

ARMCHAIR TRAVELLER

• **Entrapment**: The Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur feature as backdrops for riveting scenes in a taut thriller with Sean Connery and Catherine Zeta-Jones. Tonight, 8.30pm, Showtime Action. • **The Englishman who Went Up a Hill and Came Down a Mountain**: Hugh Grant stars as a cartographer in this 1995 charmer set amid the green valleys of Wales. Tuesday, 7pm, Family Movie Channel. • **The No 1 Ladies Detective Agency**: Episode three in the gentle sleuth series based on Alexander McCall Smith's Botswana-set bestsellers. Wednesday, 8.30pm, Showcase. • **Taggart**: Foxtel's new 13th Street channel is the ideal venue to catch up on past series off ave crime shows. Glasgow should also receive star billing for this much-loved murderfest (and if you want an Edinburgh tartan-noir fix as well, stay tuned from 10pm for Rebus). Thursday, 8.30pm, 13th Street. Susan Kurosawa

WHAT IN THE WORLD

• **Perrier** has a funky new line of three limited-edition labels on its bottles and cans with designs featuring French conversation bubbles; all very summery and sparking (find-perrier.com.au) • **Online accommodation provider** wotif.com, which attracts 3.4 million visits a month, reports its list of top 20 domestic destinations for 2009 reflects regional growth and contains a few surprises; while Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and the Gold Coast held their respective spots at the top, Canberra has snuck into fifth spot (11th in 2008) with Queensland's Mackay moving from 28th to 19th • **Visit Scotland** is clutching at straws to celebrate Elvis Presley's 75th birthday year in the king's "ancestral homeland" (his forebears lived in an Aberdeenshire village in the 1700s); an Elvis kilt has been designed by an Edinburgh specialist company and Glasgow Prestwick airport in Ayrshire (considered to be "the only piece of UK territory on which Elvis ever set foot, when a US Army transport plane stopped to refuel in 1960") has a lounge bearing his name and a marker reflecting this momentous event (visitscotland.com). Susan Kurosawa

ACCESSORY OF THE WEEK

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{ JOURNEYS: THE SPIRIT OF DISCOVERY }

Brazil's Pantanal wetlands region is sheer heaven for birdwatchers

ROBIN BAYES

I AM bouncing about on the back seat of a tinny old van on a four-hour bone-crunching ride along a sun-cracked dirt road from the western Brazilian city of Cuiabá to the dense swamplands of the Pantanal. Brazil's 250,000sq km wetlands region, and the relentless 40C-plus heat beats down on our hot little rustbucket.

In front of me are three sweating, bobbing heads; the only concession to their surroundings are small floppy white tennis hats. Noel Coward's Mad Dogs and Englishmen comes to mind; my companions are defiantly English in their heavy tweeds and pumps.

But they are stoic travellers, despite their inappropriate gear. On this potholed road, they are taking the heat in their red-faced stride.

Plump and stocky, John and his wife, Mary, both in their late 70s, are steam engine and bird-watching fanatics who have travelled to the remote climes of Pakistan, Mongolia, China, Iran, India and, now, the vast Mato Grosso flood plains of western Brazil, and all in search of rare steam engines and even rarer birds with scholarly Latin names.

The third traveller is their ruddy-faced, 50-year-old son, Peter, a younger replica, complete with little white hat, white shirt, braces and tweed pants.

Suddenly our van screeches to a halt amid a blur of dust. Carlo, our elderly, urbane Italian guide, has spotted a rare fox-tailed flycatcher sitting quietly in the dry savannah brush. My travelling companions are ecstatic, their video cameras whirling. Another 100m, another abrupt halt. "To your right, a rufous-tailed jacamar."

Barely able to differentiate between a budgie and a magpie, I too feel a sudden surge of bird-spotting fever.

Carlo's deeply ridged face is engraved with life: too much sun, too many roll-your-own cigarettes and maybe just a few too many wives. He has made his way to the Pantanal via early days as a crack paratrooper in the Italian army, an engineer with the European Space Agency and, he says, more than a few Brazilian and Italian wives. Now it is his job to rise each day at 4am to paddle gently into the dawn mists of the Pantanal wetlands, wide-eyed tourists in tow.

Our van finally trundles up to the Mutum Pantanal Eco Lodge, on the edge of the Cuiabá River, one of many tributaries of the Paraguay River that flow in to the Amazon. The late-afternoon heat is heavy and humid but the locals are far from listless. A cacophony of bird calls greets us, from laughing falcons and southern screamers to toucans and swallows.

The wooden ecodolce is simple and comfortable, as is my cabin, presenting only a minor intrusion

Twitchers all of a twitter



TOM JELLETT

They have travelled to the flood plains of western Brazil in search of rare steam engines and even rarer birds

into nature's garden. Bees roar in a branch swathed in purple flowers that hangs precariously over my roof. Their buzz, and the echoing screeches of birds and distant animals, never stops. The world around me seems to be bursting with life.

I walk to the river's edge in the twilight to be met by hundreds of luminous eyes looking back from the water. An estimated two million alligators, known as caiman, call the swamps, rivers and lakes of the Pantanal home. In the early evening they swarm towards shore to feed in shallow waters teeming with razor-toothed piranhas, which are lured by the smell of blood and devour their prey in a feeding frenzy.

Local farmers will toss a dead carcass in to the river to distract the piranha when they cross with their livestock. In the Amazon the piranha are so big they can devour horse and cow carcasses to the bone in a frenetic few minutes.

"Robin, never fall in a river with a cut finger," Carlo laughs. But we have our revenge. The so-called Pantanal cocktail, served every night at the lodge, is piranha soup and the fish is sweet and bony.

Early next morning we head by canoe to explore the neighbouring waterways. Carlo turns over a rock at the water's edge and at least eight baby caimans slither in every direction; then he points out yellow-headed vultures, a red-hatted cardinal, an American

wood stork, a rufescent tiger heron, an Amazon kingfisher and many more.

A magnificent blue-and-yellow feathered toco toucan cuts through the air near our boat, squawking loudly. The English travellers are agog.

"We have never seen so many species of birds in one place, and so close; it's much better than the Amazon," says John excitedly.

As the belting heat of the morning sets in, the caimans bake on the river bank, their eyes ever-watchful as we glide past. In the distance we see large furry heads and bodies bobbing close to shore: it's a school of giant Brazilian otters. They look at us inquisitively, standing high out of the water, before disappearing into a forest of waterlilies.

Another bend, another surprise, as the world's biggest rodent, the hairy capybara, which looks like a large brown pig, wades along the river shallows. In the murky waters, the muscular anaconda, capable of crushing and eating a small horse whole in one sitting, thrives. "Robin, please don't fall in to the waterlilies . . . and no late-night dips," Carlo warns with a smile. Cooling off in the tepid, murky waters of the Cuiabá is hardly tempting.

The next day I saddle up a frisky mare called Maradona and we ride through dry bush that, for six months each year, becomes flooded, and sometimes submerged



under water, when the Pantanal becomes a huge delta of the Paraguay River.

We finally reach the vast green savannah flood plains where herds of horses run free. In the late evening a blood-red sun sinks in the sky as we make our way along the river bank. It is peaceful as we ride slowly back to the lodge, bathed in the soft light.

Carlo is friendly with the local villagers; he respects the simplicity of their lives and they in turn allow him to bring small groups of tourists into their homes.

But before we politely peek into their world we are in for a surprise: a visit to a place normally off-limits, the "Island of the Birds".

It takes two hours of speeding down green tributaries of the Cuiabá River before we make our way along the dense jungle paths of the island where we are met

with a chorus of thousands of screeching birds. Branches are weighed down with nests and baby birds cling on precariously. All year long, birds come to breed, many flying halfway round the world to get here. Of course, humans have intruded. One year a photographer set off a bomb so he could take a picture of thousands of birds, frightened by the noise, flying out of the foliage. The island is now strictly protected and off-limits to the public.

In the village we are welcomed with smiles; the children swim, unafraid of all that lurks in the river. Carlo knows them all by name: Antonio, Gloriana, Sebastiano and so on. It is a simple and self-sufficient communal life cemented by a strong family structure. As we wander through dirt-floored kitchens, and gardens, the families get on with their daily chores, not really understanding our interest in their lives.

At dusk we wind our way back to the lodge with a final stop in the middle of Lake Mariana to haul in buckets of yellow and black-striped piranha for the nightly caiman feed. The alligators wait on the shore, patiently. In my short stay, we've come to know each other. Some creep up behind me as I walk from the small pier. Hundreds of eyes gleam in the water.

Later that night an elderly Texan, Jim, who has been fishing the Amazon for 20 years, regales us with stories. The size of the piran-

has, and their teeth, get bigger and the anaconda become longer and longer as the beer flows and the night wears on. But I have the feeling he is not exaggerating.

On our last day, we rise at our usual 4am and again paddle through the still, warm waters to the middle of the lake. Mother Nature seems to be still asleep. Carlo quietly rolls a cigarette and surveys his domain.

We are here to watch the sun rise but Carlo says maybe it is too cloudy. There are some murmurs off life as night fades. An ibis flits past and sits sentinel atop a dead tree. Rustles and squawks can be heard in the dense jungle.

Suddenly a streak of soft pink light breaks the grey. Seconds later we see the rim of the sun. Minute by minute it emerges into a shimmering ball the colour of strawberry fairy floss. This is Carlo's grand finale, and the Pantanal, awash in glorious pastels, has not let him down.

Checklist

The trip described is the four-day Pantanal Explorer, organised by BFirsttravel, a Sydney-based wholesaler specialising in holidays in Latin America. More: bfirsttravel.com; pousadamutum.com.br.

Susan Kurosawa's Departure Lounge returns next week

Hey, hey, Trinidad

Continued from Page 1

shrieks, pointing at my yellow outfit streaked with black. We laugh and hold each other close, losing ourselves in the sound of soca and the ascending dawn. No more limbo, no more fear. Just two women, one black, one white, arm in arm, jumping up and down in the middle of the road.

At dawn we disperse but meet up later to visit the mountain village of Paramin, home of the Blue Devils. Last night they ran through the streets, tossing their horns and whipping their tails on the ground. This time I am ready. I dive through the crowds and jump over sewers to avoid being daubed in blue paint. At one stage I am caught between two market stalls, one selling roti, the other shark. Trapped, I pay up my Trinidadian dollar and am left alone.

I now feel like a seasoned carnivalist. I can even recognise the costumes in the Monday and Tuesday processions from the best band competitions of the previous week. Swans dressed in crinolines peck at giant hibiscus flowers overlooked by haughty flamingos. A group of older men take Christmas as their theme, staggering under the weight of 2m-high turkeys, snowmen and puddings balanced precariously on their heads. Young boys fight with sticks, a sport developed by plantation workers who used bamboo to fight fires in the cane fields.

But nothing prepares me for the mass of people in each band. There are hundreds of them, like swirling dervishes in white flowing garments, created by master carnival designer Peter Minshall; there are armies of giant pink and purple puppet dolls in the Kiddies Carnival and thousands of women in feathers, sequins and skimpy bikinis. Bikini-mas (masquerade), as adopted by such bands as



EITHNE NIGHTINGALE

A carnival participant, posing as a Spanish senorita, in a fantastically elaborate costume

Poison, is looked down upon by carnival purists.

Carnival is full of traditional and quirky characters. There's sailor-mas, parodying British sailors stationed on the island by colonial rulers, and stilt-walking Moko Jumbies, who are said to have walked across the Atlantic from West Africa. There is Dame Lorraine with her false bust and

enlarged behind, satirising French plantation wives; the Midnight Robber with his huge brimmed hat and Pierrot Grenade in a harlequin costume, reminiscent of European jesters.

Carnival was introduced into Trinidad by French planters in the 18th century but adapted by slaves and taken to the streets after emancipation in 1834.

Then there is the music, soca calypso. All ages and races participate, with young Asians dancing to chutney soca.

By the end of the week I am exhausted and I fly to the neighbouring island of Tobago. I travel up the coast to a quiet village, wading through the waves, my suitcase aloft, to reach the



shore. There I relax, soak up the sun, eat mangoes and plan which carnival band I will join next time.

Checklist

Carnival takes place on February 15 and 16 but there are events during the preceding weeks, including the finals of the King and Queen of Carnival. On Ash Wednesday, international artists, soca artists and DJs entertain a post-carnival crowd on Maracas and Manzanilla beaches on Trinidad's north coast. If you want to join a carnival band, such as Peter Minshall's famous Callaloo Company, you'll need to pre-order a costume. Accommodation is at a premium during carnival and rates are about 50 per cent higher than usual. There are hotels, guesthouses and host homes in Port of Spain, of which Normandie is one of the most atmospheric, or try one of the lovely colonial houses such as Pearls, Schulteis or Ville de French. Blue Mango cottages in Castara, Tobago, is a delightful place to recuperate. • gottrinidadandtobago.com • ncctt.org • ncctt.com • callaloo.co.tt • normandiett.com • blue-mango.com

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