes** so after a while we thought that there is nothing else here just foxes, but later on almost when we were about to give up finding anything else we found something really exciting: a lovely **Ocelot!** It was actually pretty close to the road in the less bushy area and not running away, but sat down for minutes, then walked slowly, set down again...so this gave us a perfect possibility to observe its behaviour and even taking some shots of it by our small cameras! :-) Well, this was really a great experience! We hoped to find a Tapir, but instead we were happy with the Ocelot. Not an easy animal to see, specially not like we did! :-)

Day5 16th September, 2015

On this day after breakfast we had a short drive to the bank of the river, which still belongs to the property. On the way we saw a giant nest of **Jabiru Storks** with chicks inside. Amazing **Hyacinth Macaws** were around and we seen **Monk Parakeet** as well. Bit further on we saw a **Giant Cowbird** and a Juvenile **Road-side Hawk** that was hunting around. We enjoyed an excellent view of the colourful **Toco Toucan**, while some **White-winged Swallows** were crossing in the air. We encountered a female **Greater Rhea** shepherding a whole kinder garden of youngsters. We enjoyed a prolonged and up-close view of them and in the meantime we saw a nearby **Whistling Heron** as well.

Finally we arrived to the bank of the river, where we parked our cars and started to walk on a not too long boardwalk. At the end we found a high look-out tower what we climbed and enjoyed the panoramic view. The closest bird was a **Monk Parakeet** just in front of us eye-level. It was quite incredible that it did not fly away! :-) Perhaps it stayed because we approached it really cautiously. In a much larger distance further in the marshy areas we saw enormous **Woodstork and Jabiru** colonies. Later on we walked back to the dry gallery forest. Here we found several new species such as **Red-billed Scythebill, Buff-throated Woodcreeper, Epaulet Oriole, Orange-backed Troupial & Thrushlike Wren.**

After all these exiting discoveries we returned to the lodge for our lunch and then early afternoon at around 2 o'clock we drove out again to the Transpantaneira road and went further South to **Pousada Canta de Araucan**. During this journey we saw **Plumbeous Kite** and another **Toco Toucan, Straight-billed Woodcreeper, Roseate Spoonbill** and of course plenty of **Woodstock and Jabirus**.

Bit further we reached the river again and from 3.30 we went on a 2hour-long exciting boat trip. On this tour we saw **Southern Screamer, Ringed & Green Kingfisher, Wattled Jacana, Greater Ani, Neotropical Cormorant, Yellow-headed Caracara**. But the biggest highlights were beside **Orange-winged Amazons** a pair of **Golden-collared Macaws**. We also had an up close view of a **River Otter** which we could see hunting.

Although it was not the famous Giant River Otter still it was great to see it, especially in action. And a few days later, we could see the Giant ones as well, so could compare the small brother with the "big brothers". :-)

There was another observed species which we debated a lot for days, partly because we saw it quite shortly and also because it shouldn't be here according to the distribution maps.

But Gabor took a photo of it and although it was not a brilliant photo (mind you we were in a moving boat!), but we still could analyse it and came up with the conclusion that it was a **Greenish Schiffornis**.

Finally after a very successful boat trip we returned to the lodge, where we had a quick shower just before our last dinner. After that we went to bed early, because we were to go out very early next morning.

Day6 17th September, 2015

This morning we went out again with the truck on the Transpantaneira road. It was still almost dark when we started around something like 5 o'clock. We drove until the Transpantaneira gate birding on the way till there and back. We had seen plenty of **Sunbitterns, Capped Heron** and of course the usual masses of waders.

We arrived back at about 6.40 to our base, had breakfast at 7 o'clock, checked out and at 8 o'clock we hit the road with a Mercedes bus all the way down to **Porto Joffre**. But of course we stopped regularly to find some new species. We found **Red-legged Serriama, Monk**

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Parakeet, Orange-backed Troupial, Solitary Cassique, Baywing. On a roadside tree top we also saw **Southern Screamer**. At another roadside spot we searched hard both **Black-capped Donacobius** and **Scarlet-headed Blackbird**. The Donacobius was relatively easy, but it took quite a long time to find the Blackbird despite its incredibly contrasting colours. Later on a small group of **Peach-fronted Parakeets** flew nearby and much to our luck landed on a tree, so we all had a perfect view of them.

We stopped at some abandoned buildings where on the surroundings huge trees we looked for **Great-horned Owl**. Unfortunately we could not find any, but instead we had some other good stuff, such as a pair of **Great Antshrike, White-lored Spinetail, Pale-legged Hornero, Yellow-billed Cardinal, Chaco Chachalaca and Baywing**.

Around 1.30 we arrived to Porto Joffre from where we continued on a small boat to our floating hotel which stationed at the **Encontro de Aguas**. Within half an hour we reached a point in the **Parque Estadual Encontro da Aguas** where 3 big rivers meet. This is the best base to be in the area which boasts of having **one of the World's highest concentrations of Jaguars**. Upon arrival and after getting our cabins we refreshed ourselves and got ready for our excellent lunch in the spacious restaurant with panoramic windows. After lunch we went out with a smaller boat for the first Jaguar encounter. We were so much excited, because from the group which ended their tour recently with the boat we heard that they had some amazing encounters with jaguars... So, we could hardly wait for our first boat tour to look for the jaguars. But at the first time we were not so lucky, however we had seen our first **Giant Otters** and actually many of them! :-)

Apart from these fantastic river mammals we had also had **White-winged, White-rumped and Southern Rough-winged Swallows** in the air.

We also saw **Ringed Kingfisher** and **Pale-legged Hornero**. At the end of the boat tour at a side channel we heard **Great Tinamou** and seen several **Band-tailed Nightjars** at dusk.

Finally we returned back to our large floating hotel and had our first full dinner.

Days 7 & 8, 18-19th September, 2015

The next 2 days we had the same routine, our floating hotel stayed at the same place, but we had an early breakfast at 6.00 and then we went out on small motorboats at 7.00.

We went back to our floating hotel latest around noon, had a little siesta and a nice lunch. At around 3pm we ventured out again till dusk. In this way we could maximise our chance to see jaguars and other wildlife.

The following is a shortened list of birds we saw during these 2 days: **Rufescent Tiger Heron, Toco Toucan, Jabiru, Solitary Cassique, Chaco Chachalaca, Black-fronted Nunbird, Common Piping Guan, Yellow-rumped Cacique**, juvenile **Great Black Hawk, Crane Hawk, Water Tyrant** and finally we got news about a **pair of Jaguars**, so we turned back and quickly went to the area. Wow, on our first morning trip we have jaguars!! The male was on a tree and the female in the bush. But to tell the truth this was not exactly the experience what we were dreaming about. Don't get us wrong, the jaguars were amazing, but not the crowd in front of them on the water. We counted close to 20 boats and more than 100 people. What is more, unfortunately many of them were neither respecting these great predators, nor other people. This is what we mentioned at the beginning of this trip report, this was one of the places where from all the day visitors from Porto Joffre and people from nearby hotels, plus almost all the birding and wildlife tour operators come to see jaguars. These are the closest and quite reliable places with habituated jaguars, but not necessarily habituated wildlife watchers unfortunately. This is why although we start the tour here we suggest a different tour: to travel with the floating hotel for another 5 days all the way on 3 different rivers, partly alongside the Bolivian border and visit areas where no other people go, landscape and wildlife is incredible as well.

In this way we also have a chance to find "our own" jaguars with no people around and with the minimal disturbance of these amazing animals. So although it was in one way an amazing thing to see and be close to jaguars we decided not to stay too long, took some nice shots and then let them stay in peace. At least a few boats less remained for them today. :-)

After this we returned to our floatel or motel and had lunch and a couple of hours to relax during the hot hours and as mentioned before according to the daily routine at about 3.00 we went out again.

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During the afternoon the temptation was high to check out the same spot hoping to have less visitors at the same **Jaguar family**. We found them still there, perhaps still digesting their breakfast or lunch. But this time they were 3 of them, there was also a young male. But as other boats were coming again we stayed just shortly and went away to avoid the crowd.

Later on we saw **Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Black-collared Hawk, Barred Antshrike, Yellow-Billed Cardinal, Neotropical Cormorant, Common Piping Guan, Yellow-rumped Cacique**. We also heard several parrots and parakeets and **Great Tinamou** at the end of the day. At one of the afternoon someone stayed at the deck, and was so lucky to see **Jaguar** hunting on **Capybaras**. We also had plenty of **Aracaris** and **Common Piping Guan**.

New species were **Plumbeous Kites, Lesser Yellow-Headed Vulture, Blue-headed Trogon, Yellow-billed Turn, Cooi Heron, Smooth-billed Ani, Rusty-collared Seedeater, Unicolored Blackbird, Glittering-bellied Emerald, Common Tody Flycatcher**. We also had a strange experience, when we saw in a distance a **Black Vulture** in the middle of the water floating. When we went closer we realised, that the floating object had 4 arms pointing to the sky. As it turned out (or up) it was an upside-down dead **caiman** offering an all inclusive dinner for the vulture. We found again some other Giant Otters, which made us so happy, because we could really follow them for a while as they were playing and hunting in the water. :-)

Of course days were ending with lovely dinners and we all were excited to check our photos and what we saw during these days and then we had a goodnight sleep.

Days 9-13, 20-24th September, 2015

On day9 we started our real journey on the floating hotel towards and through the **Parque Nacional Mato Grosso**.

First we travelled on the **Rio San Lorenzo** which is the natural border between **Mato Grosso do Sul & Mato Grosso**. As we travelled West suddenly the scenery changed and we saw some beautiful hills covered with dense forests. This is where we actually left Rio San Lorenzo and reached **River Paraguay**, then continued on that. Soon we arrived to the huge **Uberaba Lagoon** where we visited the **border of Brasil and Bolivia**. We could admire some ancient, pre-historic carvings on rocks & breathtaking scenery. We visited a giant border stone in the middle of the bay and looking up in the sky we witnessed hundreds of **Snail Kites** circling.

For days we have not seen any other sign of humans, maybe at the beginning occasionally a couple of local fishermen, but surely no other boats of travel agents and loud tourists. We were simply surrounded by pure nature. :-)

During these 5 full days we enjoyed this relaxed atmosphere and were trying to search and found some more Jaguars, Giant River Otters, Capybaras and whatever wildlife could show us.

Generally the daily routine was the same also during these days: starting with breakfast at 6.00, starting to go out on the morning boat trip at 7.00 and coming back at about noon. Then lunch, a bit of time to relax and going out again on the small boats at about 3.00.

Beside the sought after mammals and the already mentioned bird species we had seen: **Fawn-Breasted Wren, Silver-beaked Tanager, Chestnut-bellied Guan, Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Picazuro Pigeon, Southern Screamer, Orange-winged Parrot, Undulated Tinamu, Blue-fronted Parrot/Turquoise-fronted Amazon, Black-crowned Night Heron & American Pygmy Kingfisher, Golden-collared Macaw, Blue-crowned & Yellow-chevroned Parakeet**.

Every day we visited small, isolated bays, little lagoons and side channels. These offered excellent photography possibilities of **Sunbittern, Sungrebe, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Toco Tucan, Buff-necked Ibis, Limpkin, Grey-necked Woodrail** & many more.

On one of the last days we reached some ranch areas where we had a short walk, which gave us a second chance for **Hyacinth Macaw** and we also saw a large group of **Black Hooded or Nenday Parakeets**. Other species here were **White-rumped Monjita, Rufous-rumped Seedeater, Creamy-bellied Thrush**.

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On the river a sandy island was full with birds such as **Large-billed & Yellow-billed Terns, Black Skimmer, Pied Lapwing**. Since it was during migration we also saw even a **Wilson's Phalarope**. Other birds in the area included **Southern Lapwing, Spotted** and **Upland Sandpiper, Pied Plover**.

Later on we continued on River Paraguay to North towards **Reserva Ecologica Taiama**. Here we found **Red-throated Piping Guan** which is a rare member of the Guan family, mentioned on the Red List. It was also a very good area for raptors, such as **Savanna Hawk, Plumbeous, Gray-headed & Rufous-thighed Kite**.

We have seen at 3 different occasions **Jaguars**, many times families of **Giant Otters** and a lot of **Capybaras**.

This is how we learnt, that when look for Jaguars it should be not just about scanning carefully the river banks, but also listen to alarming birds. This is how Gabor found one of them. Careful observation of each individual jaguar revealed on one afternoon, that we manage to find the same specimens several miles further. Of course a good photograph can be useful, so we can analyse the pattern, the spots or even the shape of the teeth of the animal.

On one day we saw a huge Jabiru nest of which the lower part was occupied by **Monk Parakeets**.

Once during the trip we also saw hundreds of **Freshwater Terrapins** on a log in the water.



On our last day on the house boat by the evening we arrived back to Caceres, had our usual nice dinner on board and after talking about all the beautiful things we had seen during the tour, checked photos and finally returned to our cabins to have our last night on the boat.

Day 14 - 25th September

We said goodbye to the staff and sadly we had to leave the boat. :-(Yes, we were all sad, because this experience was amazing, we were so happy just being in the wilderness of these amazingly huge and beautiful rivers seeing no people during at least 5-6days. I think we could all imagine staying for more time, some of us perhaps even forever!

But we had to start our journey back to the town of Cuiaba, which was about an 2-2,5hour-long transfer where we had rooms in a hotel, since our flight was next day.

Day 15 - 26th September

We had a transfer to the airport and started our travel back to Europe and arrived home next day on **Day 16, 27th September**.