



PASSPORT

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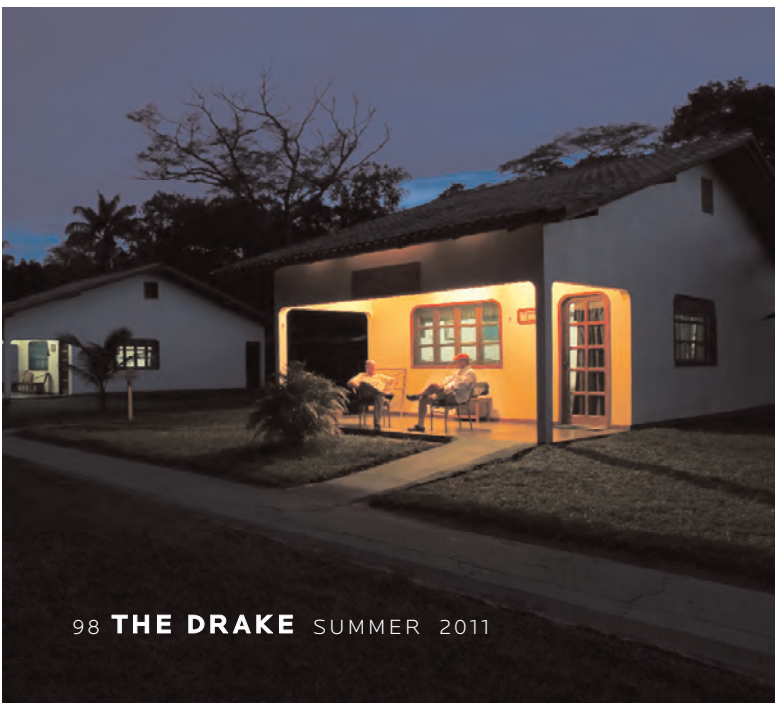
JIM JUST LOST A HEAVY FISH AND HE WASN'T HAPPY ABOUT IT. WORSE, he lost his Boga grip along with it. It wasn't Jim's fault. Our guide, Joseph, was holding the fish while he took the hook out. Then he was holding it so we could take a few photos. Then he wasn't holding it at all. Gone—a nice fat peacock, with \$140 Boga still in its mouth, both buried at the bottom of a big, muddy, Amazonian lagoon.

As an uncomfortable silence overtook the boat, Jim and I could see that Joseph was upset. All guides take pride in making mistake-free decisions that won't cost the client; Brazilian guides particularly so. We tried telling him as best we could, Portuguese not being the native tongue of the Rockies, that losing the fish was no big deal. Besides, we could always buy another Boga, and it was clear that nothing could be done about it anyway. The Aqua Boa River was still high and off-color from December rains, with water visibility about four inches at best. That grip and the peacock attached to it were beyond gone; we hadn't a chance in a million of finding either.

But Joseph believed. He kept poling us around the lagoon, staring at the water. He did it for so long that Jim and I started to get anxious, so we began thinking of ways to non-verbally ask Joseph to move on. After all, losing a nice fish and a Boga is forgivable, but wasting all afternoon searching for them was not. Yet Joseph just ignored us. So we kept on casting, while he kept on looking at the water, seemingly oblivious to the fruitless nature of his quest....









If peacock bass aren't the world's most exotic-looking fish, they're in the top three. The bright red eye on the males looks like the burning ember of a campfire, and the skin colors are rivaled only by those of a fresh-from-the-sea dorado. But what really distinguishes a peacock is the fight. A big largemouth might be five or six pounds, but peacocks—found primarily in Central and South American waters—routinely push 12 to 15, with 20-pounders taken from the Agua Boa River every year.

Still, a stout rod and a strong line ought to be able to stop one, so we didn't think much of it when, on our second morning, my travel partner Jim Klug hooked a good fish ten yards from shore using a nine-weight and a 20-pound leader. We were casting sinking whistlers into muddy water so we hadn't seen the take. But when it ran back to shore, zig-zagging its way through thick jungle-cover before announcing its release with a loud and splashy departure deep in the woods—all inside of six seconds—we knew it had been a big bass.

Thing is, Klug—not a man often described as petite—had tried to stop it. And it wasn't a case of a too-loose drag, I saw the bend in the rod before the fish hit the shoreline, and an adequately leaded nine-weight should have been enough, but wasn't. Thus endeth lesson number one: Don't underestimate, especially when blind casting, the size and strength of a peacock that might appear. (It was also a reminder that these are finger-condom worthy fish—beware the skinny sinking line, especially with wet hands.)

"That is one of the challenges here in high water," says Carlos Azevedo, who's managed Agua Boa Amazon Lodge for the past six years. "You might see a small fish near the surface and think that is the one you're casting to. But then a 15-pounder will come out of nowhere."

Agua Boa was founded nearly 17 years ago by a Brazilian doctor named John Wilt, who was at the time providing health care to villagers up and down the Agua Boa River and its tributaries. Ten years ago, in the summer of 2001, the resort became the first flyfishing-only lodge in Brazil. Its northern location in Brazil means you must fly through Manaus, a surprisingly large and metropolitan city in the middle of the jungle, where the Rio Negro pours into the Amazon. Manaus is only a five-hour flight from Miami, but if you're looking for isolation, Agua Boa is your place. It's a two hour puddle-jumper flight over endless jungle from Manaus to the lodge, and the closest town—by a loose definition of "road"—is Caracara, about 80 miles away. The combination of great fishing, exotic wildlife, good food, and 18 species of fish puts Agua Boa on many a flyfisher's bucket list.

Big peacocks are easily the number one target out of those 18 species, but far from the only one worth chasing. Motoring along upstream, we found pockets of feeders in back eddies or side channels, where groups of smaller fish would happily crush poppers for ten minutes or so, until the last brave soul could no longer be coaxed to the surface. These smaller fish are usually butterfly peacocks, a less colorful sub-species than the 20-pounders with bright orange gills that most people picture when they think of Brazilian bass. (It is butterflies that were planted in the canals of Miami in the '70s, and have thrived ever since.)

There are also red piranha and black piranha; the barracuda-like bicuda; monster catfish to 100 pounds; the saber-toothed Payara; and the prehistoric Aruana, which has evolved to the point of leaping into riverside bushes for food. But no fish in Amazon waters has created more myth and mystique than the tiny candiru, which can invade and attach itself as a parasite to the human urethra—a fact not lost on any angler who's ever peed into a Brazilian river. Despite the much-criticized claim that they can "swim up your urine stream," and despite there being but one documented case of a candiru found inside a urethra—a 1997 incident that was highly dramatized in a 2010 episode of *Animal Planet*—it might still be a good idea to pee in the woods instead.



Penis invaders aside, it's the uber-aggressive peacock bass that holds the broadest appeal to the most diverse collection of anglers. And it's easy to see why: Bass fishermen love them because peacocks act every bit like a largemouth or smallie, only bigger. Trout fishermen, particularly those who enjoy throwing streamers, feel right at home because it's like fishing for brown trout in the fall—casting into cover and stripping out, looking for the chase. And finally, the ambush-type nature of peacocks makes casting to them similar to snook fishing, so veteran saltwater anglers also adapt well.

In fact, peacock bass exhibit many of the best characteristics of dozens of our favorite gamefish: they school up and herd baitfish, working a shoreline like roosterfish or false albies; they will follow a fly all the way back to the boat without eating, like the most timid and wary of permit (why the guides make you cast so far); and they can be sight-fished on the flats like stripers or bonefish, which is the most common way to chase them at Agua Boa, though higher water allowed very little sight-fishing on our trip.

River levels should be given serious consideration when planning a trip to Agua Boa or any other Amazon-based lodge. I'd made one previous trip to the region—four years earlier on the Xingu River, a tributary in the state of Para now threatened by the Belo Monte Dam project. It was also a December trip and the water was so high that we couldn't seriously consider peacocks until the final two days. Nevertheless, we did catch several bicuda and a few Payara during the high-water days. And a hole below a waterfall produced a seven-pound black piranha—about which, like the candiru and certain Brazilian wildlife, many misperceptions abound.

"People have this image of the Amazon as a really dangerous place, and it just isn't true," says Azevedo. "They call and ask, 'What are the snakes down there, and what are the spiders?'"

We didn't have any problems with snakes or spiders. But there

were a couple 12-foot-crocs to meet us at the dock every day, and from what I understand about freshwater stingrays in the Amazon, you might want to limit your wet-wading.

The tradeoff is that we also saw more than a dozen spider monkeys swinging from tree-top to tree-top; we saw Brazilian birds like egrets and parrots, macaws and Ibis, even the stork-like Jabiru. And though we didn't see a panther, we could have.

We motored each morning, got rained on a couple of times, but had such a pleasant ride—no wind, no chop, no waves—so much more comfortable than a flats boat trip during questionable Keys weather. Some of the boat rides were long, but I don't think it was out of necessity as much as a simple desire by the guides—like all guides—to get a little exploring in, especially when we would push far back into the side creeks, like sneaking with Mexican flats guides through the old Mayan trails of the Yucatan.

It was through one of these tight and narrow trails that Joseph led us to Jim's 12-pounder, the one hopelessly gone missing with a Boga attached to its mug. It had now been nearly 40 minutes since the bass had disappeared. Jim and I had long given up hope, when Joseph suddenly announced: "I found it."

To say that Jim and I looked at each other in disbelief would be an understatement. We were both skeptical. But Joseph reached down, grabbed a small snorkeling mask, secured it over his face, and dove in, coming up about eight seconds later with what remained of the peacock, Boga grip still hanging from its lips. "What the...?"

What Joseph had been looking for were tiny bubbles rising to the surface, which is apparently a dead giveaway that the bass was being devoured—by piranhas. And when Joseph found said school of piranhas feeding ferociously on our fish, he did what I'm sure any of you would have done in a similar situation: He dove in, *stuck his hand in the middle of the feeding piranhas*, and took the fish away from them.

