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Peacocks

Amazonian Angling Adventure

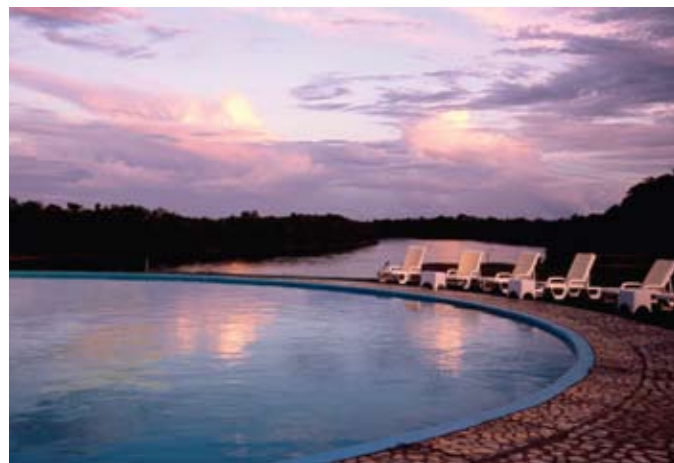
in the Agua Boa



The coloration and camouflage markings on peacock bass—note the “eye spot” on the fish’s posterior, which diverts attacks away from the head—help the fish survive in their brutal Amazonian environment.

Though there are many fish species you can catch with a fly in Brazil—the mermaid-like arawana, the giant boil-making arapaima, the catfish and piranhas—as far as the angling world is concerned, the peacock bass is the queen of the Amazon. They are eager to take flies and are renowned for tackle-busting strength.

On my first day fishing the Agua Boa, an upper tributary of the Amazon River in Brazil, I learned that a peacock bass is not like a largemouth bass, when I attempted to lip-land a 14-pound fish. With one shake of its head, it shredded the skin on my thumb. For the moment I held the fish, I was stunned by its beautiful colors, the black pupils of its eyes rimmed with red and orange, and didn’t notice blood running down my arm until my girlfriend pointed it out to me.



The camp we fished was about two hours by small plane northwest of Manaus, Brazil, near the Venezuelan border. It is also adjacent to a reserve set aside by both countries for the largest extant tribe of Amazon peoples, the Yanamame. Decades ago, a doctor from Manaus negotiated a lease on this entire 160-mile long tributary from the headwaters to its confluence with the Rio Branco. The river is patrolled to keep out commercial fishermen, so the pristine nature of the place is

preserved. The only indication from the air that a camp exists is a beige landing strip, like a huge stick of gum sitting in the forest perpendicular to the river. Lance Ranger, an Englishman who lives in Switzerland, bought the camp buildings and the lease a few years ago. A world adventurer and businessman, Ranger says he owns the camp primarily because he loves fishing, and because he was touched by the raw power and intense beauty of the place.

Fly anglers depart for adventure on Brazil's Agua Boa, a tributary of the mighty Amazon, from Agua Boa Lodge, a fishing camp not far from the Venezuelan border. The surrounding jungle is part of a reserve for the Yanamame Amazonian tribe.





You don't go to the Amazon only to fish. You can catch peacock bass introduced in roadside canals in Florida. You go, or at least I did, to enter one of the most vast wilderness areas on the planet, a sea of green that stretches for thousands of miles, an intricate freshwater system that drains the largest rainforest ecosystem in the world.

What became apparent is that everything in the Amazon is trying to eat something else, or paralyze it with venom and then eat it. Maybe this is the case everywhere in the world, but here it seemed more out in the open. Besides biting insects, there are beautiful freshwater stingrays that you don't want to accidentally

step on. Most of the region's fish have formidable teeth, and there is

Colorful streamers trigger strikes from peacock bass and (below right) species such as jacunda and arawana. Everything in the Amazon is out for a meal. Don't be surprised if an ever-present caiman, not fooled by a peacock's camouflage, takes a bass off your line.

always a chance that an ever-present caiman may come after you when casting from a sand bank. The peacock bass is a relentless predator. Most of the fishing on the Agua Boa is done in pond-like lagoons off the main river (at least in December when we were there) that you access by narrow channels on foot or in small boats. (Trapped in tight places by our boat, a few peacock bass jumped into our laps, trying to get away.) Fishing through the lagoons on a quiet day, you often hear splashes and crashes echoing from bank-to-bank. This comes from peacock bass herding baitfish against the shore. If they can't catch them in shallow water peacocks push them onto land, where they can be seen flopping around trying to get back into the water. The tiger herons, sun bitterns and kingfishers wait on shore to eat the baitfish that peacock bass leave stranded.



I'll never forget one morning entering a quiet lagoon in a small rowboat. I sensed this lagoon had not been visited in quite a while. Standing up slowly in the boat and looking toward shore, I saw huge fish just milling about looking for food. They paid us no heed, just went about their business. When I cast a fly the fish went mad. Having three or four, 15- to 18-pound fish storm my fly simultaneously put me on the edge of my seat. I was like a kid watching a huge pike stalking the minnow under his bobber.

Later I sat in the hot sun and watched the waves the bass created as they pushed bait onto the banks, and the long-legged wading birds fight over those small fish. I liked to think they'd be doing the same thing if we hadn't been there. 🪲

Val Atkinson is one of the leading fly-fishing photographers working today; James Prosek is one of the sport's leading writers and illustrators. For information on the Agua Boa Lodge, go to flyfishingtravel.com, sweetwatertravel.com or flywatertravel.com.



