



Wendy Gomersall comes face to face with one of the world's most elusive predators – as it devours a late meal in Brazil

THE Jaguar who came to tea



that human beings are bad,' said Mário. 'We had to change the jaguar's mindset, to show that we don't represent any danger.'

The great news is the project, launched five years ago using methods already used with leopards in Africa, seems to be working. 'Before we started there were two or three sightings a year in the refuge. Last year there were 300,' said Mario.

Caiman Ecological Refuge offers the best chance in the world to see a wild jaguar. During high season, tourists can pay to go out with the Onçafari team, locating kills, looking for tracks on the ground, checking and setting camera traps, assessing data collected from radio collars and spotting jaguars of course, with a bit of luck.

THESE trips are available to limited numbers but, as we soon discovered, you don't have to join the team to have a good chance of seeing a jaguar during a three- or four-night stay at one of Caiman Ecological Refuge's two chic lodges – Baiazinha and Cordilheira, which are 15 miles apart and have 11 rooms between them, as well as a swish lounge, dining room and swimming pool each.

Caiman Ecological Refuge lies about 150 miles – a four-hour drive or 50-minute flight by small aircraft – from Campo Grande, the state capital, and covers 130,000 acres.

A stay here is similar to an African



safari. Early morning, afternoon and after-dark drives in safari vehicles are led by expert guides. I stayed at Baiazinha, which sits in wetlands reminiscent of Botswana's Okavango Delta. You won't see great numbers of animals, but the creatures you do see are extraordinary. First on our list were the capybaras, large rodents, enjoying lovely lives lolling around doing nothing much – they are favourite jaguar food, though.

There are plenty of caimans, too, which jaguars also eat. The Refuge is home to a working cattle ranch and yes, the big cats do help themselves to a vulnerable cow or two as well.

However, the cats won't tackle the slightly ridiculous looking giant anteater, thanks to its lethal massive claw used to open ant and termite mounds.

Then there were crab-eating foxes, as cute as mini-wolves; feisty peccaries; and cute armadillos. We even

glimpsed an ocelot as she ran across the track in front of us.

The Pantanal has a vast array of amazing birds, from awesome hyacinth macaws and assorted kingfishers to big jabiru storks, roseate spoonbills, rare bare-faced curassows and delightful little burrowing owls. In addition to the game drives, activities include

ANIMAL MAGIC: Capybaras, right; and an anteater uses its powerful claw, left. Top: Hyacinth macaws

canoeing, stargazing, bush walks and a spot of piranha fishing. Guests also meet the Projeto Onçafari team. We learned that – contrary to popular belief – female jaguars can be sociable and hang out together; they often climb trees; and they get furballs they have to cough up, just like our pet moggies.

The enthusiasm of the team was infectious, and we couldn't wait to climb aboard our safari vehicles to go and see a jaguar – we hoped.

We were lucky. The day before our arrival, Esperanza (it means Hope), one of the project's most co-operative jaguars, had killed a cow close to a track. We made a

beeline for it, and waited in the dark... Then the headlights were switched on, and there she was, a beautiful, healthy, strong jaguar in full view and so close.

Fingers crossed, we watched to see if she would scarpers but she took no notice of us, and carried on chomping while we admired her at our leisure. Magical.

On another night we saw two other jaguars flirting with each other and Esperanza's mature twin cubs sitting in the road near a giant anteater – an incredible sight.

So, our final jaguar tally? Five big cats in three sightings. Not surprisingly, we were over the moon.

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