



# Riding the **GIPSY**

Mousin' by mothership, on  
Argentina's Río Paraná.

By Zach Matthews

**T**he mouse looked frightened. Seconds ago it slipped off a tuft of pampas grass, landing with a soft plop in a current seam. Now its tail dangled into the tannin-stained waters below. The sun nicked below the horizon, spraying the sky in pastel shades of pink and blue, casting the riverbank into deep shadow. The mouse's black eyes glimmered as it edged closer to the main stream, a surprisingly speedy current running off the massive, state-sized delta of the Río Paraná, Argentina's longest river. A harrier wheeled overhead, the bird of prey momentarily focusing its sharp eyes on the mouse's struggles. Too small, it must have thought.

The mouse abruptly made its move; a beeline straight into the current and downstream, accelerating as it hit the main channel. Its tail cut a wake. At the back of that V-shape the water suddenly bulged. In less than a second a golden dorado's yellow-ringed eyes materialized in the film. The water beneath the mouse detonated as the dorado. Then the fish disappeared, with the mouse in its jaws, as it kicked for bottom.

At that moment, Becca Shaneyfelt set the hook and the dorado surged again, this time heading for the surface in a panic. Its scale-rattling leap sprayed us with water, but the fish couldn't shake the mouse fly tucked in its jaws. Becca gave a "whoop!" as the dorado leaped a second time, shoulder high, its golden flanks flickering in the light.

"Quick, there's another one slaughtering sábalo right by that tussock," Justin Witt exclaimed, gesturing to the spot Becca had dropped her mouse. I

waited until she fought her fish to the opposite side of the boat, into a deep water channel, then made my cast. As Becca landed her eight-pounder, another just like it inhaled my double-barreled, articulated popper fly.

And so it went, fish after fish in rotation, each cast a success, each fish a holy terror—until our wire leaders frayed and our poppers and mice had nothing left to give. My last mouse fly caught fish for a while, despite its back half being stripped to bare hook. When dusk gave way to full darkness, our guide Enzo Rico fired up the motor for the short run back to our mothership, where drinks and a fine meal awaited.

Such is life aboard the *Paraná Gipsy*, the riverboat hub of the Golden Dorado River Cruiser operation, one of the most unique fishing lodges in the world.

**T**he Río Paraná arises in the highland rainforest of central Brazil, but unlike the Amazon, it courses mostly south, across the vast plains of the Argentine pampas. Shortly before it flows into the Atlantic Ocean, it merges with the Uruguay River, which forms the northeastern border between Argentina and Uruguay. At that confluence the Paraná becomes the Río de la Plata; the estuary and home port that first drew mariners in the 16th century and led to the foundation of Buenos Aires. Some Buenos Aires streets are still paved with the ballast stones of European sailing ships, laid down (like the people of Argentina itself) after a journey of thousands of miles.

Our journey to the Golden Dorado River Cruiser began in Buenos Aires, a city famous for its Beaux Arts European architecture and quaint, tree-lined streets. Buenos Aires is the kind of town that converts a Gilded Age opera house into an ultra-modern book store; where you can still wander the picturesque San Telmo neighborhood and find street vendors selling mixed sets of old silver flatware. Argentina, after all, was founded—and named—for the Andean silver trade. Years ago, Spanish galleons that docked in the waters of the Plata were loaded with mule-trains worth of silver bullion, some of which was floated down the Paraná, along with loads of tea-like mate and plants from the jungle trade with Peru, including the ultra-strong wild tobacco, mapacho.

Our traveling companion and de facto leader, Justin, is an American by birth, Argentinian by legal citizenship, and world traveler in truth. Witt was on the first leg of a plan to never stop traveling, along with his wife and toddler daughter. Khadizhat Witt, Justin's wife, runs a travel blog called *Circumwanderers*, and if ever a family deserved that name, it is this one. My other two companions were Becca Shaneyfelt—a Montana-based photographer—and Luciano Alba, an Argentinian lawyer who (like me) found fly-fishing to be a more expressive outlet than law. Alba is the owner of a famous Patagonian lodge, and last year he completed his multi-year quest to refurbish the *Paraná Gipsy* as a mothership operation dedicated to pursuing the golden dorado, primarily for fly-fishers. I greeted Alba in the *Gipsy*'s swank, air-conditioned great room, as he explained the history of his remarkable craft.

"This ship was originally constructed back in the 1990s," Luciano explained in his crisp, but charmingly-accented English. "When we bought it, eh, it was in pretty rough shape."

As originally constructed, the *Gipsy* conveyed tourists as far north as Iguazu Falls, the Niagara-like end-of-the-road



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for most Paraná River tours, more than 300 river miles away from where we now sipped Fernet and Coca-Cola (a peculiar Argentine indulgence).

"One of my guides down in Patagonia, Dario Arrieta, was a native of this area and kept telling me, 'Lucho, we need to catch dorado! Lucho, the Paraná is an amazing river!' I would say to him, 'Yes, yes, maybe next year.' And then the Patagonian lodge was doing well, and we heard about this boat, so we bought it." Luciano's smile betrayed a mix of pride and residual bewilderment that he had actually gone through with the plan. "We hired a crew of boat-builders, and let me tell you, I got an education in labor relations," Luciano said with a dark chuckle. "Eventually, everything took twice as long as we expected and was three times as expensive, but we got it done."

The revisions Alba's team made to the *Gipsy* were not insubstantial: an entire steel catwalk encircling the upper deck had to be welded in place. The boat needed new air conditioning and plumbing systems, and the kitchen required a complete update. The results, to put it mildly, were worth the wait. As presently constituted, a night aboard the *Paraná Gipsy* is as close as a modern individual can come to the South American river cruises of Teddy Roosevelt's time. Only the paddlewheel and steam-stacks are missing.

In keeping with the fin de siècle vibe, which permeates the boat, everything placed on the table is made from scratch. One evening we



arrived to find scratch-made pasta drying from the catwalk, which was later served with a lamb ragout. The Gypsy has a built-in asado or Argentine barbecue, lovingly tended by its captain (now Dario Arrieta himself). Arrieta's asado skills are as strong as any competition barbecue pitmaster, but the on-board chef, Lucas Villar, could truly cook for royalty.

Like the food, the fishing, of course, did not disappoint. On our first morning, we swung from the Gypsy's cloistered deck into one of the lodge's many Carolina Skiff flats boats, each new and specifically fitted for fly-fishing. Our guide chose a narrow channel between two grassy flats, with clear water filtering in from both directions. These kinds of color-lines serve as buffet zones for dorado, which feed on and hang out around sábalo, a large, buffalo-carp-like bottom feeder. It was immediate mayhem. At one point Justin, Becca and I all had dorado on our lines, each leaping and thrashing and threatening to tie us in one big Gordian knot. These marshes primarily serve as a dorado nursery, not unlike Louisiana's inshore waters serve for redfish, behind barrier islands like Grand Isle. As with any nursery, there is a superabundance of smaller fish (averaging around three pounds); the bigger, older fish are present, but tend to be discerning. At times you must change locations just to get away from the smaller dorado, which school together like piranhas (another species you're likely to catch here). After successive days of absolutely wrecking both teenage dorado and most of our available flies, we reloaded in the boat's on-board fly shop, and went head-hunting.

A big dorado in the Paraná delta would just scratch



20 pounds, while fish over 10 pounds are considered a good catch for a single day. Anglers do catch the massive 30 and 40-pound fish more commonly seen in Bolivia, but they typically do so by dredging dark flies down low near the main channel. We employed this method—fly fishing's version of sinking bait—but could not have anticipated the near-comical results.

After setting ourselves up with 400-grain fast-sinking lines, Witt and I bombed casts across the taylor of a wide creek, counting the fly down to depths of 20 feet or more. An oncoming storm ripped across the marsh, rattling the leaves off nearby trees, sending scores of teal and shorebirds sailing for more comfortable climes. Just as the water started to hit whitecap-level chop, Justin hooked up with something big, which surged through the water—this could well be our “ten-kilo” fish, our guide Enzo indicated. He backed off the trolling motor power, allowing us to float with the current. As Justin fought his fish, I continued crashing the bank, swinging the fly almost like a steelheader to get it down.

After one of these casts, I heard the sickening snick of a knot failing and line rattling through the guides, followed by a number of Spanish phrases. Then, my own rod doubled over, but the pulse on the end was all wrong; too wriggly for dorado, not loggish enough for sábalo. Within minutes I landed my second-ever saber-toothed payara. Payara have tusks, much like a boar, which stand straight from their lower jaw, like jagged hypodermic needles. Just as I was hamming it up for Becca's camera, the fish gave a weird wriggle, and slipped free. It fell in a perfect belly flop, executing exactly one half barrel roll before sticking the karmic landing, literally, by burying its teeth in the top of my foot. Ten points from the Russian judges.

I blanched, laughing weakly, but somewhat aghast, as Justin calmly noted, “Zach, your foot is turning green.” The payara had clipped a vein, which was rapidly bleeding out under my skin. I bent over and wrenched the fish free, flooding the scuppers with impressive spurts of my own blood. Becca, a trained EMT, flipped some kind of internal switch and took command. Within moments I was laying by the transom, my foot held firmly, elevated, and continuing to bleed. I obeyed all medical direction (most notably one about calmly drinking my beer “instead of whining”). Two beers and a surprising amount of gauze later, I was back on my feet, and we were headed for a different flat. So much for head-hunting.

To be fair, fishing the Paraná delta isn't about trophies. Instead, you fish here for action. Like “puppy drum” fishing in the Louisiana marshes, there is seemingly no end to the five- to seven-pound fish. I didn't even know mouse flies were an option until our third day of fishing, when Enzo seized upon my well-traveled, but little-used row of mice. They didn't last long, but I've never been more excited to lose flies.

As the light failed on our last evening, with a distant lightning storm searing the horizon and our supply of mice thoroughly exhausted, I sat on the deck of a Carolina Skiff. My face was sunburned (in January); my arms were tired from reeling in fish; I was slightly buzzed from beer and mapacho tobacco; and I was thoroughly happy. Fishing is supposed to be fun, and the golden dorado seems custom-designed to make angling a blast. Roll in world-class food and a mobile lodge experience, and you've got a truly satisfying South American adventure. 🎣

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## LOGISTICS

The Golden Dorado River Cruiser is a mobile operation, so its distance from Buenos Aires varies with the fishing and seasons. When we arrived, the boat was a short couple hour car transfer outside Buenos Aires.

Lodging is all-inclusive, with in-room bathroom suites and showers powered by (filtered, but stained) river water. Due to Argentina's currency fluctuations, U.S. dollars are king, especially for staff tips.

The GDRC operation is best accessed through its American booking partner, Hemispheres Unlimited ([hemispheresunlimited.com](http://hemispheresunlimited.com); 404-783-2114). Hemispheres employs actual Argentinians to help navigate the country's bureaucracy, which is extremely helpful given its occasionally volatile politics. Travel regulations may change with little warning.

This is a great fishing trip for first-time anglers. And the boat is a perfect play-land for eight-to 12-year old kids who have an interest in fishing. The dorado are so prolific, hot angling is basically guaranteed. The marsh is also a birder's paradise, with parakeets, ducks, egrets, and herons, not to mention a rich buffet of harriers, caracaras, and other birds of prey.

*Note:* The CDC lists Argentina within the Zika zone, but a closer look shows that only four Argentine provinces, all along the Brazilian border hundreds of miles from Buenos Aires, have confirmed cases of the disease. This area is well outside the malaria zone, too. Mosquitos on the Paraná are also surprisingly dedicated to a dinnertime window of approximately 7 p.m. to 8 p.m. Fortunately, that's when you'll be inside, eating dinner yourself. Outside that time window, we saw no mosquitos.



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