



DORADO DREAMS

FLY FISHING EXPLORER **DUNCAN HALL** HEADS TO THE PARANA RIVER ARGENTINA IN SEARCH OF THE GOLDEN SALMON...

What an awesome video, I thought as I viewed this, chugging back to Barcelos on the boat at the end of my Amazon peacock bass trip in 2017. Thiago, a Brazilian medical student, showed me a brief clip on his mobile phone of a wooden platform on the Pantanel River, Brazil. The fishing was perhaps as brutal as the golden fish, beneath the platform. A large baited hook was dropped into the river, followed immediately by an explosive take and a massive 15lb fish was hauled onto the platform. With a primordial surge of its tail, it threw the hook, slipping from the grasp of the angler back into the river. This I learned was the golden dorado.

The Salto Grande Reservoir in Uruguay, mega expensive dorado fishing below the La Zona Dam.

The golden dorado an aggressive ambush predator which will test your fly rod to its limits.

GOLDEN SALMON

There are several dorado all completely unrelated. There is the tropical sea-fish dorado, also referred to as mahi mahi or dolphin fish which I have caught in Antigua, another is a Mediterranean sea-fish which is more correctly a gilt head bream but the dorado that I was now transfixed, was the golden dorado (*Salminus brasiliensis*) of South America. This has the appearance of a heavily set golden salmon with powerful jaws and a fine set of predatory teeth to match. Unlike the anadromous salmon, which divides, it's life between salt and freshwater this dorado is exclusively a freshwater fish. It is an aggressive ambush predator with a voracious appetite devouring other fish. They inhabit the drainage rivers of the Amazon Basin so are found in Brazil, Bolivia, Uruguay, Paraguay and Argentina.



The Parana River in Argentina is home for a hole host of fish species willing to take the fly!

NIGHT BUS TO SALTO

I had put the golden dorado into my 'future-trip-memory-bank' and headed south to explore the trout fishing in Patagonia. That should have been the end of fishing in South America in 2017 but the memory kept

rewinding the video of the golden dorado and I did still have another six days before my exit flight from Buenos Aires. I made a hasty decision took a night bus to Salto in Uruguay where I heard there was golden dorado fishing. The Uruguay River divides Concordia in Argentina with that of Salto in Uruguay on the eastern side. This site has a shared dam and hydroelectric plant spanning the river upstream of which is the large Salto Grande Reservoir. I discovered this area is world famous for its gigantic golden dorado, which reach monstrous sizes particularly in the rich area below the dam, referred to as La Zona. The fishing in this 1km zone is expensive as it reflects the likely possibility of catching numerous monster dorado and is fiercely policed with patrollers on jet skis.

I met up with Gianni who runs Best Dorado fly-fishing on the Uruguay side of the river and fished for a day where the fishing started a kilometre below La Zona and caught a surprising number of golden dorado but nothing over five pounds. It was however very exciting fishing and this I decided was just a taster of more to come.



ARGENTINA DORADO

Dorado fishing in Argentina occurs in two areas, Salta in the west, not to be confused with Salto of Uruguay and the Paraná River where the larger Dorado is found. The Paraná River is divided into the upper and middle sections: the upper or alto, is in Corrientes region and is famous for it's giant dorado, pacú, and pira pita. Smaller golden dorado is also found in the middle Parana of the Ibera marshlands. This marshland, within a national reserve is a haven for wildlife with hundred's of bird species, deer, capybara and a greater diversity of fish, which include pira pita, tatarira and sarubi.

The Parana River is the second largest river in South America, extending over 3000 miles. It drains the southern Brazilian Amazon with the confluence of the Paranaiba and Rio Grande. Close to Buenos Aires it joins the Uruguay River to forms the Rio de la Plata. The Rio de la Plata is remembered by the historic 'Battle of the river Plate', when HMS Exeter, Ajax and Achilles immobilised the Graf Spee in WW2, the scuppered boat spars are still visible in the river.

2019 TRIP

So in February 2019 I arrived at Corrientes where the Parana River is over a mile wide, and well delineated by the brown Amazon alluvial colour on the far bank with the clearer water on the southern side.



Home for the duration, the comfortable Suinda Lodge.



FACT FILE

PARANÁ RIVER
Length: 4,880 kilometres (3,030 mi)
Countries: Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil



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Fishing trips always take some time researching. I couldn't find anyone in the UK who had fished this area so relied on my fishing ally Google and booked six days at the Upper Parana Lodge, which transpired to be the newly built Suinda Lodge. The searching and booking was rather convoluted through a company called Faraway Fishing which was linked to an old web site and a basic set up in Bento Itati, near Corrientes. I am always wary of scams particularly as I needed to make my entire payment prior to even arriving in the country. I then discovered the Swiss Chaps payment number was incorrect, for a bank based in New York for a fishing trip in Argentina! 'Are you sure', questioned my bank? I threw caution to the wind and instructed them to proceed with the payment. It proved a correct decision. As it turned out the lodge I was originally booked into, had been replaced by an entirely new establishment run by Nervous Waters. All my apprehension was unheralded as the Suinda Lodge managed by Matias was mind blowing opulent. Cord en blu meals, unlimited fine wines and of course an ice cold flannel to wipe us down as we returned from fishing, along with a refreshing cocktail thrust in my hand. I could get used to this!



BOAT FISHING

The schedule at the lodge was breakfast at 06.00 with boats departing promptly at 06.30, guided by either Pablo or Fabian, both highly experienced fly-fishermen. Most of the dorado fishing was from boats, powered by 150HP Yamaha engines, targeting the fringes of the riverbanks strewn with partially submerged trees. The notable baitfish on the Parana is the sabelo. These are seen in their thousands, shoaling in relative safety of the river banks and the drop off created by the numerous sand banks along the river. Sand island also provided 'flat-fishing', where the boats were drifted slowly and quietly using the electric motor over sand beds where dorado ambushed bait fish and drove these surprising large sabelos on the sand islands. At times the water explodes with these attacks and when I was fortunate to witness this, rapid casting with streamer flies into this maelstrom proved deadly. Rock islands, which punctuated the river, were another good holding place, but in contrast to the other fishing, heavy sink lines were preferred to get the fly down sufficiently.

Top left: Baitfish! The sabelo is one of the main food sources of the golden dorado.



Left and above: Most of the dorado fishing is done from boats targeting the submerged trees along the riverbanks.



PRECISION CASTING

The Dorado fishing involved casting large streamer flies towards the river margins near fallen trees whilst our boat was maintained steadily by the electric motor. The river velocity was often up to six-knots and the guides would control the boat with the electric motor to maintain an even downstream drift of perhaps two-knots. Precision casting was critical, as close to the bank obstructions as possible, at every angle and especially in front of obstruction along with any 'pocket' holding sabelos. Varying the speed of streamer fly retrieve was encouraged but the dorado were invariably more likely to attack the fly a rapidly stripped. The takes were fast and rapid and had to be met with an immediate strip-strike to set the hook. This was often tricky as there could be hours of casting before an explosive take and unless the strike was performed correctly the dorado would just spit the fly out. The instruction by the guides, which had to be repeated to me, was to keep the rod tip low, very low even in the water, a wide balanced stance with straight arms as this posture reduced the error of lifting the rod,

Precision casting was critical at every angle and especially in front of obstruction along with any 'pocket' holding sabelos.

which would usually loose the fish. Most times this was unsuccessful but sometimes the fish-gods smiled on me.

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GRAND SLAM

This was a six-day trip and all started well from the first morning, when I achieved the grand slam of two golden dorado, a pacu, and both a silver and gold piri pitta. The Dorado were perhaps 5lbs each and were returned promptly without even a photograph. This was going to be easy fishing, or so I thought. The next few days were tougher as the weather rose to 35°C and although the pacu remained active, the dorado had simply disappeared or gone into hibernation. It's at times like these the mind keeps questioning all the possibilities; it starts with the fly, the line, the retrieve and finally the fish, had they all gone, perhaps to Brazil!



Duncan's dorado streamer pattern fished on an 8-wt rod.

FACT FILE

THE TACKLE FOR DORADO

The optimum rod for Dorado fishing is an 8-wt with a tropical shooting head, 40lb fluorocarbon shock-leader and 10in of brown braided wire. The Rio Outbound Tropical was the perfect accompanying line. Floating Popper flies can work but Streamer flies were the most productive on my trip. These are large flies, 4-6 inches long, in various colours and with this same ethos as salmon flies; bright for bright days and dark on dull days. I had tied up a selection of which one of my designs caught the majority of the dorado. This was a Streamer, with layers of lighter fibres on the under-surface to darker layers at the top with a moderate use of flash and excellent purple Metz hackles which animated the fly. I used Steve Ferrar's flash blend from H2O and I believe it really does add something that other flashy materials lack. Another successful fly that Pablo gifted me, resemble a budgie in both size and colour and took a 21lb dorado.

I was lent a Sage One 8-wt rod by the guides and this, combined with the Rio Tropical line was a perfect balance to cast these oversized flies with both ease and accuracy. Still more remarkable to me is that a 20lb dorado can be manhandled with considerably force around the snags without the rod snapping.



Dorado and Pacu flies



FISHING FOR PACU

The pacu were the redeeming fish, which I first heard about in Jeremy Wade's River Monsters. He irritatingly describes every conceivable fish as a viscous predatory monster. The Pacu is an omnivorous fish, feeding equally of tree nuts as it does on carnivorous prey. They congregate under shaded trees where there is an ample store of nuts. The most remarkable sight was a tree full of the palindromic named howler monkeys, which emit eerie sound, initially like distant wind before it builds into a crescendo of a low howl. On this occasion our ancient primates were offering a helping hand not just the feeding pacu below but also optimising my chance of catching them, with the generous offering of tree produce which was liberally discarded into the river. The pacu can reach up to 80lbs but the five I caught were the usual size between 8-11lbs and resemble a dark coloured marine permit, but without their dorsal fin. The pacu's dentition is alarmingly and unique, their teeth look identical to our own molars. These

Duncan with a Paco caught on a bead fly! The plop of the fly imitates the nuts dropping off the trees when the howler monkey's feed!



The howler monkeys helping with a bit of ground baiting!

teeth can crunch through nuts and according to Jeremy Wade there are horrific accounts of them emasculating native Indians, who have swum in rivers with their genitalia uncovered!

There were two fishing methods employed for pacu, the most visual was using a floating bead or deer hair ball, the other and perhaps more effective, was the sunken coloured bead, with a single hook placed through it. The advice was to use an overhead cast and create a gentle but audible plop of the bead on the water, close or under the tree and observe the line. If it was pulled at all, the hook was set with a strip-strike and if not it was re-cast five seconds later. These fish put up a terrific fight before being returned carefully and unharmed. They are actually exceptionally good eating and I had previously eaten these on a trip on the Rio Negro in the Amazon. The guides observing my exhausting hours of casting streamers used the pacu as a welcome diversion, which indeed they were, with the dorado remaining unresponsive.

FINAL DAYS

Time appeared to be running out for me with only two days left and only a few small dorado to the fly but that was about to change. On my penultimate day the air pressure dropped with the arrival of cold front and this weather change created and increased activity of the dorado. The fishing had, as our guides implied, been challenging not just on the upper Parana but throughout the river system but all that changed when I landed a 15lb dorado after an explosive take besides a half submerged tree. This was followed by another larger 20lb dorado on the green budgie like fly. I could, I thought, return to the UK content but I still had a final day. So time to enjoy a relaxing evening of fine food and wine of the Suinda Lodge.

A 06.30 start with Pablo and it was back to streamer flies along the Parana banks. We were targeting the hot spots between the fallen trees where the sabelos were prolific and where there were episodic explosive attacks from feeding dorado. The company Nervous Water is very appropriately named for incidence, which we could both see and hear. The riverbed where we were fishing was actually obscured by prolific numbers of sabelos and then on script a large dorado torpedoed into the baitfish with a maelstrom of splashes. My cast landed with inches of

the 'V' of a partially submerged tree and the dorado surged vertically upwards taking my fly and my surprise with it, to land the other side of the fallen tree. Pablo announced that a small dorado was heading for the fly only fortuitously to be superseded by this brute. Pablo skilfully manoeuvred the aluminium boat into the river with the electric motor away from any obstruction so that I could play the dorado. The Sage was now completely bent over with at least a foot of the rod in the water, surely it was going to snap, was one of the many rushes of thoughts, buzzing through my head.

Dorado have hard mouths so they can easily be lost especially when they jump but luck was again on my side and after some struggle I was able to land this lovely fish. Pablo took some amazing photographs before the dorado was released unscathed to the river. Although I was aware of the large head and jaws of the dorado that I briefly cradled in my arms it was only when I has released the fish back into the river I noticed two neat, parallel slash marks down the front of my shirt. I suspect I as lucky it was just my shirt and not by nose!

Some fishing trips are a disaster others go well but this was more than that, it was almost as if it was scripted to struggle and yet catch the monster fish on the last day. Golden dorado are really fabulous fish to me.

Duncan with his 15lb golden salmon! Will dorado be on your bucket list of species for 2021?



FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT: WWW.NERVOUSWATERS.COM/THE-LODGES/SUINDA/