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TARPON

MONSTER
JUNGLE TARPON

KENDJAM

THE BIGGER
THE GAMBLE

SAILFISH

OFFSHORE
FLY FISHING

SEATROUT

CHASING
COASTAL SILVER

KENDJAM:


The Bigger the Gamble

It is difficult to imagine that unexplored regions still exist on our planet. Every footstep we take has seemingly been taken before and explorations soon become diluted. To me this is what makes our sport special; we are always searching out those last few bastions.

By STEFFAN JONES







Indeed, for a traveling angler it is sometimes difficult to imagine or comprehend why a place would be visited or the effort made to reach it were it not for its fishing potential. At times it remains just that; potential. However, sometimes, just sometimes you stumble across something truly special, which makes up for past failures, hours of travel time and research.

Anglers are all gamblers at heart. Every fishing trip is a gamble. Will the weather hold? Will the river be at a decent level or will it be coloured and unfishable? Will the fish be in a taking mood? These are all permutations that we must explore or gamble with, even on a local level. They are then exacerbated on an exploratory level, where the gamble becomes greater, but this is the gamble that we often crave as the gamble often allows us to access and attempt something very few if any brethren of the sport have

attempted before. Also, the bigger the gamble the bigger the gain...

The disdain exhibited when I divulge to a fellow angler my profession is palpable. After leaving the torment of Town and Country Planning behind me I embarked on a life within the fishing travel industry. Another gamble, I guess, but a gamble I could never regret. Whilst days and weeks are filled with paperwork – as within most forms of employment – the ultimate release comes in the form of being able to access fishing on the remotest parts of our planet and as far-flung as one chooses.

Some destinations reach into your soul and become part of you; you cannot help but be affected and changed by what you witness and experience. None have spoken truer to this phenomenon for me than a recent journey to Kendjam in Brazil.

The Destination

Kendjam is truly off the beaten track; it is based some three hours flying time South-East of Manaus. Indeed, the last visitors before our exploratory trip in August (2015) was National Geographic (search 'Kayapo Courage' for their insight). It is based around the Iriri River, which is quite unique as it largely flows over granite - this gives it fantastic clarity. The Iriri then flows into the Xingu, which then flows into the mighty Amazon.

The start of the journey near Manaus brought home what you hear of regularly in the news; huge areas of forest being cut and burnt to give way to intensive farming of either beef or soya. Smoke clouds filled the horizon, it was deeply saddening. However, soon enough this gave way to a carpet of green where the forest was protected for an unfathomable distance; three brothers from Brazil created the National Park in which the Iriri flows and Kendjam is located, an area of some five million hectares of virgin Amazon forest.

The forest canopy is dense; so much so that you cannot see very much during the journey beyond the odd rocky outcrop, rivers meandering lethargically through the jungle, then just a carpet of green from a myriad of indigenous trees.









The Standing Rock

An excitement filled the air as the pilot announced 'Iri', pointing loosely at the horizon. Soon the river was seen below; a truly unique system compared to anything else seen during the journey. Rapids are clearly distinguished, as is the clarity, along with huge granite rocks and boulders, which form the riverbed. As we lose altitude the gradient becomes apparent, as does the topography with notable hills within the dense forest. One bare rock soon catches our eye; both for its size and for the lack of vegetation around and on it. This is Kendjam and where the people of Kendjam call home with Kendjam translating to mean 'the standing rock'.

The landing strip is a rather glamorous term for what faced us. It was basically a track of cleared forest; not a long one at that! However, our pilot had traversed it several times and handled it masterfully, landing

us with ease and confidence.

As soon as the dust settled, faces emerged from the surrounding foliage. A welcome party formed and gazed on with great intrigue as to what the contraption brought into their home this time. I stood back and pondered what they made of us. The way we looked, the clothes we wore, the amount of 'stuff' we brought with us and the materials that we held so dear, which, to them would be useless and would not help them survive or exist in this environment. It was nice to strip yourself back in this way and reflect on what is actually important, how we have become so materialistic.

They really could not give a jot whether you had the latest Iphone, trainers or even a 'series XII spacecraft engineered super-duper molecular-nano graphite' fly rod. Life was simple here and what enabled this to continue was simple.





On the Water

Soon the boats were packed with supplies, which included produce cultivated and foraged by the community along with those brought in by the plane. The journey was to take some five hours, but time went very quickly given the environment through which we passed. The journey is spectacular, especially if you are a birder, as the sky is alive with colour and sound. Fish could be seen darting for cover at every turn, forming a visual feast no matter where you looked.

With the last set of rapids masterfully navigated the camp was in sight. It was located on a large sand spit where the river flowed following winter rain but continued to recede in the dry season to expose a beautiful beach on which to call home.

Wildlife was abundant but very little looking to maim or eat you – always a bonus! Indeed, even no-see-ums and mosquitos were few and far between; the dry season leaves little standing water and, therefore, few locations suitable for incubation. The jungle is surprisingly friendly, which shocked

me. I am always a good test for this; if there are biting bugs around then trust me they WILL find me!

There are things to be wary of, of course. After all you are in an extremely remote part of the jungle where undoubtedly some animals or plants exist yet to be documented. There were snakes, spiders, caiman, jaguars, sting rays, electric eels, piranhas and probably a lot more to be concerned about during the midnight dash to the toilet.

However, that's the environment you are entering and you prepare yourself for this. Respect them and usually you will be shown respect in return. Prod a sleeping caiman and chances are you will prod no more... On the other end of the spectrum you had docile creatures such as tapir, howler monkeys and turtles to marvel at.

In the Jungle

The jungle provided sufficient banquet to sustain both animals and humans. Brazil nuts, limes, avocado, bananas, mini coconuts, and also chillies – a word to the wise; the little blighters are hot!







As I found out to the great amusement of the Indians, who then named me 'pimento'; I was hoping more for 'king of the jungle', 'mastercaster' or 'kingfisher', but the cap fitted.

The Indians had a great sense of humour. They would laugh and joke throughout the day and you could not help but connect with them. Indeed, I made a good friend in 'Jocro', who turned out to be the son of the chief. He was great fun, but beyond this understood what we were doing and was keen to help whenever possible. He had amazing vision and would rock-hop until the next target was found. He would also joke when you would inevitably over-cast into the bankside vegetation, simply stating 'monkey' as if you were trying to fish for them.

The Fishing

As you can see, it is very easy to get carried away in such an environment and reflect on many things beyond the fishing. The fishing, essentially, was the icing on the cake. The river was a perfect blueprint with structure, depth and gradient

providing the ideal habitat for the bounty that lay below. The river was an aquarium and you could see fish of all colour and sizes scurrying for cover as we drifted overhead. What made the fishing special, however, were the technical differences each species presented.

There were three species of pacu present; each one with different characteristics and feeding habits – some looking for leaves, flowers and fruit, others looking for dead-drifted weed. A shared trait, however, was their strength – they were all immensely strong and it quickly became apparent why they have been nicknamed the freshwater permit. The pacu were captivating. Infuriating at times, but well worth the effort to try and understand.

You then have the peacock bass; a fish that really optimises 'the take'. They are strong fighters, but it is the take that made them special. They would be found in every run and would average between 4-8 lbs. They literally explode onto the fly, creating a lot of commotion in doing so.









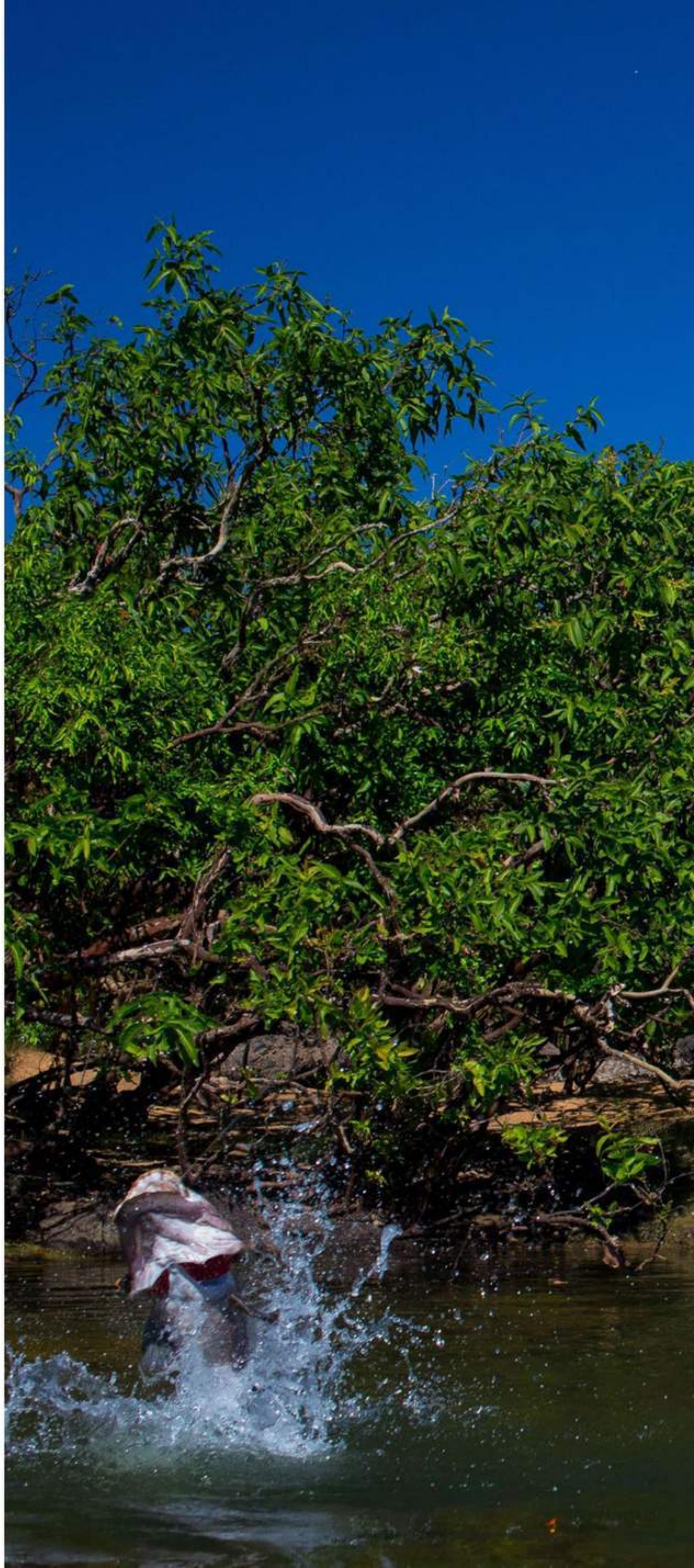






If the bully of the river is more your thing, then you have the wolf-fish to target. An impressive fish, but certainly not the brightest! They are top of the food chain and have nothing to be afraid of. As such, they just go about their business knowing that they are safe. They are lazy and lethargic. You could present your fly virtually as you pleased and with the least amount of delicacy yet still get a reaction – finally a fish matching my capabilities. They had incredibly hard mouths and would often throw the hook. Amazingly they would then take the fly again on the next cast, even though they had just been fighting for thirty seconds or more.

Also present are matrincha (yatorana), which you can target on terrestrial dry-flies and are superb sport on lighter rods. They loved to hug overhanging banks and trees, awaiting food to drop from above. They could be caught on small baitfish patterns, but dead-drifted or slowly twitched dries were far more interesting.









They were very strong for their size and would not give up easily. They were often found in big shoals where a couple would be caught before they got wary – they were quite intelligent fish and would soon understand ‘the game’, which they deserved credit for given that they had never seen an artificial fly before.

The freshwater barracuda, bicuda, were present in decent numbers but were hard to hook given the speed they intercepted the fly, often continuing in the direction of the fly i.e. towards you once they had engulfed the fly. By the time you took up the slack line the bicuda had thrown the hook.

Payara (vampire fish) were seen in good numbers. A large shoal lived near camp and were particularly active in low-light conditions; their large eyes made them perfect hunters under such levels.

As you can see you could pick a species a day and have a fresh challenge and enjoyment by doing so. It is a diverse and rich fishery that will continue to be as such given what is proposed for its future in regards to rod numbers and season length. It is an experience like no other and one that I would urge you to undertake if you enjoy the prospect of something a little more rustic, yet truly off the beaten track.









Melancholic Endings

Returning to civilisation took some acclimatisation. Everything seemed noisy and uncomfortable. Mobiles rang, emails pinged and car horns tooted. What I would have given to have returned to the simple life of Kendjam at that point.

However, that is what makes what we do and the sport we choose to pursue so special. It also allows us to fleet in and out of experiences, getting attached to some on a deeper level that form somewhat of a pilgrimage in future years.

Aardvark McLeod are the main agent for Kendjam and can be contacted for more information and availability on this unique destination.

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