

# 2015 Brazil Journal

## *Two Weeks in the Heart of the Amazon*

*Michael Caranci*

***Monday, November 2, 2015***

Our 3:59 pm departing flight from Redding to San Francisco was delayed due to storms and heavy winds in San Francisco. As we waited in the small Redding terminal the panoramic skies to the east were dramatic, dark and foreboding with towering thunderheads and flashes of lightning. I had just started re-reading Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, perhaps my favorite book of all time and fitting for our own pending journey deep into the jungle. The darkness brooding in the words on page paired with the bleak skies outside to set an ominous tone for the trip. Still, our spirits were high and the three adventurers (myself, my dad, and Allan C.) were excited for the journey awaiting us.

The flight ended up taking off almost 2 hours behind schedule, but we had a lengthy layover in SFO so it was a non-issue. The short flight was relatively smooth. We found the Gordon Biersch restaurant in the San Francisco airport and ordered some burgers and brews, then made our way to the International terminal to wait for our next flight. The fourth in our intrepid crew, Mike S., joined us at our gate, and at 10:00 we were boarded the Copa Airlines flight, barely more than half full, bound for Panama City.

***Tuesday, November 3, 2015***

This flight took off on time, and after 6 hours of on-and-off sleep we were descending into the heat of Central America. We had about 8 hours to kill in Panama, which we spent bouncing around the small, clean airport. Upstairs is a section of restaurants where we had some coffee, but the A/C wasn't working too well so we shifted downstairs to find a cooler locale. A couple of hours later we returned upstairs to the Margaritaville restaurant for Fish Tacos and Panamanian lagers. It was a bit of dejavu, as Mike, Allan, and I had been in this same restaurant with an identical meal a little over a year ago en route to the jungles of Bolivia.

The fish tacos were tasty, thick chunks of dorado (mahi mahi), and really hit the spot. By the time our lengthy lunch was finished, our flight to Manaus was finally showing on the board so we made our way to the gate.

An hour later, we were boarding the final flight of the day, a 3 hour 15 minute jaunt from Panama City to Manaus. The flight went quickly, and in spite of a hard touch-down was pretty smooth. Inside the terminal we walked to the Immigration area, where there were two lines: one for Brazilian residents and one for non-residents. The non-resident line was much shorter, and moved very quickly. They barely looked at any of our passports, visa, or the white paper document we had filled

out on the plane, then stamped us through. Our bags were already off the carousel, so we grabbed them, headed to Customs, chose the green “nothing to declare” line, and simply walked right out.

Standing right there to greet us was Jenny, holding a sign that said Marié and a sign that read Pirarucú. She was accompanied by another bulky, broad-shouldered man resembling a rugby player, with a warm smile. He was our driver and helped with the bags. They led us outside into the muggy tropical air where a new, nice mini-bus/passenger van (12 seats inside) was parked. Jaxson (the driver) loaded our bags into the van and we climbed into the comfortable leather seats.

It was a short, 15 minute drive from the airport to the Hotel Tropical. Jenny helped us get checked in at the front desk, then had us sign a waiver form for the Indigenous Society and collected our \$450 Native Community Fee.

We were shown to our rooms, which were spacious with two twin beds and a large bathroom and shower. Good beds, very comfortable, with complimentary WiFi. Everything you need for a night or two en route to the jungle.

We all met back down at the bar for a quick celebratory cocktail. All said it was a smooth and easy travel day, and we were excited for the next leg of the journey. In the bar area I met several of the guests who were heading in to Marié: Ken and Brian, Toby, and Steve. It turns out Steve was a past student at one of our 3 Day Fly Fishing Schools! Toby owns a Fly Shop in Bozeman. He had had some delays, almost missed his connecting flight in Miami, and his



bags never made it so he'd spent the day going back and forth to the airport and it sounded like he would get his bags later that night. A good thing we'd recommended they come in a day early!

I chatted with the group for a bit while, then said goodnight and returned to the room for a much-needed shower and a good night's sleep.

### ***Wednesday, November 4, 2015***

We woke up about 6:30 am, well rested and ready for the adventure to continue. We organized gear a bit and headed down for breakfast. The breakfast was a standard hotel buffet, European style with some meats, cheeses, a pot of scrambled eggs and some sausages, plus a bunch of different types of

bread and rolls. Most importantly, they had good strong coffee and some tasty juices, including guaraná which is brown and looks horrible but tastes fantastic, a sweet tangy concoction almost a blend of apple juice, guava juice, and orange juice in overall flavor.

Once we'd had our fill, we still had about an hour to kill before we were scheduled to meet Jenny for our partial day tour, so my dad and I took a stroll through the small zoo located in the middle of the

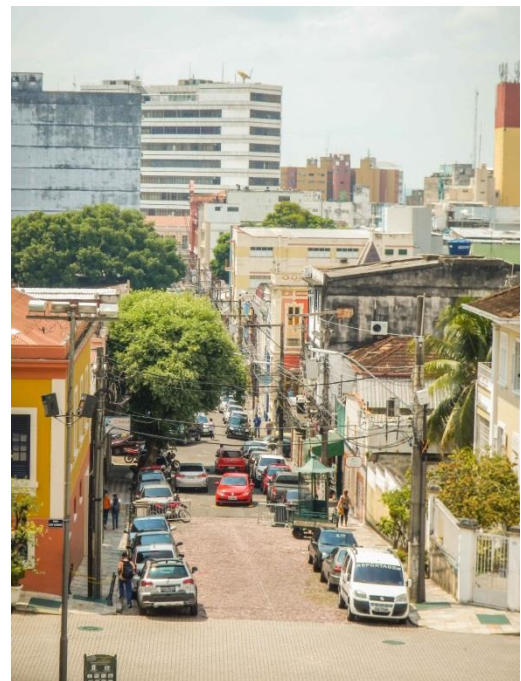


hotel. The first animal was a large, healthy-looking jaguar who paced back and forth in his jungle lair putting on a show for us. We continued through the zoo, finding several blue and yellow macaws, scarlet macaws, two different types of spider monkeys plus some capuchin monkeys, some peccaries, a small caiman, parrots, and to my delight the final animal was a large turkey-like bird that I'd seen in the jungle in Boliva a year ago and have been trying and failing to identify ever since. It turns out it is a Razor-billed Curassow.

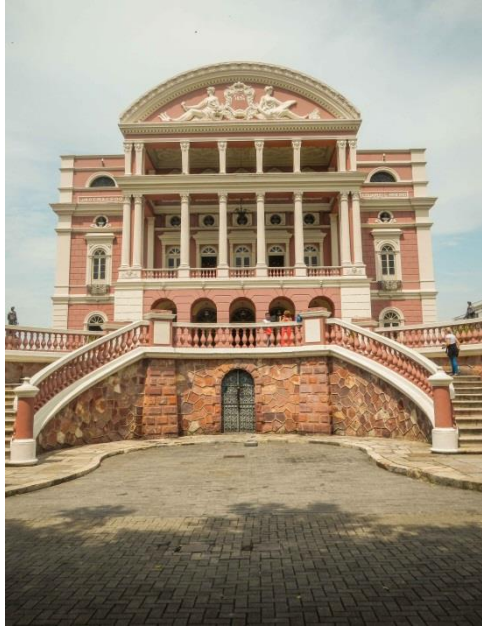
By then it was time to go, so we returned to our rooms to grab a few things for the day and at 9:30 we met Jenny back in the hotel lobby, and climbed back into the mini-bus for our partial day tour.

We drove across the bustling city of Manaus. It is an interesting city, very busy and a mix of downtrodden poor and working class folks. There is of course trash everywhere, but overall not unsafe or deplorable in appearance, just blue-collar. The Rio Negro is often visible in the background, a massive stretch of water that could easily be mistaken for a dark-colored sea if not for the tree-lined bank far off in the distance.

About 25 minutes-drive through town and we arrived at the Teatro Amazonas, the famous opera house of Manaus built in the late 1800s during the height of the rubber baron days when money flowed with the taps of the rubber trees as the precious new resource was extricated and shipped downriver 1,000 miles to sea and eventually across the Atlantic to Europe or north to the US. The theater's inaugural night was on New Year's Eve, 1896. It is a beautiful building from a long-gone era, and it shows. The exterior is a brilliant pink bordered in stark white and punctuated with a multi-colored mosaic dome. Marble columns give a sense of old Europe. Inside, the decor is much more local with







dark hard woods. It's a spectacular building, although in a relative state of disrepair. None of the metals are polished and rather leave a dull opaqueness to the inside. At least a third of the light bulbs are out. The once-beautiful painting in the dome's portico is dull and entirely void of luster. Yet it is endearing, speaking to the long-lost glory days of the early Amazonian imperialism.

In front of the Teatro is a broad piazza, unique in that the floor of the piazza is laid out in a distinct black and white pattern designed to replicate the mixing of the waters where the Rio Negro and Rio Amazonas mix just a few miles away.

Opposite the piazza Jenny led us into a small store that sells only the wares of the various indigenous communities. Items ranged from bows and arrows to blow guns to craft pottery and woven baskets, musical instruments, and hand-made jewelry. We all found something to take home, shocked at the ridiculously cheap sticker prices for such authentic goods.



From there we drove another 10 minutes to the waterfront, where we disembarked the mini bus in front of a huge market. We had driven past rows upon rows of fruit and vegetables, and this particular part of the market was dedicated to fish. Inside were all sorts of freshwater fishes from the Amazon, from piranhas to tambaqui to arapaima/pirarucù to small peacock bass to surubim catfish to dozens of fish we could never hope to identify. We strolled the aisles agog at the myriad diversity of species and the giant slabs of fish from the arapaima in particular.



Outside, we could look out at the dry riverbank running down the shore to where dozens of boats and ships were parked. There were a few smaller, long and narrow "fastboats", while most of the boats were the larger river-boat variety that are the primary means of transportation along the river. Scores of people would pile on for a 2-3 day journey to the next city up or downriver, sleeping midships in hammocks.

With fish on the brain, Jenny took us to a restaurant not far from the Hotel Tropical, called, Peixaria Poraque. It was a large open area, mostly empty, decorated with huge wooden statues of fish including peacock bass, arapaima, and tambaqui. Jenny ordered for us, including some Brahma beers (she says the best in Brazil, tastes like any other warm-climate lager style beer). The first round was a fish soup made of piranha, tasty although admittedly a hot soup on a warm muggy day didn't sound super appealing at first. The main course, however, was a meal I'll never forget as long as I live. She ordered for us tambaqui, which she says is the favorite for residents of Manaus and reserved for special occasions (birthdays, holidays, and weekends). The tambaqui is part of the pacu family, so they are omnivorous and often feed on fruits and nuts. The fish came to the table basically as a half a whole fish (three halves for our table of 6 including Jenny and our gregarious driver, Jaxson), which had been salted on the fleshy side and baked in a massive oven until the flesh was barely crispy on the outside and inside was perfectly moist. It almost had the texture of pork instead of fish. Absolutely delicious. Most surprisingly was that the fish, which is a broad-shaped fish often related to the shape of a dinner plate, had a large rib cage. The waiter for each of us served up a nice filet of meat from the back, then cut out a few ribs, like one would serve a baby-back rib. And while the "backstraps" were tasty, the ribs were to die for. All this was served with a rice and bean medley along with a vinegar sauce to drizzle over the top and a powdery grain called farofa. A great taste of the Amazon!



We paid the tab, which when split four ways came to 48 Reals or about \$12! It was a short drive back to the hotel, where we had the rest of the afternoon to relax.

I took the opportunity to explore the massive hotel grounds. In many ways, hotel is not the right word to describe the Tropical, for while there certainly are rooms and all the amenities of a large hotel, it also features much more including a lot of artifacts and cultural relics from the numerous indigenous communities of the Amazon. And, of course, a zoo. And I discovered at the far end a large outdoor area with a grill restaurant (that was closed at that time of day) and a massive pool. Surrounding the pool area was a border of a natural narrow fishpond, in which I immediately noticed dozens of large tambaqui and a couple of very big peacock bass. Smaller fish were there, too, and in one spot schooled up under an overhanging fruit tree was a small school of piranha! At the back end, behind the pool and a giant waterfall, was a second pond which was home to dozens of turtles, from giant three feet long specimens to babies to every size in between.

Another feature of the hotel is outside the front lobby, where 8 or 10 small shops were located with touristy goods ranging from magnets and keychains to full skin-mounts of various fish including piranhas, peacock bass, and paraiba catfish, along with carved brazil-woods and more handmade crafts from the various indigenous communities. There were also some more “feminine” shops with jewelry and clothes, which didn’t interest us at all.

Our “tour” of the facilities ended back at the lobby bar, where we enjoyed a midafternoon gin and tonic while waiting for the returning group from Mariè to arrive. They eventually came strolling in about 4:00 to check in for their afternoon “day rooms”, and I had a chance to introduce myself and ask about their week. They were all very happy with their trip. Fishing sounded pretty good, they said they caught plenty of fish and although only 3 peacocks over 20 pounds they caught “many” between 15 and 18 pounds. The transfers were all good, although they said the plane flight back was very bumpy. I also talked to Randy S. who had also been at Pirarucù, and he was super excited about both trips, saying specifically of Pirarucù that he’d hooked many very large arapaima and had a great trip. His largest hooked was at least 100 kilos, which after a four minute battle shattered his 6/0 Gamakatsu hook in half!

They made their way to their own rooms to shower and clean up before they were set to head home late that night, and we returned to our rooms to rest, relax, and repack for our next leg of the journey.

At 6:30 we met downstairs for dinner, but when we went upstairs to the restaurant we learned it did not open till 7:00, so we killed some time and returned a bit after 7:00. It was a buffet dinner, with salads, pastas, rice, and meat dishes including beef scallions, roasted chicken, and a giant plate of pirarucù! We sampled a bit of everything, and stuffed to the gills we returned to our rooms for an early night.

### ***Thursday, November 5, 2015***

Well rested and eager to start the next leg of our journey into the jungle, we woke, finished repacking, and headed down for breakfast. I had spoken with Rodrigo the night before and learned that our flight to Tefe was changed from 11:30 departure to 1:00 departure, so we would have more time than we wanted or needed this morning before leaving.

After breakfast we took another brief stroll through the zoo, where we were surprised this morning to see a whole bunch of “wild” monkeys. There were several different varieties and sizes, all running wild and playing in the trees around us. It was neat to watch them in their own element and not limited spatially as they so often are in zoos. And to see them move so easily amongst the trees and vines was remarkable. They really are at home in the trees!

At 9:00 am I returned to the lobby to meet Rodrigo. He was accompanied by a young American guide, Ryan, who had just left Mariè and would be joining us in Pirarucù. Originally from Alaska, Ryan spoke Brazilian fluently, as he was married to a Brazilian and had been living in Brazil for the past three years. They've been trying to get her green card to return to the states, and just had their first child, a baby girl, a few days earlier.

We spent a bit over an hour sitting with Rodrigo and Ryan while Rodrigo told us all about the Mamirau Reserve where Pirarucù is located, and their efforts to establish the fishing program there. The area had been the first protected reserve in Brazil, mainly for the birds and fauna, but it had worked as well to protect the fishery even as much of Brazil had almost made arapaima extinct in the 1980s. Over the past few decades the populations have come and gone based on regulation or lack-thereof, but there in the Mamirau they had thrived. Within the past few years, however, the indigenous community had been given both more authority to operate the reserve...and permission to begin commercial fishing for arapaima. In steps Untamed Angling, trying to convince them that sustainable tourism through fly fishing and their pro-indigenous community-based resource management model would be more profitable for the community while also protecting their natural resources. He met with the tribe in December of last year. When he described how they planned to catch the arapaima with a fly rod, and showed them the flies and equipment, the natives all laughed at them. The head chief told him they would go fishing the next day, and if he could actually catch an arapaima they would allow the program to go. Of course, Rodrigo knew nothing about catching arapaima on the fly because almost no one has done it, but that day they managed to catch and land three small arapaima, sealing the deal with the community.

By the time the storytelling was through it was time to check out, which we did and left several bags at the hotel for our return in 5 days. We left the Tropical, drove about 15 minutes and stopped at a Subway near the airport to get a bite to eat, then continued on to the airport. The commercial flight on Azul Airlines takes off at the main International Airport (albeit a different terminal than the regular international flights).

We said goodbye to Jenny and Jaxson, and Ryan stayed with us to translate and help us check in for the flight. They would not allow fly rods as carryon luggage, so we ended up checking our rod tubes and all fishing gear except our backpacks. A bit nerve-wracking, but everything came out on the other end.

Inside the terminal (security was super-easy), we waited for a half hour for the flight to board. It turned out there were several small "eateries" fast food style inside the terminal so we didn't need to have done the Subway route, but it was also nice to not have to worry about it. We boarded our flight on time, and found our seats in the  $\frac{3}{4}$  full, brand new very nice Embraer 190 jet from Azul Airlines. Two seats to a row, all leather and roomy.



It was a good flight, only lasted about an hour before descending into the jungle (paved) landing strip at Tefê. We disembarked the plane and walked across the tarmac to the small open concrete terminal, obviously still under construction. Porters brought the bags out onto a ledge and everyone pushed and shoved to get their bags in an organized chaos fashion that worked just fine. Most importantly, all of our bags (and fly fishing equipment) came off the plane!

Once we had our gear we strolled out of the narrow terminal where we were greeted with a young Brazilian with a sign for Pirarucù. He went and got his truck, we loaded our gear into the back (along with Ryan) while the four of us piled into the cab.



The roughly 10 minute drive across Tefê to the river was interesting. It is a nice-looking town, reminiscent of Punta Gorda in Belize or many small non-touristy Italian hill towns. Narrow roads, scooters and motorbikes everywhere, people all about. Very clean compared to Manaus. Soon the truck dropped down a rise and onto the dirt shore of the Salimões (upper Amazon) River. There was one floating dock, where we pulled up to, but almost as far as you could see in either direction a multitude of boats of all shapes and sizes were pulled up along the shore, with people coming and going carrying all sorts of things to and fro. It was a buzz of excitement.

And of course we, too, were excited as we walked up the plank to the floating dock. We loaded our bags into the back of a white and green “fast-boat”, a long narrow vessel with six rows of seats on either side of the center aisle, high metal sides with open windows. The captain was friendly, and moments after we’d sat down he fired up the single large outboard motor and started off upriver.

The first bit of the ride paralleled the town of Tefê, loaded with boats of all sorts and buildings on stilts towering up on the hillside above the river’s edge. Soon the town disappeared behind us, although we would continue to see the occasional outbuilding, small community, or fishing camp along with boats ranging from large passenger ships to small dugout canoes throughout the hour-long voyage to the lodge. The river here is muddy and huge, yet surprisingly swift and powerful for as broad of a river as it is.







After about 45 minutes we came to the canal entrance to the reserve, and just outside was a small school of pink dolphins porpoising a distance away from the boat. We turned left into the narrow channel and instantly the river changed. No longer the broad swift river channel, we now found ourselves in a jungle haven. The channel was maybe 150 feet wide, with jungle growing right down to the river's edge in spite of the low water. Birds were everywhere,

and the telltale ring of fish dotted the water in frequent intervals. We saw first one seemingly large caiman, about 8 feet long, floating in the middle of the river. Then another, this one at least 12 feet long. By the time we'd reached the lodge a mere 20 minutes later we'd seen at least a half dozen large caiman. It's no wonder so many of the photos of the arapaima we've seen have been out of the water!

Soon we turned a bend in the river and there was the floating lodge, several square-ish wooden buildings with red roofs connected by wooden walkways and jutting out in a bend in the river channel. As we pulled up a monstrous splash from a giant arapaima erupted just feet from one of the cabins, and beyond in the back lagoon a dozen or more monster caiman could be seen floating and swimming slowly in patrol along the edge of the lagoon. 2 foot long arowana (aquarium fish here in the US) scooted out of the way as we climbed off the boat. The water everywhere was alive with fish swirling, splashing, and in the case of the many arapaima in the area simply exploding the surface. Birds were everywhere, and never in my life have I been so overwhelmed with life all around.

We met Rafael, the "head guide" there at Pirarucù who had come over from Mariè about a month earlier. He gave us a quick tour of the lodge and explained the daily routine, then showed us to our rooms. The lodge is eco-friendly, so entirely run

on solar electricity. Meaning at this point in time no air conditioning, although Rodrigo had told us earlier that they hoped to have solar powered A/C in the rooms for 2016. Still, the place is quaint



and comfortable and, although hot and muggy, perfect for the wild jungle locale. The wooden rooms are square and about 100 square feet with lots of screened in windows for air flow. There are a couple of small fans by the bed to help with airflow at night. A bathroom with flush toilet and running (sometimes hot) water, and a small back deck overlooking the bend in the river. The sounds of arapaima (and caiman) are constant, at times literally underneath the cabin and in



fact several times water literally splashed through the windows! There are two beds in the room, one full and one twin. A bed-stand, several end tables, a small desk and chair, a bottle of fresh water and cups, and plenty of hooks on the wall make everything quite comfortable for the jungle angler.

We quickly unpacked and started rigging up our gear with the help of Rafael and Ryan. 12 weight rods with 500 gr sink-tips would be the go-to to start for arapaima although we all hoped to be able to switch to intermediate or floating lines at some point. We also rigged 7 or 8 weight rods for the other available species, which include the ever-present arowana, yellow peacock bass, and tambaqui. Big black flies with big strong sharp hooks for arapaima, and small topwater patterns like Cantara Beetles and Gurglers for the other fish.

About the time we finished rigging our gear several of the other eco-touring guests at the lodge began to arrive, and we met several nice young folks from France and Germany. We hadn't seen a bug yet, but as the sun set and the bats came out, so did the mosquitoes and we quickly went inside the main lodge building. The main lodge is also made of entirely hard woods, with many open screened windows for ventilation. There is electricity, charging stations (all from solar), and good reliable WiFi (that also reaches to the rooms). Although the Eco-Tourists have to run a bar tab, Untamed has set up their program so that all drinks are included. There's not a huge variety, but Brahma beer, red and white wine, vodka (for caipirinhas!), plus several types of whiskey and scotch are available. We had some Brahma's to welcome ourselves to the jungle, and soon the buffet dinner was spread out and we helped ourselves. Dinner was good, with a cole-slaw type salad, rice, beans, some potatoes, some sort of casserole, plus barbecue chicken and some fresh grilled arowana, all of which was tasty.

After dinner we relaxed and enjoyed chatting with both Rafael and Ryan who are great hosts and fun people, while looking at books on the local fish and fauna, before retiring early to bed to enjoy the sounds of the jungle all around us and get ready for the exciting prospects of the exploratory fishing ahead of us tomorrow.

***Friday, November 6, 2015***

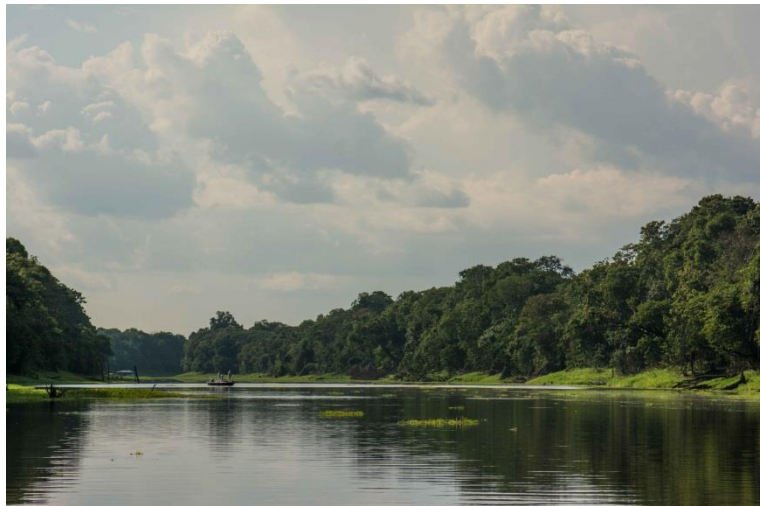
None of us slept much at all last night. It was a combination of excitement for the day ahead, heat from the non-air conditioned rooms, and most of all a constant barrage of noise from the arapaima and caiman that splashed and crashed all night long, including right under our beds and at times what sounded like crocodiles climbing onto the decks out front. Early in the morning we could hear thunder rolling, and soon the sound of hard rain was pounding on the metal rooftops.

Our alarms did rouse us at 5:30 am, and we were slurping coffee in a gray morning as the rain continued, now a slow drizzle as opposed to the hard downpour a few hours earlier. Still, it made for a nice cool morning, a very comfortable temperature.

Breakfast was served at a bit after 6:00 am, with a variety of fruit and breads, and we all asked for scrambled eggs, too. Most importantly, the coffee was good and strong.

After breakfast we returned to our rooms, grabbed our gear and rods, and by 7:00 we were loading into the boats. My dad and I would fish with Ryan and the native guide, Braulinho; Mike and Allan would fish with Rafael and another native guide.

Both boats pulled out from the dock at the same time and motored together up the channel that led north out of the lagoon where the lodge was situated. We motored for about 10 minutes, with the other boat going a minute further to where we could just barely see them further down the channel. Close enough to see, but far enough where you still felt like you had the entire place to yourself. Birds were everywhere of all different shapes and sizes. We



We could hear howler monkeys roaring in the trees just beyond the river. And arapaima from 40 to 300 pounds were rolling all over the place. Literally it seemed like fish were everywhere.

Braulinho cut the motor while Ryan dropped the electric trolling motor off the bow of the boat. The boats are the same design as the boats used at Mariè, like a flats skiff except with broad casting decks both fore and aft, therefore perfect for two anglers to fish at the same time. I took the front, my dad took the back, and we cast each off opposite sides of the boat while Ryan and Braulinho took turns running the electric motor to keep us in position while we slowly drifted with the meandering gentle current.



We both were fishing our twelve weight rods with 500 grain sinking lines, casting out and counting down and slowly stripping the flies back. I had a Chartreuse and White BigEye Redtail, my dad a black Tarpon Snake. Five minutes into the process I felt my line subtly go tight and I strip set hard into a very large fish. It started to slowly move away and I set hard again, and again, and the fish came up and rolled just enough to see that, according to Braulinho, it was about 100 kilos (220 lbs). The fish started to move off again, I set a fourth time, then it turned and started coming back at the boat. I reeled fast to gain line but the fish got just enough slack to spit the hook.

We continued fishing, and about a half hour later my dad's line came time and he strip set once, twice, three times, a good hookup to another fish. The fish stayed low at first, taking out line and getting him on the reel. Then it came back at the boat. He stayed tight to it, but just next to the boat it jumped, showing itself to be a nice-sized fish about 60 kilos (130 lbs). Unfortunately, it also spit the hook right at that moment.

Not ten minutes later my dad had another arapaima hit his fly right at the side of the boat, but it was too close for him to get a good hook set. What a great, exciting start to the day!

Although technically it was blind casting, it had the feel of sight-casting because we could see so many fish. I mean they are literally everywhere!

Eventually I had another very slight tug, but not enough to even set the hook. Soon I started spotting some arowanas cruising in schools just below the surface, and even managed to hook a few briefly on the giant arapaima fly. I decided to take a break from the big rod and have some fun with the smaller arowana, switching to my 8 weight rod with a small Cantara Beetle. I would cast it



towards the school of fish, and almost immediately started getting takes. I soon learned that you had to be very patient on the hookset, let the fish take the fly, turn down and away before setting the hook otherwise it would pull right out. I finally had a small arowana on the line, fought it for a while including several acrobatic leaps when the line went limp and I noticed the 40# leader had been severed.

Initially I thought maybe a piranha had been in the area and severed the line, but after changing to a Chartreuse Pollywog and promptly hooking and landing another small (about 3 pounds) arowana, Braulinho showed us that they have sharp teeth set inside their mouths, and that this was probably what broke the line. Soon thereafter I did hook a good sized arowana, probably 8 pounds, and had



it, too, cut the line. So I put on some 40# wire leader, and changed flies again (for fun) to a Wiggle Minnow Fire Tiger. First cast, and landed a beautiful Piranha! It had a fire-red belly and, of course, sharp chomping teeth and a powerful jaw.

At this point my dad decided to play with the topwater action, too, and for the next 30 minutes we hooked several more arowana and a few more piranhas. Loads of fun. But all around us arapaima continued to roll and splash, so we changed back to the big rods and cast for another 45 minutes searching for another big hookup, without luck.

Soon it was time to return to the lodge for lunch, another short 10 minute boat ride. Back at the dock we compared notes with Allan and Mike, who had a slower overall morning but did manage to hook and land what may be the first ever arapaima double on the fly! Allan's was about 60 kilos, Mike's about 40 kilos. They were excited.



We left our gear and rods in the boats, and at a bit after noon lunch was served. It was again buffet style, with a cucumber salad, rice, beans, some sort of casserole, some roasted chicken, potato salad, and some delicious surubim catfish. Way more than we needed to eat, but of course we all couldn't help but fill our plates!

After lunch we had a nice break, so I took a cold shower (there is hot water, but since the rain had let up late morning it was quickly getting hot and the cold water felt great!), then laid down to rest and relax before meeting back up with the guides about 2:30 for the afternoon session.

Ryan came and got us about 1:30 and said they were down to head back out early if we wanted to, so we hurried back to the boats and soon were back on the water. We motored back down the channel we'd fished this morning, then continued on another 10 minutes further before turning right into a narrow channel. Braulinho took us down the channel a ways then cut the motor just before the channel opened up into a broad lagoon. Ryan dropped the trolling motor, and we slowly and silently entered the lagoon.

Instantly a large fish rolled. I cast to it, made a long slow strip, and whammo the line came tight. I set hard, it took off, I set again and the fish shook his head and the line went limp. I made a few more casts and was hooking the bottom on every cast with the heavy sinking line that we'd been using in the deeper channel earlier that morning. Braulinho told Ryan it was shallow here, only 6-8 feet deep, and that we should change from the heavy lines to Intermediate. My other reel had a floating GT line on it, so I went with that.

As I was changing my reel up, my dad hooked up tight to a fish. He set hard several times, and the fish started steadily moving out of the lagoon and down the channel, and was quickly well into his backing. We gave chase with the electric motor. Then, about 200 feet downriver, there was a gigantic splash, at least ten feet in diameter. It looks like someone drove a VW bug into the river. And the line went limp. My dad reeled it back in to discover the fish had easily shattered his 80# Fluorocarbon. Our best guess based on the incredible size of the splash would be 250-300 pounds, a real river monster!

We re-rigged my dad's setup and finished switching mine over to the floating line, changing both setups to the heavier 130# Zippy soft mono that I'd used previously for monster GTs in the Indian Ocean. We returned to the lagoon, and not long after my dad had hooked up again, but again the fish came loose.

Less than a minute later my line came tight and I set hard. It was right next to the boat, however, and I didn't have a chance to get a second strike in, but the fish stayed on and I kept tension while it slowly moved away. Once it got far enough from the boat I hammered in another solid strip strike, which also pissed the fish off and he took off, leaping and shaking his head like a tarpon. 10 minutes, a few more short runs and leaps near the boat, and we were sliding him up into the grassy shallows, keeping one eye out for curious caiman as we did so. It wasn't a huge fish, but a nice, beautiful arapaima about 30 kilos (65 pounds). We unhooked him, snapped a few photos, and released it back into the lagoon.





We climbed back in the boat, and continued our progress into the lagoon. Moments later I had hooked up again. It felt like a solid fish, but only was tight briefly before it came unbuttoned. I checked the hook, to find that it had bent out a bit after landing the first fish. I took that fly, a large black GT fly, off, swapping it out for a white and brown Major Bunker.

A few casts later and I was hooked up again, this one a small arapaima about 20 pounds which I landed quickly in the boat and released. Then my dad had another solid tug, but the hook didn't stick. Five minutes later another fish, a bit larger at maybe 30 pounds, on and released at the side of the boat.

My dad was still fishing the heavy sinking line and although he was also still hooking some fish he was catching grass on every cast, so we changed him out for a floating line and another Major Bunker. Braulinho wanted to go explore another area, so he motored us up into another even smaller channel which led out to an area filled with hundreds of beautiful white egret-like birds, some in trees and others nestled into the grasses along the shoreline. The lagoon at the end of the channel wasn't high enough yet to be fishable, so we returned to the earlier lagoon and continued fishing. Soon my dad was hooked up again, this time landing a nice arapaima of about 35 pounds.

We kept casting around the lagoon without any more luck, then on down the channel. I did land a decent-sized arowana, but mostly we cast as the sun began to disappear behind a blanket of clouds, a slight cooling breeze picked up, and it was obvious the weather was changing. We were tired from casting the heavy 12 weight all day, and fully satisfied with every aspect of the day. Time to head in.



Back at the lodge, about a 20 minute boat ride, we unloaded and headed back to the room to stow our gear and clean up a bit before dinner. We were soon joined by Allan and Mike, who spent the afternoon with 8 weights and had a ball catching a whole bunch of arowana on poppers. Allan even caught a small Piripatinga.

The power was out to our rooms, but it just made it feel more like camping using head lamps and flashlights instead of the solar electricity. We headed down for dinner, another buffet with salad, some sort of sweet potatoes, some sort of pickle dish (that was actually pretty good), some barbecue chicken, fried fish (more surubim), and grilled piranha. After dinner I chatted with Rafael and Ryan for a bit, then headed for bed. The weather had moved in and it was nice and almost cool with a slight drizzle.

### ***Saturday, November 7, 2015***

With the cooler, quieter night I slept well, waking only a couple of times and finally feeling rested when the alarm went off. We headed down for coffee and breakfast at around 6:00 am, another nice spread of fruit, giant avocados, bread, and scrambled eggs. After breakfast we gathered our gear, loaded into the boats, and headed out for the day.

We motored further up the channel this morning, fishing again with Braulinho and joined this time by Rafael. We drove past the channel where we fished the first morning, past the entrance to the lagoon we'd fished yesterday evening, then finally turned right into another narrow channel entrance to another small lagoon. We still had on the floating fly lines, and on his first cast my dad hooked and landed a small arapaima of about 30 pounds. I was trying to change out the fly I'd used the night before because it was pretty thrashed, and before I could even change the fly my dad had hooked fish on every cast, literally five fish on five casts. It was an incredible start to the day.



That was the story of the morning, as we proceeded to hook fish after fish after fish. It wasn't quite a fish on every cast like those first few casts, but it was steady action. Like fishing for baby tarpon, the fish ranged from 15-40 pounds, and like baby tarpon fishing you hooked and jumped a lot more than you landed. But still, we easily lost count of how many fish we hooked and even how many we released off the side of the boat. After a couple of unbelievable hours of fishing -- including three double hookups! -- Braulinho wanted to do some exploring so we again tried to motor down a narrow channel that he knew led to an open lake that can be full of arapaima. But again the water



was not yet high enough and eventually we had to turn back. While motoring down the canal, barely the width of the boat, we noticed that along both sides were myriad trails through the grass. We asked Braulinho, who explained that they were from jaguars hunting caiman. There were a LOT of trails, indicating a LOT of jaguars!



After returning to the small lagoon we did hook a few more arapaima, but the fishing was not as hectic as it had been in the morning. I did incidentally manage to hook and land a medium sized tambaqui, and a few casts later landed a decent arowana. The first official fly-caught Mamirauá Grand Slam!

As we worked our way towards the exit to the small lagoon, we noticed two large caiman patrolling the opening, with a small school of arowana hanging around them. For fun, I thought it would be a good idea to try to catch a giant caiman, and started casting right next to them. I put one fly a few inches from the snout of the smaller (maybe 10 feet long) crocodile but it was not interested. Another cast landed just two feet away from the larger (at least 12 feet long) reptile, only this time one of the arowanas charged my fly and ate it, then started jumping and thrashing about which really got the croc

excited. It followed the fish then attacked in a blur of motion and frothy water, but missed the fish. When it came up empty, it turned to look at us and literally looked pissed off. I still had the arowana on the line, but the caiman could care less now and there was no way any of us were reaching in the water to try and unhook it because the caiman was looking right at us and slowly swimming towards us. From 15 feet away you could read its mind as it tried to decide if it should launch into the boat to try and eat us or not. Braulinho gunned the electric trolling motor to get us away as the croc slowly followed, then eventually lost interest. I learned my lesson about messing with big crocodiles. At least for today.

By this time we'd had such a great morning and it was getting close to lunchtime, so we decided to head on back to the lodge. Lunch was ready not long after we were back at Uacari, another tasty spread of salad, rice, beans, chicken, and fish. Allan and Mike had just as good a morning as we had, saying they landed 22 arapaima and lost count of how many they had hooked, including 3 more double hookups. Everyone is ecstatic.

We relaxed in the hammocks on our back deck for a bit, then returned to the boats a little before 2:30 to head back out for the afternoon. The sun was out and it was hot and muggy. After such a fun and action-packed morning catching arapaima, everyone wanted to spend a bit of time casting the lighter 7 and 8 weight rods with poppers for arowana for a bit, then maybe dredge for some big arapaima later in the afternoon.

We motored up the channel and started fishing around where a floating building from the native community is perched, casting small gurglers and large beetle patterns towards the bank. At times we would see the arowana cruising and sight cast to specific fish or schools of fish; when we couldn't spot fish we cast towards the grass or logs along the edge. Either way was ultimately effective and 4 hours later we had hooked well over a hundred arowana and landed probably close to fifty. It was fun, non-stop action on topwater flies. The best producers were a small white Gurgler my dad tied and a Black Cantara Beetle I had brought from The Fly Shop. Most of the arowana were small fish from 14-22 inches, but loads of fun like catching trout or baby tarpon, every fish pulls hard and jumps multiple times. We did catch a few larger fish, too, up to maybe 3 or 4 pounds. In addition, I landed two small payara, and spotted a pair of yellow peacock bass which I cast to, stripped fast and had one charge the beetle fly and unfortunately miss. We had so much fun doing this that we never bothered changing to the heavy rigs and fishing for arapaima. It was a really fun afternoon.

Back at the lodge we learned that Allan and Mike had also had a fun afternoon, although a bit frustrating at the same time. When they were fishing for arowana they had a hard time catching arowana because wherever they went there were lots of piranha (even though they were just a short distance from us in the same channel!); when they switched up and started trying for arapaima they had no luck for the big fish but did manage to catch a handful of larger arowana. Still, they were happy with the day as altogether it





was a very memorable day of fishing for all of us.

We cleaned up, then headed down for caipirinhas and dinner. A whole boatload of new tourists showed up, and I enjoyed some good conversation with a father and two sons all from Buenos Aires. Dinner was salad, rice, beans, mashed potatoes, a couple different types of fish, and chicken. We are starting to joke about the somewhat monotonous menu, although there remains so much variety and the preparation of the fish and chicken is different every time. So while the staples remain the same, each meal is unique and delicious.

We were all pretty tired after dinner tonight, and quickly retired to our rooms for an early bedtime.

### ***Sunday, November 8, 2015***

It was a still morning: no wind, no clouds, no drizzling rain; a sign of a very hot, muggy day to come. Breakfast was the normal routine, and by 7:30 we were in the boats, already sweating, and



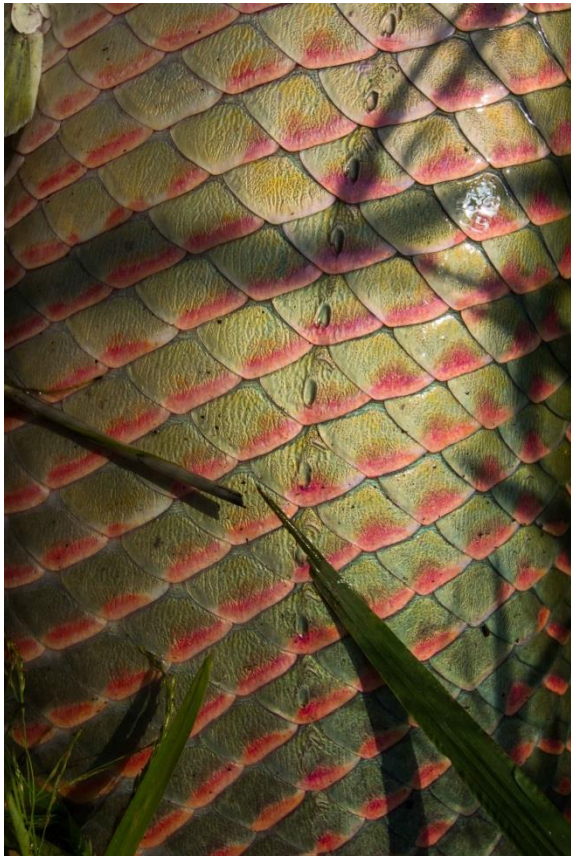
ready to start the day. Everyone had decided that we would try to dredge the deep water with heavy sinking lines again this morning in search of a big fish, then maybe try something else late morning if that wasn't working.



Braulinho motored us, with Ryan as our guide, to the mouth of the small channel that headed to the lagoon we'd fished the first afternoon. We stayed in the main channel, fishing both sides of the boat. Fish of all sizes rolled all around us, and in the very middle of the "river" there were some monster fish, but apparently it's 40+ feet deep there in the middle. Testing a theory we tried some flies with rattles in them to try and make some noise underwater. I did hook one large fish. The fly stopped, I set the hook and it felt like I had bottom...then the bottom started to move so I set hard again and it kept moving slowly away, then nothing as the fly slipped out. Dang!

The rest of the morning, in spite of many casts, was fruitless. It was very hot, so we asked Braulinho to drive us around a bit to cool off and try a different spot. It was still in the main channel but to the side near the shoreline where we could see fish cruising in the shallows. We switched to floating lines, but still could not get a take. Watching these fish cruise the shallows was almost reminiscent of fishing for baby tarpon or snook when they get pushed out of the mangroves on a low tide...and the arapaima acted just as spooky in the shallows as tarpon and snook do on the flats!

From there we decided to return to one of the lagoons that had been so good the day before, and in 15 minutes I managed to hook five small arapaima, landing two of them. It was a good way to end what was otherwise a challenging morning.



We returned to the lodge, where we learned that Allan and Mike had a similar morning, with no luck on big fish with heavy lines then trying shallow water work in one of the lagoons and hooking several arapaima there. Allan did get a couple of shots at large tambaqui and may have had an eat but never did come tight to it.

We ate a lunch of salad, rice, beans (black beans this time, really mixing it up), grilled chicken, potatoe salad, and surubim (catfish). Then it was off to the hammocks to relax for a bit and sweat some more before the afternoon session. Some dark clouds are starting to build and a very slight breeze is picking up, indicating a chance of cooler weather and maybe even some rain this afternoon or evening.

The water levels are starting to drop. From what we've seen, we almost hope they come up instead of down to keep the lagoons open; although perhaps if the water drops far enough it'll make the channel fish better. Nobody knows, which is part of the fun of a true exploratory trip like this!

Most of the group took an afternoon snooze, while I finished reading River of Doubt, the incredible epic and true story of Theodore Roosevelt's exploratory descent of the river that now bears his name. It's a must read for anyone heading to the Brazilian jungle!

At around 2:00 we meandered back to the boats, and decided to again try fishing the main channel with the heavy lines. Rafael was adamant that that technique had been the most effective this season and every taimen they'd caught until we arrived and started doing so well in the lagoons on small



fish had been taken this way. We tried and tried and tried. Fish were rolling everywhere, but we couldn't get them to eat anything. Late in the afternoon I tried a giant popper (the infamous Happy Meal my friend Mark Johnstad had introduced me to while fishing for giant taimen in Mongolia), which did attract several very large arowana but alas no arapaima.

We were finally exhausted from casting the massive twelve weight rods all day, so switched to 8 weight rods and poppers and ended the day catching a bunch of nice-sized arowanas. Plus, as a bonus, my dad landed a piripatinga (small pacu). All told a fun day.

We are of course trying to figure out the big arapaima which seem to be eluding us even though we're using the same techniques that had been working earlier this season. My guess is that the fish are mating or spawning, because there are plenty of fish there but getting them to eat is challenging.

We returned to the lodge, a tougher fishing day – Allan and Mike fared a bit better, with Mike hooking one and Allan three – but still loads of fun as this place is incredible. Dinner was to be later tonight, at 8:00 because the *touristas* were doing an evening canoeing tour. Dinner was good, more of the same fare. Although the basic ingredients are consistent, every meal features a varied style of preparation which keeps things interesting. Satiated and tired from a long fishing day, we promptly retired for the evening.



### ***Monday, November 9, 2015***

The wakeup call this morning was given by a clan of Howler monkeys roaring from the treetops not far away, punctuated by a pair of Scarlet Macaws causing a ruckus as they circled overhead. We enjoyed our fruit and bread and eggs for breakfast, then I swapped out my 500 grain Leviathon line in favor of a Scientific Anglers Titan Taper Sonar 450 grain Intermediate tip line to try something different today.

We motored down the channel and the length of the lake to another far lagoon entrance towards the far end of the lake. We started casting around the entrance, and slowly worked our way into the channel that led back into the lagoon. There were crocodiles everywhere, the most we've seen so far



on the trip. There were a few arapaima rolling, but not nearly as many as we'd been seeing on previous days.

I did spot a couple of good-sized tambaqui cruising through the shallows, but was never able to change rods and make a cast before they disappeared. We continued casting the 12 weight rods, my dad with floating line and a Major Bunker and myself starting

with a Cuda Killer, then changing after a while to an olive and white Andino Deceiver. Soon after the change, I was hooked up to the first fish of the day, a nice arapaima of about 40 pounds.

We continued fishing, and before long my dad was hooked up, this one a nice fish closer to 50 or 60 pounds. A large caiman was very interested in the commotion going on at the boat and kept coming closer and closer, until finally we managed to scare it away by banging on the boat as loud as we could. We got the arapaima into the boat, took a few photos, and released it.



We hit a lull for a while, and I decided to change flies again, this time tying on a black and orange fly of Rafael's. First cast, bang, hooked and landed a small arapaima of about 15 pounds. After the release I tossed the fly back in the water beside the boat and was beginning to strip out line to make a new cast when I felt a tug and set the hook into another small arapaima, literally right under the boat!



We continued working our way further back into the caiman-infested lagoon. My dad hooked and lost a couple more fish, then we were into a double hookup although his fish eventually came loose at the side of the boat while I did land mine, about 30 pounds. We kept fishing and my dad caught a really nice fish about 60 pounds, and just about time to head back for lunch we both hooked up again and this time were able to land, and record with photos, a great arapaima double!



That was more than enough to make our morning, so we cracked a couple of celebratory Brahma Beers for the 30 minute boat ride back to the lodge. Allan and Mike had a similarly eventful morning, including hooking two different caiman in addition to a handful of nice medium-sized arapaima. A fantastic morning for all on the final day of the trip.

We ate another tasty lunch, then settled in to our rooms to rest and relax for a bit before heading out for the afternoon session.

After a nice hammock session we hopped back into the boats and motored off for the final fishing session. The game plan was to return to the area we fished this morning in the hopes to find more arapaima of decent size. But en route Braulinho decided to stop at the small cove at the entrance to the lake, a spot where thousands of cormorants were roosting in the trees. We pulled into the cove and started puttering around with the electric trolling motor, and soon were seeing school after



school of tambaqui, all feeding on the surface. We moved around the lake casting fruit fly patterns and beetles at them. Much akin to a permit in saltwater (which are shaped so similarly to tambaqui), they routinely snubbed their eerily human mouths (complete with molars) at us and refused our flies. I did eventually hook one, a small fish about the size of a dinner plate, which did put up a nice fight on the 8 weight rod. Both my dad and I had several takes, too, but we were

unable to set the hook on any except the one. Still, it was fun to be sightcasting to the schools of feeding fish with topwater patterns!

A bit of a breeze started to pick up, which ended our sight-casting for tambaqui opportunities, although it felt great in the constant sweltering heat to have a bit of air movement. We decided to continue with our original plan and started motoring back up towards the far end of the lake. Mid-lake, we spotted two pink dolphins rolling, our first sightings inside the Mamirauá Reserve.

When we reached the far end of the lake, we resumed casting the twelve weight rods off both sides of the boat as we slowly worked our way into the lagoon. There were caiman everywhere. In fact, as we first pulled up to the lake we spotted 6 crocs in a 50 foot radius, all of them 10 feet long or more! We kept fishing without luck, until my dad had a good hard pull. He set the hook, and was hooked up for a few seconds before the hook slipped out. We continued on, with arapaima rolling periodically to all sides.

Right about the time I was ready to be done with the big heavy rod, my line came taught and I strip set hard. The line didn't budge. Rather, it started pulling in the opposite direction and I knew instantly I was hooked into something big. It moved away from the boat and I set hard one more



time, then the fish rolled on the surface and I could see it was the biggest fish I'd had on since the very first fish four days ago. The fish fought hard, jumping several times. Miraculously the Black and Chartreuse Andino Deceiver stayed in its mouth, and we maneuvered the now-tired fish around a series of crocodiles over towards the shore where we could get it into the shallow grassy water for a photo. Right as I was ready to jump out of the boat the hook slipped out of the fish's mouth. No photo, but everything else one could hope to get from a fish. Braulinho estimated it at 40-50 kilos, or around 100 pounds. A great way to end the arapaima fishing!

We were ready to end on that fish, although I realized that I now had a tambaqui and an arapaima, and although I'd hooked several arowana earlier in the day fishing for arapaima I hadn't actually landed one, so we put the heavy rods away and headed back to the log and wood structure in the channel near the lodge where we could try to catch a few arowana on poppers to end the day.

As we motored out of the lagoon, however, we passed through a giant school of arowana. One literally jumped into the boat as we motored past, slamming right into my dad's chest and shoulder and then bouncing around the inside of the boat and almost breaking our rods. Finally we snagged a hold of the fish and chucked it overboard and back into the water.

20 minutes later we were casting small white poppers for arowana, and my dad was roping them in one after another. It took me a while to finally get one, but I eventually did to complete the second Mamirauá Slam of the trip!

As we motored past Allan and Mike we saw them taking pictures of Mike landing a tambaqui. We learned later that Allan had also landed one, so both of them also managed to connect to a Mamirauá Grand Slam today!

My dad caught a few more arowana including one really big one (close to 8 pounds), then we were ready to be done for the day and return to the lodge. It was a fantastic trip, in a remarkable place. The wildlife, birds, caiman, and fish everywhere is something none of us will ever forget. And so exciting to be fishing in a place no one has ever fly fished before, for a variety of fish that no one has ever tried to catch on a fly rod before. And to top it all off, we were incredibly successful in doing so!



Rodrigo Salles from Untamed Angling was there at the lodge to greet us when we returned. We showered and cleaned up, then had another dinner of, you guessed it, salad and rice and bean and potatoes and chicken and fish. Again, it was delicious! We had a whole new group of tourists joining us for dinner tonight. After dinner we chatted with Rodrigo, then everyone headed in to start packing and hit the sack for the night.



*Tuesday, November 10, 2015*

We awoke at the normal time even though we would not be fishing today. Breakfast was the usual. We learned that the boat would not be departing for Tefè until 11, so we arranged to take a 20 minute boat ride to the community at the mouth of the reserve: Boca di Mamirauá. A local guide named Antonio greeted us on the shore, and gave us a quick tour of the community. Boca consisted of about fifteen houses plus a school, and community building, and the frame of a large church they were in the process of building. And, of course, a soccer field! There was also an additional 5 or six floating cabins, one of which held their pigs and chickens because otherwise the jaguars would come in from the jungle



and eat them. Most of the community members were in a meeting, but there were a handful of small children that followed us around smiling and giving thumbs up signs. The brief tour concluded at a small store with local hand-made crafts, mostly consisting of bead jewelry, jewelry made from the scales of arapaima, and wood carved goods such as miniature canoes, paddles, and dolphins.



It didn't take long to see the village, then we returned to Uacari Lodge to sit and wait and relax until the big transfer boat was set to leave at 11.

Finally 11:00 rolled around, and we boarded the same big "fastboat" that had brought us to the Uacari Lodge just 5 days before. It was an uneventful boat ride down past the community of Boca we had just visited, then down to Rio Japurá to where it joined the massive roiling Salimões (upper Amazon) and past dozens of small motorized boats and canoes heading every which way, many loaded with large cooler obviously used to transport fish or other goods to market.

An hour later we were pulling up to the floating dock in Tefè. We were silently greeted by the same young driver, who loaded our bags into the back of the truck. We drove a short ways out of the mud riverbank and a block into the town where we stopped at the small office for the Uacari Lodge.

There was a small gift store there where we found a few more cheap souvenirs to bring home, then piled back into the truck for another short, 5 minute drive to a small outdoor cafe. Our flight wasn't until 3:00, so we were just killing time as there is nothing to do at the airport. After a half hour of waiting there in the cafe, we continued our stop and start journey through Tefè amidst countless motorcycles and scooters zooming this way and that, finally making our destination at the still under construction Tefè airport.

The guide Ryan was with us, continuing eventually on home to finally meet his newborn daughter. He helped us get checked in, then we cleared security and headed into the supposedly air-conditioned departure area. It did have A/C, but since the building wasn't complete the cool air just left, so we sat and sweated for an hour more before the plane, a few minutes late, finally arrived.

The flight was only about half full, but another nice flight in a new and clean jet plane, pleasant staff, snacks, drinks, and an hour's flight over the Amazon jungle before we descended into the hazy mist of humid Manaus. All of our bags again made the journey, and immediately outside the baggage claim we were met by a smiling Jenny. Jaxson waited a few meters away with the van, and in to time we were back at the Tropical, checked in to our rooms, and starting to re-organize, re pack, and most importantly, shower and cool off!

At 7:00 we all met in the lobby of the hotel. It was the first time the entire group was together, so introductions went around as our 4 from Pirarucù joined Doug A., Richard B., Gary M., Ed M., Chip G., John C., and Kelley M. We got to know each other for a bit, then Jenny and Jaxson showed up and we piled into the van to head out to the Bufalo restaurant. It was about a 25 minute drive through traffic into the downtown area where the restaurant is located.

The Bufalo is a stark contrast to the rustic jungle accommodations we'd been used to. It was open and modernistic in decor. Very nice, with white tablecloths and cloth napkins. They made a large table for us, and we settled in to start feasting. There is a big salad bar where you can load up plates with all sorts of tasty morsels, and at your table a small army of servers constantly come around with sharp knives and hunks of meat which they carve off onto your plate right there. The meats ranged from chicken hearts to sausage, lamb to all sorts of different cuts of beef. And everything was delicious. Before long we were all meat-drunk and stuffed to the gills.

Back at the hotel we had a few Brahma beers and told some fishing yarns in the lobby, then headed off to get a few hours of air conditioned sleep before the long travel day ahead of us in the morning.

### ***Wednesday, November 11, 2015***

5:30 came quickly this morning, still full from the incredible meat-fest meal the night before. We grabbed some coffee and a light breakfast upstairs, then checked out of our rooms and waited for

Jenny and Jaxson to arrive at 8:00. They did, collected the Native Community Fee for the Mariè, and we loaded ourselves and all of our luggage into the van for the short drive to the airport.

We went to the smaller domestic terminal where we checked in for the charter flight. Even though it is a charter flight on “Apui Taxi Aereo” (air taxi), we still had to check all of our bags and rods and go through security. We had a very short wait in the spacious, air conditioned terminal, then a lady called out the flight to São Gabrielle and we exited into the sweltering heat on the tarmac.

The plane was an Embraer 110C Bandeirante, with 12 seats and some space in the back for luggage and supplies. They had pumped cool air into the plane while it sat on the tarmac so it wasn't too bad when we got on board, but as we taxied out to the runway and had to wait for clearance to take off for 20 minutes it got oppressively hot and sweaty inside. Finally we took off to begin the 2 hour 15 minute flight across the Amazon jungle to the town of São Gabriel.



We de-planed in São Gabriel. One of the guides, Guilherme, was there to greet us, along with a husband and wife team that drove the van. There at the airport was the group departing the Mariè, and we had a few moments to chat with them. They had a decent week; the water had come up a lot while they were on the river so they had to work hard for their fish, and while they would have liked to have landed more they did land a few great fish and were all smiles, enjoyed the experience, and universally said that they had a great time.

All of our bags were loaded into the back of a truck while all of the clients piled into a van. Guilherme passed around a bottle of bug spray and strongly recommended we douse ourselves in it because the bugs (No See Ums, not mosquitos) in town and at the port are really bad.



We drove through the town, which took less than two minutes. At the port there was a small store, and Untamed Angling has a “tab” there so you can just grab a bottle of water and they put it on the tab. We watched as Guilherme and a couple of the native guides loaded all of our bags into one of the Untamed flats skiffs, food in giant styrofoam coolers into the other skiff, and then all of the guests into the small transport boat, which was about 20 feet



long and 10 feet wide and in three rows fit 10 clients plus the pilot and the guide Guillermo. I was extra so I rode on one of the flats skiffs by myself with one of the native guides.

We pulled out of the port and started motoring down the massive Rio Negro. It is black water, meaning clear but dark in color because of the tannins and acids in the water because it is such an ancient river and drainage coming out of the oldest part of the Andes. In this area it is broad, about a quarter mile across, and marked with many rocks and “mini-rapids”.

We motored down the Negro for about an hour and a half, then turned right at the Rio Mariè. Just upstream from the mouth, we stopped at a small community to refuel the boats and take a pee break, then continued on up the Mariè. The next hour of the ride was negotiating a series of boulders, but the water is so high that barely the tops of the boulders were visible so it was easily navigable and no real rapids at all. Eventually we stopped at a large rock near a small staircase leading into the jungle for one more pee break, exactly 2 hours from São Gabrielle. From there we continued on, and exactly 4 hours and 45 minutes into the trip we turned a bend in the river and there was the beautiful Untamed Amazon.



Overall it was an interesting boat ride, and really gives you a sense of scope for how far removed you really are from civilization. We had just travelling about as far into the jungle wilderness of the Amazon as is humanly possible. The jungle and river here is so very different from where we'd

spent the past week at Pirarucù. The jungle is thicker and wilder, and yet there is very little wildlife visible. There is also almost no sign of habitation at all.

We pulled up to the lodge and everyone boarded the mothership. We were greeted by the guides and shown to our rooms.

The live-aboard ship, *Untamed Angling*, is a remarkable sight. It was moored adjacent to a stark white sand bar. Three stories tall, the lower level is reserved for staff, the middle (main) floor holds the 8 guest rooms (6 doubles and 2 singles), and the upper floor has the kitchen, dining room and lounge, and a second screened in lounge with more chairs and couches. The guest rooms are very comfortable, with two twin beds and floor to ceiling windows looking out on the Rio Marié and the jungle beyond. There is a huge closet with two sides (one per angler) so plenty of room for stowing clothes, gear, and bags. The room has a small en-suite bathroom with toilet and shower, and just outside the bathroom is a sink area. Under the sink are two baskets, one per angler, for laundry, which is done every day. Everything is clean and well-appointed, bordering on luxurious. The main lounge upstairs starts with a large dining table, then opens up to two long couches and several chairs. There is room for at least 20 people, so with 10-12 guests it remains very spacious. The “outside” lounge is similar with many couches and chairs, plus two hot-tubs in the back. The entire boat is air conditioned, with the exception of the “outer” lounge area which does have a couple of circulating fans for air movement. It operates on solar energy, although they have been having problems with the batteries this year so the solar works during the day but they have to run the generator at night.



All of the guests are raving about how incredible the boat is.

We settled into our rooms, unpacked, and spent the evening glad to finally be here. Appetizers were served, and soon dinner. Dinner was outstanding, steak with roasted garlic and mashed potatoes. Delicious.

After dinner we discussed fishing strategies with Gerson Kavamoto, the head guide. Then one by one everyone trickled off to bed.



### *Thursday, November 12, 2015*

We slept in this morning, waking up a bit before 6 o'clock. Coffee was on upstairs, and breakfast was served at 7:00. There was some cheese, ham, bread, and pancakes set out, and they brought out eggs to order. While we finished breakfast Pablo brought out some lunch fixings so that everyone could build their own lunch with a collection of meats, cheese, and toppings. After breakfast everyone grabbed their gear and headed to the back of the boat.



One by one boats would pull up to the steps at the back entrance of the boat and pairs of anglers would walk down and board their boat. Since nobody was rigged up yet, the boats puttered over to a nearby sandbar and everyone strung up their rods.

Since Ryan had to leave to see his newborn baby, he wasn't here, meaning that although they had 6 boats and plenty of native guides they only had 5 "professional" English speaking guides. Since the lodge capacity is normally only 10 they would have been fine except I was in as an extra, so my dad and I were to fish with Charles, one of the native guides, but without a second "professional" guide. Charles is one of the best native guides, and he and I were



able to communicate well enough with a mixture of broken Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, and hand signals.

We fished a series of lagoons near where the boat was moored the night before. The water is really high, way up in the trees, so we were essentially casting into holes in the foliage and near any overhanging trees or submerged wood. At the end of the first lagoon we'd fished I hooked a small butterfly peacock (called *borboleta* in Portuguese), and as I was bringing it in I noticed that several other fish were chasing it around so I told my dad to cast in there, too. He did so, and was quickly also hooked up, starting the trip with a double! Once those fish were released we tried a few more casts in that area and I did land a nice, large butterfly of about 6 pounds.



We got one more butterfly peacock in the next lagoon we fished, and at lunch were at four fish to the boat, all butterflies. We joined up with Chip's boat at lunch, with Gerson. A nice lunch break in the shade. They had fared overall about the same with a handful of butterflies, although they had seen a few big fish blow up on the hook-less teaser that Gerson was casting.



After lunch we hit a hot spot casting pole dancers, and I landed about 7 or 8 butterflies on the topwater pattern which was exciting. My dad had a few grabs and takes but no solid connections. Then it was slow for a while. Eventually we found a long shallow sandbar where we could see V-wakes moving around and were able to sight cast to some fish, and I got one more there.

We fished a few more lagoons that afternoon, without any action, and eventually it was time to find the boat. We motored upriver about 30 minutes and found the boat still motoring upriver. We climbed out of the flats skiff and onto the *Untamed Amazon*, tired from a long day but satisfied to have caught a few in spite of the high water.

We showered and went upstairs to enjoy some cocktails and appetizers and hear the stories from the rest of the group. Most were similar with a handful of butterflies. We did get 4 big fish for the group, Doug landing a 12 pound Temensis (that straightened a 5/0 Gamakatsu, a testament to the incredible power of these fish!), Richard got one about 15, Allan got two big fish one about 15 and one about 17.



Everyone is happy, and it was a great day overall. The place is beautiful. Wildlife viewings from the group include dolphins, monkeys, macaws, toucans, parrots, and of course a few fish!

Dinner was another remarkable meal, risotto with a giant “steak” of arapaima. The chef aboard the *Untamed Amazon* is amazing with the quality of the dishes he prepares, as well as the presentation. To eat food like this so far removed from civilization is unfathomable.

### ***Friday, November 13, 2015***

Even though we went to bed early and slept well, it was tough waking up this morning. Tired from a long couple of weeks of fishing. We made our way up for breakfast and coffee, the same program as the day before.



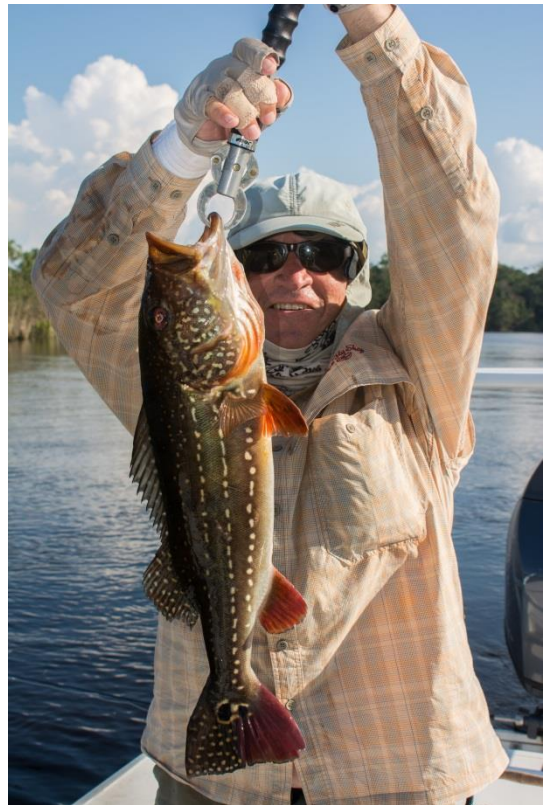
At 8:00 everyone loaded into the boats and headed out for the day. All 6 boats were going upriver. Two would fish some lagoons in the main Mariè, two boats heading left up the upper Mariè, and two would turn right up the Turi.

My dad and I were one of the boats heading up the Turi. From the Untamed Amazon it was about an hour boat ride to the confluence, then we continued another 30 minutes upstream. Even this far upriver the water was super high. You could see the high water mark in the trees, just 3 or 4 feet higher than where it's at right now. Way up in the trees. We could finally see some white sand bars at least, which was exciting.

In the first spot we started fishing there was a small channel curving around a small island off the main river. Before long my dad was into a fish, a small butterfly peacock. Not long afterwards he hooked up again, and I cast into the same area and we were into our first double of the day.

We then started motoring to the lagoon, but Charles saw a white sandbar he liked so we stopped to fish where the sand turned red in the black water. We caught a couple more butterflies there, and I managed to hook and land a small “paca asu” a non-spawning temensis. It was only 2 kilos (about 5 pounds), but still fun to hook, bigger than the butterflies and much stronger. It was dark with a lot of small white spots, none of the prominent bars you see in the “asu” variety.

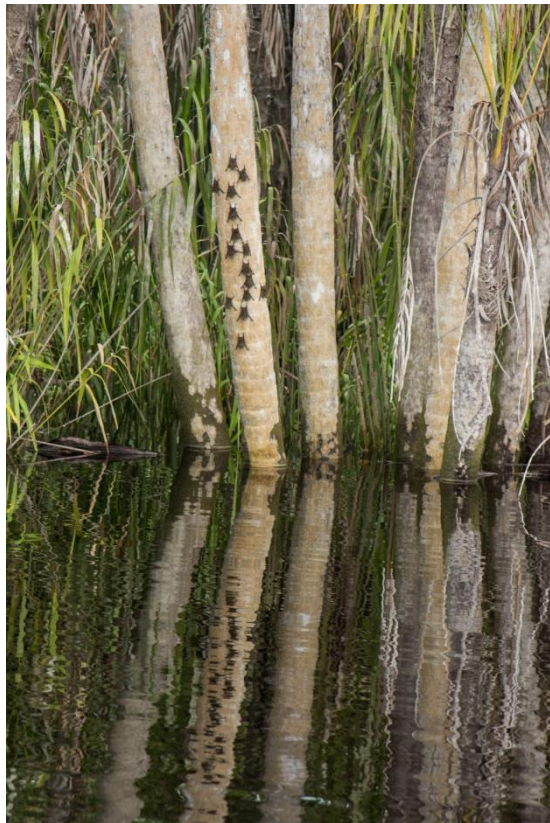
From there we headed to a large lagoon with a big island in the middle. Right at the point, near a stand of molongo trees, we got into a bunch of butterflies, one after another and a couple of doubles, landed at least 15 fish between the two of us. In between fish, we were kept very busy dodging the many bees buzzing around





our heads and landing on our buffs, and swatting the even more ubiquitous No-See-ums that kept creeping under our glasses and buffs.

We finally hit a small lull in the action, and decided to find a bit of shade for lunch. Ironically, the bugs didn't follow us into the shade so we enjoyed a nice cool, quiet bug-free snack.



After lunch we fished the same spot with no further success, then moved to a new spot. For the rest of the afternoon we explored a handful of sandbars, small lagoons, and basically anywhere on the river that Charles saw a grove of molongo trees, and almost every spot we hooked at least a few fish. A couple of times we were even able to spot the fish on the white sand bottom and sight cast to them. Late in the afternoon my dad hooked up with a good fish, and landed his first Paca of the trip. Charles weighed it on the official scale at 3 kilos, so a 6.6 pound fish. Nice!

We returned to the mothership tired and happy, to learn that we by far had the most action that day. John and Kelley did see two really big fish, and Kelley hooked and broke off one so that was exciting. Their boat also had about 12 butterflies, so they, too, had a decent day. The water is just really, really high making for challenging fishing.

Everyone cleaned up and enjoyed some more tasty appetizers (grilled pirarucù). Dinner was bacon-stuffed chicken and mashed bananas (like mashed potatoes but different!). Chip and Gerson went out to go catfishing, but returned before too long because of a torrential downpour. Ed, Gary, Doug and I solved the world's problems with some interesting discussion and debate, then everyone meandered off to sleep for the night.

### ***Saturday, November 14, 2015***

We had the normal wakeup and the same breakfast, and at 8:00 everyone was in the boats and heading out for the day. All six boats headed up the Turi, with boats stopping here and there. We motored for a full hour before stopping to start fishing. The water was up at least a foot, maybe more, from the day before.

It was an incredible morning. We started off casting towards some mologno trees. Right off the bat we started hooking fish, a bunch of nice butterfly peacocks. We had double after double, numerous

hookups, it was a busy morning! At one point I hooked a small “Paca” that weighed 5 pounds. Amazing how the same size fish can fight so much harder than the butterflies, which fight pretty hard in their own right.

We kept fishing -- and catching, right up to midday, then motored a short distance to meet up with Doug and Mike in Gerson’s boat for lunch.

After lunch we started fishing again, and before long I saw a very large fish attack my John Leonard custom streamer. It was a hard fight with strong pulls, and soon I had a big temensis in the boat. Gerson came over to help net and measure the fish, which weighed on the scale at 17 pounds!

We continued fishing -- and catching -- more and more butterflies. Loads of fun. Late in the afternoon my dad hooked a Paca Asu, and while he was bringing it in I briefly hooked its “friend” but it came unglued. His fish weighed in at 5 pounds.

Soon thereafter I hooked another big fish in a small channel. It pulled hard, and after a 2 minute fight the fly came out. We never saw the fish, but it was definitely big! I was never in control. We continued fishing, and amongst a few more butterflies I landed another small Paca, this one probably 4 pounds.

From a fishing standpoint, it was an incredible day. We had at least a dozen double hookups, and easily landed 50 or more borbolettas (butterfly peacocks), plus 4 temensis from 4 to 17 pounds. A stellar day of fishing in spite of really tough conditions.



By now it was 5:00 and we were still a long boat ride up the Turi, so we turned the boat for home. 15 minutes into the boat ride we were hit with a wall of heavy wind, and soon thereafter hard rain which pounded us the duration of the boat ride back to the lodge.

Back at the mothership, we learned that everyone had fairly similar days, with good action on butterflies and a handful of big fish. Ed and Gary had the best big fish day with four toads landed from 15 to 21 pounds! Mike got a 12.5 pound fish and Allan landed another 18 pounder. A great day for the group in spite of tough conditions.

We swapped war stories of blisters, line burns, bee stings, and big fish, enjoying tasty appetizers and cocktails until the main course of fettucine alfredo with mussels and shrimp came out. Delicious!

After dinner we told more fishing stories, played some cards, and one by one everyone disappeared to bed for the evening.

***Sunday, November 15, 2015***

After breakfast we motored almost two hours to get way upstream on the Turi, in an attempt to find lower water levels. We fished hard, but only found a handful of small borboletas. We did have a nice shore lunch of grilled butterfly peacock. On the long ride back we got hammered with an intense, very wet rainstorm.

Back at the lodge everyone else fared somewhat better than we did, with a handful of butterflies here and there. Chip got his first big fish a 20 pounder! And Ed landed a 20 pounder as well. John and Kelley landed a 13 and a 15. Tough conditions for the day, but some impressive catches by the group nonetheless.





***Monday, November 16, 2015***

This morning after breakfast three of the boats, including ours, had an extra jug of gas strapped to the back deck, indicating another long boat ride. And it was. Two hours and 54 miles upstream later, we stopped at a small beach to stretch, a place where they'd set up another camp area.

We started fishing there working our way around a small island of molongo trees. Deep in the island we could hear a very large fish splashing around, but we were never able to bring it out. We did land a few good-sized butterflies, however, and soon had already done better than the entire day yesterday.

We could hear John and Kelley whooping and hollering nearby, and Charles gradually worked us over to the backside of the same malongo trees they were successfully working, and we, too, started getting into some good numbers of smaller butterflies. It was awesome, we could just see them through the thin trees on the other side, and both boats, all four anglers, were regularly hooked up to good sized, hard fighting, leaping butterfly peacocks one after another. We stayed there till lunch time, then returned to the sandbar to join the other boats for a quick lunch.



After lunch we returned to the little island to try and get that big fish, but soon it started to rain in torrential buckets. We donned our rain gear and Charles motored off downstream to try to get away from the rain.

Once we were dry, we resumed fishing. We spent the afternoon bouncing our way downriver fishing a series of small eddie lines and coves along the main river. We caught a butterfly here and there, and in one small lagoon dad finally landed a dogfish, our first of the trip. Soon thereafter I



landed, in the same spot, a bicuda. The two fish look nearly identical except the dogfish have a lot of teeth, while the bicuda are toothless with a beak-like mouth. Both look like small barracuda's in shape. They're the size of a large trout, pull hard on the end of the line and jump repeatedly, a lot of fun.

We had a few large swirls around our flies, but no big fish hooked yet. Late in the

afternoon we started getting into lots of piranhas. My dad lost 4 flies in a row to the toothy critters, before we finally each landed one. These were big black piranhas, nearly twice the size of the smaller red piranhas we'd landed in Mamirauá. Charles quickly dispatched them to take home for dinner!

At the last spot of the day we pulled into the giant swirly backeddy in a bend in the river, littered with dead palm fronds and joined by a small family of small grey freshwater dolphins rolling on the outside seam. We fished into the logs and palm fronds, when I felt something plucking at my fly, one of the smaller streamers my dad had tied. I kept stripping, and near the boat finally felt the line come taught. Although it was a subtle take, it turned out to be a huge fish. It pulled hard but each time I was able to turn it before it got into the trees. Soon the giant *as* peacock was coming in to the boat, and just as Charles was starting to reach for it the hook slipped out. We would get no photo or official weight, but it was a beautiful fish and quite a bit larger than the 17 pounder I caught earlier in the week. I'm 100% confident it was well over the 20 pound mark.

From there we called it a day and started off for the long boat ride back to the boat. The upper Marié was interesting, quite a bit different than the Turi. The trees are a little bit bigger and older, and we saw quite a bit more birdlife with lots of macaws and toucans and a handful of birds of prey and herons. The river is larger, and though it seemed like less lagoons and molongo trees the lagoons we did see looked larger.

Partway downriver the sky got really dark. We donned our rain gear, and soon were once again getting pounded with a torrential downpour. Soaking wet, we finally made it back to the boat. How nice to return to such a lovely home base after a long day on the river. Dinner was delicious as always with steak and potatoes followed by a tasty dessert.

***Tuesday, November 17, 2015***

I woke up before my alarm went off this morning, ready for the final day of fishing on our Brazilian adventure. Upstairs the coffee was ready, soon followed by the usual breakfast of fruit, pancakes, meat, cheese, and eggs and bacon. After eating, we prepared for the day and at 8:00 am everyone was in the boats and motoring off for the day.

The liveaboard had moved a ways downstream during the night, so we were now a good distance downriver on the Mariè, but not as far as where we'd started only 6 days before so it would all be new water. We motored a upstream just a few minutes and immediately started fishing a huge lagoon near a bend in the river.

As we cast around the edge of the lagoon, we each caught a couple of butterflies. It was a good way to start the day. Action wasn't hot and heavy, but we managed to catch one fish here, one fish there. And we missed more than a few. Then suddenly my dad came tight on a huge fish. It rapidly pulled out line and in seconds had tore off and deep into the trees. It was simply un-stoppable; exciting and disappointing at the same time. Charles got in the water to retrieve the fly which had 30 feet of fly line wrapped up in submerged trees.

The rest of the morning was similar with one butterfly peacock here another there, enough to keep us busy. Twice we had giant peacocks blow up on the teaser, one coming clear out of the water, but we were never able to get them to return to eat our flies. My dad also landed a couple of small dogfish. Eventually a family of dolphins started swarming around us, so we decided to leave and go have lunch and find some new fishing grounds.

After lunch we started bouncing our way downstream fishing a lagoon here and there as we gradually worked our way down. We continued to get a hard grab here and there from butterflies, keeping us on our toes and ever-ready for the huge fish that we'd seen and knew were there somewhere lurking in the dark waters of the river.



Late in the day my dad hooked what felt like another large peacock, but after a few seconds the hook slipped out. Bummer! Finally in the last spot of the day my dad ended the trip by hooking and landing a very large butterfly, at least 6 pounds. It pulled so hard we thought for sure he finally had his big asu! No big asu, but plenty of butterflies and at least he did hook a river monster earlier in the day.



That night we learned that Richard, too, had hooked several big peacocks that all took him to task in the woody debris. John did land a 25 pounder though, the biggest of the trip, and nearly a world record on fly tackle. Overall 6 different people in our group landed fish over 20 pounds. Remarkable, especially considering how high the water was! That would be an excellent season on most known Amazon peacock bass rivers, and we did it in one week with tough conditions. That's a true testament to this remarkable fishery.



Dinner was a special event with the chef's signature Paella dish, and it was fantastic. Then the 6 guys who'd landed 20+ pound fish were honored into the 20 Pounder Club: Gary, Ed, Allan, Chip, John, and Doug.

After dinner everyone packed up a bit, told some stories, and eventually found their way to bed.



***Wednesday, November 18, 2015***

The alarm went off at 5:00 am this morning as we had to be ready for breakfast at 6 in order to leave early for the long travel back to Manaus. We had breakfast, then all of our luggage was loaded onto the back of two of the flats skiffs. I boarded one of the skiffs, while the rest of the group climbed into the transport boat that had brought them upriver just a few days ago, and we started off motoring downriver for the four hour ride to São Gabrielle.

It was almost an entirely different river than what we'd ascended just a week earlier. The water was so high coming in that we saw hardly any rocks. Now that the water was finally starting to drop, there were giant boulders all over the place. The rocks are worn smooth by the thousands of years they've been in the river, so they are invisible in the black water until they finally pop up above the surface. It was an interesting, and fortunately uneventful, ride back to town. We stopped midway downriver at a beautiful white sand beach in the middle of the river to stretch our legs and take a group photo.



There in São Gabrielle our luggage was unloaded and piled into the back of a truck while we boarded the air conditioned van for the 5 minute ride to the airport. The plane arrived just a few minutes after we did, and we had a few minutes to chat with the arriving guests before we boarded the plane and took off.



We flew for about an hour and a half before landing in Tefè to drop off Ed and Gary, who were heading in to continue their journey at Pirarucù. The plane stayed on the runway, sweltering in heat and humidity, for about 15 minutes while it was refueled, then we were back up in the air for the remaining hour and half flight back to Manaus. I nodded off for a moment, and when I awoke I turned around and observed that everyone else on the plane was also asleep. We were exhausted full a full week of fishing!

Soon we were back on the ground in Manaus, where we gathered out bags and were greeted by Jenny and Jaxson. They drove us back to the Tropical where we checked into our day rooms. We re-packed and organized our gear for the trip home, showered up, then re-convened for a couple of final caipirinhas to celebrate a great and memorable trip. John, Kelly, and Chip wanted to take a cab out to a restaurant and they did so, while the rest of us opted to simply eat upstairs and try to get a few hours of sleep. We were in luck in that they served tambaqui in the buffet, by far the best and favorite of all the fish dishes we'd sampled over the past few weeks.

We slept hard and good for about 3 hours before waking up at a bit after midnight. We met in the lobby at 1:00 am, where Jackson greeted us. We loaded everything into the mini-bus for the 10 minute drive to the airport, where we soon were checked in for our flight, through security, and waiting for the departure.

The 4 hour flight from Manaus to Panama City was smooth and easy and we all slept for the duration. We had a 3 hour layover there in Panama, before we would say goodbye to Doug, Chip, John, and Kelley and continue north to San Francisco and home. We enjoyed a light breakfast and hot coffee, watching an intense morning thunderstorm pound on the glass and drench the runway beyond as we pondered the past few weeks. The sights, sounds, smells, and senses of the heart of the jungle resounded within us still, and surely would for many days to come. It was a marvelous adventure, and one none of us will ever forget.