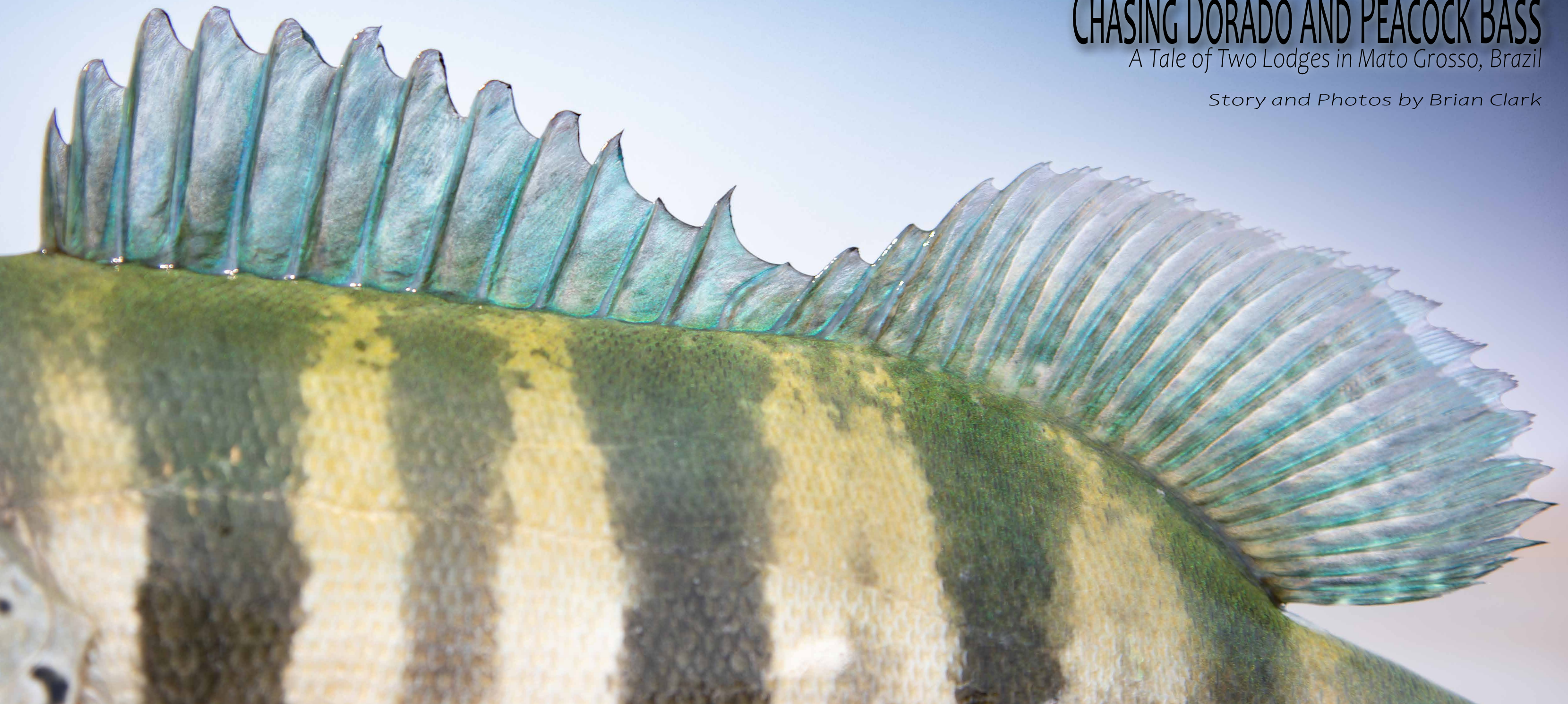


BUSINESS BEFORE PLEASURE

CHASING DORADO AND PEACOCK BASS
A Tale of Two Lodges in Mato Grosso, Brazil

Story and Photos by Brian Clark





Many anglers say that they want a non-touristy experience when they travel abroad to fish. A few people actively research the history, geography, cuisine, and culture of their destination, and perhaps the language as well. Most of those relatively intrepid travelers are genuinely interested in getting outside their comfort zone, even if it means encountering some hardships and experiencing the unique disquiet that comes with exploring a new place. But if we’re honest, what most traveling anglers really want is probably something in the middle: enough familiar amenities and logistical streamlining to feel safe and comfortable, enough new foods and challenges to feel like we’ve had a real adventure, but nothing that impedes the fishing. Traveling to fish isn’t quite like mainstream tourism; sure, we’re there to learn a few new things, but we’re chiefly going to fish.

There’s nothing wrong with any of those motivations, but the angler’s skill and fitness level and appetite for adversity should inform their destination choices. Not every journey is meant for every traveler, and this principle arguably applies to target species as well. If ever a particular fish should give an aspiring angler pause, it’s dorado.*

Along with permit and musky, dorado can be a daunting challenge for fly anglers. Consistent success – especially with larger specimens – requires advanced casting skills, physical strength and endurance, and a healthy dose of mental fortitude. The days start early, run long, and conditions can be hot and steamy. There’s a great deal of blind casting involved, usually with 8-10wt rods and often with sinking lines. You can hurt yourself if you aren’t prepared.

Peacock bass, on the other hand, are a little less demanding. While heavier peacocks are powerful, impressive fish with stunning paint jobs that can be a real handful when they dive deep and get into the snags, catching a significant number of less brutish fish on most days is within reach for most anglers.

The genius of a Brazil-based fishing program now offered by Eduardo Crespo, founder of Peach Fishing and Adventures, is to offer prime opportunities to tackle both species during a single week. *OTFM* was fortunate enough to tag along on the very first week these options were offered in late 2025, and the phrase “business before pleasure” seems like an apt summary.

Dorado mean business; peacocks are pure pleasure.

LOGISTICS

Getting there and back from North America really isn’t difficult, at least compared to many other angling destinations in South America. My route required only two flights each way: a comfortable non-stop red-eye to São Paulo, and an easy domestic hop to Cuiabá, the capital of Mato Grosso. Eduardo’s team picked us up from the airport and drove us straight to Rancho do Mano on Rio Manso about two hours to the northwest.

RIO MANSO

If you’re trying to follow along on Google Maps, it’s easy to make a wrong turn and land on the wrong Rio Manso. There are two rivers in Brazil with that name, and a third in Patagonia that begins in Argentina and ends up in Chile – that one is famous for whitewater and excellent trout fishing, and I hope to visit someday. Of the two in Brazil, one is in Minas Gerais in the southeast, near Belo Horizonte; it’s also a tailwater below a reservoir that looks fishy, and I’ve added it to my bucket list as well. Clarifications complete, let’s turn to the Rio Manso in Mato Grosso, in the southwest of Brazil.

MATO GROSSO

When most North Americans imagine Brazil, we tend to think of either the steamy Amazon jungle with enormous anacondas draped from the trees and vicious piranhas lurking in every pool, or of the beaches in Rio. Like all stereotypes, these ideas have roots in reality but speak only to narrow slices; there’s obviously much, much more to the country. Fewer facts illustrate this fact more clearly than a simple size comparison: Mato Grosso, the state in southwestern Brazil where the action in this article takes place, is significantly larger than Texas and only slightly smaller than British Columbia. That makes it only the third largest state in Brazil, behind Amazonas and Pará; together those three states occupy an area well over twice the size of Alaska. Naturally, such a massive area defies a single definition, and in ecological terms, Mato Grosso alone hosts a number of diverse biomes. The northern edges overlap with the southern reaches of the Amazon rainforest proper; the eastern area is mostly a tropical savannah known as the *Cerrado*, and the *Pantanal*, the world’s largest wetlands area boasting a staggering abundance of flora and fauna, can be found in the southwest near the border with Bolivia.

**Since “dourado” and “dourada” mean “golden” in Portuguese (like “dorado” in Spanish), the common English moniker “golden dorado” is a glaring redundancy up there with “table mesa” and “pita bread” and “chai tea”. This article will use only “dorado” when referring to *Salminus brasiliensis*.*



Rio Manso and Lago Manso lie in the nexus of these eco-regions where the horizons are lined with *chapadas*, striking flat-topped escarpments of eroded sandstone. It's arid, rugged country punctuated by dramatic vistas. Rocky plateaus rise abruptly from plunging, verdant valleys covered by tropical flora and populated by maned wolves, jaguars, tapirs, and armadillos. Although we didn't have time for a side quest, Chapada dos Guimarães National Park boasts over 100 waterfalls tumbling over red sandstone cliffs, numerous caves, striking geological formations, ancient rock art, and abundant fossils – definitely a place I'll make time to visit on the next trip.

It's an embarrassing exercise in ethno-centric geo-cultural approximation, but I had trouble shaking the sense that I'd stumbled into a tropical version of Wyoming. The land is raw and rugged, with mesas visible in almost every direction; it's sparsely populated, the economy is dominated by ranching interests and mineral extraction, and the politics lean conservative. A hard land of austere, wild beauty, Mato Grosso is dense with sporting potential.



RANCHO DO MANO

There are lodges frequented by anglers, and lodges which cater mostly to anglers. Then there are fishing lodges run by hardcore fishermen which almost exclusively host avid anglers, places you probably wouldn't go unless you're there to fish hard. Rancho do Mano on Rio Manso is firmly in the latter camp, and it's a camp almost cultishly dedicated to the dorado.

A majority of the other anglers at Rancho do Mano during our stay were Brazilian, and most of them were fishing conventional gear. Aside from a Chilean fly angler who arrived on our last day, there were no other foreigners. None of that was remotely problematic; enough people at the lodge speak enough English to cover all the necessities, and all of our guides had obviously worked regularly with fly anglers.

The rooms provide what serious anglers need to fish hard in Brazil's backcountry: showers, beds, a small fridge full of water bottles, room to assemble and stage gear, and air conditioning. There's a small swimming pool, a well-stocked bar, and the buffet-style meals don't skimp on alternatives or quantities.

Without question, the highlight of the amenities – and possibly of the entire trip – was the lunchtime *asado* on our last day. Whereas the lodge itself is a short walk up and over a small hill above the river, the *asado* happens in a purpose-built cabana built directly into the riverbank. The fires had already burned down to coals and meat was cooking when we rolled down to the river before sunrise; we returned midday to find a serious party already in full swing. Within minutes of setting down my rods, one hand was holding a caipirinha, and the fingers of the other were greasy from the grilled meats being circulated among the group. A large group of old friends had assembled at the lodge for their annual outing, a tradition started several decades ago that's presently being carried on by sons of the founders. The revelry paused for a moment as everyone reverently watched the patriarchs make their way up the hill; now in their 80s, Jose and Jose have been fishing together for over 50 years, and neither has ever missed one of these trips.

Turning to the fishing, as mentioned above, the dorado rules the Rio Manso. Some genuinely large fish are regularly taken from the river, well over 50lbs. Although we were occasionally able to sightfish, most of our days were spent hitting likely spots with a sinking line on a 9-10WT rod. Also as alluded to previously, this isn't easy fishing. It requires powerful, efficient casting technique to keep the fly in the water rather than the air or the trees without causing injury, but also needs strong retrieval skills to move the fly fast enough to interest the dorado. Hand-over-hand tarpon-style retrieves with the rod tucked under the arm are almost not fast enough. Long days of nonstop casting with a big rod and executing rapid retrieves in tropical heat will ensure that you sleep well at night!



Fortunately, the savagery of dorado strikes are more than enough to keep things interesting. For variety it's also possible to target *pirapatanga*, often with large dry flies floated under trees lining the shore. This is fun, visual fishing, and the fish themselves are aggressive and beautiful. Still, it's hard to shake the need to stick a big dorado. I put a couple good ones in the air on this trip, but never landed one. This is a problem. I'm very much hooked on the dorado game now, and I'll be back. Like permit and 'poon, this could definitely mess with my life.



Opposite, Top: top of the hill heading down to Rio Manso

Opposite, Bottom: Lesser Kiskadee (*Philohydor lictor*)

Left, Top: asado fires already burning before dawn

Left, Middle: the asado master at his craft

Left, Bottom: greasy fingers and caipirinhas

Above: helping the patriarchs as they head back up over the hill

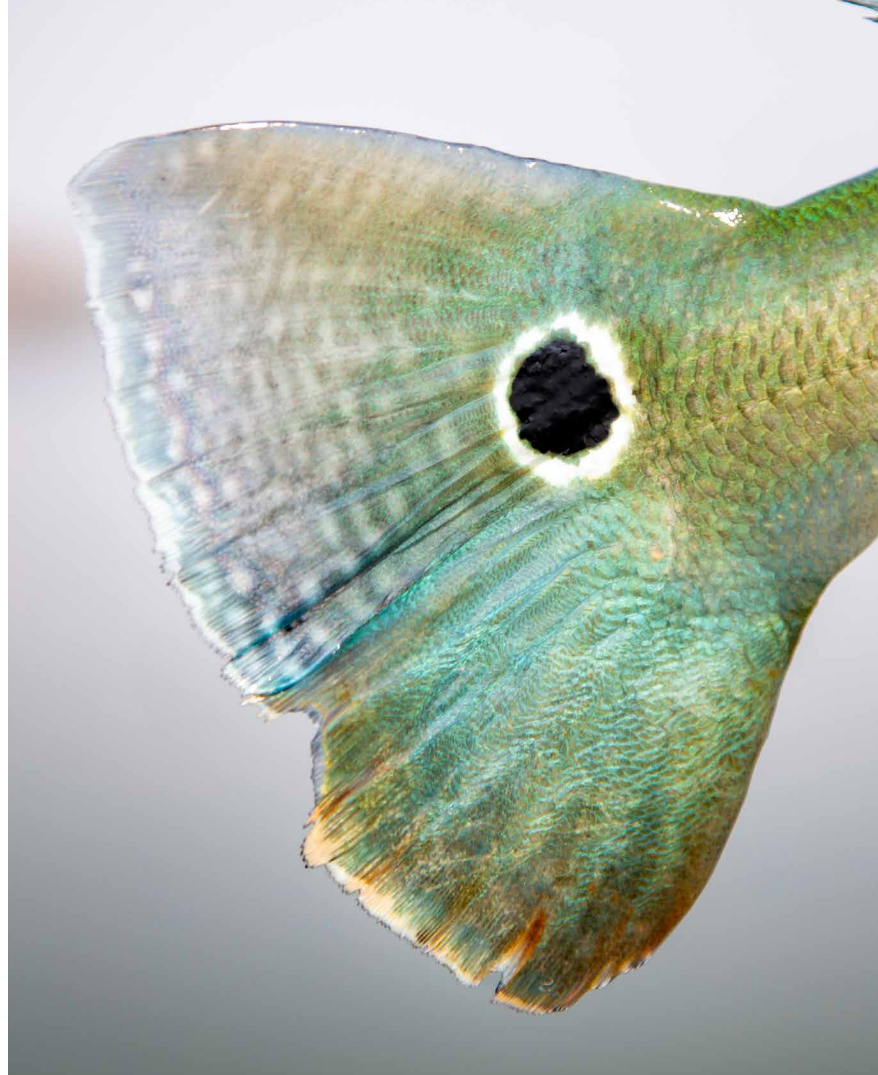


LAGO MANSO

Manso Fishing Resort sits on the northwestern reaches of Lago Manso, a large reservoir (427km² / 165Mi², a bit smaller than Flathead Lake in Montana) above the tailwater where we fished for dorado earlier in the week. No dorado or pirapatanga here; the primary targets on the lake are three species of peacock bass – note the captioned photos on the following page.

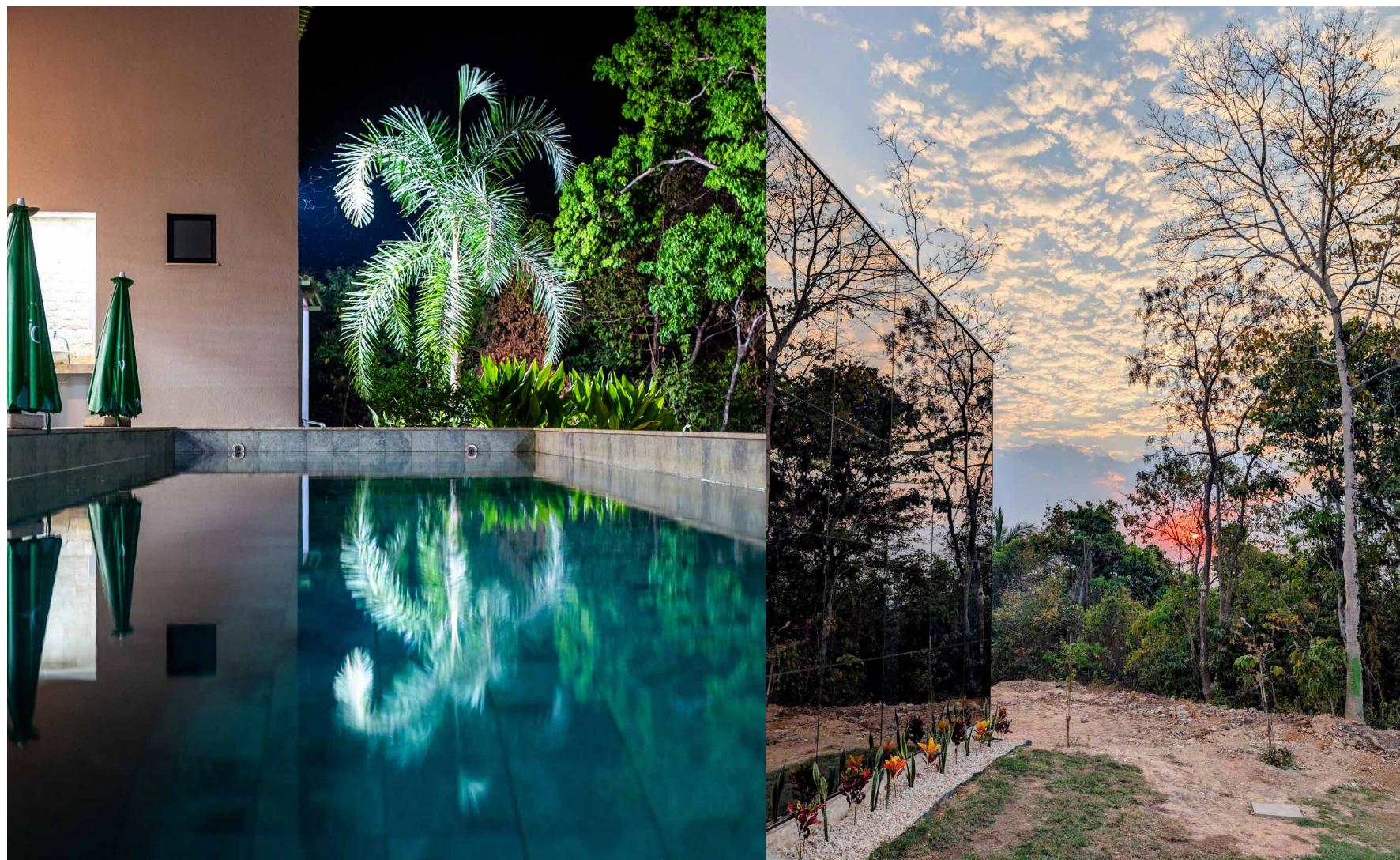
Whereas we fished from aluminum jon boats with pull-start motors down on the river (entirely appropriate for the water, though neither roomy nor particularly comfortable), on the lake we were on proper sparkly bass boats powered by 100HP Mercury outboards. Between the smooth-running sleds and the slicked-out conditions we lucked into for several long trips across the lake, some runs felt like riding a magic carpet.

It's a big lake. I figure that we fished over 30 hours across three days, and we never hit any area of the lake twice – much less returned to any particular spot. Although the guides obviously know some hotspots to target (and especially where to avoid finding an over-abundance of piranhas), virtually every corner of the lake hosts a stand of flooded timber and brush. One gets the idea that you could find quality peacocks almost anywhere.



MANSO FISHING RESORT

After a few days of the dorado grind, we were ready for a change of pace – and we also needed to recuperate after that *asado*. Eduardo's team packed us up and trundled us upstream, past the dam, and around the corner of the reservoir to the Manso Fishing Resort. I hadn't formed any preconceptions, but the resort far exceeded any expectations I might've imagined. It's new, clean, and classy almost to the point of opulence. Rather than the wood and concrete usually found in jungle fisheries, the vibe is more steel, stone, and glass. The rooms are spacious and modern, the beds are comfortable, and the slate shower is a nice touch. They've done a wonderful job blending open-air social areas around the bar and pool with tasteful air-conditioned dining and entertainment rooms. There's a full-time chef, and every meal was excellent. I didn't quite feel guilty, but I've rarely fished from such sumptuous digs – and that feeling hit me before the free massage in the dedicated massage room overlooking the lake, administered by a masseuse who travels in once a week from Cuiabá. It's a fine thing, getting a good massage after a long day on the water – highly recommended.



Although we found no evidence that Lago Manso currently holds any of the fabled *Cichla temensis* stock – the *Açu*, the largest subspecies of peacocks, usually found in the Amazon River drainage – both the *Azul* and *Pinima* offer serious sport, and the *Amarelo* is plentiful and cooperative. Compared to the Amazon itself, Lago Manso is mercifully free from the complications of caiman, dolphins, and otters. That said, there are plenty of piranhas; don't worry – your digits aren't in danger while releasing fish, but bring plenty of flies. Lots of them will get munched by those rapacious little devils, especially flies with darker colors or a lot of flash. Flies in brighter colors without much tinsel work well enough on the peacocks without attracting unwanted attention from those amphibious chain saws.

Like the riverside *asado* that wrapped up our stay on Rio Manso, our trip to Lago Manso culminated with a delightful, gluttonous afternoon devouring obscene amounts of steak under tents pitched in the lake itself. The resort staff trucked a grill, tents, chairs, a full bar, and a slew of side dishes to a small sand island 20Mi (32km) across the lake. We rolled in from fishing a cove near one of the lake's original inlets, enjoyed an unhurried picnic below several of the most scenic bluffs overlooking the lake, then headed back out to fish until sundown. Not a bad day.



Cichla piquiti

Commonly known as the “Azul” variety thanks to the neon blue hues that often light up the fins and tail, this subspecies is extremely common in Lago Manso; its five prominent stripes make it one of the easier species to identify quickly. They’re quite territorial; the bigger fish fight hard, are lovely to behold, and are an eminently respectable gamefish.



Cichla pinima

Sometimes grey-ish, sometimes more yellow, often with haloed black spots on the head, *C. pinima* is a particularly formidable and aggressive species of peacock that can grow to over 30IN (78cm) and 20LBS (9kg). Most adults have three vivid broken black bars on their flanks, and the tails are usually two-toned. Larger specimens are exceptionally brutish.



Cichla kelberi

Often called the “Amarelo” strain because of its striking yellow accents, the coloring on these fish ranges widely, usually with golden flanks and stripes so variegated that they appear almost pixelated.

Pygocentrus nattereri

Commonly known as the Redbelly Piranha, these omnivores are plentiful in Lago Manso, although their concentrations seems to vary dramatically from one area to another. While their reputation for being blood-thirsty threats to human life and limb is wildly exaggerated, the Portuguese name *piranha* is derived from an Old Tupi word “pirãia” meaning “scissors”. With respect to the damage they can do to flies, that’s certainly accurate!



EL DORADO

As a kid, I definitely read too many tales of swashbuckling explorer lore. Like countless others, I was captivated by *The Lost World* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and *King Solomon's Mines* by Sir Henry Rider Haggard. Although they lost some of their luster when I later learned of the myriad problematic aspects of colonial exploitation, I also discovered that, in addition to the El Dorado myths going all the way back to the 1500s, one plausible inspiration for both stories was a real-life adventurer, Colonel Percy Fawcett. When discussing the logistics of this trip with Eduardo, I remembered that Cuiabá had been the departure point for Fawcett's last

expedition in 1925. He and his son Jack were heading into the jungle once again to search for the ruins of an ancient civilization that Fawcett called "Z" (that's pronounced *Zed* in this context since, as he was extremely British). Based on manuscripts supposedly drafted in the mid-1700s by a *bandeirante* named João da Silva Guimarães, he believed his lost city to be somewhere in Mato Grosso.

Whereas the ill-fated final Fawcett expedition trundled northeast from Cuiabá, towards Bahia, we drove northwest, into the *chapadas*. Nobody knows what miseries they endured toward the end, but near the *Parque Nacional da Chapada dos Guimarães*, our small party struck gold. 🐦

Eduardo Crespo was born in Brazil but currently lives in Atlanta, Georgia. He runs Peach Fishing and Adventures, an operation dedicated to providing anglers with the best possible experiences in Brazil. The dual-lodge program described here will be hosted at least twice in 2026. The early season is in May and June, when the temperatures are generally quite civilized. The late season is August and September; it's usually quite warm at this time of year, but water levels are a bit lower in the late season, and it's sometimes possible to sightfish for dorado in the river. The peacocks fish well year around.

Contact Eduardo directly for the cost, but pricing for these programs will be extremely competitive compared to similar dorado or peacock trips. He's also able to arrange additional excursions to the Pantanal or to the Chapada dos Guimarães National Park, and he offers a range of other programs targeting tarpon, payara, Açu (*Cichla temensis*), and more in other parts of Brazil.

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