



RANCHER PREPARING MY SADDLE © MARK EDWARD HARRIS



COWBOY DRIVING HERD OF WHITE-HUMPED CATTLE



WATERFALL IN BONITO © MARK EDWARD HARRIS

Leaving the stable to explore a tiny part of Brazil's Pantanal wetlands on horseback, I encounter water almost immediately – this is, after all, the world's largest wetlands during its annual flood. My black mare happily plunges in, a cool reprieve from the 30-degree heat and humidity, while I instinctively raise my feet in the stirrups to avoid getting wet.

Rain that fell upstream two to three months earlier has now reached this enormous floodplain that extends into Bolivia and Paraguay, covering much of the land with up to half a metre of water. It looks and feels wild, but ranchers have grazed their hardy Nelore breed of cattle here since the 19th century. Cowboys drive huge herds of the white, humped cattle over vast distances, sometimes for weeks

at a time. It's a tough life for them, but for myself, this is an adventure unlike any other. Riding across the flooded plain with a group of like-minded adventurous travellers from North America and Europe, our horses often stop to drink, giving us the chance to admire the clouds reflected in the water between the abundant lily pads.

My journey started with a flight to Corumba, the southern gateway to the Pantanal, just eight kilometres from Brazil's border with Bolivia. Corumba was a thriving city with 26 banks at the end of the 18th century. Today, the busiest place is along the Paraguay River, where tour boats depart for fishing and sightseeing cruises, and stand-up paddle boarders tackle the strong current.

This is where my group boards a small ship for a three-day cruise into the heart of the Pantanal. The boat has 12 cabins, air-conditioning, and a large outdoor deck where I sip a caipirinha – Brazil's national cocktail – and watch a brilliant orange sun sink in the sky. At dinner, a lavish buffet includes roasted catfish, fish in a pumpkin, and piranha sashimi. I've never seen fish presented in so many different and delicious ways.

The next morning, the ship docks at Port Manga where those aboard pile into an open-back truck and drive (some of us cycle) along the South Pantanal Park Road, stopping frequently to observe parakeets, kingfishers, snail kites and a goose-like bird called the southern screamer. We also see giant river otters and a family of capybaras, the largest, and possibly cutest, rodent in the world.

“Several pairs of blue Hyacinth macaws screech from the shady branches of a large tree that's on dry ground, while a hairy armadillo scurries into its hole underneath”

Arriving at a ranch a couple hours later, I saddle up for a ride through the wetlands before the day gets any hotter.

Several pairs of blue Hyacinth macaws screech from the shady branches of a large tree that's on dry ground, while a hairy armadillo scurries into its hole underneath.

Returning to the ranch house, I try tereré – the traditional cowboy drink – and enjoy a hearty Pantaneiro-style lunch final cowboy custom – a nap in a hammock.

At the end of our days in the Pantanal, my group hits the road – a dry, paved road – for the 350 kilometre journey from Corumba to Bonito, also in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul.

If the Pantanal is a bit like the Wild West, Bonito is more like a theme park. The area's karst limestone geology has given birth to enormous caves, crystal-clear rivers, hundreds of waterfalls and a sinkhole so deep that red-and-green macaws nest in its chinked walls.

But just like in the Pantanal, ranchers own most of the land. As well as raising cattle, many are now licensed eco-tourism operators in a tightly regulated system that protects the environment from overuse. “You always have the sense of exclusiveness,” says my guide, Daniel, as we walk to a river for a morning of snorkelling. “It's rare you come across other people.”

In the days ahead, we do come across wildlife, however: agoutis, armadillos, anteaters, monkeys and one very big and hairy tarantula. And fish – so many colourful fish that we could be snorkelling along a tropical coral reef rather than a freshwater river that cuts through a Brazilian ranch!

Several dozen other adventures are on offer here, including swimming in the enchanting Mimoso River with its tumbling waterfalls; rappelling 72 metres into the Anhumas Abyss cave; and exploring the Blue Lagoon Cave, a Natural Monument with steps winding past needle-sharp stalactites to the sapphire blue water at the bottom.

But this is still cowboy country, and late one afternoon, I climb onto a horse one final time to enjoy the forests and fields – it's dry ground here – and stop for a swim in yet another idyllic river before riding off into a glorious Brazilian sunset.