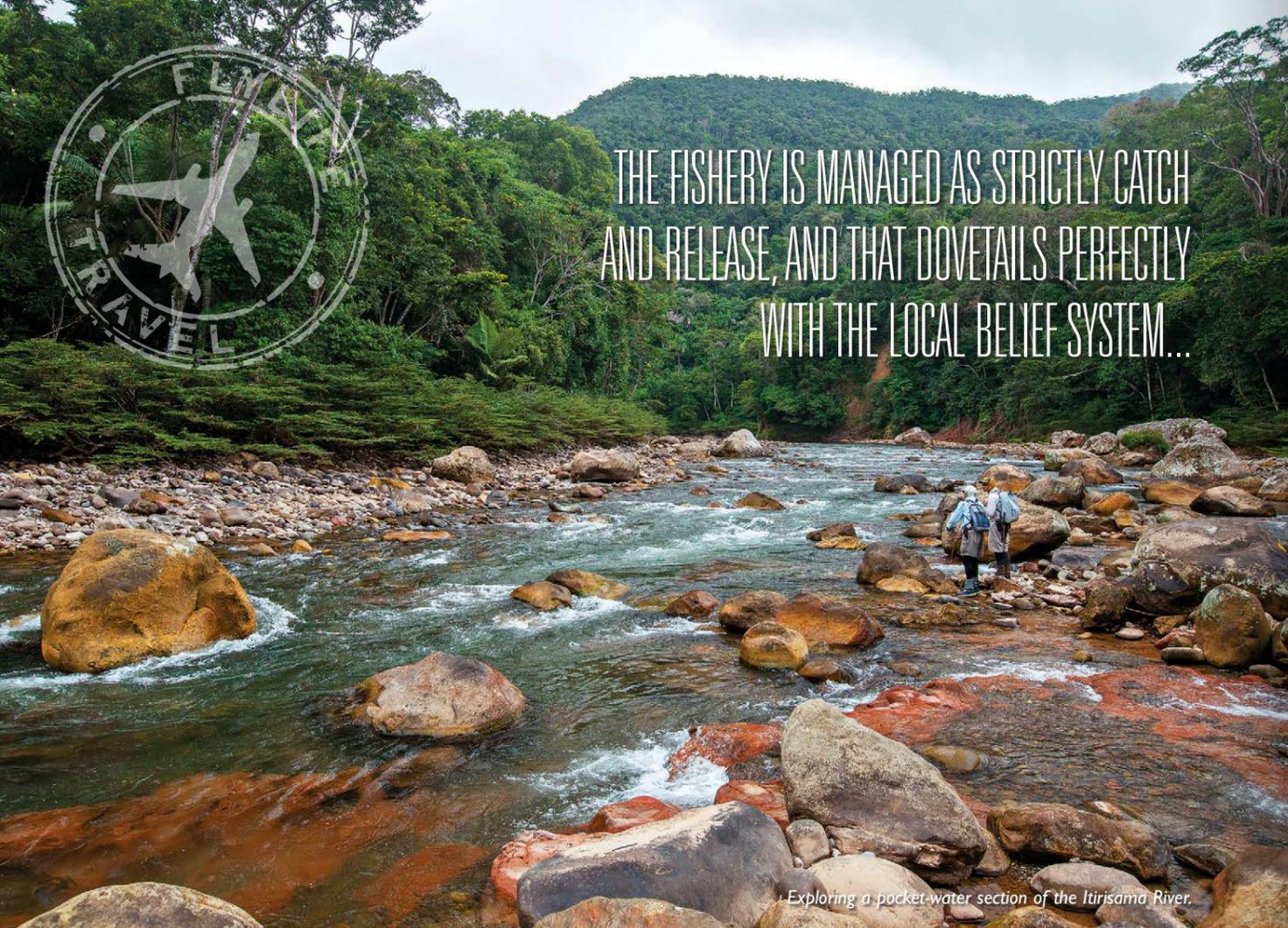




THE FISHERY IS MANAGED AS STRICTLY CATCH AND RELEASE, AND THAT DOVETAILS PERFECTLY WITH THE LOCAL BELIEF SYSTEM...



Exploring a pocket-water section of the Itirisama River.

A school of small baitfish gathers in a side branch of the main river.



back, heading directly downstream and towards me, and this time successfully engulfed the fly as it drifted forlornly under my rod tip.

The rest was a blur of adrenaline and anxiety, each mighty jump a statement of wildness, strength and size. Until, finally, I was able to put my hand around that giant tail, stare into its large, black eye and admire the fish's pelt, iridescent and sparkling gold like some crazy sequin dress from Rio de Janeiro's Carnival. This was raw Latin American beauty, defiant and uncompromising.

You can probably tell, I'm still buzzing from the quality of the experience. The area I fished is referred to as Tsimane, named after the indigenous tribe that calls this part of the Amazon home. While the fishing was nothing short of spectacular it was the overall immersion in the jungle and local culture that was the cherry on this piscatorial cake.

#### INDIGENOUS GUIDES

What I loved about the Tsimane experience was that each day we had two indigenous guides and an English-speaking fly guide. The fly guide was rotated each day and was in charge

of talking us through the techniques required for taking dorado on fly gear. It was super handy to have them tying up the wire trace that is mandatory for these fish (it needs to be changed often especially after hooking a few fish). They were also great at giving tips about casting really large flies in moving water, something I've not done a lot of.

In our case the indigenous guides were a father and son team — Sixto and 'Zombie'. It wasn't hard to guess

how Zombie had attained this moniker. He was a pretty reserved young fella but that is not to say he wasn't engaged in what was happening, quite the opposite. In my experience, people that live close to nature have a tendency to be quiet and at first may seem shy. But they live in a place where actions are far more important than words, a welcome elixir from our Antipodean world where, in my opinion, there are far too many words and not nearly enough action.

## Bolivian Gold

Nick Reygaert is inspired by the Amazon's golden dorado.

The young indigenous guide spotted the fish first. He was standing on a rock that towered above a set of rapids that lay at the head of a beautiful pool, full of structure and flowing swiftly with mountain water. He motioned me to join him and then pointed to some calm water right where a rapid entered the pool.

"Grande," was all he said. It took my eyes a couple of seconds to zoom out and take in the true size of the massive fish in water barely deep enough to cover its back, every scale and fin distinct in the crystal clear flow.

At a glance, this could easily have been a river in New Zealand's North Island but the rainforest canopy and sounds of tropical parrots were a



Indigenous guide Sixto on a wet day at the office.

poignant reminder that I was in the jungles of Bolivia. And my quarry was not a trout but the mythical golden dorado.

We had seen plenty of dorado for the day so I could tell that this was one of the larger models. I felt that casting from the rock would run the risk of spooking it, so I dropped back downstream and managed to get the fly into the rapid slightly ahead of the fish. With the first strip the fly emerged from the white water and the dorado attacked with gusto, but somehow totally missed the fly. The next strip saw the fish turn and try again — another miss! By this stage I had lost control of my line, there was slack everywhere. The dorado came



NOWHERE ELSE IN THE WORLD CAN YOU SIGHT-FISH IN CLEAR WATER FOR DORADO OF THIS SIZE AND IN THIS NUMBER.

Nick's biggest dorado, sight fished from very shallow water at the head of the pool.

EVER SINCE THIS FISHERY WAS UNCOVERED LESS THAN A DECADE AGO  
IT HAS BEEN THE TALK OF THE FLY FISHING WORLD.



Richard Sinke and guide Juan Maccio sight-fish to a large Amazonian pacu.

## Bolivian Gold... continued

### THE HUNTER

The Tsimane people refer to golden dorado as 'cazador', which in Spanish means 'hunter' and hints at the high esteem they place on the fish. They worship the dorado as they play a fundamental role in herding vast schools of sabalo, which migrate up these river systems and are an important part of the Tsimane diet.

When I asked if they ever spear and eat the dorado, which would be very easy to do, I was told that only in the most extreme circumstances will they take a dorado. They prefer to go hungry for a few days than to take one of

these magnificent fish. And it is that level of adoration that has maintained these systems as a trophy dorado fishery. It is a fantastic example of indigenous management working much better than more sophisticated (or should that be complicated) fishery models in the modern world.

It also goes a long way to explaining why the Indian guides relate so seamlessly with fly anglers. They would get very excited when dorado were hunting or when a large one was spotted holding station. That is something that you can't fake no matter how hard you are trying. The fishery is man-

aged as strictly catch and release, and that dovetails perfectly with the local belief system of giving the dorado the ultimate respect.

### ISOLATED POPULATION

The golden dorado (*Salminus brasiliensis*) is native to warm freshwater habitats in southern Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and northern Argentina. Up until the early 2000's this was thought to be the extent of their range as no dorado population had ever been found in the main Amazon system. That was until the discovery of this small and genetically isolated population in the mountain rivers of Bolivia.

It is thought that this dorado population was originally connected to the Parana River system (an enormous watershed that flows south into Argentina) via the Parapety River, located on the border of Bolivia and Paraguay. A rare geological event, most probably an uprising caused by tectonic plate movement, changed the course of the river causing it to flow north and into the Amazon drainage, thus isolating this dorado population.

It is still not known if these dorado are a new species but one thing for sure is that this fishery functions in a unique way. Nowhere else in the world can you sight-fish in clear water for dorado of this size and in this number.



On the two-hour canoe ride to the lodge through the jungle.

### THE SET UP

The fish described in the opening paragraph came from the Itrisama, a tributary of the Pluma River. It took a fair amount of walking to get into that water but we left plenty of river unfished. In fact, they tell me that there was another five days worth of fishing above where we finished. You need a certain level of fitness to get up there but the good news is that the fishing in the lower reaches was just as spectacular.

We stayed at Pluma Lodge, nestled on a high bank on the true right of the Pluma River about 4 km upstream from its confluence with the even larger Secure River. The lodge has ready access to the Secure, lower Pluma, upper Pluma and Itrisama. These are divided into beats and rotated through to even out the pressure.

The lower Pluma is spectacular. It runs parallel to the Mosetenes Mountain Range and has the character of a freestone river, with big pools,

Richard hooked up to a giant, leaping dorado.



referred to by the guides as 'fresh-water permit', signifying their fussiness. I got lucky and hooked a small one by presenting a static streamer in front of a pod of fish. That one put on

heat and humidity that I have come to associate with the jungle was also pleasantly absent during our stay. Overall it was the friendliest jungle I've ever experienced.

### FEEDING FRENZIES

A highlight of the lower reaches were the 'feeding frenzies' that we witnessed. Sabalo are a 'baitfish' that enter this system en-masse in early May. By the time we got there, in mid-June, the migration was well underway. The biomass of this migration is enormous. There are tens of thousands of sabalo in every pool, with a constant stream of new individuals moving upstream.

The sabalo average around 25 cm in length, are dark in colour and have a deep body shape similar to a black bream. Each one represents quite a meal, even for a 40 lb dorado. So it is easy to understand the excitement of the dorado when the sabalo begin pouring into their pool. The dorado



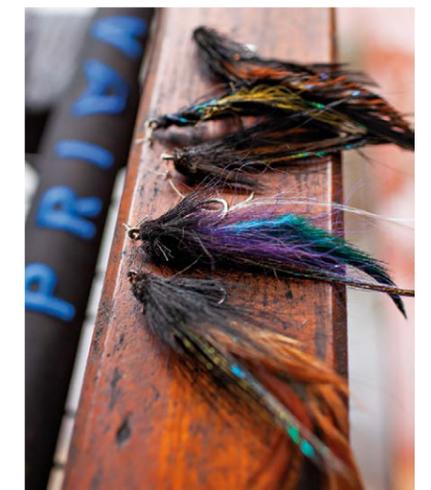
Nick with a solid dorado on a very wet afternoon in the jungle.

gentle riffles and smooth tailouts. You move around this section by dugout canoe, poled by the Indian guides — it is quiet and unobtrusive. Most of the fishing is from the bank and the general practice was to hop out of the canoe at a tailout and fish your way through and into the head of the next pool. The wading is easy and the whole thing works very well.

As well as dorado, the river is home to yatorana and surubí, two species that can also be taken on fly. Further upstream in the tributaries there are good numbers of Amazonian pacu,

a mighty fight for a fish that was only just over 10 pounds. We saw plenty that would have been two or three times that size.

The lodge is in the Amazon jungle at the foothills of the Andes Mountains at around 600 m of elevation. The jungle here is considered to be in a transition zone between lowland jungle and mountain terrain. As a result there are very few mosquitoes and the jungle is a lot less buggy than you might expect. I left without a single bug bite on my body, a rare occurrence for me. The oppressive



Dead soldiers on the lodge railing — dorado have a habit of destroying flies.

Thousands of sabalo stack up in the lower Pluma River on their spawning migration.



An oasis of luxury in the jungle.



would rest them while we had something to eat or a cheeky beer. And sure enough, when we recommenced, the first streamer swung through the heart of the pool would draw an immediate response. It was a fitting way to finish an amazing week's fishing.

Ever since this fishery was uncovered less than a decade ago it has been the talk of the fly fishing world. There is something about sight fishing for huge, aggressive fish in crystal clear jungle streams that pushes my button, trout fishing on steroids if you will. It is this unique combination of qualities that sets this destination apart from all the others I have visited. If you have been thinking about this one for a while, I encourage you to take a leap of faith; to hold but one of these regal fish in the mists of the Amazon jungle is a near spiritual experience. **FI**

Nick Reygaert will be hosting a return trip in 2020. [www.gincleartravel.com](http://www.gincleartravel.com)

## Bolivian Gold... continued

often form packs that hunt in formation, corralling the sabalo into a corner and then rushing the tightly packed fish with mouths agape. This happens right on the edge of the river in very shallow water. The sight of a 20 lb dorado exploding out of the water and landing on the bank, to then wriggle back into the water, is not one I will forget easily.

The great news for fly fishers is that when these feeding frenzies are happening the dorado are very catchable, requiring a short cast and a few strips of the fly. Often the largest fish in the pool are the ones that form the hunting packs. We spent many an enjoyable hour waiting for frenzies to happen, safe in the knowledge that it would only take a couple of casts to get a favourable result.

Richard, my fishing partner for the week, also unwittingly created a feeding frenzy by walking close to some very shallow water at the back of a pool where the sabalo were hiding. Richard's presence spooked the sabalo back into the main seam where the dorado were waiting. A massive eruption of fish, scales and blood ensued and Richard just slapped his fly down into the edge of it and was immediately tight into a dorado of epic proportions.

### SECURE RIVER

The lodge also fishes the downstream portion of the Secure River where the Pluma enters it. While the Secure is not clear water, it is full of dorado of all sizes. We spent a number of sessions

down there blind casting to structure such as snags and log jams. This was fun in its own right and a nice change from the other types of fishing.

On our last day, the Secure River coloured up from overnight rain while the Pluma River remained clear. The confluence pool of the two rivers filled up with giant dorado seeking clear water to hunt in. Both Richard and I fished the pool most of the day, hooking one giant fish after another. They would go quiet after a time and we



Richard Sinke looks very happy with a beauty from the Lower Pluma.



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