

## **Brazil trip report – September/October 2014**

We travelled to Brazil in a group consisting of the two of us, Gerald Broddelez (Belgium), Duncan Rankin (England, South), Sue Cullen (England, North) and Andrew and Suzy Speirs (Melbourne, Australia). Gerald engaged Brazilian naturalist Regina Ribeiro as our local guide (always remembering that in Portuguese R in that context is actually an H sound), an extremely good decision as she was charming, is extremely knowledgeable about Brazil's wildlife and its habitats and speaks excellent English.

Brazil is BIG. It's the seventh largest country in the world. But it's still tempting to see as much of a country as possible on one's first visit, even if it does bring back memories of those stories of Americans "doing" the whole of Europe in a week. We visited six different places in just over two weeks, which meant a lot of internal flights. The planes are modern and safe but timekeeping (on GOL at least) is dreadful. There were no explanations for delays, but nearly all of the announcements on the planes and at the airports were given in Portuguese anyway so we would have been none the wiser.

### **Rio de Janeiro**

We four Brits started by flying to Rio de Janeiro (always remembering that in Portuguese J is actually an H sound) where we met up with Gerald (who flew out the previous day) and Andrew and Suzy (who also arrived the previous day, but from the opposite direction, having flown via Sydney, Auckland and Santiago de Chile – a very long way indeed). On a rather misty morning there was time for a bit of sightseeing in Rio. Before breakfast we walked onto Copacabana beach (outside our hotel – but no skimpy bikinis at 7 am); then on to Christ's Statue and the Botanical Gardens, followed by lunch at a restaurant where large hunks of meat were carved from skewers (virtually swords) onto your plate. Brazilians like meat. A lot. But there were plenty of fantastic salads as well. Then we went back to the airport to fly to Iguaçu, a flight of a couple of hours westwards.

### **Iguaçu**

The falls at Iguaçu have to be seen to be believed. Much more impressive than Victoria and Niagara combined. At the time of our visit there was some three times the volume of water coming over the falls than normal, and one of the astonishing walkways at the top of the falls, at the wildest section, the Devil's Throat, had just been swept away only a few weeks earlier. We stayed in a fantastic hotel on the Brazilian side of the falls, but spent one of our two days on the other side of the river in Argentina ("Argentina has the falls and Brazil has the views", people say). In Argentina there are several walkways that lead out to the edge of the falls just before the water plunges over the edge. Being a weekend there were also many thousands of Argentines there, all taking selfies and getting in our way. One of the walkways leads past the falls where the dusky swifts live – actually behind the curtain of water.

It is possible to take a boat under the falls but we didn't, as you get very wet. It is also possible to have a helicopter trip over the top but we didn't do that either (even though we had budgeted for it), as the visibility was not good, partly because of the weather and partly because of the spray caused by so much water.

We were sorry to leave this fantastic hotel – so much so that Duncan asked if we could do the rest of the holiday from there!

After three nights (two days) at Iguaçu we flew back to Rio and then drove in a minibus to a reserve called Regua a couple of hours away.

## **Regua**

Regua (Reserva Ecológica de Guapi Assu) is a reserve devoted to preserving a large remnant of Atlantic Forest, of which there isn't much left in Brazil. Most of it has been cut down for farmland. There we went walking and birdwatching (Suzy proved particularly good at seeing birds whose names begin with M, for some reason). Penny and Duncan had a trip out on their own to see some special hummingbirds; this was very successful as you can see from some of the photos.

We found out about Regua at the Bird Fair last year and were impressed by the fact that any profit made from the reserve is put back into conservation. There were beautiful lakes and scenery there and the highlight for everyone was seeing the Common Potoo (well camouflaged, pretending to be part of a branch). The staff were friendly and the food was excellent and there was a lovely view of the forests from its tower. Simon Barnes from The Times has commented a few times about Regua and what the World Land Trust is helping to achieve there. We could see the importance of protecting this very special type of forest.

## **Caraça**

After three nights at Regua, we moved to Caraça. This is a former seminary (religious training school) high in the mountains above a town called Belo Horizonte (remembering that in Portuguese the H is silent). This entailed driving back into Rio in the morning rush hour, allowing four hours instead of two, and wondering how they will cope with the Olympics (but then we wondered about that for London in 2012 and everything worked fine). The flight from Rio to Belo Horizonte took us over rust-red earth and ghostly white concrete plants. It was then a two hour drive to Caraça, much of it along a very busy switchback road that is only now being made into a dual carriageway. There are some very big lorries in Brazil – with trailers the same size as the lorries themselves, which is something you don't see in the UK.

Caraça is famous among visitors for one thing – the maned wolf. This looks like a fox on stilts (see photos). Although the seminary is now a hotel, there are still priests here, and they started to feed the wolves many years ago on the hotel terrace. The wolves are quite tame now and we saw two of them. Penny waited up until 2.00 am one night, and then woke everyone; the same evening a different animal appeared at 6.30 pm (Penny wasn't very pleased about that for some reason). The photos are not good as we didn't want to use flash, but you can see what an extraordinary animal it is. Long legs help to see over the top of the grasses, presumably. We were staggered at the length of its legs when we first saw it. It walks really elegantly rather like a foal. Definitely one of the highlights of the holiday.

Caraça was a surprise for us as it was cold, perhaps 10 degrees or so. We had not taken enough clothing with us, not anticipating anywhere in Brazil could be so cold. But it is over 1,000 metres up in the mountains, which we hadn't allowed for.

Meals at Caraça were served in the old refectories, and the food was kept warm in a bain marie heated by wood. At breakfast time you could fry your own eggs on a griddle over a wood fire as well. Those fires were the only heating in the building, as the showers didn't seem to produce any hot water.

After three very cold nights at Caraça we made for the Pantanal. That was hotter than we had anticipated! We drove back to Belo Horizonte and flew to Cuiaba, a journey of about an hour if there had been a direct flight. However, there wasn't and we flew via Sao Paulo which took about six hours in all (including a two-hour delay courtesy of GOL).

## **The Pantanal**

The Pantanal is a huge wetland in Brazil, Paraguay and Bolivia about two-thirds the size of France, similarly to Okavango in Botswana and the Everglades in Florida. It's in a basin

surrounded by higher ground and water collects for most of the year – although some months are drier than others and most of the pools disappear altogether in the very dry season. It's a splendid place to see wildlife, especially at the end of the dry season (when we visited), as the water evaporates and animals are forced into limited areas. (That's the theory anyway. Earlier this year apparently it rained unexpectedly for days so there was a lot more water around than is usual – but it didn't matter.)

There are two gateways to the Pantanal. Cuiabá is a large city to the north and Campo Grande is a large city to the south. There is nothing in the middle except wildness interspersed with farms, with one road that winds about a third of the way across, the Transpantaneira. It was going to be a road right across the Pantanal but fortunately for the wildlife the project was abandoned. Now it's merely a 95 mile unpaved access route to a few dozen lodges and farms, with 122 wooden bridges (and a couple of bigger concrete ones). Apparently it needs rebuilding every year after the floodwaters recede.

We stayed at three locations in the Pantanal, two in the northern part (accessed via Cuiabá) and one in the southern part (accessed via Campo Grande – fortunately there was a direct flight between those cities on the day we wanted it). The main attraction in the north is an elegant lodge at Porto Jofre where the Transpantaneira road meets the Cuiabá river and just stops. It's very hot there – 35 degrees or so, but it feels less hot on the small river boats on which you go out to search for giant otters, capybaras and jaguars. The jaguars hunt along the river banks and the boat drivers are all in contact with one another, so it's like being on safari in Africa, except you are in a boat. We had some excellent sightings of jaguar (on three occasions), and giant otters as well, with birds such as herons, egrets and kingfishers.

The star bird in the Pantanal is the Hyacinth Macaw, which is the biggest and possibly bluest parrot in the world – about three feet from head to tail and very loud. They eat palm fruits, holding them in their feet to open them with their beaks – very engaging. They live in the trees in the grounds of the Porto Jofre lodge, so are literally on your doorstep.

After four days in the northern part of the Pantanal, we moved to the southern part by returning to Cuiabá and flying to Campo Grande – a whole day's trip although the flight was only an hour. From Campo Grande we had a gruelling six hour trip (four hours in a minibus on-road and two hours in a pair of Land Rovers off-road) to an extraordinary lodge, Baia das Pedras, literally in the middle of nowhere. This is an area of vast cattle ranches, where a farm of 10,000 hectares is a small one. The attraction (if you can call it that) was that it is possible to see the giant armadillo, which is almost impossible to see elsewhere. Scientists have tagged some animals and they can be tracked at night. We were successful, which means another mammal for Gerald to add to his list (he now ranks second in the world for mammals at 1,133, according to his web page on the Surfbirds website\*). We feel bathed in reflected glory, given that we woke Gerald up at 2.00 am to see the maned wolf !

Few people in the world have ever seen a giant armadillo. It is the most incredible creature and Regina has very kindly let us have a photo to add to our website. You can also visit the website from the Giant Armadillo Project where you can see some more photos and learn more about this very rarely seen amazing creature <http://www.rzss.org.uk/>

Then, after 2½ weeks away, we flew home to London (leaving Baia das Pedras at 1 am) via Campo Grande (one hour delay), Sao Paulo (three hour delay) and Rio de Janeiro (back to London with British Airways – no delay), vowing never to fly with GOL ever again.

\* <http://www.surfbirds.com/cgi-bin/surfbirds/display.cgi?highVal=49&list=list150>