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HOW TO GET THERE, ESSENTIAL GEAR & WHAT TO EXPECT

FIELDSPORTS

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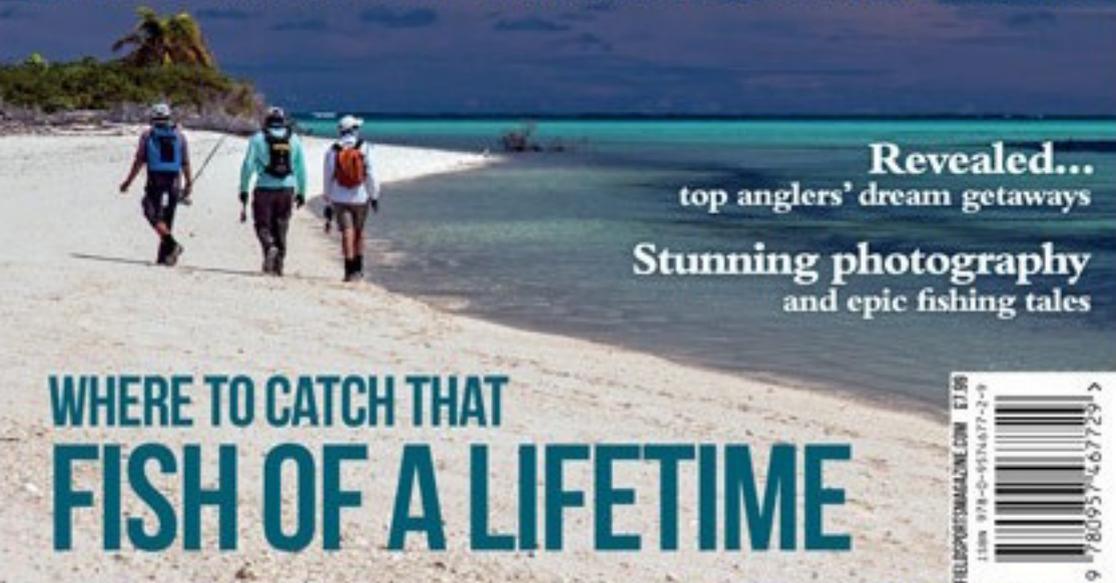
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Fly fishing



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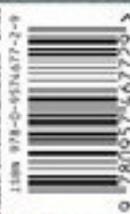


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top anglers' dream getaways

Stunning photography
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WHERE TO CATCH THAT FISH OF A LIFETIME

FIELDSPORTSMAGAZINE.COM \$7.99
1188 978-0-95194877-3-9



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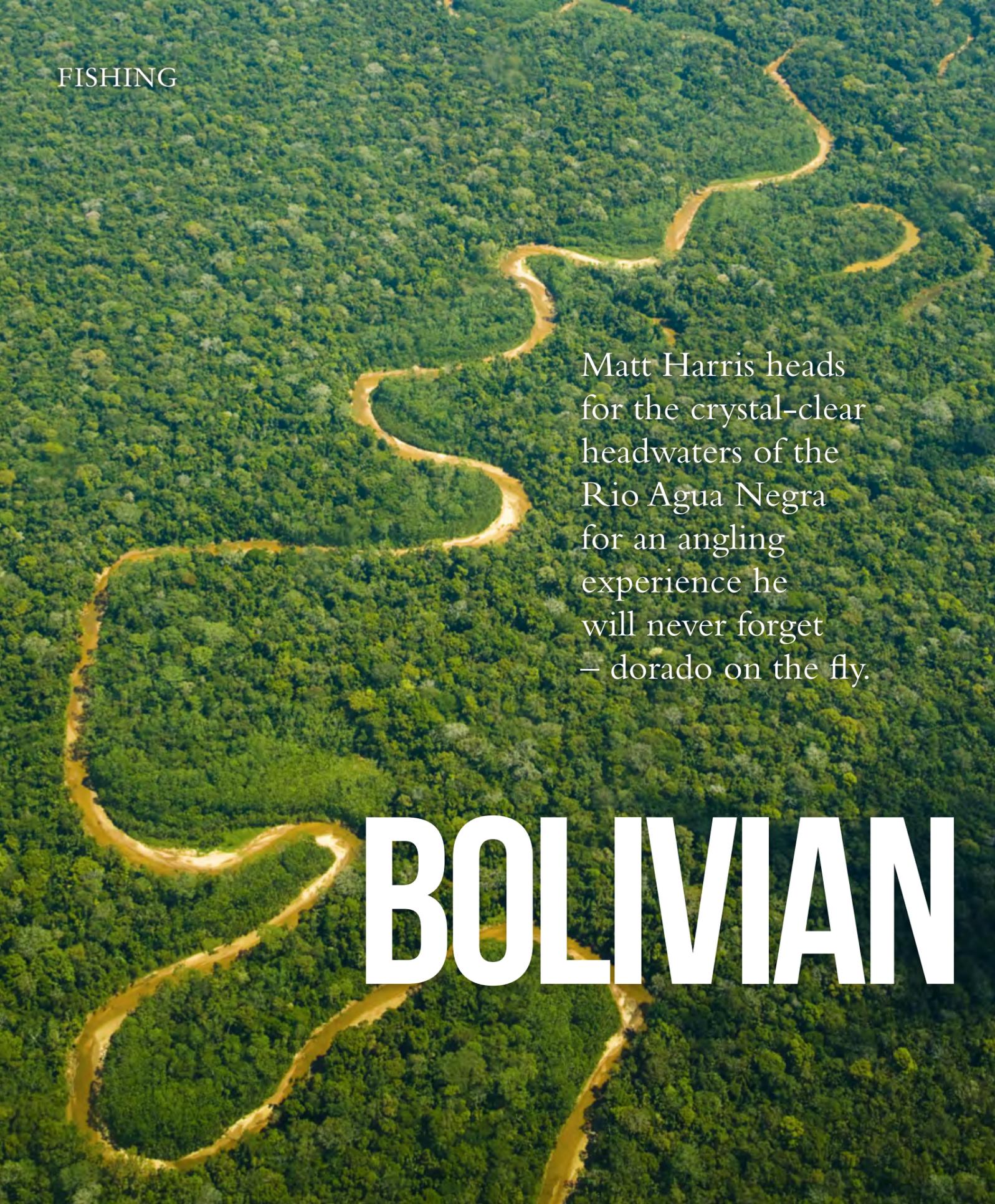
FISHING

Matt Harris heads for the crystal-clear headwaters of the Rio Agua Negra for an angling experience he will never forget – dorado on the fly.

BOLIVIAN

GOLD RUSH

The author with a superb
27lb golden dorado



FISHING

In the far south-western corner of the Amazon watershed, the headwaters of the Rio Agua Negra come splashing down out of the mist-shrouded rainforests of the Bolivian Andes. These waters will travel thousands of miles, tumbling their way into the mighty Amazon before eventually emptying into the Atlantic Ocean on the far side of the continent. Up here, in the high forest, the Agua Negra isn't your typical, mud-stained Amazonian tributary, but a crystalline, rain-fed stream. Its boisterous currents cascade and gurgle over smooth boulders like the waters of a classic freestone trout stream.

But this is no trout stream. This is a river full of gold.

Salminus brasiliensis is the Latin moniker for the freshwater dorado. These fish are big, bullet-shaped killers, armed with a blood curdling array of razor teeth and a muscle-packed fuselage wrapped up in a freakish, 24-carat paint-job. They fight like tigers and leap like lunatics, and they are one of the most spectacular and astonishing quarry in the fly fishing world. Dorado are typically found in turbid brown waters where 'pot-luck' blind fishing is the order of the day. However, if you know where to look, there are a few magical and almost impossibly remote spots where you can sight fish for these fabulous, solid gold killing machines in fast flowing, gin-clear water...

Agua Negra is one of these places.

In April, big numbers of dorado chase huge schools of sabalo baitfish into the Rio Secure system and by late summer, the fish are barreling into the tiny tributaries at the top of the system. The Secure often runs dirty, but its freestone tributaries, the upper Pluma, Itirisama and the Agua Negra are, more often than not, as clear as a New Zealand trout stream, allowing anglers to sight fish for these fabulous creatures at close quarters. I, for one, have rarely experienced more exhilarating fishing.

TSIMANE

Tsimane is a series of lodges and camps strategically placed to take advantage of this spectacular annual migration, and it is surely one of the most remarkable operations in all of fly fishing. Despite the incredible isolation of the location and the seemingly insurmountable logistical conundrums that it presents, the camps offer five-star accommodation, with fabulously



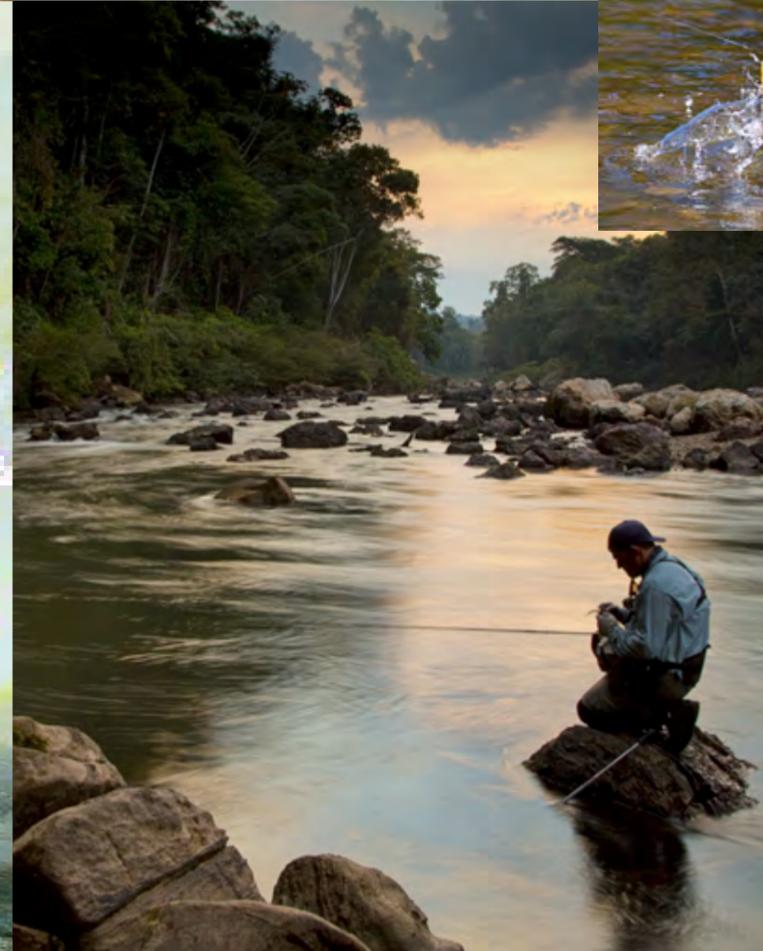
appointed rooms and tents, delicious food, attentive service, crisp white sheets and even broadband internet.

Every day on the river is a genuine adventure: a constantly unfurling panoply of beautiful jungle landscapes, studded with exquisite flowers and a blizzard of stunningly beautiful birds, monkeys and cayman making it almost impossible to concentrate solely on the fishing. Encounters with the local Chimane people, who live in a few small settlements on the river's banks, are fascinating. This indigenous tribe still hunt both fish and wild boar with bow and arrow, and apart from the odd LA Lakers T-shirt gifted to them by American anglers, these people live much as they have done for thousands of years. Many of the adults approach with diffidence, but the children are a joy, splashing into the river and grinning for a photograph with an infectious and unfettered glee that transcends all cultural barriers.

Untamed Angling, who run Tsimane, have made great efforts to work with the Chimane tribe, and employ boatmen from the tribe to push-pole the log canoes that carry anglers up and down the various rivers.



“...SOLID
GOLD KILLING
MACHINES IN
FAST FLOWING,
GIN-CLEAR
WATER...”



THE FISHING

So let me tell you about the fishing... As well as dorado, there are tricky, fruit-eating pacu and murderously strong surubi catfish, and both are astonishingly powerful. But for me, the dorado is king – an impossibly beautiful fish that makes fishing for anything else feel like time wasted. Be warned: the fishing isn't always easy. If these rivers don't get rain and become low and ultra-clear, the fish become hypersensitive and are almost impossible to approach. My first few days on the Secure and Itirisama were intensely frustrating. Well versed in fishing for the big, wily brown trout of New Zealand and Patagonia, I know how to sneak up on fish in clear water. In spite of this, along with the rest of the group, I just couldn't get near to the bigger dorado without them skulking into the depths or rushing out of the pool.

Sure, I caught a few small fish, but the good-sized ones were almost impossible to get close to. Occasionally, one of the big trophy beasts I craved would come rocketing out of nowhere in a blur of golden mayhem to cannibalise one of his little brothers that was flipping around on the end of my line, but other than that, the big

FISHING

fish were conspicuous by their absence and, after four long days, I was starting to wonder if my luck was out.

Then something happened to change the game. Walking back downstream after yet another slow day on the stunningly beautiful Itrisama with fellow angler, Fabian Forget, we felt the first few big drops of rain starting to fall out of the darkening sky. Our guide urged us into the dug-out log canoe as the rain intensified, and huge, lurid bolts of lightning started to light up the premature gloom in a spectacular and deafening display.

By morning the rivers were all hopelessly dirty and swollen with rain, but despite Fabian's pessimism, I thought that it might just be the best thing to have happened since we'd arrived. So it proved.

We lost that day's fishing, but by the next morning, as I woke to the sound of the million magical noises of the jungle, the Pluma River was plainly dropping and starting to clear. I told Fabian that today would be the day, and for once my relentless optimism was not misplaced.

The fish of the Pluma – deprived of the ability to hunt for a good 36 hours in the high, mud-stained spate-waters – went on an astonishing feeding spree that afforded us one of the most remarkable day's fishing I have ever experienced. From the moment that we first stepped out of the canoe, fish were everywhere, crashing into the luckless schools of sabalo with demented, psychotic abandon. While the remaining spate-water in the river's system meant that we were unable to truly sight fish, the violent eruptions, as marauding packs of these great golden butchers crashed into the terrified schools of sabalo, were impossible to miss. A fly cast quickly and accurately into the melee almost guaranteed a savage strike.

Fabian opened his account with a cracking fish of around 22lb, and then, after we'd taken a number of beautiful fish in the mid-teens, I latched into a giant brute that abruptly came rocketing up through the surface to light up the dark shadows of the emerald forest with a spectacular, heart-stopping cartwheel. As I clung on grimly, the great golden fish went crashing off downstream in a blistering, knuckle-busting run, punctuated by more demented, catapulting vaults into the broiling air, and the fight quickly degenerated into a



Thomas Schwingeler fishing the pocket water on the upper Agua Negra



A hard-fighting surubi catfish



Fabian Forget with an impressive Pacu

violent slugfest, as I tried to keep the fish out of the tree roots and sunken branches, and my enraged opponent countered with a fabulous tail walking display that had me holding my breath and praying that the hook would hold. Finally, my brilliant guide Lucio deftly grabbed my prize by the wrist of its great tail, and we were looking down at one of the most stunning creatures I have ever seen in my life: 27lb and a genuine trophy dorado. I was elated.

A fish of that size is rare in the Secure River, but I was soon being upstaged by my roommate Gene, a hugely likeable angler from the US who managed to drag a monstrous 31lb fish out from downstream. All afternoon, the fish would betray themselves with their wild raids on the wretched schools of sabalo, and the hunters became the hunted as our big Andino Deceiver patterns wreaked havoc. I've rarely experienced more exhilarating fishing but, astonishingly, the best was yet to come.

After waving goodbye to Fabian, Gene and the rest of the group, who were heading home, I headed upriver to Tsimane's newest camp, just above the confluence of the tiny Agua Negra and the Secure. I was paired up with a German angler, Thomas Schwingeler, great company and an enthusiastic Tsimane fan. We enjoyed some fantastic fishing over the course of the next few days, but one day was simply off the charts.

On our third day, our guide, the excellent and resourceful Lucas, decided that we would try to push way upstream. We woke early and drove through the jungle, dragging huge, storm-felled

tree-trunks off of the track using our trusty Subaru and a hefty winch. Our boatmen poled the canoe way upstream, through long straights and wild, winding riffles, and finally, we came to a long, brawling rapid. As Thomas and I clambered out of the canoe and started to make our way stealthily up towards the holding water above, the river suddenly exploded – a wild golden combustion, as a rabid mob of big dorado went ploughing into a huge school of sabalo, chopping the poor creatures to pieces with hideous, slashing, razor-jawed bloodlust. So started an absolute gold rush. Around almost every corner, we watched blitz after heart-stopping blitz, as crazed wolf packs of big dorado attacked with a primal violence that sent countless sabalo – and bits of sabalo – flying into the crisp golden air of the upland forest. Thomas and I could barely believe our luck as we took it in turns to pitch our big flies into the churning morass, and most times we would be rewarded as yet another golden psychopath walloped our fly and rocketed skywards.

As we worked upstream, the river became even smaller and more intimate, and the valley started to become steeper and more confined. We were starting to climb our way into the foothills of the mighty Andes, and the river started to break up into a series of tiny cascades and deep, alluring pools, all of them seemingly stuffed full of savage, sabalo-slashing dorado. The action was utterly relentless.

Finally, after long hours of incredible excitement and any amount of golden carnage, the shadows started to lengthen and our guide started to look ominously at his watch. Surely there was time for one last shot – I pressed on ahead as Lucas helped Thomas re-rig his hopelessly frayed wire leader, and, turning a corner, I came to a long deep pool,

“...DEEP, ALLURING POOLS, ALL OF THEM SEEMINGLY STUFFED FULL OF SAVAGE, SABALO-SLASHING DORADO...”

bounded by powerful rapids at either end.

Lucas caught up with me and was clearly about to call it a day when he caught sight of a big, smudgy shape languishing in the nearside shadows of the pool. The light was off the pool now, and the fish was hard to make out, but finally I saw its silhouette against the golden gravel. Constricted by trees and low creepers, I made a low, side-arm shot and as the fly landed, I barely had time to wonder if the cast was a little short when the line was wrenched from my hand and my rod contorted right down to the cork.

The dorado came straight up through the surface and left me in no doubt that it was a real trophy – perhaps larger even than the big beast that I'd wrestled out of the Pluma a few days before. The fish shot across the river, making for a huge submerged tree-trunk and I held hard, determined to stop it.

All to no avail: the dorado bolted under the log and came kiting up on the taught line. It shot into the air, giving me one last glimpse of its titanic golden frame, before the hook hold gave way and the fish splashed heavily back into the water. It seemed churlish to feel disappointed after the day I'd had, but how I would have loved to have seen that magnificent creature up-close.

It was the last action of a fabulous day. The light was starting to fade into the west, and reluctantly, I accepted that the gold rush was finally over. It was time to head for home.

As we started the long trek back to the camp, I took one last wistful look back at the tiny, sparkling headwaters of the Agua Negra – it really did look like an innocent little trout stream. But no trout fishing would ever be quite the same after this epic day of mayhem and adrenaline-fuelled chaos. This little jewel of a river really is one of the most special experiences in all of fly-fishing.

I cannot wait to go back.

Contacts

Tsimane is one of the most magical operations in the world of fly fishing. It is simply a must-do. My trip was organised by Tarquin Millington-Drake at Frontiers UK. Contact Tarquin by email: tmd@frontierstrvl.co.uk Tsimane is brilliantly organised and run by Untamed Waters. Contact Rodrigo Salles at Untamed Angling: rodrigo@untamedangling.com