

The Lost Lagoon

By Philip Smith

Yellow and black, it was hiding among the sun-bleached branches at the water's edge. Our boat nudged closer to the island. I lifted my camera and pulled the creature's beady eyes into focus. Then, in a quarter of a second, measured by the camera's rapid frame-burst, the anaconda snapped open its jaws, sprang forward, and hissed in my face. In the Esteros del Iberá, I learned, it's hard to avoid getting up close and personal with nature.

Our guide, Maximo, was smiling. There was no danger, he told me. Anacondas aren't poisonous – they squeeze their victims to death. I can't have looked convinced because he quickly edged the boat away from the bank, and soon we were threading our way through the streams and inlets that weave an unknowable pattern through the embalsados – hundreds of floating islands which bump and skitter across the surface of this vast lagoon system, in a kind of slow-motion game of dodgems.

The Esteros del Iberá is the least known of Argentina's natural wonders. Its 63 lagoons are spread across an area the size of Wales and mark the former course of the Paraná River. In these vast wetlands an improbably rich ecosystem thrives, but until recently it received only a passing mention in many guidebooks. Only now, with a flurry of low-rise, eco-friendly development, is the Esteros finally opening up to tourism.

To reach the Esteros from Buenos Aires we took an overnight coach to the dusty town of Mercedes. After a further hour's journey in a 4x4 truck down the first track otherwise known as 'provincial route 40' and as a red sun crawled over the horizon, we approached the



makeshift bridge which serves as a gateway to the Laguna Iberá. Iberá means 'bright water' in Guarani, and as we rattled over the bridge, the surroundings fell away as if we were driving across a gleaming ocean.

The sweeping lawns of the Posada de la Laguna were dotted with a selection of multi-coloured birds. One had a shock of bright red head feather, as if it had been dunked headfirst in a pot of Day-Glo paint. The birds barely noticed us; it was hard not to trip over them as we rolled our luggage through the freshly cut grass. Later, at breakfast, I turned to see a pair of hummingbirds on the veranda. They would return every morning.

We were staying in the small town of Colonia Carlos Pellegrini, an

ideal base for exploring the Esteros. The posada was built in 1997, and in recent years a number of other lodges that share its emphasis on conservation and tradition have opened nearby. But none has such a privileged position, right on the water.

Walking to the small jetty, it was difficult to see where the posada's four acres of gardens ended and the water began, so dense was the covering of aguape and irupé: water hyacinths and lilies. As Maximo readied the boat, he told us that these plants spread so quickly he has to clear a new path through the water each morning.

We pushed away from the jetty, thrilled by a glimpse of a basking yacaré. Soon, sightings of this South American alligator would prompt little more than a nod of recognition. It seemed that every few metres you could spot a leathery snout and pair of prehistoric yellow eyes poking through the water.

The yacare feast on the local fish. Fat and happy, they pose little threat

to humans. And some say it's OK to swim, as long as you don't mind the odd nibble from the palometas, a type of piranha found in these parts. I decided that any swimming would be confined strictly to the hotel pool.

When the Esteros became a natural reserve in 1983, hunting was banned and indigenous Guaranis like Maximo retrained as guides. Each day we explored a secluded new site offering an uncanny array of river otters, bizarre spiders, carpinchos, yacarés, snakes, butterflies and howler monkeys. We would hear rumours of a beautiful rare deer that constantly seemed to elude us. And then there were the birds. Almost 400 species call these marshes home. Some are difficult to miss, such as the chaja, that resembles an ugly turkey and emits a gurgling scream. Others take a little searching out: kingfishers, heron, ibis and eagles.

The lagoon system is so vast we rarely saw another boat. The wildlife here works in shifts, so when the daytime gang clocks off, many rarer creatures show their faces. Back among the water lilies where we had spent our first afternoon, we continued our search

Exercises

1. From paragraphs 1 and 2, give two facts that the writer gives about the anaconda.
2. What made the lodge in Colonia Carlos Pellegrini, in which the writer stayed, different from other lodges in the region?
3. By referring closely to paragraph 9, explain, using your own words, what the writer says about swimming in the Esteros.
4. Using your own words, explain what you learn about the life of Maximo from paragraph 10.
5. Which word in paragraph 11 tells you that the marsh deer was difficult to find?
6. By referring to paragraphs 3 and 11:
 - a. Give two reasons why the writer says that the Esteros del Iberá is 'the least known of Argentina's natural wonders'.
 - b. Explain, using your own words, what the Esteros del Iberá is and how it was formed.
 - c. Why do you think Maximo looked confused while searching for the marsh deer?
7. Explain, using your own words, what the writer means by the words in the following phrases:
 - a. 'hundreds of floating islands which bump and skitter across the surface'.
 - b. 'One had a shock of bright red head feathers, as if it had been dunked headfirst in a pot of Day-Glo paint.'
 - c. 'a secluded new site offering an uncanny array of river otters, bizarre spiders, carpinchos, yacarés, snakes, butterflies and howler monkeys'.
 - d. 'The wildlife here works in shifts, so when the daytime gang clocks off, many rarer creatures show their faces.'
8. Explain how the words and language used by the writer in each of the phrases you have chosen help to suggest the particular fascination of the Esteros region and the creatures that live there.

for the elusive marsh deer standing glorious in the landscape, the furry tufts of its ears lit up by the tungsten glow of the torch. It turned its gaze

towards us for a moment and then, with a twitch of the nose, disappeared into the darkness. It had been worth the wait.