

The New York Times: -In the Land of the Jaguars- [C2]

Il Pantanal brasiliano, la più grande zona umida del mondo, ospita numerosi giaguari. Sebbene timidi, questi splendidi felini sono piuttosto facili da avvistare.

I was prepared to wait, to **soak up** the magical morning light as our small motorboat traveled up the Rio São Lourenço in the Pantanal, Brazil's vast wetlands. A **tangle** of lianas, acuri palms and **strangler figs** pressed close along the riverbank. I stared into the forest, scanning for movement, for shadows, for a jaguar. But it was too soon. Patience in the wild is a lesson I have learned over a lifetime of travel. On an African safari, for example, it can take days **to spot a cheetah** or a leopard. But in Brazil, we had been out on the river for barely half an hour when the cry went up from Gabriel, the captain: "Jaguar!" And there he was, a magnificent male **sunning** himself in the **reeds**. I expected him to **flee**. But as we **pulled up** to the riverbank, he remained **watchful** but inscrutable, giving no sign of being disturbed. Farther upriver, we **happened upon** a female jaguar with her **cub**. As they walked along the riverbank, the **cub eyed** us suspiciously, but for the mother it was as if we were not even there.

WHERE NATURE HOLDS SWAY

Close to the center of Brazil, the Pantanal begins south of the city of Cuiabá. From there to tiny Porto Jofre (about 160 miles), the MT-060 and the **unpaved** Transpantaneira Highway **unfurl** across the world's largest wetlands, passing savanna and forest, ranches and eco-lodges. At Porto Jofre, the highway ends and motorboats take over, with guides and local captains, many with their own Instagram accounts, ready to take you upriver to look for jaguars. It was late November, the end of the dry season, when I arrived, and Porto Jofre was **barely a pinprick** of human presence, with a handful of lodges, camps and houses surrounded by rainforest. Families of capybara, the world's largest rodent, had taken over the **airstrip**.

Hyacinth macaws screeched overhead. Over the days that followed, I would wake before dawn in the simple, **palm-shaded** surroundings of the Jaguar Camp, run by my guide, Ailton Lara, and we would head down to the riverbank, where each **sultry** morning, with rain on the near horizon, a few fishermen cleaned their morning **catch**. The flotilla of tourist boats during the June-to-September high season was already a distant memory. But even on these quiet mornings, there were still boats **setting out** with visitors, heading as far as 60 miles **upstream** in their search for jaguars. They usually don't have to travel that far, finding what they're looking for in the Encontro Das Águas (Meeting of the Waters) State Park, less than an hour upriver from Porto Jofre. I had been **drawn** to Lara, forty-four, and his Pantanal Nature tour company, by his **soft-sell approach**. One of the Pantanal's most experienced guides, he had been exploring the network of rivers for decades. For him, it was all about the jaguars. If I wanted to join him, that would be wonderful. If not, he'd be out there anyway, looking for the animals. I had Lara and Gabriel to myself. After our first two sightings of the morning, we **eased** from the main river into a **creek** called Corixo Negro. "This is ground zero for jaguars," Lara said. **As if on cue**, beyond a family of giant **otters**, a female jaguar, **cub in tow**, launched herself from a branch **overhanging** the water's edge and onto an unsuspecting caiman in a violent commotion of water. With a handful of other guide boats alongside us, there was an audible **gasp** from amid the **whir** of camera clicks. The female jaguar, magnificent in the golden light of morning, emerged from the water, a small, **wriggling** caiman in her **jaws**. I looked around at Lara. Like all of us, his eyes were shining, as if seeing wild nature for the first time.

AN UNLIKELY INTIMACY

This section of the northern Pantanal has one of the highest jaguar densities in South America — about three for every 39 square miles. But when it comes to actually seeing jaguars, it hasn't always been like this. Beginning about twenty years ago — after decades of hunting, **poaching** for skins and **retaliation** for the occasional loss of **livestock**, all of which drove jaguars into hiding — a combination of government protection, a rise in tourism and early eco-tourism projects resulted in an increasingly friendly relationship

between humans and jaguars. Over the years, the jaguars have become used to the boats and the [camera-toting](#) humans in them. "Human-jaguar conflict is disappearing around this area of Porto Jofre," Lara said. "We are starting to live in harmony with jaguars." It's an unusual situation. "Jaguars are normally very shy and avoid the human presence," said Fernando Tortato, the Brazil conservation program coordinator for the wildcat conservation [nonprofit](#) Panthera. "People say that the jaguar is like a ghost living inside the jungle." But not here. There is an unlikely intimacy between the animals and the guides, who have given the jaguars names — Ousado, for example, a male whom Lara named, whose [paws](#) were burned in recent wildfires; Patricia and her [cub](#); [bent-eared](#) Marcela, [amber-eyed](#) and pregnant. It helps that in the northern Pantanal, there are no [sizable](#) towns — Porto Jofre, with a transient population of perhaps one hundred, has neither a gas station nor a shop within one hundred miles. And the riverbanks are filled with jaguar [prey](#): caiman, capybara and tapir, as well as birds like black-backed [water tyrants](#), and the [menwig frog](#), which [blends in](#) perfectly with the brown [leaf litter](#) on the forest floor and has a call that sounds like a Formula 1 engine. "Jaguars here are doing so well — said Lara — because there are so many different species they can eat."

CHALLENGES AHEAD

The Pantanal may look like a jaguar paradise, but threats remain. On the last day of my trip, the Mato Grosso and Mato Grosso do Sul state governments announced plans to build a bridge across the São Lourenço at Porto Jofre, where a road would cut through forest and wetlands to the regional city of Corumbá. In their announcement, the state governments — which did not respond to requests for comment — justified the move as a means of [furthering](#) eco-tourism by connecting the northern and southern Pantanal regions. Local activists, scientists and tour operators are against the project. Even without the road and bridge, the Pantanal faces challenges. Last year, fires burned one-quarter of the Pantanal, and a [drought](#) led to the lowest water levels ever in the Rio Paraguay, part of the network of rivers [upstream](#) from Porto Jofre. A landmark 2023 study of plans [to dredge](#) the Paraguay River [to enable](#) cargo river traffic found that the project posed an existential

threat to [**the wider biome**](#). Just 5 per cent of the Pantanal is officially protected. And as ever in Brazil, the political winds that [**pit ranchers against**](#) conservationists are never far away. Even in times of relative peace, the two coexist uncomfortably: a sign welcoming visitors to Cuiabá describes the city as “Capital of the Pantanal and [**Agribusiness**](#).” For now, the region’s isolation and growing fame as the world’s best place to see jaguars are keeping it safe. Back on the river for the last time, we watched Marcela, the pregnant female jaguar, [**stalk**](#) and attack a caiman in the river [**shallows**](#), carrying it into the [**undergrowth**](#). Soon, her meal finished, she reemerged and [**took to the water**](#). We followed at a distance for more than an hour, until she disappeared. **This article originally appeared in ***The New York Times***. **

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Glossary

- **happened upon** = imbattersi in
- **cub** = cucciolo
- **water tyrants** = tiranni mascherati
- **palm-shaded** = ombreggiato da palme
- **otters** = lontra
- **tangle** = groviglio
- **retaliation** = ritorsione
- **nonprofit** = organizzazione senza scopo di lucro
- **menwig frog** = rana starnazzante
- **leaf litter** = lettiera di foglie
- **furthering** = promuovere
- **drawn** = attrarre
- **As if on cue** = neanche a farlo apposta
- **prey** = preda
- **undergrowth** = sottobosco
- **writhing** = contorcersi
- **paws** = zampe
- **bent-eared** = con orecchio piegato
- **Agribusiness** = agroindustria
- **pulled up** = fermarsi
- **in tow** = a rimorchio
- **sultry** = soffocante
- **sizable** = di grandi dimensioni
- **strangler figs** = piante strangolatrici
- **barely a pinprick** = una traccia minima
- **airstrip** = pista di atterraggio
- **screeched** = stridere
- **overhanging** = sporgente
- **shallows** = acque basse
- **jaws** = mascelle
- **blends in** = mimetizzarsi
- **to enable** = permettere
- **pit ranchers against** = mettere in contrasto

- **eyed** = osservare
- **soft-sell approach** = approccio commerciale non invadente
- **eased** = muoversi con cautela
- **camera-toting** = con macchina fotografica
- **catch** = pesca
- **drought** = siccità
- **stalk** = seguire furtivamente
- **setting out** = partire
- **poaching** = cacciare di frodo
- **cheetah** = ghepardo
- **unfurl** = dispiegarsi
- **took to the water** = buttarsi in acqua
- **reeds** = giunchi
- **creek** = ruscello
- **whir** = ronzio
- **to dredge** = dragare
- **Hyacinth macaws** = ara giacinto
- **gasp** = sussulto
- **soak up** = assorbire
- **to spot** = avvistare
- **sunning** = prendere il sole
- **flee** = fuggire
- **watchful** = vigile
- **unpaved** = non asfaltato
- **livestock** = bestiame
- **upstream** = a monte
- **the wider biome** = l'intero bioma