

FIELD & STREAM EXPEDITION

I N S E A R C H

O F T H E

R I V E R G O D S

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY KIRK DEETER

In South America, the Mbyá Guaraní, “People of the Jungle,” share a legend that Tupa, the god who lives in the sun, had two sons, and that each brother now rules a domain on earth. One is the jaguar, monarch of the rain forest. The other is the dorado, king of the rivers. They share an inheritance of skin gilded in gold from the sun, with vivid black spots from Mother Earth. The Indians believe that both will forever reign over their kingdoms, even above mankind. As such, they are considered sacred.

**I**

**ZIPPED SHUT THE** fly on the tent and crouched in a corner, where the pistol was. Little comfort. Monkeys wailing in the treetops, cicadas buzzing in the brush, frogs grunting over the rumble of the river reminded me that I had already been swallowed by the jungle.

There were jaguars out there, jungle phantoms that would play on my fears throughout the trip. Hidden by the dense underbrush of the rain forest, their presence had already been revealed by paw tracks stamped deep into the sandy riverbank.

Trumping the nervous pit in my stomach, however, was a strong sense of elation, because, on this day, I had caught my first golden dorado. The dorado is the jaguar of the river, arguably the toughest fish in South America. Cunning and wary, it conceals its shiny gold profile by lying deep in the currents, then pounces on unsuspecting prey with primal, thunderous charges. Hooking one on a fly brought a spectacle of molten metallic scales and gill-rattling





*Clockwise from Top:* Thisgen family friend Bill Holeman, with Patrick, Vicki, Nate, Jarrett, and Brandt Hagen at Montauk State Park. arrett, n at Montauk State Park.arrett, and Brandt Hagen at thios is moer her eand here and this is m





fury the likes of which I hadn't seen in my life. It justified all the risks I had taken to get here.

## THE SEARCH FOR GOLD

**T**My headlamp sliced through total darkness. The air was so hot and humid that I could see my breath in the light's beam. I smelled like mud. Sweat dripped off my face and smeared my journal as I wrote:

"Bolivia. Today we flew into the jungle in a Cessna, landed on an airstrip cut by drug traffickers, and were greeted by the Tsimáne (chee-MA-nay) Indians at the village of Asunta. Friendly and curious, they followed our every move after we stepped from the plane. A girl in a tattered woven dress stared in fascination as I laced my boots (like the other children in the tribe, she wore no shoes). A giggling boy showed me his bow and arrows, as if to suggest that my skinny graphite stick was no real weapon for catching fish. We quickly made overnight packs, gathered our gear, and climbed into dugout canoes. Tsimáne oarsmen push-poled us upstream on the Río Sécure to a large playa by some rapids, where I caught my first golden dorado. I have never felt a river fish fight like the dorado. I have never seen a place like this. I am exhilarated and afraid."

The idea for this adventure took root months earlier, during a dinner with Marcelo Pérez in a Buenos Aires restaurant. I had just come back from Pérez's Far End Rivers Lodge on the Río Irigoyen in Tierra del Fuego, one of the southernmost rivers on the planet. There, I had spent a week catching sea-run brown trout that weighed as much as 22 pounds. In the middle of our merry recap, Marcelo dropped a hint.

"If you liked the big truchas [trout], amigo," he said, "you would love dorados. They are as big, or bigger, than sea trout. They are tougher fish, and they are bright gold. We have discovered a place that will possibly blow your mind."

I sat up in my chair, poured two more glasses of Malbec wine, and asked where.

"Bolivia," he answered.

Marcelo told me that 18 months earlier, three of his Argentine friends—Noel Pollak (arguably the most experienced dorado guide in the world), Joaquín Arocena, and Ramiro Badessich—had set off on a two-month quest from Argentina to Peru in search of virgin rivers that held these mystical golden fish. After several weeks, hundreds of miles, and many dead ends, the trio chanced upon a bush pilot in the town of Trinidad, Bolivia, who told them about a remote Indian village where the jungle met the Andean foothills. This pilot promised they would find big dorado there if they were willing to take a plane ride.

When Noel returned from the Río Sécure to Trinidad, he phoned Marcelo to report: "We have found Nirvana."

Months later, Marcelo went to the Sécure with Noel, Ramiro, and Joaquín, and he also saw this wild jungle river where golden fish finned in every run and rapid. "I would not have believed it had I not seen it for myself," Marcelo said to me.

He was reeling me in.

"We will go back there again—we must explore it further—but it will be a tough trip," Marcelo went on. "We will have to camp and live among the Indians. We do not know how dangerous the rapids on the upper river might be. It will be intense. There are jaguars, and many snakes. This is pure jungle."

"Tell me more about those big, golden fish," I said, smiling.

I was hooked. To be sure, I was not the first to be lured into the South American jungle to search for treasure. Dating back nearly 500 years to the age of the conquistadores, many expeditions were launched to find the fabled El Dorado, the king whose skin was bathed in gold. Almost all of them met with disaster. Perhaps the best-known one, led by Francisco de Orellana in 1541, navigated the entire Amazon River from Peru to the Atlantic. The expedition was decimated by murder, disease, and starvation; it never found the golden king, nor his opulent kingdom.

My adventure, my story, and probably my life would rest in the hands of four guys from Argentina and one from Brazil who would be coordinating this expedition.

They called themselves "The Jungle Anglers."

## INTO THE HEART OF DARKNESS

**I**There is something that makes a fishing trip more exciting—even more enjoyable—when there is danger involved, when your life is on the line. To the Jungle Anglers, that means going to places where few others have the nerve to go, and coming back out, together.

Each team member plays a role. Marcelo, 48, is the leader, the diplomat. Noel, 33, is the teacher, the naturalist. Joaquín, 28 and known as Moose, as he is a semipro rugby player, is the engineer and photographer. Rodrigo Salles, 32, from Brazil, is the medic as well as a photographer. Ramiro, 28, is the cook and quartermaster.

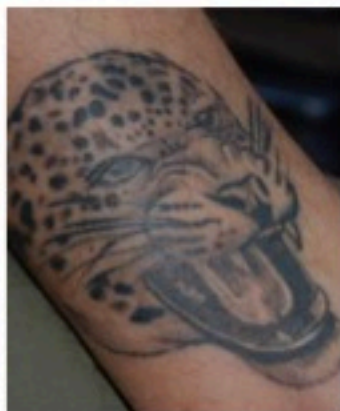
All five Jungle Anglers met me at the airport when my flight from Miami got in at 11 p.m. August 24 of last year. From the onset they embraced me as one of their own, a part of the team. We spent the next three days in Santa Cruz, Bolivia's largest city, planning and provisioning for the expedition, then loaded up a small bus and truck and set off on a bumpy, 12-hour ride through the Bolivian lowlands to the city of Trinidad.

Along the way, Noel and Joaquín explained to me why the golden dorado in the rivers of northern Bolivia are freaks of nature. Dorado are most commonly associated with the Río de la Plata basin, which begins in southern Bolivia, extends through Paraguay, and ultimately forms the Argentina-Uruguay border. It is believed that a massive, ancient flood must have lifted dorado from this native rivershed and deposited them in the southernmost stretches of the Amazon basin, where they now coexist with thousands of other species in the most diverse and abundant

## WHERE WE WENT







## JUNGLE PREP LIST

- **WHERE TO GO:** The Jungle Anglers recently opened two tent camps on the Río Sécure. Called Tsimáne Lodge, it is the only operation with full government and tribal permission to fish this area. Travelers to the lodge will find the comforts of a home base, with pure water, good food and wines, generator power, satellite phone, and English-speaking hosts. [www.untamedangling.com](http://www.untamedangling.com) or [www.tsimanelodge.com](http://www.tsimanelodge.com).
- **TRAVEL TIPS:** Commercial air travel is to Trinidad, Bolivia, via commuter flight from Santa Cruz. Many U.S. carriers fly nonstop to Santa Cruz. A passport is required for U.S. citizens, as is an entry visa, which can be purchased upon arrival for \$150. U.S. currency is accepted, or you can withdraw local currency (bolivianos) at ATMs.
- **HEALTH WATCH:** Visit your doctor prior to departure for immunizations (including hepatitis A, typhoid, yellow fever, and tetanus) and possibly anti-malaria medication. Carry prescriptions with you.
- **WHAT TO PACK:** Perspiration-wicking clothes, fishing gear (fly gear should include 8-weight rods, disc-drag reels, weight-forward floating and sink-tip lines, 2/0 streamers with eyes (black, purple, orange, and red), camera, headlamp, utility knife, watch, wading boots, hats, dry bag, fleece jacket, rain gear, superglue, insect repellent, sunscreen.

*Caption lede Here* Tktktk this exploratory adventure, the Jungle Anglers have created a highly civilized, in fact luxurious, tent-camp lodge on the banks of the Río Sécure. These fish and the nea

aquatic ecosystem in the world.

Until recently, almost no one except the indigenous tribes realized that dorado were even there.

We arrived in Trinidad in the middle of the night, after driving most of the day through the orange, acrid-smelling haze emanating from distant jungle fires. We spent two days there, meeting with representatives of the Tsimáne tribe; officials for the 3.4-million-acre Isiboro-Sécure National Park and Indigenous Territory, through which the Río Sécure flows; and the commander of the local army base. (Because our destination was deep within a national park and restricted airspace, the Jungle Anglers had to negotiate passage to the river.) I had never imagined finding myself at a conference table with a Bolivian army colonel, but there I was.

Arrangements made, we met up with our pilot, Teddy Becerra, and began shuttle flights to Asúnta. A load of gear went first, then Ramiro and Joaquín went with more gear. After that, the rest of us clambered aboard the single-engine plane for the hour-long flight. We climbed out of Trinidad and were soon over a deep-green jungle that stretched as far as the eye could see. Forty-five minutes later we flew over some hills, spotted the



river below, then followed it upstream until we swooped over the village and landed on the tiny, grassy airstrip that had been carved out of the jungle. That's when things got interesting.

## THE INDIANS, THE TEACHER, AND THE GOLDEN

**FISH**

Stepping from the plane, I was overwhelmed by the oppressive, intense, saunalike heat of the jungle. Members of the village came out to greet us en masse. Flashing smiles and shaking our hands,





**Sidebar Hedline tktktktk** Since this exploratory adventure, the Jungle Anglers have created a highly civilized, in fact luxurious, tent-camp lodge on the banks of the Rio Securé. These fish and the near-virgin angling experience, replete with In

they grabbed our gear and carried it down to the river, where dugout canoes were already lined up, waiting for us.

The village had no power, no lights, and no running water. The natives wore western clothes given to them by the Jungle Anglers and by missionaries who had preceded us. They spoke their native tongue, as well as Spanish, and used Spanish names such as Ramon, Trini, Pablo, and Juanito ("Little John").

The Tsimáne Indians would be indispensable throughout our stay. They took us up and down the river and watched over us as we fished, sometimes laughing uncontrollably when we tangled our lines or hooked tree stumps. We paid them in bolivianos, an amount equal to about \$10 per man per day, a relative fortune. For an extra 20 bolivianos a day (about \$3), Juanito brought along his rusty old .22 rifle, just in case we encountered "itch-eh-kay"... a jaguar. We knew a .22 wasn't going to do much good against a 250-pound jungle cat, but we paid anyway.

That first day, we boarded the canoes within half an hour of landing and began pressing upstream. I felt an odd sensation that I was slipping back in time, back to some prehistoric age. I was stunned by the towering heights of the jungle canopy. Formations of macaws glided overhead, while brilliantly colored toucans flittered about in the understory. There was a constant buzz, a muted whine from insects in the bush. The water was clear and cool. The air smelled spicy and earthy.

While I had brought enough insect repellent to melt the gray paint off a battleship, I was surprised by how few mosquitoes there were. Instead, there were butterflies everywhere, vast, vi-

brant swarms of them gracing every bend in the river, like confetti in a ticker-tape parade.

The massive canoes we rode in had been built as they had been for generations, cut from dense hardwoods, chiseled, then burned to form. They smelled musty and fishy and were remarkably nimble for their weight; the Indians easily pushed them upstream, sliding through rapids that would stop most boats.

On occasion, our guides would drop their pushpoles, pick up their bows, and shoot at splashing schools of sábalos (like freshwater mullet) in the shallows. It was uncanny how the Tsimáne could skewer a darting shadow from 20 yards away with a bamboo arrow fired from a bow strung with twine.

When we reached the first good-looking run, Noel told me to hop out of the canoe and to bring my 8-weight and fly box. "This is the one," he said, peering into the box and plucking out a gaudy, tinsel, black 2/0 fly with lead eyes.

We marched upstream over volcanic rocks. The water looked like a classic trout run—haystack rapids on the drop, a series of riffles as the river bent, then a meandering, bubbling tailout below.

Noel tied my rig: a stout monofilament leader, a 3-foot strand of 20-pound Maxima, and finally a 25-pound wire tippet. The tippet length, he explained, should be a few inches wider than a dorado's mouth. He peeled off 12 inches and attached the fly.

"Cast across the current, make a mend, let it sink, then strip the fly with a nervous, erratic motion," he instructed.

Awkwardly I lobbed the heavy fly 40 or 50 feet toward the far bank. Mend. Drift. Three strips. Then, suddenly, I saw a golden



flash in a shadow behind a large rock. I could see the dorado's angry eye as the fish arced on the fly. The line went taut, then slack. I missed!

When I retrieved the fly, I saw that its orange eyes had been stripped clean off. The lesson: Dorado don't mess around. They aim for the head.

Noel laughed, then made a cast of his own. The fish charged again, inhaled his fly, and shot skyward. It was a 10-pounder. After landing it, Noel cradled the fish and carefully removed the fly from its toothy, snapping jaws. "These are the ultimate fish," he said, "They are aggressive fighters—they have Latin blood."

#### COCA TEA AND THE TUG

The jungle has moods, like a living being. We spent seven days and nights along the rivers, catching fish and testing these moods.

**C** Morning, just after sunrise, was the calm. We would emerge from our tents, bathe in the river, and gather for breakfasts of crackers, canned cheese, and coca tea.

Then came the anger. When the sun crested the jungle canopy, a sudden, suffocating heat would beat down on us with incredible fury, causing us all to perspire uncontrollably. Then, after an hour or so, a soothing breeze would start to kick up the river. This is when the best fishing occurred.

Nights were chilly, a time to gather around the campfire and reflect on the day. We ate surubí (tiger-striped catfish), which we wrapped in banana leaves and cooked over the fire, along with bowls of rice. I'd share tales of fishing in Alaska among

the brown bears, which drew wide-eyed stares from the Jungle Anglers (all the while I was glancing over their shoulders into the humming rain forest).

Every day saw the same pattern of heat, sun, breeze, and nightfall, and yet, in terms of the fishing, every day was wildly different.

One morning, Noel, Ramiro, Rodrigo, and I hiked upstream from our campsite. As we waded chest-deep through milky pools (I kept remembering the giant anaconda skin I'd seen tacked to the wall of a restaurant in Trinidad, the night before we flew into the jungle), I lagged far behind. I shuffled my feet along the bottom, having been warned that the strike of a freshwater stingray here, while it wouldn't kill you, still packed more pain than a grown man could stand.

I reached a pool where the others were waiting. Ramiro told me where the fish would be, at the edge of the run, by a downed tree. I made a cast, let the line slip taut, then made two strips...

I will never forget the feeling of that take as a giant dorado grabbed the fly and bolted into the current. My rod bent flat to the surface, and the reel's drag screeched. It felt like a giant animal, not like any fish I had known. I could sense purpose and anger sizzling back up the line as the dorado shook its head and wove through an obstacle course of boulders in the river. Then it showed itself, rocketing above the surface with three violent jumps. After 10 minutes, I finally managed to land the fish of my life. I had caught bigger fish before (this one weighed around 25 pounds) but never, ever could I remember a worthier opponent. Rodrigo patted me on my back and asked if I was starting to appreciate the whole "Jungle Angler dorado thing."

All I could do was smile.

#### RIVER PERMIT AND THE WHITE MONKEY

**R** Later that afternoon, Marcelo landed a pirapitinga, or river "permit." Though brown in color, it had the same tall, slender power build that makes the permit so formidable. And like permit, these fish are extremely wary. Pirapitingas have flattened teeth like sheepshead, which they use to crush fruits and flowers that fall into the river, as well as baitfish. They can grow upwards of 50 pounds, and because they live in the slower and deeper runs, it takes a perfect cast and presentation to hook one.

Around the next bend, Joaquín worked a riffle and caught another species I had never seen, the yatorana. If the pirapitinga is the permit of the jungle, the yatorana is the bonefish—lightning quick, able to get into your backing in a heartbeat.

When Joaquín released the 20-inch yatorana, we all celebrated by passing around a cold 2-liter bottle of Coca-Cola, having collectively bagged the "jungle slam," no doubt one of the most difficult and exotic feats in angling.

As the trip wound toward its end, I had many more reasons to celebrate. I never saw a single snake. I never got bitten by a noxious insect. I never got sick. I didn't have a scratch (my friends took good care of me). And I caught more big fish than I had imagined. I felt more alive than ever.

Because we fished at the end of the dry season, we only had a few showers during our days in the jungle. But on our last night, fishing until dark, we got caught as a tropical downpour thundered up the river, shooting lightning into the distant treetops.

Ramiro strained on the oars to move our raft foot by foot (Rodrigo and I would jump out in the darkness to push the raft over gravel bars) into the stiff upriver breeze. Ramiro pulled until his hands turned ghost-white, but he never lost his poise nor sense of humor; he started singing and screeching like a monkey.

"We call him the white monkey," Rodrigo yelled through the pelting rain. Ramiro was all grins.

It took an hour to cover the last mile of river, even though the current was with us. In time, we saw the glow of a flashlight ahead, then another, and another, on the riverbank at Asúnta. As we got closer, we realized that it wasn't just our friends. Every adult male in the tribe was also there, waiting to help us.

When we landed, they scooped up our gear and carried it up the muddy slope to the village. I have never felt such faith in the good nature of humanity as I did then. Exhausted, we sacked out on the floor of the village schoolhouses.

The next day, the Cessna came sweeping through the clouds to pick up Marcelo, Noel, and me, so we could begin our long journeys home. Ramiro, Joaquín, and Rodrigo were going to stay for another week to explore the Río Pluma, where, it turns out, they found massive schools of dorado, stacked up like gold bars in runs in the river.

Before taking off, I gave our guide Ramon 200 bolivianos, a hat, and a box of fishhooks. In return, he gave me his bow and arrows. They are now colorful reminders of the treasures I sought, and ultimately found, deep in the Bolivian jungle, with the Jungle Anglers and the Tsimáne.

The greatest reminder stays with me to this day. When I go to sleep at night, I still hear the breath of the jungle. As I fall asleep, golden river gods start swimming through my dreams.



# In Search of the River Gods

CONTINUED FROM P. XX

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For a list of the 10 items you can't be without on a trip such as this



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