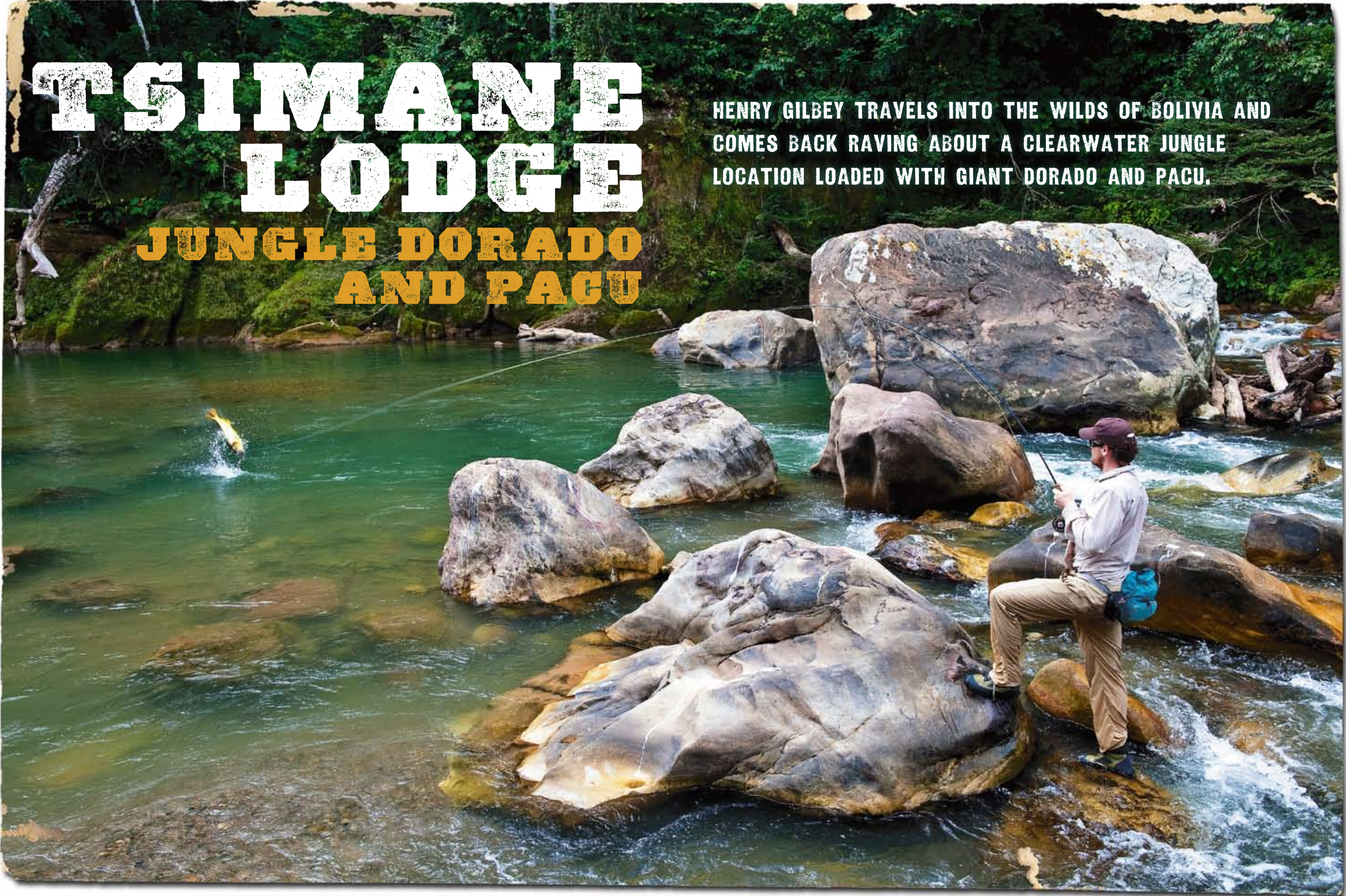
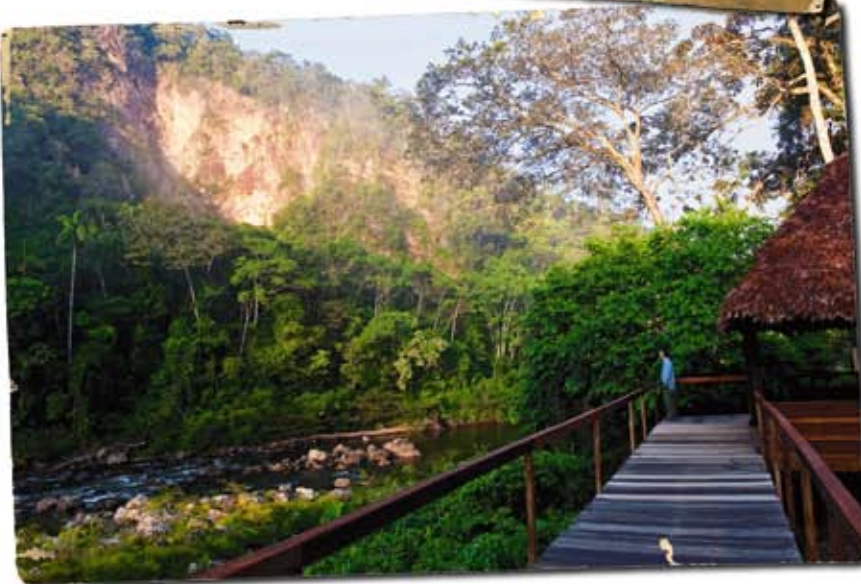


# **TSIMANE LODGE**

## **JUNGLE DORADO AND PACU**

HENRY GILBEY TRAVELS INTO THE WILDS OF BOLIVIA AND COMES BACK RAVING ABOUT A CLEARWATER JUNGLE LOCATION LOADED WITH GIANT DORADO AND PACU.





IF YOU would prefer to spend your evening looking at a bunch of fishing pictures instead of reading a lengthy article extolling the virtues of a particular species or location, then allow me to save you the hassle right now. Chasing big dorado and the rare Amazon pacu (known also as pirapitinga or even freshwater permit) in clear rivers within the pristine jungles of Bolivia is flat out the best freshwater fly fishing I have ever seen. There you go. Have a great evening. Skip my words, have a look at the photos and get yourself out there. It's that good.

But if you like to immerse yourself in a proper adventure fishing story, then please read on and I'll do my best to take you deep into the remote Bolivian jungle. Allow me to bring you up to speed with one of the world's newest and most out there fishing experiences. It's one of those trips that does not really begin to properly sink in until you are back home and playing those key moments over and over in your head.

Dorado are just an awesome fish to catch, indeed it's not until you go and spend some time in parts of South America that you will understand how much these magnificent fish

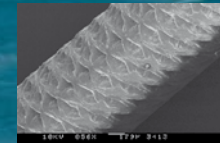
Top: A local ger camp surrounded by livestock on the desolate Mongolian steppe.

Middle: Fish Mongolia's fixed ger camp on the Delger-Muron river. We stayed our first night here and then rafted off downstream and spent the rest of our nights under canvas. Note the chimney poking out of the ger's roof; the wood burning stove is like lifeblood in the cold.

Bottom: Peace and quiet for the morning movements. Without doubt the 'prettiest' loo/toilet/bog I have ever seen. Ian relaxes and reads a comic to help pass the time.

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Microscopic view of Sharkskin line



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- Sink Rate: Tip section 1.5 – 2.00 i.p.s
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Top: Pete McLeod with a decent lenok he nailed one glorious afternoon. It's tempting to spend far too much time chasing these greedy fish, but the taimen are always calling.  
Middle: I have been waiting a long time for the right light and geography conditions to nail this kind of photo. Alex McLeod unhooks yet another good lenok and wonders why on earth the photographer (me) is literally shaking with excitement at being able to create this exposure. Mongolia is off the scale special for so many reasons.



mean to so many fishermen. For some reason we know these fish as “golden dorado”, but in reality it makes no sense. “Dorado” already means “gold” in Spanish, so we’ll call them what they are. Dorado. Fishing for dorado usually involves blind casting with either fly, lure or bait, very much like when targeting their long lost cousins, the tigerfish in southern Africa. But the more you learn about dorado fishing, the more you begin to hear these rumours of unspoilt, remote locations, where it is possible to sight fish for them in some kind of utopia where the rivers run clear. Imagine great lumps of savage golden predators swimming like trout in see-through waters. I was sold the first time I ever heard of this.

Somewhere like La Zona in Argentina sure does chuck up plenty of massive dorado, and the fishing is huge fun and gloriously unsubtle (my kind of thing). But nobody could ever claim that a huge dam across a big river is anything special as regards a location, or that you are ever really seeing the fish you are fishing for. Cue the remote jungles of Bolivia that nestle the in foothills of the mighty Andes mountain range. Is this the dorado fishing paradise that has been searched for as relentlessly as an archaeologist might search for an ancient, rumoured Mayan city? The Argentinean company Untamed Angling seem to think so, and considering that the same people opened up La Zona to sport fishermen, I was inclined to believe them.

The three of us are waiting for a flight out of the domestic airport at Santa Cruz in Bolivia. You know the usual thing by now I am sure. Rod tubes, tropical shirts, sunglasses, travel bags, all my camera gear, and a whole overload of excitement. Anybody within a mile radius can tell we are visiting fishermen. We are led out to the Cessna and we take off into the middle of nowhere with a strong, warm crosswind tugging at the

little aircraft. As soon as we clear the outskirts of the sprawling city of Santa Cruz, it’s jungle, jungle and more jungle below us. Very suddenly any sense of civilisation as we know it has ended. I find it endlessly reassuring that to find the best fishing on this earth, we tend to have to head as far from big population centres as possible. Lots of people and lots of fish simply do not mix, and I am guessing that most of us here thrive on taking the odd journey as far away from massed humanity as possible.

Bearing in mind that none of us really have much of an idea what to expect, it is with some relief that a couple of hours later our pilot put the

**IMAGINE GREAT  
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I WAS SOLD THE  
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plane down on a non-descript grass strip next to a winding jungle river. Amongst the wonderfully expressive local Tsimane Indian faces are a couple of guys wearing the obligatory guide “uniform” – light trousers and shirts, baseball caps and that intense but friendly look of people who have spent some decent time somewhere very remote. We help load the bags onto narrow motorised canoes and set off upstream, but us three travellers, I think, just stared in a state of wonder at the clear river water loaded up with vast shoals of baitfish. Clear water,

plenty of small fish, plus big blue skies and a distinct lack of sport fishing pressure. Looks pretty good to me.

What I would love to be able to tell you is that we literally fell onto a bus load of huge dorado the moment we had dumped our bags. But it wasn’t like that. I wish it had been, but our first few days were tough. The trips are based around the group fishing two very different areas, with generally three days spent at each location. This first place on the Secure river was a simply sensational setting, with the comfortable lodges built atop a small escarpment overlooking the river. All around us was just about the most impenetrable jungle I have ever come across. From time to time we saw some huge dorado moving up river right below camp, and reports kept coming in from the second location that their fishing was on fire. We caught a fair few dorado up to around 15lb, but they were resolutely not playing ball with us as the guys said they should be. We are all guilty of building a place up in our heads before a trip, but I guess we just got unlucky to start with. The actual fishing varied between working pockets of clearer water to swinging big flies across and down relatively coloured runs and pools like we would for Atlantic salmon, albeit on generally far smaller sections of river. Very intimate fishing if that makes sense. Anywhere else and it might have been classed as awesome, but it was not how it was meant to be and we knew it

When it came to heading back downstream and catching the little plane to the next location, I suppose it would be fair to say that we were a little deflated. All we could hope for was that the next spot was going to continue fishing as we had heard, so you can imagine how wide those smiles spread across our faces as the outgoing clients we crossed over with on the runway were reporting lots of hungry fish. That endless five hour boat ride upriver to the next location seemed to

take double the time, for we were that excited to get there. The jungle gets seriously, seriously dark at night, and it was our headlamps that enabled us to eventually to eventually stumble in for a quick supper, a talk about plans for the next day, and then a fitful night’s sleep full of dorado dreams.

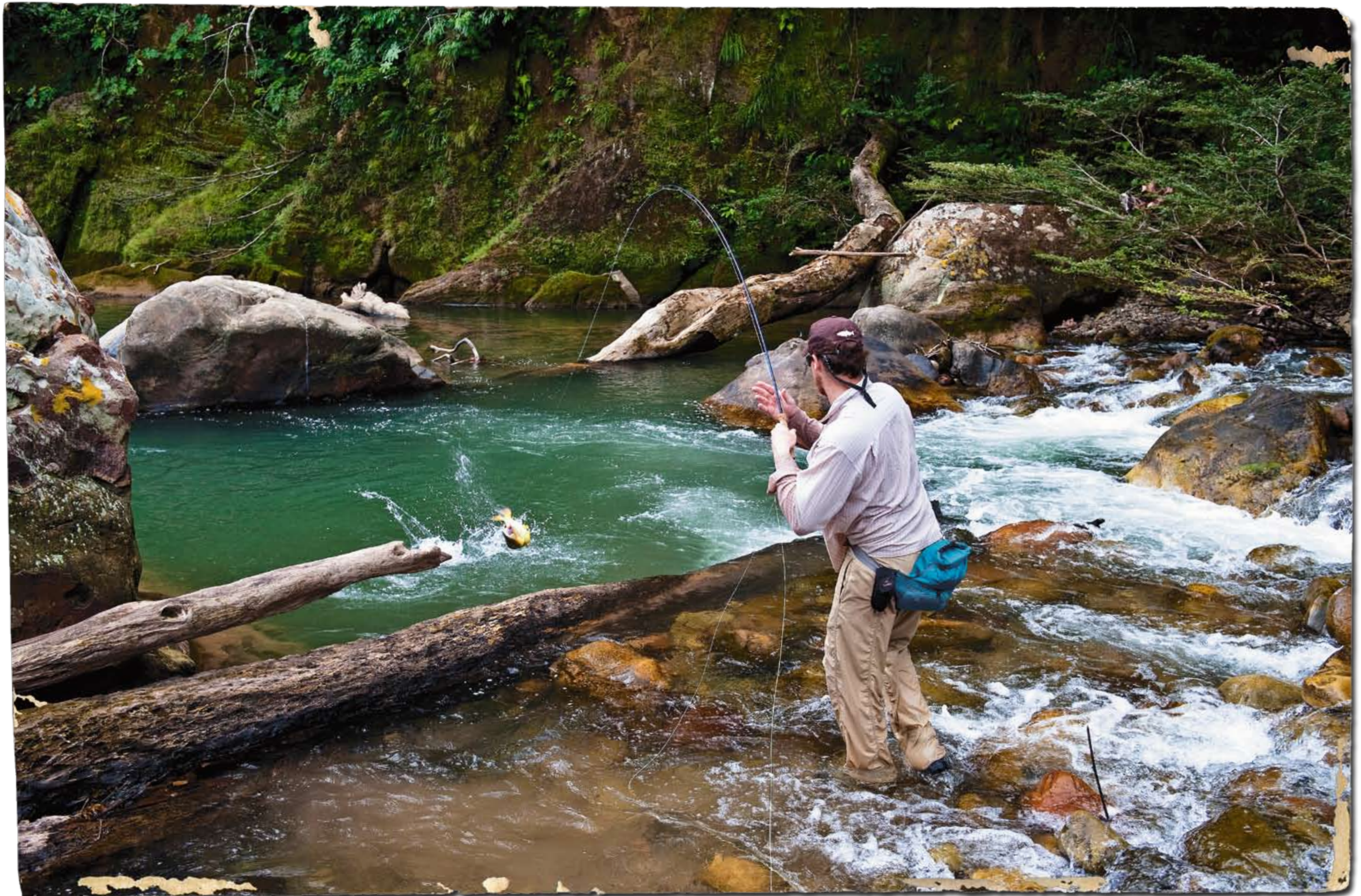
The plan was to head above this next camp and fish a small tributary of the Rio Pluma called the Itirizama. Our guide Alejandro took our barrage of questions as calmly as a guide does, but what struck me was his almost Zen-like assurances that yes, we would see dorado swimming in clear waters like trout do back home, and that yes, the fishing had been consistently outstanding for weeks now. I am an excitable person by nature, but I could hardly contain myself as we gently settled ourselves into the extremely narrow local wooden canoes and serenely headed off up the river. OK, so the local Indians paddled serenely

Top: Pete McLeod with a decent lenok he nailed one glorious afternoon. It’s tempting to spend far too much time chasing these greedy fish, but the taimen are always calling.

Middle: I have been waiting a long time for the right light and geography conditions to nail this kind of photo. Alex McLeod unhooks yet another good lenok and wonders why on earth the photographer (me) is literally shaking with excitement at being able to create this exposure. Mongolia is off the scale special for so many reasons.

Bottom: Alex McLeod with a big lenok he caught ‘by mistake’. Note the double-handed fly rod and the huge tan gurgler fly. This greedy fish ate a fly intended for a somewhat larger taimen.







It's a special feeling when you lay eyes upon a fish like the taimen, whatever size it is. The guides take the utmost care with them.

while us westerners sat there trying desperately not to tip the canoes over and look like idiots. Naturally balanced we are not.

Above the camp lies a fork in the Pluma where two smaller rivers flow into it, and we went right. And literally the moment we went right, I saw a frantic commotion as a horde of ravenous dorado smashed into a shoal of sabalo. Pull over, jump out, give that first cast to Gordon Richmond. Put the big fly down hard somewhere in

the vicinity of the angry fish and then strip like hell. A dorado charges him just like a GT on the tropical flats, indeed the similarities are uncanny. But I guess that the complete state of adrenaline fuelled overexcitement we felt caused Gordon to forget all about strip-striking, and instead he essentially pulled the fly out of the fish's mouth as it bow-waved towards him. We have all done it, and we'll all do it again one day. But the fishing was on, and it seemed to be sight fishing in

the purest sense. This is what we had come to see.

Every single thing that I had hoped jungle fishing for dorado might be came true. We left the boats behind and began a criss-cross route upstream, and all the while we were spotting dorado of all sizes nearly everywhere we looked. The further we walked, the more this place reminded me of some sections of small, boulder-strewn rivers in which we might fish for small wild browns. But one big

difference was that there were 30lb plus golden predators lurking in these warm jungle waters. The gear is on the heavier side, but it's remarkably similar - essentially you are spotting either lone fish, groups of fish, or casting in a state of fish-fevered panic at numbers of rampaging dorado careering into those unfortunate sabalo. It seemed that as the river narrowed, the more fish we saw, and we even began to see some big, deep black shapes moving around. One of them decided to smash Gordon to pieces for a bit of fun. So these were the legendary Amazon pacu that I had heard a little about.

I am not sure how best to describe the fact that we were now actually in the middle of what we had set out to do. Is there a word that can do justice to this insane fishing? I don't even like the song, but I can't get that annoying "Somebody's Watching Me" by Rockwell out of my head as we frequently pass fresh jaguar footprints leading in and out of the dense jungle. I can almost

feel their eyes on me as we wade the tumbling river and scramble up and down massive boulder fields. The distant Andean foothills never seem to get any closer, and my lungs are crying out for air in the humidity. We were finally casting to, and hooking dorado on the fly in a crystal clear river, but my abiding memory will always be of one particular fish that was not even mine.

**EVERY SINGLE THING  
THAT I HAD HOPED  
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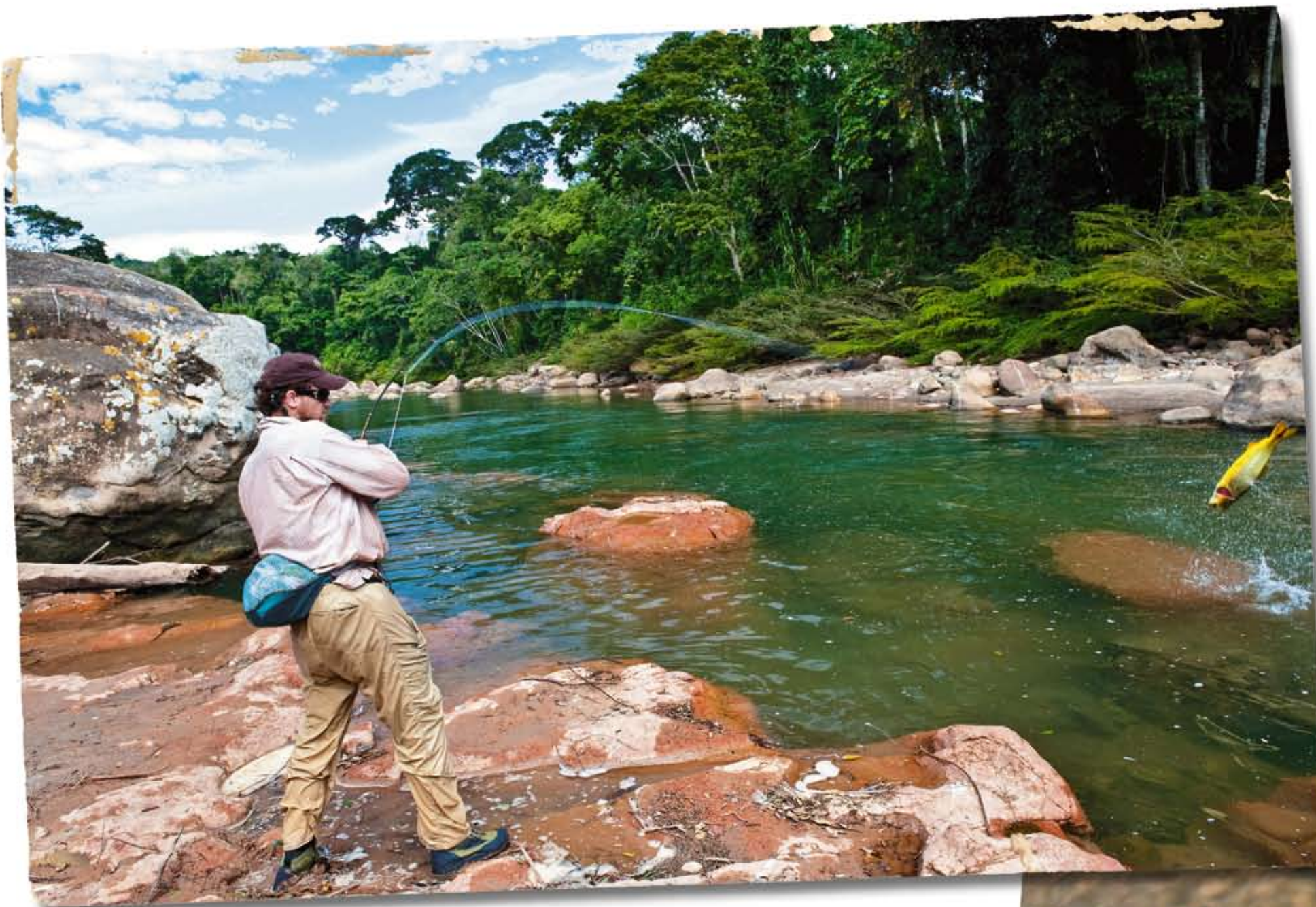
It's a special feeling when you lay eyes upon a fish like the taimen, whatever size it is. The guides take the utmost care with them.

Alejandro spotted a pod of big dorado lying in a very tricky spot and he got Gordon and Joerg to come and take a shot. Typical sight fishing, Bolivian style – fast, long casts, use that double-haul to increase the line speed, and place the fly say a metre away from the front of the fish. Within a split second the two guys were hooked up to a couple of rampaging 30lb plus fish that simply turned and ran them over the rocks. You know when you have been done good and proper by a fish that you were never destined to land? That was the guys

**“TROUT FISHING ON STEROIDS” IS ONE EXPRESSION COMING TO MIND AS THE TWO OF THEM WORKED ON SUBDUING THIS DORADO.**

right now, but Alejandro was having none of it. He literally picked Gordon up and frogmarched him up to the next pool. No chance to sit and grieve for lost fish out here. I hung back slightly and watched what happened. The guide points a fish out straight away, the client tenses slightly while he looks for it, and then he spots it as well, relaxes slightly, and makes a cast out across the turbulent pool. I don't know why, but I suddenly think of casting the fly across and letting it work down for salmon. Gordon though is ripping that big baitfish fly back as soon as it

hits the water. Both angler and guide crouch slightly as the fish obviously charges the fly, and then Gordon strip-strikes perfectly into a big dorado. And the moment he strikes, Alejandro is having to help him downriver as this fish goes loopy and charges straight out of the pool. I can recall that beast jumping clear of that little bit of river as easily as I saw it on the day. “Trout fishing on steroids” is one expression that I remember coming to mind as the two of them worked on subduing this dorado. Alejandro has seen it all before, but I know that Gordon and I stood there for at least five minutes with our mouths open as 25lb plus of fish was eventually released. Bear in mind they have caught and released dorado to just under 40lb out here, and who knows what the potential is. The rumours were true. There really is a place on this earth where you can sight



else but him has ever sport fished. Watching the guy catch dorado on the way was like watching an artist at work, but all the time he was checking his watch and driving us ever onwards. There comes a point where you are going to have to turn back and walk back down the river to make it to the waiting boats with a little daylight left, but when you have a bunch of big pacu milling around in front of you, things like time and jaguar footprints in the mud matter not a damn. Joaquin's secret pool was loaded with them. A long, slow moving pool that preceded

a small set of rapids, with minimal flow but maximum numbers of fish. Another glimpse of heaven.

Honestly, you could not script this any better.

**HE PLACES HIS FLY  
DOWN IN FRONT OF  
ONE OF THE PACU AND  
WE BOTH WATCH AS  
IT NONCHALANTLY  
TURNS, FOLLOWS IT  
IN AND THEN JUST  
INHALES IT.**

I firmly believe that some things are simply meant to be. Joaquin is one of those guys who works a fly rod like an artist works a brush. He places his fly down in front of one of the pacu and we both watch as it nonchalantly turns, follows it in and then just inhales it. Joaquin

sets the hook and the fish is down to the backing in a split second. I call a bigger fish out to Joerg on my right, and he puts a fly down close to it. This pacu just trundles over, nails the



It's a special feeling when you lay eyes upon a fish like the taimen, whatever size it is. The guides take the utmost care with them.

fish in small jungle rivers to a truly world class fish. My words are never going to do true justice to fishing like this. I can only hope that my photos go some way towards lighting your fire as much as the place did for me.

I guess you could say that we went hell for leather for three days and smacked as many fish as we could. From deftly putting a fly three feet above a bar of gold to dredging

a couple of deeper pools and taking fish after fish, we did as much as we could to fill our proverbial boots with all that this remote part of Bolivia had to offer. It never felt entirely right to put fast-sinking lines on and get flies right down deep in a few of the slow dark pools we came across, but it did prove that the dorado were obviously stacked up and hungry. But what of the Amazon pacu that we could see,

but had so far eluded all of us bar Alejandro one evening? I asked that Joaquin take a day off from running the camp and come with us on the last day to see if he could nail one more for my cameras.

I thought we had walked a long way already, but Joaquin was having none of it. If we really wanted pacu, he wanted to take us even further up river to a spot that he reckons nobody



fly, and then just bites through the 30lb wire as if was not even there. I guess that some things are also just not meant to be. Poor Joerg just stood there in a state of shock.

Dorado fight hard, but pacu leave them for dead. Dorado are a very “showy” fish that likes to jump a lot, but pacu just use their deep, round body shape to make very powerful, telling runs. The guys at Untamed

**DORADO ARE A VERY “SHOWY” FISH THAT LIKES TO JUMP A LOT. BUT PACU JUST USE THEIR DEEP, ROUND BODY SHAPE TO MAKE VERY POWERFUL, TELLING RUNS.**

Angling might well have found some kind of dorado paradise here in the Bolivian jungle, but I have learnt that they also had an ulterior motive when they spent many weeks camping and exploring in this part of the world. From the off they had a hunch that there had to be an area where you could sight fish to both big dorado and pacu in the same vicinity. Having been there, I can understand a bit about the effort it has taken to find this place, and I can also imagine how off the scale exciting it must have been to have followed the twists and turns of these intimate jungle rivers and stumbled upon this fishing for the first time. Wake me up and tell me when I can stop dreaming please.

It’s a special feeling when you lay eyes upon a fish like the taimen, whatever size it is. The guides take the utmost care with them.



## FACT FILE FACT FILE FACT FILE

### OPERATOR

The easiest way to go and do this fishing is to deal with fly fishing travel specialists Aardvark McLeod. Check out their website [www.aardvarkmcleod.com](http://www.aardvarkmcleod.com) and send them an email. They can arrange it all for you.

Alternatively contact Untamed Angling at [www.untamedangling.com](http://www.untamedangling.com).

Price - \$6000.USD excluding international flights – the price includes internal flights from Santa Cruz to fishing locations, hotel nights and meals in Santa Cruz, airport transfers, 6 days fishing on boat, two anglers sharing one guide, 8 nights in shared room at fishing locations, all meals and drinks (water, sodas, beers, wine and some spirits), plus fishing licenses. Not included are Visas (if required) and international flights, travel insurance, tips, and costs of a personal nature.

### FISH SPECIES

Primarily dorado, Amazon pacu (pirapitinga), and a species called yatorana that is known as the freshwater bonefish (I did not see these ones landed), but I hear they scrap like crazy.

### SEASON

From May until mid-October. The rainy season is from December to March, and if the rains do what they are meant to do, more and more fish keep on moving upriver all season. The rivers are essentially flushed out each year, and the fish begin to move back up as the water clears. Dorado are totally dependant on the vast shoals of sabalo, indeed the dorado young start to feed on the sabalo young almost immediately after birth. Their lives are intrinsically bound together.

### HOW TO GET THERE

You need to find the best way to get to Santa Cruz in Bolivia – Untamed Angling will take care of you from there and will fly you into their fishing operation that is known as Tsimane (the name of the local Indian tribe on the Secure river). It is easy to get fairly regular flights from Miami down to Santa Cruz, and the flight time is nearly seven hours. We flew with American Airlines out of Miami. I have also heard of direct connections out of Madrid in Spain. Australian anglers could fly through Santiago in Chile or Buenos Aires in Argentina. You will be picked up from the Santa Cruz international airport and taken to a good hotel in the city centre. We were advised to stick around the hotel until we flew out to Tsimane the next morning. Untamed Angling takes care of all this – the hotel and the internal flights.

### ACCOMMODATION/FOOD

I was amazed at how good the lodges were, especially considering just how hard a logistical exercise it is to get building materials into this remote part of Bolivia. The trips are based around splitting your time equally between two locations, on the Secure river and then the Rio Pluma. Two fisherman share a big wooden cabin, with comfortable beds, hot showers, electricity, and loads of space. There is even high-speed satellite internet for the clients if they wish to use it. Both camps are built on wooden walkways, and the Secure camp especially is built in the most stunning position imaginable. All meals and drinks tend to be taken in the what I would call the dining lodge. The food is consistently outstanding. Lunches range from a barbecue on the river

bank to a range of sandwiches and salads, depending on where you are actually fishing. All drinks are included.

### WEATHER

The temperatures range from 20°-35°C and it does get pretty humid. But at no point did we find the heat a problem, indeed it could get surprisingly cold at night from time to time. Take a lightweight rain jacket for the odd shower.

### LANGUAGE

The official language in Bolivia is Spanish, but they pronounce a lot of their words somewhat differently to what you will hear in Spain. All our guides spoke English, and obviously some better than others. My spoken Spanish is terrible and I got by just fine using English. Being able to swear profusely in Spanish always puts a smile on your guides’ face when a fish does you properly!!

### CURRENCY

As it does in all kinds of places, the \$US does just fine. The meals and drinks we had at the hotel in Santa Cruz were not expensive at all. Tipping at the lodges is at the clients’ discretion.

### CLOTHING

As with most overseas trips, it is vital to listen to their advice when it comes to clothing. Tropical shirts, polarised sunglasses, sun block and hats go without saying, but one very important thing is to take a decent pair of felt-soled wading boots that you would more normally wear with breathable chest waders. The fishing is based around wet wading, and you will need to be able to walk over all kinds of surfaces, from wet rocks, dry rocks, mud, gravel, boats, tree trunks etc. I know of no better grip for this than felt (no studs), indeed one of our guys listened to the wrong person in a shop and brought completely the wrong footwear. He literally could not stand up on the wet rocks, and it was by pure luck that a guide there had a spare pair of felt-soled wading boots that he could borrow. Not taking heed of the pre-trip advice can impact on a trip in a big way.

I tend to wear shorts whenever I fish in hot places, but I could not help noticing that everybody else there was wearing lightweight guide trousers/pants. I soon discovered why as my legs got munched by a load of no-see-ums on the first late afternoon/evening. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly for the jungle, insects are no great problem at all – just make sure to cover up your legs when you are out fishing and you will avoid the no-see-ums. Personally I don’t like wearing those lightweight guide pants, so all I did was wear a pair of tight-fitting running/cycling trousers with a pair of shorts over the top. I might look like a bit of an idiot, but I find this really easy for walking long distances and there are no loose bits to my trousers to fill up with water and hold me back. I can never understand why fishermen who like to wear long trousers when wading the flats don’t do this as well. Loose long trousers drive me mad when they keep filling up with water.

### VISAS AND TRAVEL DOCUMENTS

Aussie anglers do not need to have a visa for entry into Bolivia, but I know for example that US citizens do need one. You will have to have a Yellow Fever Vaccination certificate – nobody ever asked for mine, but I can guarantee that if I did not have one I was going to get asked for it. Ain’t that always the way?



### FISHING EQUIPMENT

This is fly only fishing, so pack accordingly. It might be a bit of fun to take a bait rod that could handle some of the big catfish that swim in the rivers – sit out at night with a beer and see if you can hook one. As regards the fly fishing tackle, this is what is recommended, and the stuff we took worked just fine:

**8 or 9 weight single-handed fly rods work fine** – make sure to take a spare in case of a breakage. We all know that it can and does happen

Fly reels to match – if you are spending serious money on a trip like this, I can see no point in not taking decent gear. The fish tend to run hard, so a good drag that you are comfortable using is essential

**Lines** – tropical floating lines will cover most of the fishing, but it also helps to take an intermediate, and one of our guys successfully “dredged” some deeper pools using fast sinkers. If that is your thing, go prepared for it. I know it’s freshwater fishing, but make sure to take tropical saltwater fly lines. Freshwater lines mess up in the heat

**Leaders** – 30-40lb fluorocarbon is fine, finished off with a short biting trace of 30lb wire that you can tie. The Argentinean guides really like this titanium based wire that can be tied

**Flies** – if you don’t like tying your own flies, or would rather wait, they sell all the best flies out there. If you want to take your own, use 2/0-4/0 high quality hooks and make up various baifish patterns. Remember that big dorado will attack and eat smaller dorado as well. Flies tend to be fairly heavily dressed, from 6 to 10 inches long. A really popular dorado pattern is the “Andino Deceiver”, essentially like a regular Deceiver but with chain eyes and a muddler head. Fly fishing for pacu is really being developed as we speak, and the guys have taken a few off the top on flies such as the Chernobyl Ant, as well as on smaller, less-heavily dressed dorado type flies.

### STAR RATINGS (out of five)

Accommodation	★★★★
Food	★★★★
Ease to get to	★★
Guides	★★★★
Boats	★★★★
Weather	★★★★
Suitability for non-fishing partners	★