QUEEN OF THE PANTANAL

A ranch in Brazil's Pantanal is not only helping to save some of the planet's rarest species – including jaguars – but lets visitors join those battling to protect them out in the wild...

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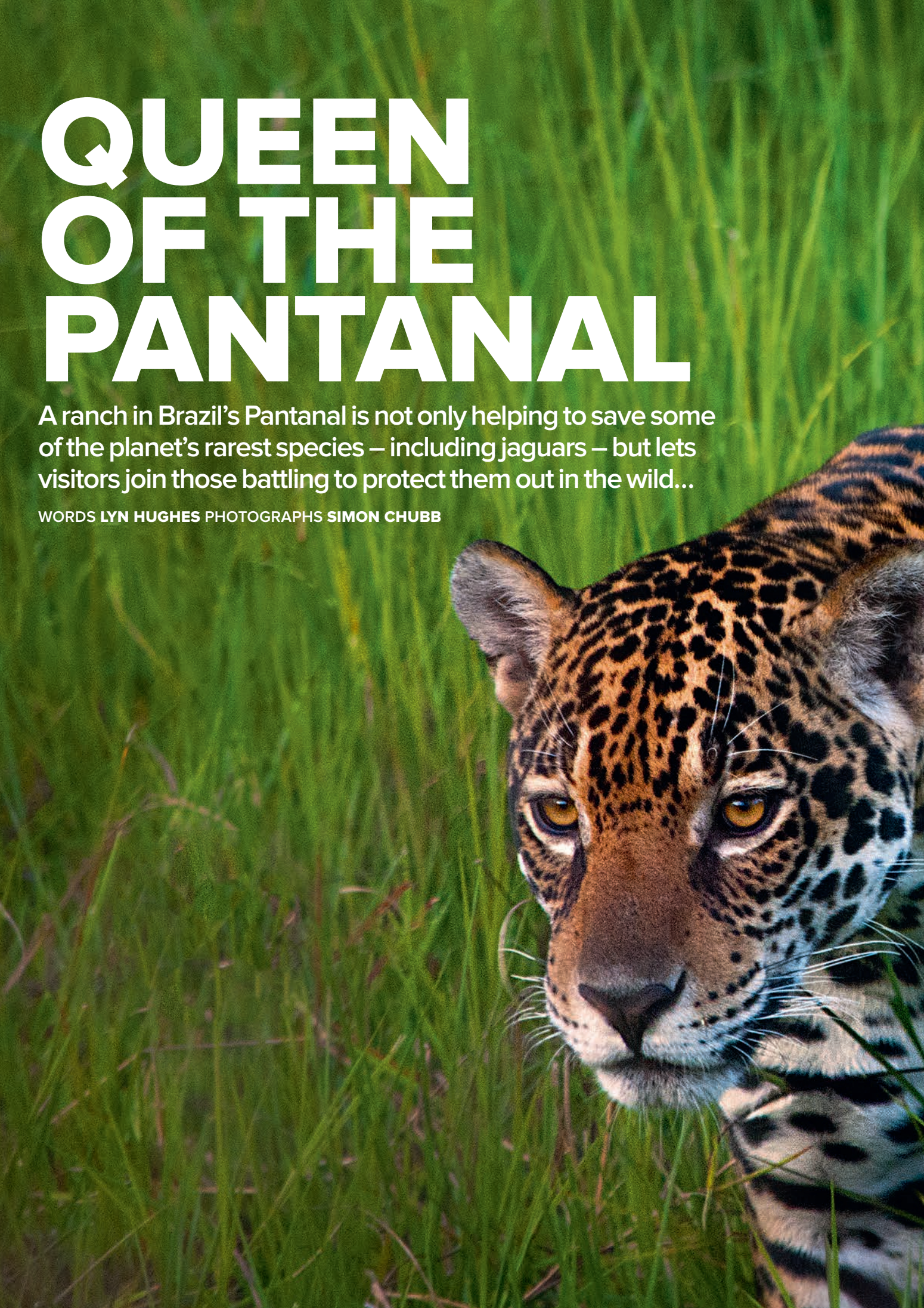


The radio burst into life and Jessica, one of my two guides, grinned as she turned to me: "A pair of jaguars have been seen… You want to see if we can find them?" Mario accelerated and the open safari vehicle tore along unpaved track deep in Brazil's Pantanal region while Jessica and I pulled on ponchos to deter the winter chill blasting our faces.

As we reached the location where the jaguars had been seen, we heard the alarm calls of jays announcing their presence. The road was bordered by a strip of forest and Mario had picked a spot that gave us the best possible view, but we saw nothing. The minutes ticked by. Suddenly, he hissed something in Portuguese to Jessica, then turned to me and said that he thought he'd heard a noise, so we drove back a short way before detouring up a grassy track.

We emerged in a tree-dotted field behind the woodland. Mario turned the engine off and we scanned the pasture in silence, our senses alert. In unison we spotted a powerfully built male jaguar with a huge round head. It sat in the grass, relaxed, before loping across towards the trees and disappearing. It was only then, as we turned to leave, that we realised a female jaguar was in the field too. She was much smaller than him, almost sylph-like in comparison, and as she strolled towards the same patch of forest, she took a line closer to our car, completely unperturbed at our presence.

'As we reached the spot where the jaguars had been seen, we heard the alarm calls of jays'

Entering the woods, she made her way along the other side of the wire fence that bordered it, staying often in sight. She then came back out into the field, looking back all the time for the male, and rolled in the grass in a provocative manner. She seemed to be playing a game of come hither: one minute hard to get, the next displaying herself to the male. It worked, as he reappeared and settled down to watch her.

As twilight fell, she walked past us another time, just five metres from where we sat. The male was clearly fixated with her but kept his distance. Eventually they both headed off across the field together. By now it was pitch black and fireflies danced in the meadow. Switching the headlights on, we slowly followed the pair, keeping a respectful distance.

Jessica revealed that the female was known as Juju and was two years and three months old. "We know her mother, Nusa, very well," she said. "We first saw Juju as a tiny cub, so she is very used to us. But the male we do not recognise. He is possibly a new one to the ranch."

We turned back down to the road and drove on, exhilarated and chatting excitedly. "Even for us that was exceptional," announced Jessica. But before I could answer, there was a sudden but significant movement in the trees at the side of the road. Mario slammed on the brakes. Another jaguar had started to run across the road but stopped, and instead ran alongside the treeline parallel to us. "That's Nusa," exclaimed Jessica, "the mother of Juju." The animal crossed behind us and made a guttural noise, something between a cough and a roar, before heading off. ▶

On the big cat trail
Searching with Jessica and Mario for the pair of jaguar; (*left*) capybaras hang out in social family groups

‘The jaguars were absorbed in each other and they mated right there, in the open, in the beam of our car headlights’

◀ We had driven full-circle and, as we approached the reception area of the ranch, we spotted the jaguars again. The female strolled confidently into the complex, sitting for a while outside one building just as a domestic cat would. She then sauntered past reception, where there were people inside and the door was *mostly* pulled shut.

She moved away from the buildings and the male approached her. They were absorbed in each other and oblivious to our lights as they mated right there, in the open, in the beam of our car headlights.

It had only been a couple of hours since I’d arrived at the Caiman Ecological Refuge in Brazil’s southern Pantanal, and what I’d seen was overwhelming. Here, the world’s largest wetland extends some 180,000 sq km across Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay. However, over 90% of it is privately owned land, with cattle farming dominating a region home to the Americas’ greatest concentration of wildlife. Sadly, the two aren’t easy bedfellows, but I had come to see how a pair of projects was not only changing minds locally but helping visitors to get closer to the area’s rare wildlife in the company of those battling to protect it.

The road seldom taken

The four-hour car journey from state capital Campo Grande had been enlivened by spotting rheas and flat fields full of grazing Brahman, the off-white Asian cattle that thrive in the harshest parts of South America. At one point the driver pulled up, gesturing excitedly. There was a giant anteater ambling the verge; it was the first one I’d ever seen and an extraordinary sight, but it disappeared quickly from view.

At the small town of Miranda we turned off the highway and started down an unmade road, the earth now a distinctive orange-red colour. A few kilometres on, we spotted another giant anteater in the neighbouring cattle field. We pulled up and I slowly and quietly approached the wire fence. The anteater was huge; the size of a large golden retriever. It was oblivious to me as its long thin snout sought out some of the 30,000 ants or termites it eats a day. I was close enough to hear the noise its long, sticky tongue made, a sound akin to someone sucking the end of a drink through a straw.

Driving on, we entered the Caiman Estancia, a working ranch that is also home to the Caiman Ecological Refuge. Owned by rancher, conservationist and businessman Roberto Klabin, it combines ecotourism and conservation alongside traditional cattle farming.

We passed more fields before they gave way to a mosaic of habitats. Rainy season was over but water still sat on the open areas of grassland, filled with birdlife and snoozing caimans. As our accommodation at Baiazinha Lodge came into sight, stilts raising it high above the water, I wondered whether I had stumbled on some magical animal kingdom. A pair of beautiful hyacinth macaws were sitting in a tree while a giant anteater snuffled the banks of a stream below and a family of capybara – the world’s largest rodent – grazed on the grass by the lodge. ▶

Spotlight superstar
Juju strolling past the rangers' car, enticing the male to follow her

◀ We pulled up and I was greeted by Jessica and Mario, who were to be my guides for the next few days. They actually work for Projeto Onçafari, the jaguar conservation project based at the ranch, and so combine fieldwork and research with guiding interested visitors. While excellent guides and activities are laid on for all guests, there is also the opportunity for a more immersive conservation experience by pre-booking to spend time with the project team, and I had opted to do that for my whole stay.

I mentioned to them how much wildlife I had seen in just the last couple of minutes, including the fact there was a giant anteater just a couple of hundred metres away. Jessica had a theory: "It's chilly today – winter has arrived and we have a cold front from Paraguay. It can be more common to see anteaters and other animals in the daytime when it is cool."

It was late afternoon and I'd been travelling for over 24 hours, so it would have been tempting to have a shower and relax. But I was itching to get straight out and see even more. And thank heavens I did, as it was minutes later that Mario got the call about the jaguars having been seen and we then enjoyed three or four hours of the most extraordinary wildlife watching I've ever experienced.

Changing attitudes

The next day Jessica gave me an introduction to the Onçafari project – a pun on onça (pronounced 'on-sa'), meaning 'big cat', and 'on safari'. Jaguar numbers are hard to estimate, given how secretive they are. However, what is known is that throughout the Americas their historic range has shrunk by more than 50% and that their numbers are a fraction of what they once were. Brazil is home to a major proportion of the world's jaguars, and since 1967 it has been illegal to hunt them. But that hasn't always been enforced as it should. Even here in the Pantanal, some farmers will kill jaguars to protect their livestock.

'It is illegal to hunt jaguars... but here in the Pantanal, some farmers will kill them to protect their livestock'

Onçafari accepts that jaguars will kill cattle, usually calves or sick animals. Farmers had been claiming they lost 10-to-20% of their cattle each year to the feline predators, but studies have shown that the real number is far less. Indeed, here on the ranch where a very healthy population of jaguars live, fewer than 1% of cattle is lost each year.

"It is easy to blame jaguars for any missing or dead livestock," explained Jessica. The project is therefore trying to develop and promote ways of preventing conflict between jaguars and farmers. It also aims to show that a jaguar is worth more alive than dead, and can have a positive socioeconomic impact on the region through tourism.

"A survey in the north Pantanal concluded jaguars cost US$56,000 a year in lost cattle but bring in up to $3 million a year in tourism," said Mario Haberfeld, co-founder of Projeto Onçafari, when I met him the next day. "The farmers have always hated jaguars, but some are starting to change. You have to show them numbers, so they can understand how the jaguars are not killing as many cattle as they think, and how much having the animals on their land can benefit them." ▶

Pantanal predators
(*clockwise from this*) Caiman congregate on the banks of the Pantanal; giant anteater on the search for the 30,000 termites a day that it eats; a caracara with the small crab that it has just caught; burrowing owls can be seen on look out on fence posts

◀ Mario was fascinated by wildlife as a child and that passion has stayed with him. "I used to be a racing car driver," he told me. "When I retired, I knew that I wanted to work in conservation. I spent two years travelling to see wildlife and what was saving animals. I came to Caiman with a ranger friend from South Africa. We said to Roberto that people like the place, the food, the birds. But what they want to see is jaguars. We need to make them viewable by people."

And so began a plan to slowly habituate the jaguars on the ranch to vehicles. "We started seeing jaguars regularly after three years of the project," Mario added. "Last year, 99% of visitors viewed them in high season."

Other work that the project carries out includes monitoring the jaguars to learn more about them, so several are collared and there are camera traps along many trails. The ranch was also the site of a successful reintroduction programme where two orphaned cubs were returned to the wild; this was even the subject of a BBC documentary called *Jaguars: Brazil's Super Cats*.

'Last year, 99% of visitors viewed the jaguars here in high season'

You would expect Mario to be against cattle farming but he was actually positive: "Cattle saved the Pantanal," he explained. "If there was no livestock, people would have found a way to plant soy beans or another agricultural crop, and that would have been disastrous for the wildlife and ecosystem. Visitors are also interested in the local Pantanal culture – it gives the place its identity."

Of course, like most successful conservation programmes, the plan is not just to save one species but a whole ecosystem. The jaguar is the flagship species, but by helping it, the project benefits the economy, creates jobs and preserves the Pantanal and all the other species who live here. It's not all about the jaguars, as I was about to discover.

Birds of a feather

Another long-running and highly successful wildlife project on the ranch focuses on the largest species of parrot in the world, the hyacinth macaw. It is endangered thanks to habitat loss and hunting, but the Pantanal is still a stronghold because of the efforts of Projeto Arara Azul (Hyacinth Macaw Project), founded by Neiva Guedes in the early 1990s.

The next morning, after the usual wake-up from the 'Pantanal alarm clock' (aka the raucous call of the chachalaca bird), I joined Neiva and some of her team as they toured the ranch monitoring nests. The first stop was a handsome tree very close to the lodge.

"This is a disputed tree," smiled one of the team. As well as a manmade nesting box for hyacinth macaws, there was also a pair of jabiru storks sat on a huge nest as well as a pair of nesting ibis. They were all angry at us being there, each demonstrating their profound displeasure through a different indignant call.

A metallic band was around the tree to try and prevent predators, such as ocelots or opossums, from climbing it to reach the hyacinth nest. Two of the team had on climbing equipment, and one went up the ropes to monitor the nesting box. They took photos and reported that there were no eggs yet, but that there were signs that the macaws

At a crossing... Juju decides which way to go; (*left*) a researcher checks a hyacinth macaw nest hollowed out in a tree; hyacinth macaws are one of the largest and rarest animals in the world

had been "exploring" it, and they had been building up the nest with fresh wood chips, which they had pecked off the nest box.

One factor that surprised me, and probably doesn't help in their survival, is just how highly specialised (read limited) the macaws are. Their main food source is the acuri tree, which produces even in dry season. They eat the hard nut in the centre of the tree's fruit, and coexist well with the local livestock because cattle eat the fruit but defecate or regurgitate the nuts that the macaws then devour.

"There are more than enough acuri trees in the Pantanal for the birds to survive on," said one of the researchers. "The limiting factor here is the lack of trees to nest in. They will usually only nest in manduvi trees, as they have a big enough trunk and are soft enough to hollow out a nest." These are in short supply, which is why the nest boxes put up by the team have taken on such importance, given they also have a higher success rate for the survival of chicks.

We spent the morning being squawked at by irritated macaws as we visited tree after tree, some with cameras set within or above them. We watched footage from one of the nests and could see a pair of macaws being loving to each other. The birds are monogamous and mate for life, living 40 to 45 years in the wild. "They spend a lot of time cuddling," said one of the team. "Macaws care very much for their families and for each other. They really are partners."

One final encounter

If having an insight into these projects was enhancing my visit, every excursion was throwing up its own rewards. On one night drive we spotted three handsome ocelots hanging around under a bridge, lying in wait to catch fish. On the same drive a tapir, South America's largest native mammal, lumbered through a field next to the track we were following. And sitting in an open vehicle at night with around 100 wild peccaries surrounding us will go down as one of the most surreal, as well as smelliest, experiences I've ever had.

One activity I was keen to do was to get out on the water on a sunset canoe trip. So, late afternoon on my last day, we headed out in a vehicle. The sun was shining and it promised to be a glorious sunset. But then the radio crackled into life. "There's a jaguar!" relayed Jessica. "It's probably Juju. Do you want to go and see her?" There could only be one answer.

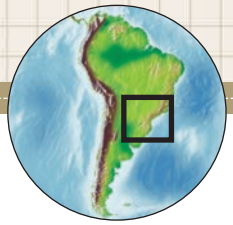
A familiar head was peeping above some golden grass. Her senses were alert and her ears twitched as she looked around, yet she seemed entirely oblivious to our presence. As we watched on, we wondered if she was looking for the male who had been her love interest for the past day or two.

The minutes ticked away. "What do you want to do?" asked Jessica, needing a decision. "If we leave now, we still have time to make it to the canoes for sunset..."

I knew that Juju might stay where she was for hours, semi-concealed by the long grass. And so I agonised what to do. But, as I was about to acquiesce, Juju made up my mind for me, slowly rising to her feet and stretching – almost teasing me to stay.

As cameras clicked,and the atmosphere between those of us watching her became so charged that it felt tangible, Juju coolly sashayed through the grass. Was she really so oblivious to us that our presence made no difference? Or was she simply enjoying the attention, the admiration, the adulation?

She passed within a few metres of us, reached the red-earth road and paused. There she sat for a moment, looking for all the world like a domestic tabby cat deciding which way to go. Slowly rising, she sauntered off down the road. Engines started and we formed a respectfully slow procession behind her, loyal subjects all.



The Pantanal, Brazil Footnotes

VITAL STATISTICS

State capitals: Campo Grande (Mato Grosso do Sul), Cuiabá (Mato Grosso)
Language: Portuguese
Time: GMT-4 (Oct-Feb GMT-3)
International dialling code: +55
Visas: Not required by UK nationals
Money: Brazilian real (BRL), currently around BRL5 to the UK£

When to go

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec

Best time to visit – winter is the dry season, which makes it good for wildlife spotting as the animals tend to congregate around the remaining water.
Wettest season – rains usually arrive in the late afternoon. A good time for spotting chicks and jaguar cubs.
Shoulder months – rains gradually cease during this period. Expect beautiful watery landscapes and lots of aquatic birds. Access is more limited, but wildlife is often seen on the roads as the animals use them as highways.

Health & safety

While there are remarkably few recorded instances of jaguars attacking humans, don't take chances in their habitat. Don't go running, and don't walk unaccompanied. Malaria isn't a problem in the Pantanal, but mosquitos and other bugs are a nuisance – take precautions against getting bitten.

Further reading & Information

Pantanal Wildlife (Bradt, 2010)
oncafari.org – Onçafari Project, which promotes conservation in the Pantanal
Western Brazil (Footprint, 2016)
www.lata.travel – Latin American Travel Association

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PLANNING GUIDES
- **Brazil travel guide**

THE TRIP

The author travelled to Brazil with **Audley Travel** (01993 838610, audleytravel.com). A similar 13-day tailormade trip costs from £7,929pp (based on two sharing), including flights, transfers, four nights at Caiman Ecological Refuge, one night in Cuiabá, two nights at Cristalino Jungle Lodge in the southern Amazon, one night in Rio and three nights at Casa Cairucu, Paraty. The price also includes the Hyacinth Macaw Project and a private excursion with Onçafari at Caiman.

Getting there & around

LATAM (latam.com, 0800 026 0728) flies from London to São Paulo from £630 return. **British Airways** (ba.com) also flies direct. From São Paulo, there are flights to Campo Grande (from 1hr 50 mins), the main gateway to the southern Pantanal, and Cuiabá (from 2hrs 20mins), gateway to the north. Domestic carriers include LATAM and **Azul** (voeazul.com.br). Independent travel in the Pantanal is difficult. Roads are unsurfaced and most land is private. Transfers are usually arranged by tour companies or lodges.

Cost of travel

Lodges offer packages that usually include food, accommodation, transport and activities. It is easier and often cheaper to book via a tour operator, who can arrange lodge stays. Brazil tends to be cheaper than the UK; beers cost from BRL3 (65p), bottled water around BRL5 (£1).

Accommodation

Caiman Ecological Refuge (caiman.com.br) is in the southern Pantanal, 240km west of Campo Grande. The author stayed at Caiman's **Baiazinha Lodge,** which is set overlooking a lake. Included activities and guiding are excellent; excursions with the Onçafari team and the Hyacinth Macaw Project cost extra and should be booked in advance.

Food & drink

The Pantanal is cattle-ranching country, so expect a lot of **beef**. Lodges such as Caiman also offer plenty of variety with fish (catfish), beans, veg, fruit and vegetarian dishes. Expect to become addicted to **pão de queijo** – cheesy gluten-free dough balls. End the day with a refreshing *caipirinha*, made with cachaça (a sugarcane-based spirit), sugar and lime.

What to pack

Don't forget **binoculars** – though Caiman does have spares to hire to guests. Insect repellent is advised, especially outside of dry season. The author took trousers, a shirt, a gilet and socks from Craghoppers' repellent-impregnated **NosiLife** range – highly recommended.

PANTANAL WILDLIFE HOT LIST

1 Jaguar
The world's third-largest cat, the jaguar has power, presence and beauty. The largest specimens are found in the Pantanal. Each has slightly different markings, so they can be easily recognised by researchers.

2 Giant anteater
The size of a large dog, the giant anteater is an astonishing-looking critter, with its tiny head, long snout and huge tail, on which it can balance to fight other animals with its fearsome claws. Those claws also explain its strange, rolling gait – an anteater walks on its knuckles with the claws splayed out.

3 Hyacinth macaw
The world's largest flying parrot – and one of the rarest. Hyacinth macaws have a raucous cry, so you'll probably hear them before you see them. Most often seen in loved-up pairs.

4 Tapir
Brazil's largest native terrestrial mammal looks like the love-child of a hippo and a giant pig. Capable swimmers, they are sometimes spotted in the water, and will happily use roads to get around. However, they are mostly shy and nocturnal, so a sighting is to be celebrated.

5 Jabiru stork
The tallest flying bird in South America, the jabiru can reach 1.5m. Rather prehistoric-looking, they have white plumage and black necks and heads with a red 'bandana'. Commonly found near water, they are rather ungainly on the ground but magnificent in flight (*pictured*).

6 Caiman
These relatively small crocodilians are found in large congregations around water. They are a popular food for other creatures of the Pantanal, including the jaguar.

7 Capybara
The world's largest rodent looks like a rather cute giant guinea pig. It hangs out in large family groups and is easily spotted near water, grazing on grasses and aquatic plants. In hot weather they may also be found wallowing in water or mud holes.

Digital Mapping.co.uk; Dreamstime