



If heaven has fishing, surely its rivers are filled
with peacock bass

The Brazil Boys

By DAVE PRECHT
Editor In Chief

THE AMAZON JUNGLE is a forbidding, dangerous place. Since the first Europeans landed on the shores of South America 500 years ago, thousands of adventurers have entered the gigantic rain forest and were never seen again. After explorer Percy Fawcett disappeared, along with his son and a friend, in 1925 during the last of his attempts to find El Dorado, the city of gold, more than 100 people perished trying to find the men.

They died at the hands of unfriendly tribes of native South Americans, or from disease, insects, drowning or starvation.

Starvation? If only they had packed some red-and-yellow bucktail jigs and some 7-inch Woodchoppers, they'd have had plenty to eat, I thought, as my guide, Ney, unhooked yet another chunky peacock bass. He whacked it over the head with a pair of pliers and stowed it under the back bench of our aluminum fishing boat. The fish would make another appearance that evening at dinner, fileted, sprinkled with a wonderful Brazilian seasoning mix and grilled over a fire pit.

After reading about explorers who emerged from the jungle emaciated, I felt guilty for having gained a few pounds during my seven days on the upper Jufari River, a tributary of the Rio Negro. And while early adventurers had to sleep fully clothed and shrouded in mosquito netting to endure insect swarms, my friends and I slept blissfully in our air-conditioned floating "suites" each

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(From top) The author's near-record butterfly weighed 12 pounds; prop baits, jerkbaits and SubWalks took lots of abuse; a float plane lands in a rare, straight stretch of the Jufari; Joshua Cruz tends the fire from a delicious shore lunch. (Right) Native guide Jardel battles a tailwalking peacock bass. Photos: Dave Precht and Hobson Bryan

The Brazil Boys

Jack Odle (top)
and Jim Copeland
enjoy a shore
lunch and a siesta
during a midday
break.
Photos: Dave Precht



Floating suites were towed into the midst of prime, unmolested fishing waters.

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But the food and accommodations weren't the reasons I had traveled more than 3,000 miles to the center of the Amazon region. Like hundreds of other bass anglers from the United States who fly to Manaus, Brazil, each dry season, I had come to catch the giant, powerful peacock bass.

They're not really bass — they're actually members of the cichlid family — but they bite like bass, and they fight like bass ... on steroids.

It was the trip of a lifetime for me, fulfillment of a long-held dream, No. 1 on my bucket list of fishing experiences. And it did not disappoint.

Like most great fishing trips, the last day was the best day, so I'll begin there.

My partner that day was Dr. Hobson Bryan, a professor at the University of Alabama, who in his spare time competed in exactly 100 Bassmaster tournaments. Our party of four pairs of anglers drew names to see which guides we'd go out with that last day, and we won the lottery with Jardel, who had guided Bryan to a 21 1/2-pound peacock a few days earlier.

All the guides were good, but Jardel seemed to have the fish dialed in that week. He took us to a small pocket off the main river, a cove no more than 25 acres in size and averaging about 3 feet deep. If you stood on the casting deck, you could see lighter colored areas, roughly the size of truck tires, beneath the tannin-stained water. These were our targets.

"These fish are bedding!" Bryan said. "I've been saying all week these peacocks seem to be spawning, and no one believed me." Seeing was believing for me. We had only to get a lure near one of the white circles to get an explosive strike.

While most of our party had spent the week performing the arm-wrenching ripping retrieve required by Woodchoppers, Bryan had taken outfitter Billy Chapman Jr.'s advice and tied on a Rapala X-Rap SubWalk. After catching the 21 1/2 on the bait, he saw no need to wear himself out with the chopper. Nor did I.

We started off with 5- and 6-pounders. Then a much bigger peacock engulfed the plug and headed for a wad of roots and vines. It pulled off, straightening some of the hooks. We paused to replace the stock trebles with heavy-duty versions and went back to work. (The heavier hooks actually seemed to improve the performance of the baits. The peacocks thought so, at least.)

The money technique involved working the SubWalk from side-to-side with the same rod-twitching, reel-turning motion that makes a Zara Spook walk the dog on the surface. Spooks caught plenty of peacocks for us that week, but the underwater walking bait did even better.

What I missed in doing that, though, were the explosive strikes on Woodchoppers and other surface baits. Several times, 10-plus-pound peacock bass hit so hard, they knocked the heavy plugs head-high into the air. If you ripped it just right when it returned to the water, they'd bat it again, and again, before hooking up. It's a sensation bass fanatics can almost imagine, and one they should hope to experience.

Jimmy Yarbrough, a B.A.S.S. Nation member and the most intense fisherman in our party — he caught 40 fish heavier than 10 pounds in 6 1/2 days — compares the disposition of a spawning peacock to "Mike Tyson on a bad day."

After hooking an 18-pounder on a Woodchopper, he said, "It was all I could do to hold on as the fish ripped off yards of line in a powerful surge that has to be experienced to be fully appreciated." With 65-pound braided Spiderwire, you have to keep drags relatively light and accept the risk of a fish making it into the trees. Fish smaller than 18 pounds have the ability to straighten saltwater hooks, pull trebles out of the baits and straighten split rings.

The peacocks didn't miss the subsurface baits very often,

but they compensated for their low-key strikes with acrobatics once they felt steel. Most 10-pound largemouth bass just wallow on the surface, but an 18-pound peacock will turn cartwheels trying to shed the hooks.

By noon, that small cove had given up 11 fish weighing more than 10 pounds, along with dozens of smaller ones. We kept track of the weights: four 12s, a 13, a 14, two 16s, a 17, an 18 and one almost 19 pounds. Almost all of those fish were pacas, or peacock tucunare, as they're known in Brazil. These peacocks average around 6 to 7 pounds, and anything heavier than 12 is bragging size. A 20-pounder turns heads, and the current world record is 29-1. The other species is the butterfly tucunare, and most of them are small, although no less beautiful.

When Jardel netted a big butterfly peacock I had hooked, his eyes grew wide. He put it on the Boga-Grip. "Twelve pounds," he announced. "I've never seen one over 11!" Indeed, the IGFA all-tackle record weighed 12-9. I didn't realize the significance of the catch until I had returned to the States.

I'm bragging about the fish and the fishery here, by the way, not the fishermen. And to put it in perspective, our first five and a half days were somewhat less productive. During the week, our group of eight boated close to 1,000 peacock bass, according to the guides' very conservative count. It sure

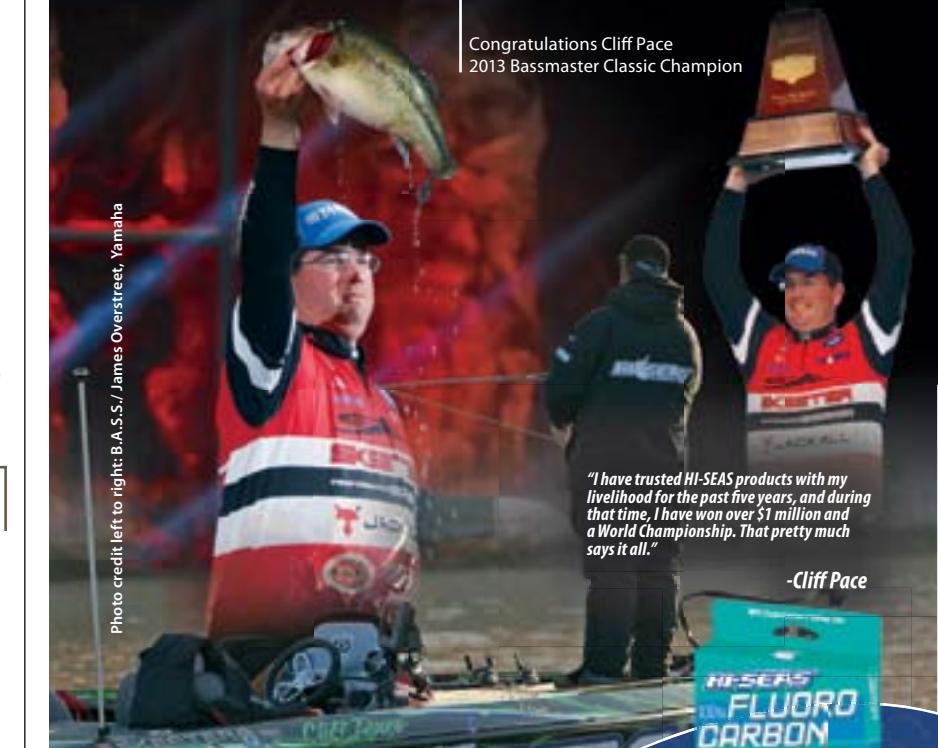
seemed like more. Including the numerous other species — dogfish, monkey fish, piranha and others — it was.

Companions Don Logan and Jim Copeland, co-owners of B.A.S.S., had fished the Amazon previously, as had Bryan. All three agreed that the fishing was better during our trip last January than they had ever experienced. Other members of our party — Tom Curl of

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Interesting Facts About The Amazon

- The Amazon River is the second-longest river in the world, behind the Nile, and carries more water than the next seven largest rivers combined.
- The Amazon Basin is the largest river basin in the world, draining 40 percent of South America. It is responsible for 20 percent of all freshwater entering the world's oceans.
- More than a third of all species in the world live in the Amazon rain forest, including more than 2,000 species of fish.
- Manaus is a city of 2.2 million people situated on the Rio Negro and is virtually an island. Only two roads connect it to the rest of Brazil, and one of them requires a ferry crossing. Travel to the interior is by float plane or riverboat.



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Hobson Bryan's big peacock bass put on an aerial show. (Inset)
Bruce Akin holds a heavy pacu peacock bass.
Photos: Dave Precht

Amazon Trip Notes

All the information you need about fishing the rivers of Brazil is available on the Internet, especially at www.anglersinn.com; 800-468-2347. Here are a few additional notes on what to expect, as well as pointers for making your trip memorable.

What To Take — You can pack all you need in carry-on luggage: three changes of clothes (laundry service is available), a rainsuit, camera, toiletries and the like.

Binoculars and a pocket guide to wildlife in the Amazon will be helpful in identifying the parrots, macaws, otters and other fascinating creatures you'll see.

Tackle — Anglers Inn provides all the tackle and lures you'll need, including sturdy Abu Garcia rods and Revo reels spooled with 50- or 65-pound braided Spiderwire. If you must take your own gear, select medium-heavy and heavy rods with fast tips.

Necessaries — Billy Chapman supplies a waterproof "Amazon Tough Bag" filled with dozens of items you'll be glad to have handy. If you're not booking a trip with him, note the list of items on his website.

Accommodations — The mobile suites are surprisingly comfortable, offering two beds, a desk area, hot shower, toilet, air conditioning, electricity and a deck on the stern to relax and watch the river flow by.

Food — The Brazilian way is to offer a buffet of choices. We had fish at every meal (including breakfast!), along with a variety of other meats, vegetables, fruits and desserts.

Cautions — Because the Jufari is one of the "black rivers," meaning it's tannic, insects weren't much of a bother. I saw one mosquito the entire week. Trips to other rivers might require insect repellent to guard against gnats, mosquitoes and other pests. Sunburn is a real threat in any equatorial region. Wear high-SPF sunscreen, long-sleeve shirts, wide-brim hats and coverings for the neck, face and hands. Rainstorms are always a threat in the Amazon rainforest; we were fortunate that it only sprinkled once, for five minutes.

Getting There — Most travelers fly from Miami to Manaus and then board a float plane for a two-hour flight to their destination river. Flight

schedules may require 20 hours of travel time, including layovers, so it's wise to arrive in Manaus a day early and get plenty of sleep.

Recommended Reading — Two books enthralled me about the Amazon: *The River of Doubt: Theodore Roosevelt's Darkest Journey* and *The Lost City of Z, A Tale of Deadly Obsession in the Amazon*.

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