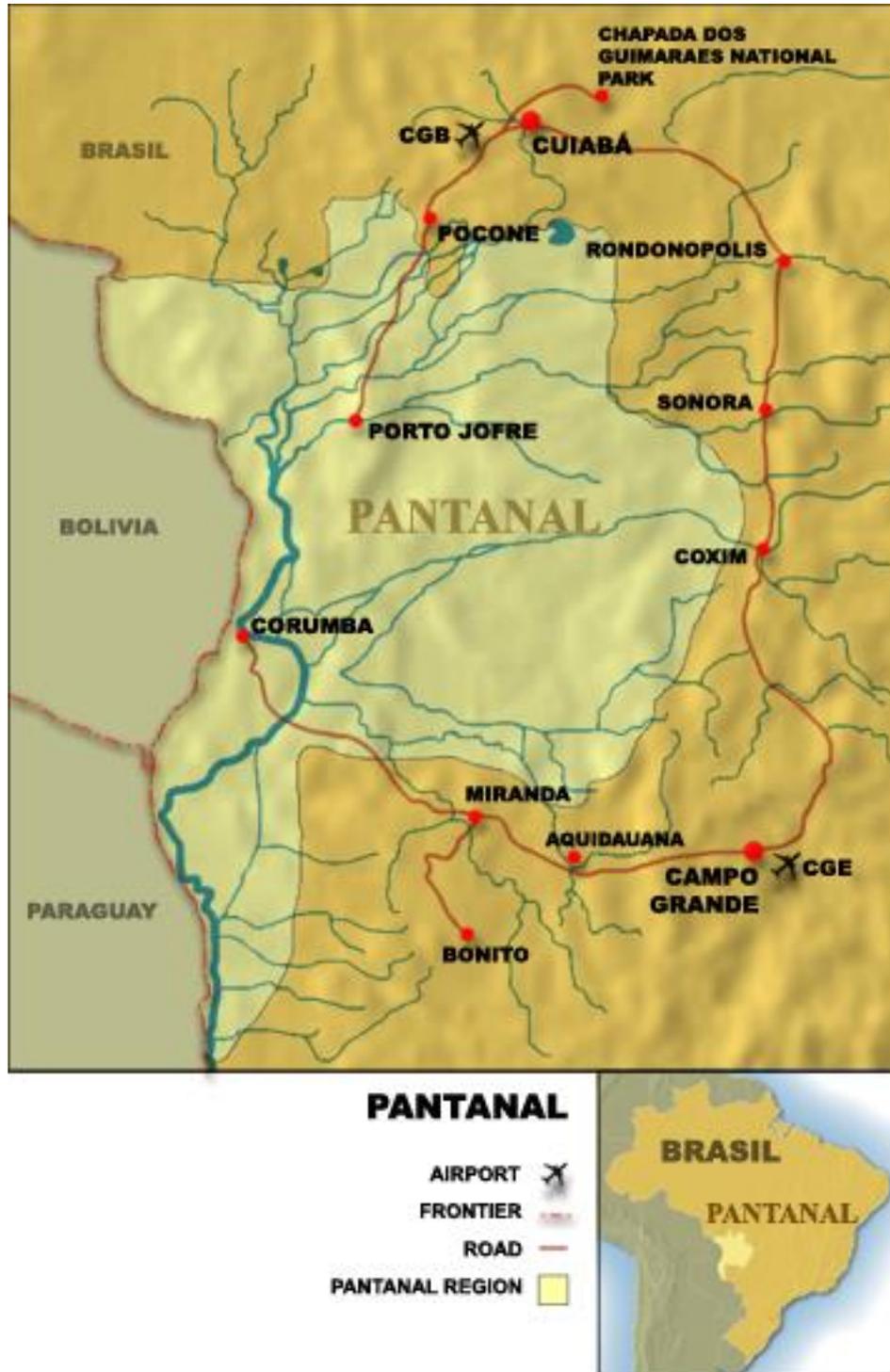


Pantanal, Brazil, 2015

The Pantanal is a very large region of western Brazil plus some of Paraguay and some of Bolivia.



It is made up of a vast low lying wetland bordered by high red sandstone plateaus. Interspersed in the wetland are small areas of raised land, called *caapõe*, that remain dry during the floods and house many species, particularly mammals. They resemble the hammocks of the Everglades. Estimates of the Pantanal's size usually vary between 56,000 square miles and 84,000 square miles. Each year it experiences a cycle of heavy rain followed by an ebb season and then a dry season. Water levels typically vary by 2 to 5 meters during this cycle, caused by periodic flooding of the Paraguay River, as well as a half dozen other major rivers. The very small gradient of the Paraguay River basin is rarely greater than 20 centimeters per kilometer, or one part in 5,000. This means the flood reaches the south and west many weeks after the rain in the basin. The response to this dramatic variation in water level by plants and animals is remarkable. When water is scarce animals (I am including mammals, birds, reptiles etc. as animals) congregate around the few remaining water holes to feast on trapped fish and provide the lover of nature with an unparalleled opportunity to observe and photograph. The Pantanal dwarfs the Everglades (flooded area is ten times bigger) and is much larger than the Botswana's Okavango Delta (flooded area is fifteen times bigger).

We chose a segment of the ebb season, the second half of May, to visit the Pantanal. This would make sightings of mammals more challenging but there would be fewer people and many birds. We thought the mosquitoes would be minor then but that turned out to be wrong. Lynn was so bitten up by the last day in the Pantanal at Caiman Ecolodge that she skipped both excursions for the day and they were two of the best of the entire trip, punctuated that night by the only sighting of a tapir.

Our trip was custom made by Boutique Travel of Oakland, California and Blumar of Brazil. We had been to Fiji by custom arrangements made by Boutique Travel a few years ago and enjoyed the trip and trouble free arrangements very much. After several small group trips with Overseas Adventure Travel out of Cambridge, Massachusetts we tried Boutique Travel on the recommendation of a fellow traveler. When I decided to go to the Pantanal I asked Boutique Travel if they could put together a trip and was told that they did not work in that part of the world but that they just took on a Brazilian agent who would give it a try, Mr. Angelo Chaddad. Working with Blumar and with us he arranged this trip.

We flew overnight from Atlanta to Sao Paulo arriving on May 17. After breezing through customs we found our next flight on Air GOL to Cuiaba in

northern Pantanal in the state of Mato Grosso. We stayed the night in Hotel Deville Cuiaba. Cuiaba is located in the zone between the low lying flat Pantanal and the high plateau. It has many clay colored high rise apartments and office buildings that from a distance give it the look of a field full of termite mounds. At noon on May 18 we were picked up by a driver and our bilingual guide, Juan, who already had an English couple with him, Steff and Paul. We would spend three days with them making two a day excursions into the wild parts of Araras Ecolodge ranch, a property of some 3000 hectares (one hectare is 2.47 acres or 10,000 square meters). The owner is an ardent conservationist and pays for the ranch by raising Zebu (Brahman) cattle for dairy, meat and leather.



Zebus and jabirus

The meat is rather tough and you learn to easily recognize when you have been served Zebu. *Arara* is Portuguese for macaw and the lodge has a mated pair of resident hyacinth macaws, *arara azul*. These are the largest macaws and some find them the most beautiful in their solid blue feathers with yellow rings around the eyes and yellow lunate accents abutting their lower mandibles. On the third day with Steff and Paul we were joined for a day by Kim and Gerd from Belgium. The last day, our fourth, we were alone except for a Brazilian photographer and his wife. The lodge could hold 16 when full, making it a small hotel, or *Pousada*. Juan was an excellent and enthusiastic guide. One night he and I walked around the lodge in the dark with a spotlight. We saw a snake-headed fish, normally hidden in daylight, a small water snake and bats.

We were repeatedly warned to bring a small bag for our trip to Araras Ecolodge. I even had Angelo send me the dimensions. We carried our small bags inside our big ones and planned on leaving the big ones with half our stuff in

Cuiaba. Juan was puzzled by this and told us he would take everything. During ebb season tourism is slow and the small van can carry four with all their luggage but during high season later on space for 10 with luggage is not adequate. We prepaid everything but Kim and Gerd tried to use a credit card at the lodge and couldn't. They had to return to Cuiaba and pay on their way to the airport.

I will elaborate on animal sightings below, along with photos taken by Lynn. For now I only want to point out that on the trip from Cuiaba, south through Pocone, and onto Araras Ecolodge, most of the road was paved but the last third was dirt road and the whole trip took nearly 5 hours for about 125 kilometers. Along the way we spotted more than 36 species, mostly birds. My friend Ted Hill used to sneer at bird watchers until he understood that birds are basically living dinosaurs. With that perspective he enjoys the obsession with birds many others have. Now he husbands a wild female turkey at his home in Los Osos, California. The Pantanal is a birder's paradise.

Markus, who spoke no English picked us up May 22 and took us back to Cuiaba. There we were collected by our next multilingual guide, Cecilia, who took us to Pousada Do Parque in Chapada Dos Guimares. This lodge was up a long dirt road behind a locked gate. While it could house 10 guests we were the only guests for three days. The property had its own delightful and peaceful waterfall as well as a tower that took you above the tree canopy. On May 22 we visited the geocentric point for Brazil and saw Cuiaba in the distance on the plains below looking like a field of termite mounds. Chapada is in the high plateau region and offers views of many splendid waterfalls as well as vast vistas of the lowlands. On May 23 we hiked into three falls and drove to another that was 85 meters tall. Lynn nearly suffered from heat stroke during the long hike.



85 meter tall falls

On our hike we observed 2 to 3 inch wide paths devoid of stones or other debris of any kind. These paths ran for many meters and ended in vast mounds. They were leaf cutter ants' highways. The leaf cutters marched in dense columns

each carrying a tiny green parasol. So many little legs swept the paths clean. The ants grow a specific fungus on the greenery and eat the fungus. It is a challenge to imagine how this behavior evolved. Sometimes we also observed columns of army ants terrorizing the landscape. You had to check that when you stopped walking you did not stand in one of their phalanxes.

Around the lodge's grounds I saw Brazilian guinea pigs, burrowing owls and fat green-backed skinks. Many birds also visited including a woodpecker attacking a papaya and a little screech owl in the rafters.

On May 24 we flew from Cuiaba to Campo Grande on Air GOL. Campo Grande is in Mata Grosso do Sul, the southern Pantanal. We spent the night at the Novotel Campo Grande. Cuiaba is the capital of Mata Grosso and Campo Grande is the capital of Mata Grosso do Sul. Around $\frac{3}{4}$ of the Pantanal is in Brazil and of that 60% is in Mata Grosso do Sul. On May 25 Anderson (this is his one name) drove the two of us some 200 kilometers to Caiman Ecolodge near Miranda. The road from Campo Grande to Miranda was paved, in good condition and traveled lightly by cars and trucks. Nevertheless despite roadside signs warning about wildlife many road kill creatures were seen including armadillos and a giant anteater. The road from Miranda to the lodge was red dirt.

The Caiman Ecolodge is beautifully situated next to a permanent wetland a few feet deep. It is situated on a property some 53,000 hectares in size and has 36,000 zebus. Off the back deck a middle sized caiman takes up residence and can be observed eating piranhas that come too close. Standing there, all sorts of wildlife passed by including parakeets, toucans, capybaras and feral pigs. The capybara is the largest rodent on earth, aquatic at that, and sometimes topping 50 kilograms. They are herbivorous and prefer water plants, especially water hyacinths. Caimans like to munch on little ones and jaguars enjoy the big ones. The lodge supports the hyacinth macaw project that started when these spectacular birds were endangered. It has been so successful that now it is hard to see any other type of macaw, most of the ideal nesting sites being taken up by hyacinths. They are highly social and are sometimes seen in large flocks of a dozen or more. They especially like a type of palm nut that is hard to crack. It has a pulpy cover. Zebus eat the nuts and digest the pulp but excrete the hard nuts. We observed a dozen or more hyacinths on the ground picking through zebu dung for pulp-less palm nuts.



Arara azul

A loud crackling sound could be heard as the nut's hard shell was breached. On the ground the hyacinths move comically with a side to side waddle. In the air, with their long flared tail feathers, they are utter grace.



Hyacinth macaw with palm nut

For two days we did two a day excursions with Dorothy and Jim. Our morning guide was Rafael and our afternoon/evening guide was Rachel. Each was university educated, multilingual and well informed about Pantanal nature. Several native vaqueros also helped out, driving and guiding. The word vaquero comes from *vaca* + *ero* which mean, respectively, *cattle* and *one who cares for*. In the eighteenth century when the word originated boys tended to be the ones who tended cattle. Hence the English word *cowboy*. Only later did adults tend the cattle but the name cowboy stuck. Our last two days were shared with Mexican mother and daughter, Olga and Olga, who live in Brazil. At dinner with guide Rachel and the two Olga's there were lively discussions of the USA, economics and politics. The others viewed the USA as a sort of utopia with fairness, justice and opportunity without corruption or oligarchy. With diplomacy and tact I dispelled their naivety.

On May 29 Anderson transported us back to Campo Grande where we flew Air GOL to Sao Paulo and then connected to Rio de Janeiro. We lodged for two nights at the Miramar Hotel in the Copacabana region near the beach. A little luxury gave Lynn some respite from her bites and both of us had a chance to feel clean again. On May 30 our guide, Yuri, took us to the cog train up Corcovado Mountain to see the famous *Cristo Redentor* and the exquisite view of all of Rio. On May 31 we went to the Jardim Botânico in a light rain. That evening we flew from Rio overnight to Atlanta. Rio was discovered on January 1, 1500 by the Portuguese when they landed in Guanabara Bay, which they thought was the mouth of a river, hence *Rio de Janeiro*, the river of January. Had they known better *Rio* would now be *Baía*.