

The Golden Kings of Bolivia

A journey
to a simpler
past for
golden
dorado.

by Sekhar Bahadur

The V-shaped bow wave from a pack of marauding golden dorado was 50 feet in front of me and coming on fast. I could just about make out the fish themselves. After a couple of heart-pounding false casts, I managed to drop my red and black Andino Deceiver in front of the nose of the lead fish, and all hell broke loose. The dorado attacked my fly with a mighty splash, and I remembered to strip-set hard, twice. The 20-pound fish went airborne, its black-speckled golden sides and shiny gill plates sparkling in the sun, propelled aloft by a powerful orange tail with a dark stripe down the middle. After a spirited tussle involving more head-shaking leaps and a few powerful runs toward cover, I brought the fish to hand, and after extracting my mangled fly from its powerful jaws and razor-sharp teeth, I released my first dorado.

The dorado of Bolivia travel up the Mamoré River in the Amazon basin to the tributaries near Tsimane's Pluma Lodge. We fished freestone rivers where the Amazon rain forest meets the foothills of the Andes. The Itirizama is a small, rocky, fast-flowing, and usually clear stream emerging from just visible hills, which slows and widens after it meets the Pluma just upstream from



The author says he's seen hundreds of photos of DJ (pictured here) with fish and smiling, but this smile is a first. Previous page: Hardy with a stunning dorado.

the lodge. Downstream from the lodge, the Pluma joins the Sécure, a slower river with lots of sunken tree cover, and then becomes a wider, gently flowing river with islands and flats. All these waters are bordered by dense vegetation, with almost no sign of human presence except for the lodge.

The golden predators are usually in hot pursuit of sábalo, shadlike baitfish that migrate upstream to spawn in huge numbers. Sábalo somewhat confusingly share the name given to tarpon in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, and we saw many of them that must have weighed a couple of pounds or more. Massive schools of sábalo with their distinctive black tails congregate in the river, and when the dorado attack, the baitfish flee in splashy terror and create what looks like a saltwater blitz.

In addition to their brute strength and aerobic leaps, dorado have the attitude of pit bulls, and catching and landing these fabled fish on the fly is among the most demanding freshwater-angling experiences around. One reason is that there are challenges other than a formidable fish. The weather is hot and humid, and long hikes over sunbaked, beach ball-shaped rocks and through tough, slippery, uneven and obstacle-strewn jungle paths are commonplace. The wading gives no respite, as the smooth rocks are greased with slimy algae, requiring studded-felt boots, wading sticks, and great



care. Wading quite a few times turned into swimming, sometimes to retrieve flies stuck on cover. We used 40-pound or heavier straight fluorocarbon leaders with wire bite tippets, so a quick tug to snap off a hopelessly marooned fly was not always a practical option. As in some saltwater fishing, long accurate deliveries of very large flies to moving fish were often required.

At other times, when rains in the mountains upstream discolored the rivers, we had to blind-cast into murky water—the marketing phrase “gin-clear freestone waters” contains some hype. When we couldn’t see the fish, we cast

to cover, seams, and confluences while managing line—all that plus wading in deep and fast currents proved a handful for even the most experienced anglers.

Outwitting spooky trout in crystal clear spring creeks on sunny days may arguably require more finesse, but rarely does one need to cast 70 feet just to be in the game. Specialized overweight jungle fly lines with heavy front tapers to turn over big flies are helpful. And next time I’ll also take a stripping basket and not attempt to tame dorado with any outfit lighter than a 9-weight. Penetrating the hard bony mouths of the fish requires a timely, powerful, and low tarponlike strip strike, often more than one, and they then need to be vigorously prevented from heading for tangly cover with a good rod and reel with drag locked down tight. A golden dorado is a worthy adversary and a hard-earned prize indeed.

While somewhat overshadowed by their glamorous golden brethren, other species of hard-fighting game fish filled the rivers. They include the omnivorous fruit-eating pacu, dubbed the freshwater permit for its finickiness and shape, which it uses to great effect in the current when hooked; the yatorana, an aggressive smaller, sharp-toothed relative of the golden dorado; and the spectacular surubí or striped catfish. Pacu are often targeted with flies that resemble the small



Sekbar enjoyed the dorado and all the other species of fish that took the fly—among them this yatorana he caught in the Itirizama River. Above: DJ with a pacu he pulled from the Lower Sécure River.

round fruits they eat, but they will sometimes take streamers left to drift.

But the fish are just icing on the cake. The rivers we fished are in the Isiboro Sécure National Park and Indigenous Territory that is home to the Tsimané, Yuracaré, and Moxeño-Trinitario ethnic groups. It is beautiful, very sparsely populated, untouched, and well protected. The local people watch over their lands and waters vigilantly, and the Bolivian authorities have little patience with trespassers, poachers, and the like, sometimes rooting them out with tough, anti-narcotics troops accustomed to locating jungle drug labs and dealing with whomever they find there. Our guides shared a cautionary tale about would-be fishermen from abroad who bribed a local guide to take them on an illegal expedition—ending in arrests and imprisonments.

The first slice of the cake is the journey into a simpler past. Anglers fly on small single-engine planes into a tightly situated jungle airstrip in a 90-minute journey from Santa Cruz, a fast-growing and prosperous city with several restaurants that would hold their own against those of any of the world's capitals. The Saturday arrivals and departures at the Oromomo village airstrip on the lower Sécure River are major events for the villagers, who turned up in force. Bread is not available in the village, so the planes bring large plastic bags of rolls for the

village children. The children scarf them down and when the planes start up and begin to taxi, the children stand behind them in order to enjoy the cooling breeze of the prop wash.

The village has received considerable funds through its partnership in the fly fishing operations, and while it remains basic, we did see quite a bit of new infrastructure investment, which we understand includes a small airplane for medical emergencies. Smiles and seemingly good health were in good supply. After landing and gathering our gear, we then traveled for nearly an hour upstream from the village to the Pluma Lodge in wooden dugout canoes.

The second added benefit was the spectacular scenery and abundant wildlife. We saw several jaguar prints and a tapir. Beautiful butterflies and birds were all around us, including the black-and-yellow crested oropendola with its distinctive xylophone-like pinging call. We sent birdsong recordings with deciphering requests to our mad-keen birder friend and fishing buddy Michael, who after hearing them while walking down London's Oxford Street, was even more disappointed he couldn't make this trip. A birdsong version of the Shazam app that can identify the feathered creatures that make beautiful sounds may

or may not be commercially feasible, but it would definitely have come in handy.

As I think back on our trip, however, the local people themselves are easily the most memorable aspect. Each group of two anglers fished with an Argentinian professional guide and two indigenous boatmen. The boatmen are assigned to the lodge's fishing program on a two-week rotating basis by the village's reputedly formidable elected mayoress (whom we saw running a no-nonsense village meeting). The boatmen grew up on the rivers and know every inch of them and the surrounding forests. The professional guides wisely listened very closely to them. Their skill and strength in navigating rapids in our low-sided vessels were nothing short of miraculous. The boatmen knew the names of every plant and animal we came across, and while caiman evoked no particular reaction from them, a particularly dangerous poisonous caterpillar above a jungle path most certainly did.

The boatmen enjoy eating sábalo and would hunt the baitfish with simple hand-made bows and arrows. Not only did we never see them miss a shot, but they also hit just above the midline of the sábalo, a few inches behind the gill plate—every time. We also were told they have deep respect for dorado, historically for driving

A flotilla of dugouts navigated by master boatmen ferried the author and his angling partners between the village of Oromomo and Tsimané Lodge.



sábalo into the shallows within range of their arrows, and now their appreciation of dorado is augmented by the tourism revenue the game fish generates.

These small, fit men—coca leaves frequently in cheek, carrying their few belongings in small simple woven satchels slung over their shoulders—had a quiet stoic dignity that left a lasting impression. I noticed one of our boatmen had a deep open gash on his toe. Fortunately, our surgeon friend Dr. Joe was on hand to take care of him, but I am sure if I had not said anything he would have carried on without a murmur of protest. We brought waterproof watches as gifts for the boatmen and lodge staff, and they were a big hit. On our last day I was heartbroken to see our wounded but recovering friend, who had worked so hard for us all week, sadly tapping his bare wrist as we were pushing off—we thought we had taken care of everyone but had inadvertently not done so. Fortunately, an impromptu one-off payment in lieu of merchandise seemed to do the trick, but it just underscored how

much we take for granted.

Meeting these incredibly humble, hardworking, and accomplished persons made us all a bit ashamed of many of our first-world worries and concerns and being able to tame a few beautiful golden dorado in such special surroundings made us feel even more fortunate. We hope this special sanctuary and its people remain undisturbed. ■

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If You Go

Sekhar and his friends traveled with Untamed Angling (untamedangling.com), which operates the Tsimane Lodge and arranges round-trip transportation to and from Santa Cruz, Bolivia, which is fairly well served by direct international flights

Before you go, make sure your inoculations are up to date, and consider antimalarial precautions. You might also want to hit the gym before you go or otherwise work on your stamina for hiking long distances, wading strong currents, and fighting big fish. Further, you will need to pack the following:

- ▲ tropical saltwater fishing clothing;
- ▲ sun and insect protection;
- ▲ full wading boots with felt soles and metal studs;
- ▲ wading stick and stripping basket;
- ▲ 9- or 10-weight rods with specialized floating and intermediate sinking jungle fly lines
- ▲ solid, saltwater reels with good drag systems; and
- ▲ decent gratuities for your guides.

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When flights leave the village airstrip, local children gather behind the plane to experience the breeze created by the prop.