

Exploring the Pantanal



Caimans (above), reptiles found in Central and South America, are not aggressive like alligators and crocodiles. Sede II (top) is one of four lodges operated by Refugio Ecologico Caiman, in the Pantanal do Mato Grosso in west-central Brazil. BETH PARKS PHOTOS

BY BETH PARK
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

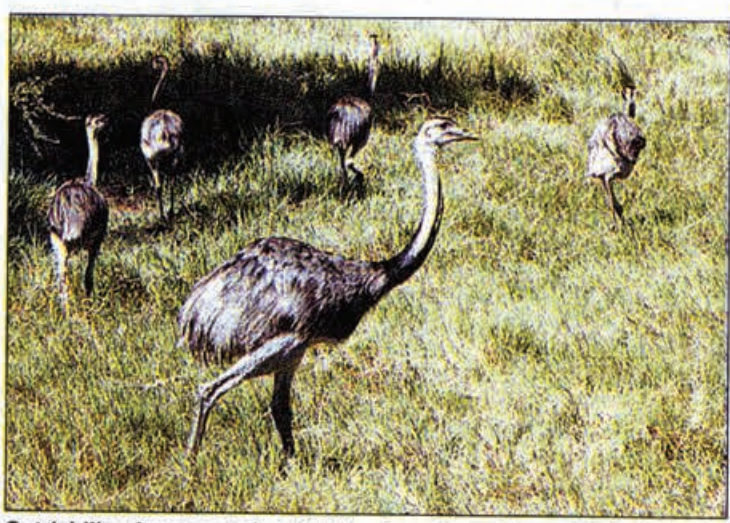
My gosh, look at this place!" The words slipped out of my lips before I even knew they were in my mind. I had just crossed the threshold of Sede II, one of four lodges or "pousadas" operated by Refugio Ecologico Caiman, on a 143,000-acre cattle ranch in the Pantanal do Mato Grosso in west-central Brazil.

"This is where the owner and his family stay when they come to visit," confided Carlos, one of the receptionists who works at the nearby main lodge. "Make yourself at home, and feel free to use the entire house. Breakfast will be served to you here each morning, but you will take your other meals in the main dining room."

I was stunned. Could this be happening to me, a woman so cheap that she claims she'd fly on an airplane's wing to save a few dollars? At about \$225 per day, including meals and a host of activities, I had expected far less.

Refugio Ecologico Caiman was the brainchild of owner Roberto Klabin, a paper baron living in Sao Paulo who pioneered a bright future by combining ranching and land management with ecotourism. The ranch boasts about 23,000 head of white, hump-backed zebu cattle and up to 71 guests who come to see the Pantanal's famed wildlife.

It was the fauna that drew me to the Pantanal, a word derived from the Portuguese term for "swamp." A biologist's paradise and one of the most pristine and ecologically diverse environments on earth, this Florida-sized seasonal wet-



Ostrichlike rheas search a field for insects and broad-leafed plants.

land extends into Bolivia and Paraguay.

The Pantanal teems with birds (nearly 700 species), mammals (more than 100 species), fish (more than 250 species) and reptiles (more than 80 species). Take these numbers, however, with a grain of salt. The Pantanal is a virtual mother lode of unrecorded life forms.

My first encounter with wildlife was on a bike ride. Just outside the ranch's gate I spooked a gray, piglike animal weighing perhaps 600 pounds that had been lolling in a marshy area alongside the rutted dirt road. As it crashed off into the brush, I caught a glimpse of its short, prehensile trunk. The animal was a tapir, a New World relative of the rhinoceros, and no one had ever seen one this close to the lodge. Not more than five minutes after encountering the tapir I watched a striped giant anteater tear apart an enormous termite mound with its scythelike claws.

The remainder of my ride was replete with a spectacular array of critters that ranged

from playful and curious capuchin monkeys to majestic, white jabiru storks flaunting their jet-black heads and bright scarlet neck bands. Toco toucans flashed their lightweight, powerful bills in the treetops, while families of flightless ostrichlike rheas plied the fields in search of broad-leafed plants and insects.

The vegetation, too, was amazing. For me, the most bizarre plant was the strangler fig. A species of banyan fig, the strangler engulfs its host tree and chokes the life out of it as it outcompetes its host for water, sunlight and nutrients.

Later, after paddling around the sparkling lake adjacent to my lodge, I strolled over to a bridge that spanned the outlet. Beneath the bridge and off to one side, a semicircle of alligatorlike caimans lay shoulder to shoulder, mouths agape, waiting for fish to swim into their gullets. Not aggressive in the manner of alligators and crocodiles, the caimans seemed undaunted by my presence when I moved down to take some close-up photos.

Ecotourism ranch in Brazilian wetland allows visitors to experience a paradise of mammals, birds, fish and reptiles

The next morning I booked a walk with Victor, a handsome local man who spoke no English but knew English names of birds. We identified 87 bird species in two hours, and 57 of those were within sight of my lodge.

Victor also spotted a submerged caiman lizard probing the water with its blue forked tongue. When I first saw it, I thought it was an anaconda, but when it turned to swim away I saw its legs. The lizard was at least 4 feet long.

Of all the birds I saw in the Pantanal, my favorite was the stunning hyacinth macaw. This Rolls Royce of parrots is about 42 inches long and sports a wingspan of nearly 4 feet. Its blueberry-colored feathers almost seemed to glow in vibrant yellow facial crescents and eye rings. To help preserve this critically endangered species, Roberto Klabin provided for a research base right on the ranch.

In addition to bike rides, paddling opportunities and nature walks, visitors to Refugio Eco-

logico Caiman have other options. They can go horseback riding, watch cowboys work the cattle or take day and evening excursions into the field in open-air vehicles.

I booked a private horseback ride with Getulio, a weathered old "camperiro" who wore faded dungarees and a broad, sweaty straw hat. Like Victor, he spoke no English, but that

didn't stop him from pointing out marsh deer grazing in the savanna or ring-tailed coati mundis scattering helter-skelter beneath the trees. We also rode up to a capybara, a guinea-pig type rodent with a boxy nose and webbed feet, munching vegetation alongside the partially submerged trail. Capybaras are the world's

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A jabiru stork flaunts its jet-black head and scarlet neck band. BETH PARKS PHOTO

Pantanal

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largest rodents. This one probably weighed about 120 pounds.

If these activities sound a bit too strenuous, you can kick back and enjoy the delightful swimming pools or doze in shaded hammocks at Refugio Ecologico Caiman. You can sit on a leather saddle at the bar in the main lodge and drink a "caipirinha," a margarita-type drink made with unrefined white rum, lemon and sugar. You will meet fellow travelers from all over the world and enjoy delightful buffet-style meals that cater to a multitude of tastes.

You won't find fancy stores or glitzy night life in the area near the ranch. It's a full 146 miles of

The time of year to visit the Pantanal depends on what you want to see

not-so-great road to Campo Grande, the closest big city, which has a population of about 700,000.

The time of year to visit the Pantanal depends on what you want to see. The best time to view migratory birds is during the wet season, from December to March. The temperatures run higher during these months, which are equivalent to our summer, but the flooded landscape makes the roads difficult to travel. You will probably see more mammals during the dry season, which occurs from June to September, but the lush vegetation will have turned brown, and the roads will be swirling with clouds of dust.

If you have trouble making up your mind, try visiting the region during the draining or filling cycles. Each phase offers its own unique combination of attractions.

Whenever you go to the Pantanal, if you stay at Refugio Ecologico Caiman you won't be disappointed. It's a magical place that will linger in your dreams long after you've returned home.

Beth Parks lives in Hancock County village of Corea. You can reach her at bparks@umext.maine.edu.

If you go...

- You can book reservations directly or through a reputable tour company or group associated with Refugio Ecologico Caiman. Prices will vary. More information is available online at <http://www.caiman.com.br>
- What to wear: Sports clothes, long-sleeve shirts, T-shirts, sneakers, bathing suit and insect repellent. Add lightweight rain gear during the hot rainy season or a windbreaker and pullovers during the cooler dry season. Also bring a hat, camera, binoculars, sunglasses, lip balm and flashlight.
- About the Pantanal: The Pantanal: "The Pantanal: Brazil's Forgotten Wilderness" (Sierra Club Books) by Vic Banks. Retail for \$22.50, but you can buy a used one online for about \$10. "Birds of Venezuela" (Princeton Paperbacks) by Steven L. Hilty. Retail for \$55, but is available online for about \$35.