

Trip Report : Tsimane, Agua Negra, Bolivia, July 21- August 1, 2023. July 23- July 30 on the river.

Jim and Andrew Hine

Andrew and I traveled from SF through Houston and Panama City, arriving in Santa Cruz, Bolivia late the night of July 21. After personally experiencing and also observing (twice) the heartbreaking tragedy of missed gear luggage connections on trips where the final leg is small plane flight to a remote location, we have made it a practice to fly in a day early so that if there is a luggage snafu, there is a full day for the airlines to rectify the situation.

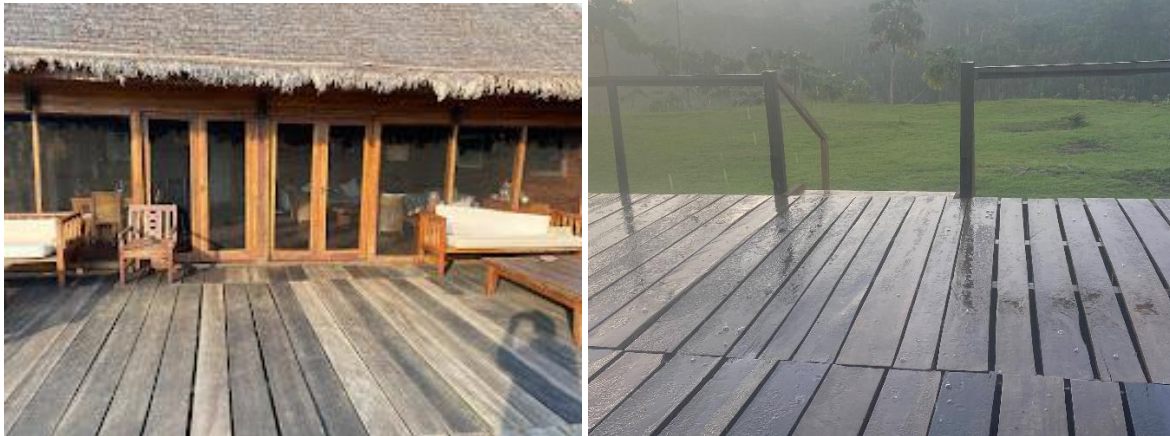
It also allowed for a lovely relaxing day at the beautiful pool at the Los Tijeras hotel in Santa Cruz, where Untamed Angling, our hosts, have a long-term relationship.



After watching the Friday night bullfights at the local sport bar and restaurant (not to be missed), we met up with the other guests staying at the Pluma and Agua Negra lodges, were transported to the civil aviation airport where we boarded several small planes for the trip up to the grass landing strip in the heart of the Tsimane wilderness. There we met our lead guide (Santiago- an outgoing Argentinian), boarded our powered canoes for the 2 hours ride up to Agua Negra with our two other camp mates Oudo and Fernando from Switzerland. The lodge sits at the intersection of the Secure River, the primary drainage of the area, and the Agua Negra, a beautiful clearwater stream.



The Agua Negra complex is extremely comfortable and the service is outstanding. Andrew and I shared a spacious tent cabin, got laundry service every day, and joined our Swiss buddies for amazing meals and multi-lingual evening conversation (Swiss-Italian, Argentine Spanish, and California English). Interesting note: the planks and wood structures for the entire camp were cut with unbelievable precision by local village craftsman using just chainsaws.



The tropical sunrises and sunsets were absolutely stunning.



But enough of the travelogue – on the main event, the fishing.

Day one- we fished the Secure upriver, mostly blind casting 8 wt. floating lines with streamers to logs and rock structure (with a lot of snags and trees as we got the kinks out). But we were rewarded with Andrew catching his very first Dorado, which actually had to be caught twice: Andrew fought it all the way to the boat, where it somehow unhooked itself in the shallows. Knowing the importance of his first Dorado, our intrepid guide Gonzalo (another Argentine) and one of our “local” boatmen, leaped into action, corralled the pesky Pisces in the shallows and recaptured him.



I also got my first double digit dorado of the trip, though I lost one that wrapped itself around a log, and missed a couple others with a “California hook set” on one, and inadequate strip set on another. In our dreams Andrew and I will be haunted for months with the echo of the Santi/Gonzo mantra: “Strip! Strip! Strip! Set! Set! Set!”

Days two and three: We experienced a fabulous Tsimane treat- an overnight up the Agua Negra river, staying at the beautiful outpost camp about 14 kilometers up the river, awakened in the morning by the jet engine level roar of the Howler Monkeys. It also has a lovely swimming hole:



The Dorado fishing on this stretch is very special- almost entirely sight casting to medium and large dorados. This is definitely team hunting, with Santi and the locals spotting the fish, getting us our one shot. It could be frustrating but was also most rewarding when everything came together.

And both Andrew and I also got our very first Pacu’s. These 15LB+ monster cousins of the piranha are absolute bulldogs when hooked, pound for pound perhaps one of the strongest fish I have ever encountered. Santi told us he has seen at least five 8 and 9 weights explode when the fish got the better of the fisherman.



They have incredibly weird, almost human looking teeth



I also achieved the Agua Negra Grand Slam, by landing a Yatorana (a smaller cousin of the dorado) in addition to Dorados and the Pacu, in one day.

Day 4- Back on the Secure, this time the lower section, with Gonzo and the two locals. We almost got our first double. Andrew and Gonzo latched into a nice Dorado in a rocky wash. I was downstream with the two locals; I just asked them where I should put my fly- they pointed, I cast, and was immediately rewarded. Gonzo was unhooking Andrew's fish a good 100 yards upstream, but couldn't resist yelling an energetic "Strip! Strip! Strip! Set again!" even though the roar of the river drowned him out within 25 yards.



Despite some reluctance, Gonzo let me put on my Pole Dancer popper for some most entertaining surface action, though mostly from small and medium size dorados.

Day 5- Another special treat. We boated down to the mouth of an even smaller stream, the Chimoro, for a full day of walk and wade. It was an extremely intimate experience, with sight casting to good size Dorados. It was on this day that Andrew earned the deep respect of the locals by matching their shoeless style, walking the entire 10 miles round trip up and down the stream barefoot. They had never seen an "outsider" do anything like that.



I caught my biggest Yatorana of the trip- I was targeting a couple of Dorado's but the Yatorana beat them to the fly, a move he soon regretted as the Dorados immediately turned on the "captive" prey and starting eating him alive:



I also caught Yatorana on the surface with a Chernobyl ant style fly.

Day 6- Last day. Back up the Agua Negro for more sight casting. By now we were really getting the hang of it, and I hooked up with my first 15lb+ Dorado.



And the locals showed us how they "hunt" the Sabalos, the primary bait fish for the Dorados, which get to be a foot or more in length.

We were also reminded that we are not alone in the jungle- we saw traces of many of the non-human locals including these footprints of an ocelot, and the remnants of the dinner of one of his big brothers- the jaguar.



We left the Agua Negra a bit early this day as I still had one species to bag to get the ROYAL Tsimane Grand Slam for the week- the not so elusive Catfish. I have to confess for this one I did not use an actual fly, although flies like what I used- a big smelly hunk of Sabala. The locals, however, put me and my \$1200+ fancy Sage 9 wt. rod and Abel reel combo to shame by using about \$1 worth of 50lb mono to handline one twice as big as mine.



Saturday morning, we boated back down the Secure to the landing strip for the return trip to Santa Cruz, with great memories and a firm commitment to come back.