

Across the Brazilian Pantanal on horseback

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A diary
By
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Typical Pantanal landscape from the air

The Brazilian Pantanal is one of the strangest places in the world, perhaps only comparable to the Okavango delta in Botswana. Huge amounts of water coming down from the Andes Mountains in innumerable rivers during the rainy season in summer are flooding large areas of the southern Pantanal in the far west of Brasil. Only slightly elevated pieces of land, often covered with primeval forest remain dry. During the southern winter, however, the water recedes into many small pools and lakes while only the larger rivers keep running. The swamp transforms into a green savannah, covering almost 250'000 km² and populated by an incredibly rich wild animal life, a huge variety of water-loving birds in all sizes, many types of macaws and parrots, caimans, capybaras (large brown rodents), peccaries, coatis (a raccoon-like animal) and armadillos as well as by herds of white cattle coexisting quite peacefully.

There are almost no larger settlements and even less tarmac roads in the inner Pantanal. However a number of the cattle Fazendas, often owning small kingdoms of land, offer rooms for tourists and provide close contact to the wildlife as well as to the people on the farm (provided you speak some Portuguese). Since practically each of these fazendas has its own landing strip, the best thing to do is to fly in with a small plane and then to change onto horseback to explore the area. Most excursions into the Pantanal start from Campo Grande, a town more than 1000 km northwest of Sao Paulo. Because of its remoteness and large distances between individual fazendas it needs time to visit this fascinating wilderness and to try catching more than a superficial glance of it. Although the accessibility is limited to the dry season during the southern winter this is no disadvantage because the temperatures stay pretty high even at that time of the year (at least for Central European standards).

While most tour operators only organize relatively short excursions, I discovered that at least one of the English travel agencies for trail riders offered a 10-day horseback adventure in the central Pantanal during August of 2008. Although the actual dates turned out to be quite different from what they wrote in their catalogue, the overall arrangement worked well and provided for an unforgettable experience. However, probably the best thing to do for prospective Pantanal riders would be to contact directly the local tour operator, a small company called 'Riding Brazil' (www.ridingbrazil.com) owned by a very nice expatriate German. They know first hand what dates are available and are happy to provide any other information about horses, required riding skills and necessary equipment. Of course the prices are the same whether you book with them or with an agency in England or France.

Two important pieces of equipment should not go unmentioned: First, try to bring with you a good camera with ample zoom and electronic movement stabilization. Most of the birds tend to fly away long before you will be able to take a nice close-up picture. The mammals, on the other hand, tend to come out primarily around sunset in the evening and need a camera that can handle reduced levels of light. Equally important is a book on flora and fauna. Otherwise you will not be able to identify the plants and animals on your pictures. The overlap with central European plants and animals remains minimal. Out of the series 'Travellers Wildlife Guides' I found the one on 'Brazil, Amazon and Pantanal' by David Pearson and Les Beletzky (Interlink Publishing, 2005) most helpful, even though its section on plants appears rather rudimentary.

From Europe I first headed for Sao Paulo. From there a daily direct flight connection exists to Campo Grande, the meeting point for our excursion. However the connections were such that it proved inevitable to spend a night in Sao Paulo. Since the flight to Campo Grande left early in the morning, I had decided to stay in one of the hotels close to the airport which, like in most cases, was not a very attractive alternative. Moreover, communication in English made some problems and I failed miserably asking for an early wake-up call. Nevertheless, I

successfully caught the hotel-airport shuttle and managed to reach the airport in time. This proved essential because the check-in procedures were a real adventure. The funny thing about this huge international airport is the fact that there is no information whatsoever in any other language but Portuguese. Since I knew some Spanish, I could at least guess at the meaning of written signs but was unable to understand anything spoken. There was already quite some crowding around the desks of TAM the airline for my next flight. Actually there were two lines for check-in. First, one was supposed to use an electronic self-service system to acquire a boarding card. Needless to say that the computer screen talked to me exclusively in Portuguese. Only after my slow progress started to upset the people behind me, I was approached by a kind English-speaking employee who helped me through the program. After that I had to join the second queue for a full hour to get rid of my luggage. All the time I wondered who might have invented this absolutely crazy system and had even been successful in selling it to the airport authorities. From time to time there arose some hectic movement in the queue when flights were called up (in Portuguese) and the respective travellers were allowed to move to the front. There was not much time left when I finally arrived at the assigned gate. However, the gate stayed closed and after an obscure loudspeaker announcement the few people that were sitting there started to move away. It turned out that the gate for my flight had been changed in the last minute but the message had been impossible for me to understand.

In spite of all these obstacles I finally found a place in the right plane that reached Campo Grande with only half an hour delay. At the foot of the staircase that we descended from the plane to reach the airfield we were expected by a friendly employee distributing umbrellas for the walk to the arrivals building because it was raining like hell even though August was supposed to be in the middle of the dry season! In the hall of the airport we were awaited by our guide Peter, a friendly gentleman in his fifties and who turned out to be an expatriate German who had wound up as tour operator in Brazil. With me in the same plane four additional guests had arrived, Christian, a businessman from Mexico, but originally French, and Patrick, a Belgian paediatrician accompanied by Claire und Marie, two girls of 10 and 15 years, respectively.

Soon it became clear that, given the unfavourable weather conditions, it would be impossible to continue, as planned, on the same day with a flight into the Pantanal. The small Air-Taxis needed stable and reasonably dry weather. Therefore we were all transferred into a downtown hotel to decide on the available options. In the hotel we met two more guests, Chantal and Marc, a French couple who had arrived in Campo Grande the previous day. To reach the first fazenda by car rather than by plane would have required a seven-hour drive on bad roads. Moreover we could not arrive before dark. Therefore it was decided to wait until the next morning and either to start early with the cars or, if the weather permitted, with the plane. That left us, unexpectedly, with half a day for sight seeing in Campo Grande. Consequently, Peter, right away, led us to the first sight, a huge and very special Brazilian restaurant for an incredibly rich lunch. The special thing about this restaurant was its meat service: waiters went constantly around with big chunks of freshly grilled or spit-roasted meat from lamb, pork, cattle or calf and offered to cut off sizable pieces for the individual guests. On a nearby big self-service buffet everybody could select from a large choice of vegetables, salads, potatoes and the like to supplement the meat. After quite a time of testing all the delicacies including deserts like fried pineapple (truly first rate), we were well prepared to spend the rest of the afternoon visiting the natural history museum of Campo Grande situated in a park on the outskirts of the town. The 'Dom Bosco' museum is maintained and has been recently extended by the order of the Silesians, a religious community with much influence and a long history in this part of Brazil. Unfortunately only a small part of the exhibitions were currently

accessible and the new building remained largely empty due to lack of funds for rearranging the exhibits. Nevertheless, we were able to visit a few rooms housing a well organized display of all the principal animals of the Pantanal. Here, at least was a chance to look at stuffed representatives closely while in reality most of them cultivated rather secluded life styles. Apparently, not enough money had been available to provide name badges for the animals and hence, without a knowledgeable guide we would have been lost. On the way back we visited a large shop with all the traditional Spanish-south American riding equipment. They had about 50 different types of resplendent spurs all of which apparently designed to impress bystanders but essentially useless or illegal on a horse.

On the next morning the weather appeared good enough for flying. Nobody (not even my travel agency) had realized that this meant we were required to reduce our individual luggage to maximally 10 kg. The two small Air-Taxi planes would not carry more than 50 kg in addition to four people. Hence we all left more than half of our belongings with the wife of one of the pilots. I, for my part, did not miss much of the stuff that I left behind because all warnings about cool weather during southern winter in the Pantanal turned out to be utterly wrong. From the second day onwards the weather stayed hot and dry such that waterproof or warm clothing was perfectly disposable.



Fuelling the plane for the flight into the Pantanal

Finally, at about half past 10 we were ready to leave in two planes from two different airports. After about one hour flight first over farmland and then over immense woods and pastures with many winding rivers we arrived at an idyllic but very isolated old fazenda in the middle of the swampy Pantanal called 'Pouso Alto'. Parrots nested on the old trees around the farmhouse and right beyond the garden fence in a reed-encircled pond a lot of white herons and other waterfowl looked for fish and a few lazy pig-sized capybaras rested on the shore. Fernando, the fazendeiro, a friendly man in his early forties made his income from cattle and tourists but lacked a wife and children. Apparently it is not easy to convince a woman brave enough to stay forever in such an isolated place to marry a fazendeiro. The rooms for the guests proved to be quite spacious and comfortable.



Flying over the Pantanal



Coconut tree on Pouso Alto

In the afternoon we started for our first ride on the local breed of horses which are produced originally for the use of the vaceiros, handling the cattle on the huge land areas belonging to the individual fazendas. The horses are of relatively small stature, not overly pretty but friendly, tough and agile.



First meeting with the horses of Pouso Alto

Together with the French couple that we met in Campo Grande our group consisted of 7 guest riders, Peter as overall guide and organizer and a vaceiro as local guide. The Pouso Alto fazenda is surrounded by small woods, extended pastures and a network of swampy ponds that harbour an incredible variety of animals.



Great egrets in front of the Pouso Alto fazenda

In addition to the waterfowls we met the capybaras, already mentioned, with a life stile of oversized beavers half on land half in the water, then peccaries, a kind of wild pigs, and South American racoons called coatis. Coati females hunt together in large groups and look quite funny when they run away all with their large bushy tails in the air. Even though the mammals are not as large and impressive as in Africa, they seem exceedingly exotic and unfamiliar. After 2 hours we were back, dusk was falling already at 18h, right in time to watch hundreds of white herons assembling on their sleeping trees behind the farmhouse. Only after dark the generators started running and we had light up to 22h while outside the house the concert of crickets, frogs and night birds fought against the silence of the night.



Buff-necked Ibises on a tree trunk in front of Pouso Alto

Usually two days are spent on an individual fazenda before moving on to the next one. Hence we had another day of exploring the surroundings, islands of pristine forests on raised sandy

soil mounds separated by flat swampy ponds and green pastures that are flooded during the rainy season but are now occasionally dotted with the decorative white cattle of Brazil. Grave big water birds like spoonbills, storks and herons stood in each and every pond together with whistling ducks and lapwings. Unfortunately, they were not very patient with photographers and usually moved away shortly prior to be focused at.



Jabiru storks in a pond

In a large tree we discovered a pair of the huge brightly coloured scarlet macaws that made an enormous amount of noise but did not fly away. At the shore of one of the ponds we detected a big group of small caimans that also were too lazy to jump into the water. During midday time it became exceedingly hot and during our extended siesta most animals went into hiding. On the way back in the afternoon the area was almost devoid of animals. Back on the fazenda the meat for our dinner was already prepared on a huge fireplace.



Our group on its way through meadows and woods



Flowering Tabebuia tree



Three yellow-headed parrots in front of their nest

The following day we had to rise before dawn because Peter predicted a long and hot ride to the next fazenda. While the luggage was transported by cross country vehicles, we first moved through a seemingly endless pampa totally devoid of trees and shrubs. We were glad to cross this shadow-less plain in the fresh early morning hours rather than during midday time.



Roseate spoonbills, black-necked stilts and jacanas on the way to Baia das Pedras



Ploughing our way across curious cattle

At a few wet spots large flocks of birds had assembled and frequently pampas deers crossed our way. Even though the terrain seemed ideal for trots or canters, walking was the only gait the indigenous guides deemed adequate. After passing another fazenda in the middle of nowhere, we reached wooded terrain again and finally, after more than four hours on the horses, arrived at a small abandoned building underneath huge Mango trees where we were to meet the people and the horses of the 'Baia das Pedras' fazenda, our next hosts.



Blue-and-yellow macaws in flight

Since the area still looked totally deserted, we prepared ourselves for an early siesta and started photo expeditions for the Blue-and-Yellow macaws that seemed to populate all the big trees in the neighbouring small woods producing lots of noise. Unfortunately, they refused to sit quietly until photographed but flew off in groups or pair-wise as soon as I approached their trees. But also in flight they offered a spectacular picture with their yellow bellies exposed and their long yellow-and-blue tails spread. After less than an hour the Baia das Pedras owner arrived together with his Peones (farm workers) and a set of fresh horses in exchange for the ones that carried us up to here. He was a jovial, friendly looking man in his early fifties, about twice the waist size of Fernando our previous host. Everybody was assigned a new horse. I exchanged my easy to handle but rather uninspired dun horse against a sturdy white one who turned out to have a much better walk and served me well for the next three days. Surprisingly none of the horses would touch my goodies beloved by all their colleagues in Switzerland. Nobody is feeding horses here anyway. During the night they are free to graze on a pasture but they do not obtain any supplementary fodder whatsoever.



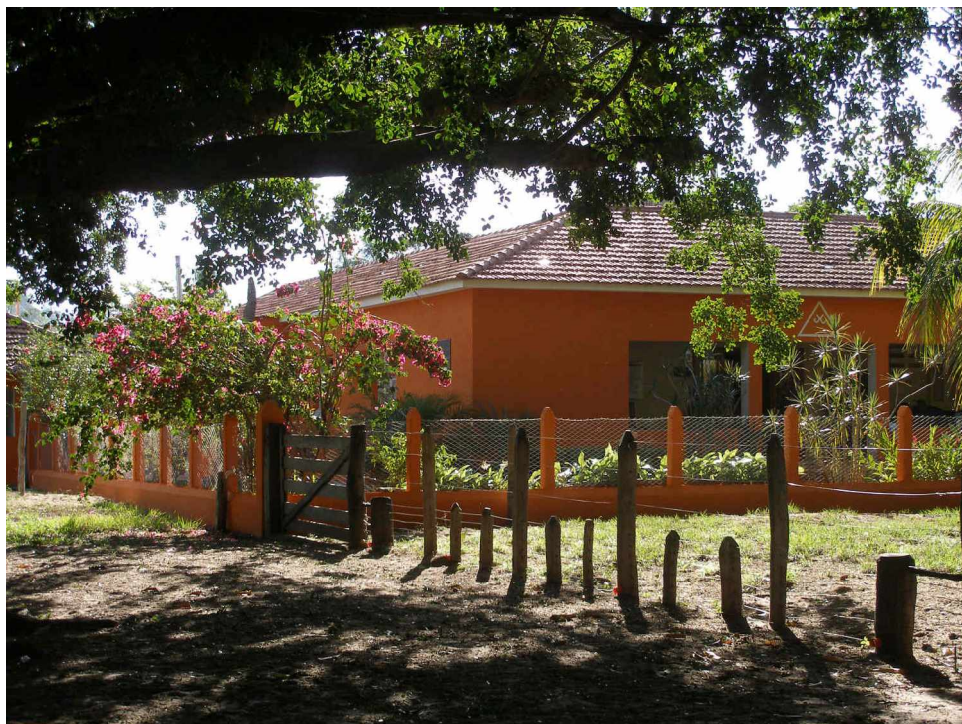
Farewell to our friendly guide from Pouso Alto



The Pouso Alto horses
on their way home

Afterwards we rode for several hours in mounting heat across shrubby woodland, pastures and marshland until we arrived at a small lake surrounded by trees for a break. Although it might have been possible to take a bath, the water looked rather torpid and not exactly inviting. From here we spend only one more hour until we arrived at the much longed-for Baia das Pedras Fazenda beautifully situated between palm and Mango trees and inside a very comfortable place, indeed. The wife of our host came from a family proud of belonging to the first settlers in the Pantanal. A voluminous book full of family photographs explained the

ancestry. Overall the family of our hosts appeared to own three large cattle fazendas two of which welcomed tourists.



Baia das Pedras
Fazenda

Apparently they are keen to generate some additional income in the tourist business because the profits from the traditional cattle farming, which are exclusively relying on meat production, suffer from the isolated location in a sparsely populated area and the resulting high costs of animal transportation into city slaughterhouses. By contrast, for the family of our host the isolation appeared to be a minor problem, because they live at least half of the year in their town house in Campo Grande. Peter, our Guide, in his capacity as tour organizer, was proud of having convinced some of the fazendeiros in the inner Pantanal to participate as hosts in his fazenda-based horse trails. What he disliked, though, was the tendency of the freshly converted hotel-fazendas to market their facilities directly and thus, competing against him.



Two Greater
Rheas (Nandus)
foraging close to
Baia das Pedras

From our hammocks underneath one of the huge mango trees we observed two Greater Rheas (an austrich-like bird) quietly looking for their evening meal on the pasture in front of the main building and we listened to the noise of the many birds, particularly parrots, fighting for a sleeping place on the palm trees surrounding the fazenda courtyard. It was strongly reminiscent of the noise from the baboons, two years ago, which used to compete for their sleeping trees adjacent to my tent in the Okavango.



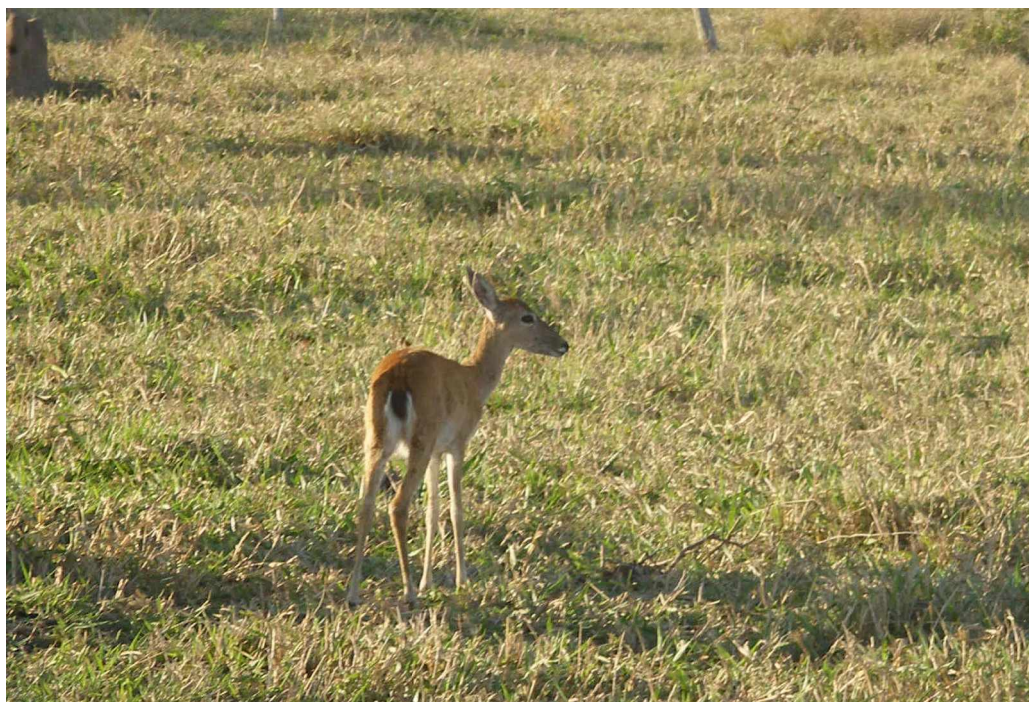
The vaqueros of Baia das Pedras



Driving cattle through the water

Early on the next morning we were again on our horses to join the vaqueros in collecting a widely dispersed herd of cows the calves of which had to be marked with the sign of their

proprietor. The vaqueros looked quite amazing, more than anything else like a band of friendly robbers that one would not like to meet in the dark. In these early morning hours in an area full of little ponds and swamps lots of Capybaras, pampas and swamp roes, Coatis and even armadillos crossed our path.



A pampas
roe

It was already half past ten and quite hot when we finally met the herd and were able to corral them such that the calves could be captured by lasso and earmarked against the violent protest of their mothers. We admired the skills of the vaqueros for a while and then returned back to the fazenda on a different route. Once again I was impressed by Claire, Patrick's 10-year-old daughter who took part in all these long rides good humouredly and without ever overtly complaining except about the slow riding speed. Strangely enough we also met groups of cattle that looked extremely lean in spite of the green pasture. We were told that the grass in some of the areas was rather nutrient poor such that every so often groups of cattle had to be moved to corrals close to the fazenda where they received supplementary feeding.



Catching reluctant cows with their calves



Got the calf!



Meeting two
Jabiru storks in
their nest on
the way home

After another early morning start the next day we explored a completely different part of the fazenda grounds. We crossed a number of small patches of virgin forest that usually grow protected from the flooding on barely recognizable sandy hills. The forest was composed partly of deciduous partly of evergreen trees. Most impressive were the large *Tabebuia* trees which, now in the dry season and devoid of leafs, were covered with beautiful pink or yellow flowers. The shallow ponds surrounded by grassland and woods were particularly rich in animal life with all kinds of birds, swamp roes, a pampas fox and even the secretive nine-banded armadillos. Judging from the number of their burrows these latter animals must be rather common but they did not show very often. They are only the size of a cat and if disturbed will usually disappear as quickly as a flash in their burrows.



Marsh deer in
the marshes



Nine-banded
armadillo

Close to 10h we were already back right in time to admire the huge barbecue prepared to roast the impressive amounts of meat required for the festive midday meal in celebration of the 50th birthday of our host. Yesterday evening a couple from his kinship had arrived by car after many hours driving to join the family (and us) for the occasion. The barbecue was constructed on top of a deep stonewalled cavity half-filled with glowing pieces of wood such that flames would never reach the meat which cooked slowly without retaining any smell of smoke or fire. The grill was sized to accommodate an ox.



Meat being grilled for the birthday party



At the birthday barbecue: Chantal and Claire



Patrick and Marc



Crested Caracara on its evening walk

After the meal and the siesta we opted for a motorized photo safari in the evening rather than for another ride. The number of animals leaving their hides when the dusk fell was absolutely amazing. However, very rapidly my light-hungry digital camera could not cope any more and, to my utmost frustration, delivered nothing but blurred pictures. While we walked back to the fazenda in the dark an armadillo crossed my way that rested immobile when approached rather than running away. Hence, using my flashlight I was finally able to produce some sharp pictures.

The way to the next fazenda on our circuit was supposedly too far to be handled in a single day. Therefore the next night had to be spent in a hut close to the border of the next property. As on the previous occasion the riding speed was modest, walking most of the time in spite of a terrain that would have offered itself for some lovely canters or trots. Cantering was considered amusement for children only. Therefore, we did not cover overly impressive distances in spite of long riding hours. On the other hand it was also true that the fitness of the horses was not overwhelming. They did not receive any grain or pellets in addition to whatever grass and herbs they were able to munch during the night. Among the vaqueros they are considered essentially as a piece of equipment rather than a comrade in sports. Although they were handled perfectly ok, there seemed to exist very few emotional ties between human and animals. On the other hand, they were very easy to handle, friendly and patient. Almost never did I observe any kicking or biting.



On the way to the Retiro
San Luis:

Caymans along the way and
within the pool



Egrets and cattle

We started already at 6 o'clock and moved for a long time along a shallow depression with innumerable small ponds or swamps with equally innumerable birds, peccaries (a type of wild boars), caimans and coatis. Later in the morning we passed a larger pond with a huge egret sanctuary and caimans lying so close to each other on the shore that they rivalled bathers on a hot day at the rim of a public swimming pool. I wondered how many of these caimans might survive when those ponds dry out later in the season and they are cut off from any major river and have no more fishes to catch. Will there be a march of the caimans in search for a new pond?



Lunchtime with
the people from
Baia das pedras

A short time afterwards we arrived at a fazenda close to which we met the support cars and were served a lunch introducing an extended siesta. After another three hours riding in the afternoon we finally discovered the promised hut called 'Retiro San Luis' hidden in the midst of a wood. It was beautifully and comfortably equipped with kitchen, dining room and sanitary installations.

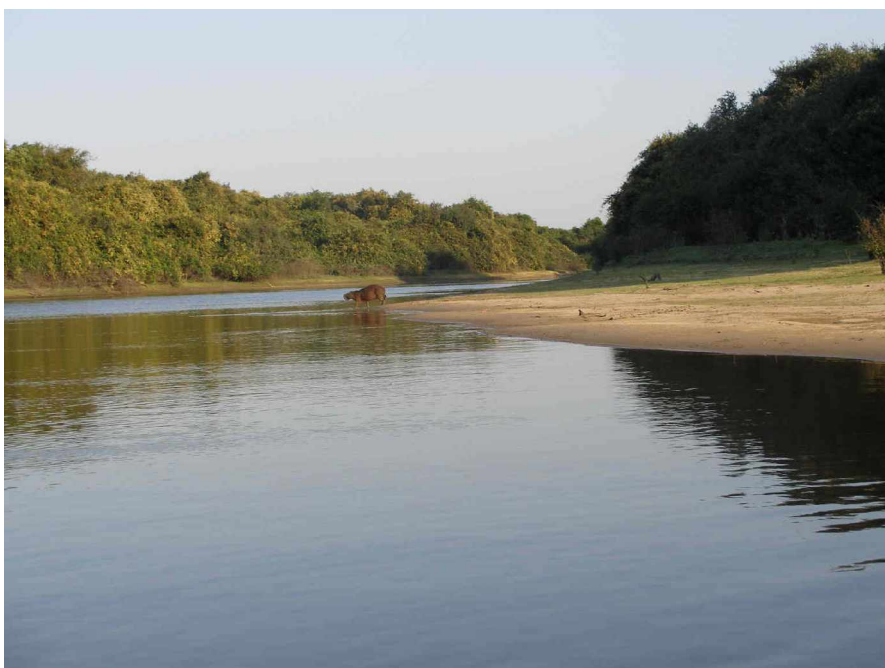
The main room in the middle of the building would serve as sleeping room with about twelve hammocks suspended circularly around the supporting beam. We were still cared for by the hospitable people from Baia das Pedras including the fazendeiro and his wife. Apparently the hut belonged to friends of our hosts living somewhere in this area on another fazenda. The night in the hammocks started relatively early since there was no electricity and we felt the eight hours riding in our bones. It proved quite comfortable although there was really breathtaking snoring concert. Poor Christian our French-Mexican travel companion with a true snoring-phobia barely could find a place in the house remote enough to be protected from the noise.

On the next morning we had to say good-bye to the people from Baia das Pedras who had made us feel so comfortable for three days. We had to follow a somewhat cumbersome sandy path mostly leading across virgin forest. Among the shrubs there was one kind with quite inconspicuous flowers but giving off an extremely strong jasmine smell. After about three hours the next fazenda announced itself with groups of beautiful yearling stallions rather than cattle. The horses grassed along our path or searched for herbs in the middle of a swampy pool producing an impressive picture when they all of a sudden started to gallop out of the water onto dry land.



Free ranging stallions close to Barra Mansa

The 'Barra Mansa' pousada, attractively situated on the banks of the Rio Negro was not a working cattle fazenda. Except for breeding horses they centre their activities entirely on tourism. We obtained rooms in a complex of pavilions. But we shared the facilities with a number of other guests from all over the world. The Rio Negro perhaps 30 to 50 m in width meanders through a more or less untouched wilderness.



Rio Negro in the afternoon light

In the afternoon we mounted a couple of canoes and paddled upstream. The current remained modest and we could row against the slug flow without too much exhaustion. The water temperature must have been well above 25 C°. In principle the many sand banks looked quite inviting for a swim but the turbid brownish waters and the big caimans did not really encourage a try. The permanently running river supports its special wildlife with cormorants,

herons, kingfishers and giant otters. All of them proved to be rather shy and difficult to photograph. In the beginning dusk we gave up and let ourselves drift slowly back to the pousada. The strong smelling shrubs on both banks emitted clouds of Jasmin fragrance. Two of the huge Jabiru storks landed right beside our canoes and started poking for food in the shallow waters.



Capybaras foraging right behind our sleeping quarters



Hyacinth macaws on a tree close to Barra Mansa

When we arrived on the boat landing site I tried to leave the boat without wetting my feet. However, I failed miserably stumbling over something and causing the boat to capsize. Christian my co-passenger and I fell into the flat water which proved to be much less funny than it may have looked because Christian's exceedingly expensive camera caught some water while mine (a much cheaper one) remained dry. I would have preferred otherwise.

The horses of this pousada which we tried the next day were said to be more nervous and requiring better horsemanship than those of Baia das Pedras. Yet, the difference was minor even though they looked a little prettier and, unlike the previous ones, they accepted gladly my Swiss horse goodies. The surroundings of the Pousada turned out to be quite varied, slightly hillier than on the previous days, lots of virgin woods dotted with hidden romantic lakes and pools. The ground was mostly sandy but neither the horses nor the leading peon showed much interest in cantering. Once again Peter proved his qualities as a knowledgeable and unobtrusive guide while the local vaquero like his colleagues on the other fazendas only led the way. Since they only spoke Portuguese only Peter could communicate with them. We others would never know whether they had anything interesting to tell, but I had the suspicion that their overall interest in their guests remained limited. But in the middle of this beautiful unspoiled nature the problems of the naïve tourist travelling in a foreign country without knowing the local language lost much of their usual awkwardness.

In the afternoon the canoes were transported on land for quite a distance upstream such that we could drift quietly back to the Pousada for the rest of the day trying to observe the animals in and out of the river. I immensely enjoyed the smooth gliding on this completely unspoiled river with its rich animal life. The only important task was to avoid running on ground in the occasionally very shallow waters and not to catch sunburn in the hot afternoon sun.



Baby capybaras on the shore of the Rio Negro

The next day was also our last day in the Pantanal. While the flight back to Campo Grande from the airstrip right in front of the guesthouse was scheduled for the afternoon we started for another ride in the morning. Either by chance or by purpose it was designed to alleviate our farewell from this beautiful country. We set off late in the morning when it was already quite hot, Peter could not accompany us, and the local guide managed to walk around with us

for more than 3 hours without a word and without a single change in gait. With the heat almost all animals remained hidden in the woods only the indefatigable birds like whistling ducks and the ubiquitous lapwings provided a little bit of noise.



Farewell to Barra
Mansa and the
Pantanal

In the early afternoon we were all ready for lift-off on the airstrip. Two small plains brought us safely back to Campo Grande where the heat was as impressive as in Barra Mansa. We missed the shadow of the large trees while we waited for the taxi that should bring us from the small rural airport back into the city. In Campo Grande we picked up our surplus luggage and headed for the airport to catch flights to Rio or Sao Paulo each one of us harbouring the sweet and bitter feelings that accompany parting company with travel companions and looking forward to the next destinations.

The End