

Brazil – South America's Big Cats

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly London to Punta Arenas (via São Paulo and Santiago)
Day 2	Punta Arenas
Days 3/6	Torres del Paine (Hotel Ovejero)
Day 7	Transfer to Punta Arenas
Day 8	Fly to São Paulo
Day 9	Fly to Cuiabá, transfer to SouthWild Pantanal Lodge
Day 10	Transfer to Jaguar Flotel and afternoon boat safari
Days 11/13	Jaguar Flotel
Day 14	Transfer to SouthWild Pantanal Lodge
Day 15	Transfer to Cuiabá, fly Cuiabá to London
Day 16	Arrive UK

Departs

October

Focus

Principally Jaguars and Pumas, with a wealth of other mammals and birds in the Pantanal and numerous charismatic mammals and birds in Torres del Paine.

Grading

Grade A/B Mostly day walks, vehicle and boat safaris, but there will be some nocturnal outings in Torres del Paine National Park and the Pantanal.

Dates and Prices

See website (Tour Code BRA06) or brochure



Puma



Jaguar

Highlights

- Pumas in their natural habitat
- Dramatic scenery in Chile's Torres del Paine National Park
- Large herds of Guanacos and numerous other Patagonian mammals
- Spectacular biodiversity in the Brazilian Pantanal
- Toco Toucans, Hyacinth Macaws, Greater Rheas and innumerable charismatic birds
- Possible encounters with Giant Otters, Giant Anteaters, Brazilian Tapirs, Black Howler Monkeys and Silvery Marmosets
- Jaguars lounging on a riverbank or in the shade of a Brazilian gallery forest



Introduction

While it has long been possible to see big cats in Africa and India, it is only very recently that their South American relatives, the Jaguar and Puma, have been on any naturalist's horizon. The Jaguar is the strongman of South America's cats: powerful, muscular, and almost equivalent in stature to a Lion. The Puma, by contrast, is more Leopard-like: sleek, agile and elegant. The two species occur side by side in many habitats across a huge area of South and Central America, but both are famously elusive.



Jaguar

In recent years, however, Jaguars have become relatively easy to see in Brazil's phenomenal Pantanal region, while Pumas have regularly been seen in Chile's stunning Torres del Paine. Despite this, it has not been until now that both species – Jaguar and Puma – have been realistic targets on a single tour.



Puma

Our Big Cats of South America tour is divided between the Brazilian Pantanal – by far the best place on earth to look for the Jaguar – and the fabulously beautiful Torres del Paine National Park in southern Chile – increasingly well known as the best place to see a wild Puma. In both regions we work with local experts who have been watching the cats for years and who understand, better than anyone, their movements and their use of local habitat.

The tour begins in Santiago, capital of Chile, and from here we fly south to Punta Arenas, our gateway to the fabulous Torres del Paine. While Pumas will be the main focus of the four days and nights we spend here, there are many other charismatic creatures to see including plentiful Andean Condors, large herds of Guanacos, two species of fox, South Andean Deer and Patagonian Hog-nosed Skunks. Among the special birds to be found in this remote and beautiful park are Cinereous Harriers, Darwin's Rheas and with some luck the magnificent Magellanic Woodpecker. While searching for Pumas we will work with guides who have many years' of experience with these enigmatic and beautiful cats. We will be guided by their local knowledge and the latest information, giving us the best chance anywhere on earth of seeing a Puma in the wild.



Hyacinth Macaw

From the dramatic temperate beauty of southern Chile, we move to the tropical swelter of Brazil's justly famous Pantanal. In addition to its healthy population of the largest Jaguars in existence, this region offers the most spectacular wildlife-watching on the continent, especially in October as the dry season draws to its close and animals concentrate around remaining water. Greater Rheas, Toco Toucans, Jabiru Storks, Cocoi Herons and Plumbeous Ibis are all common here, and both Capybaras

and Yacare Caimans crowd around every waterhole. In forest islands it is common to see Black-tailed (Silvery) Marmosets, Black Howler Monkeys and Brown (Tufted) Capuchins and even the spectacular Hyacinth Macaw is easily seen. Other animals which are often seen here include Giant Anteater, Southern Tamandua, Marsh Deer, Crab-eating Fox, Crab-eating Racoon, Brazilian Tapir and the hugely charismatic Giant Otter.

Our main aim though is to see the powerful, enigmatic Jaguar. To this end we stay four nights at the Jaguar Flotel, a floating hotel in the heart of what is widely regarded as the best place on earth for seeing this magnificent animal. Whilst here, we will take morning and afternoon boat safaris to explore the Cuiabá, Three Brothers and Piquiri Rivers, carefully scanning the dense forest and floating vegetation along them for signs of South America's apex land predator. Our movements will be guided by the latest news from expert local guides and, in addition to excellent chances of encountering Jaguars, we will be surrounded by the breathtaking wildlife of the region.

This trip represents your best chance anywhere, of seeing South America's two great cats, accompanied by a host of South America's other charismatic wildlife.



The Pantanal

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

In Flight

We fly from the UK to Punta Arenas, via São Paulo and Santiago.

Day 2

Punta Arenas

On arrival in the southern city of Punta Arenas, located to the north of The Strait of Magellan, we transfer to a comfortable hotel where we have the opportunity to rest up prior to commencing our South American big cat adventure which begins in earnest the following day.

Days 3 - 6

Torres del Paine National Park

From Punta Arenas we embark on a scenic drive to Torres del Paine National Park, journeying through expanses of open pampas. With a little luck we will enjoy flamingo-lined lakes and the first of many encounters with the herds of Guanaco which will be a frequent sight during this stage of the holiday. Torres del Paine National Park is dominated by three stunning mountain peaks, from which it takes its name, and we will stay deep in the heart of the pampas grasslands, at the beautifully rustic Hotel Ovejero, located just a few kilometres from the national park. This hotel will be an ideal base for our daily wildlife excursions as it has excellent access to the park.

Residents of this immensely picturesque park include a fine selection of Patagonian mammals, but our prime objective will be the local Pumas. Despite their relative abundance, and a 100% success rate to date, it is no easy task to find such a wily predator. However, aided by skilled trackers we will be hoping for the privilege of being able to watch these magnificent predators from a respectful distance.



We have organised a busy schedule of searches for Pumas in the area. We will inspect the immediate surroundings of our hotel as well as their hunting grounds located in the eastern range of the park. The area comprised by the northern coast of Sarmiento Lake, Laguna Amarga and Laguna Azul is well known for holding one of the largest concentrations of Pumas in South America.

With ample time to explore the stunning scenery, our quest for Puma is likely to see us encounter a wide variety of mammals and birds. In addition to ubiquitous and often confiding Guanacos, we will hope to see Andean Deer or Huemul, Patagonian Hog-nosed Skunk and the two canid species present in the park, Chilla and Culpeo Foxes. Andean Condors are a relatively common sight here and we should get some close views of these magnificent birds. Other birding highlights could include Silvery and White-tufted Grebes, Darwin's Rhea, Torrent Duck, Black-chested Buzzard-Eagle, Crested Caracara, Cinereous Harrier and the very impressive Magellanic Woodpecker.



Guanaco

Despite the plentiful cast of distractions, they will all be secondary to our main task in Torres del Paine and our trackers will be using the latest intelligence and reports to concentrate our activities in the areas most likely to yield sightings of the spectacular Puma.

Day 7

Punta Arenas

Today we make a leisurely journey back to Punta Arenas, enjoying the stunning scenery and hopefully recounting tales of fantastic Puma sightings!

Day 8

Sao Paulo

Having been enchanted for several days by the spectacular scenery and beautiful temperate wildlife of southern Chile, today we fly to the tropical bustle and biodiversity of Brazil with a scheduled flight via Santiago to São Paulo, where we overnight in a comfortable city hotel.

Day 9

SouthWild Pantanal Lodge

This morning, we will leave São Paulo and fly to the remote city of Cuiabá, the capital of the state of Mato Grosso and the gateway to some of the finest wildlife viewing in South America!

Driving southwest on asphalt roads for the first 100km, we pass through various types of tropical dry forest that go by the name of "cerrado" and "cerradão", before arriving at the town of Poconé. With 25,000 inhabitants, Poconé is the county seat for the 5 million acres of the North Pantanal and is the final staging post before entering the Pantanal proper. As we leave Poconé we join a dirt track that extends south for approximately 17km before connecting with the infamous "Transpantaneira", a 145km raised dirt road that runs south through the Pantanal to the locality known as Porto Jofre on the Cuiabá River. Leaving Poconé behind, we soon notice a change in our surroundings, as the dry forests and fields drop slightly and give rise to the vast open floodplains of the Pantanal. With the change in habitat, we begin to encounter some of the Pantanal's famed wildlife inhabitants, with Caiman, Capybaras and large assemblages of waterbirds all vying for position in the few remaining pools.



Travelling approximately 60km along the Transpantaneira we arrive at the delightful SouthWild Pantanal Lodge (also known by its two older names: Pantanal Wildlife Center and Santa Tereza) where we can enjoy a late lunch and settle into our air-conditioned rooms, before venturing back out around 3pm for an afternoon boat trip or walk through the gallery forest.

SouthWild Pantanal Lodge is full of wildlife and photo opportunities that are missing or much more difficult at the Jaguar Flotel. Firstly, there are two wildlife observation towers: one in the riverine forest and the other next to a nest of thoroughly-habituated Jabiru Storks. Secondly, the Brown Capuchins in the gallery forest of the lodge are among the most visible and photogenic in all of Brazil. Finally, the wildlife within 20m of the lodge is rich and varied, including good, daily views of the world's largest toucan, the emblematic Toco Toucan. Other regulars include Capybaras, Paraguayan Caimans, and a number of very colourful songbirds at nectar and fruit feeders, notably the Orange-backed Troupial.

The marked trails in the gallery forest present a unique opportunity to see more elusive forest birds and mammals, but you must walk slowly and silently to have the best results. Gallery or riverine forest is the most species-rich habitat but represents only 2% of the entire Pantanal; our lodge has the best trail system in the gallery forest and, as it is not grazed or invaded by cattle, the understory is intact, meaning more bird species and more fallen fruit to attract wild mammals and large game bird species. As night approaches we will have the chance to walk around 300m along the riverbank to a viewing area where we may see Ocelot. We will sit and wait here for a short time to see if this beautiful cat appears for a small free handout of food. If an animal appears, they typically stay around for around 15 minutes, giving brilliant views, before melting away into the surrounding habitat.

Day 10

Jaguar Flotel

Today we leave SouthWild Pantanal Lodge early in the morning, in our unique roofed, open-sided safari lorry, and drive towards the end of the Transpantaneira Road at Porto Jofre. The 80km drive is a wildlife safari in itself and we will be on the lookout for family groups of Black Howler Monkeys and Capybaras as well as for South American Coatis and aggregations of large wading birds in ponds along the side of the road.



Upon reaching Porto Jofre, which lies on the north bank of the 170-m-wide Cuiabá River, we board our radio-equipped Jaguar search boat and cruise upstream for 15 km (30-45 minutes) starting our search for Jaguars and Giant Otters. Both species reach their global maximum and are most habituated in the 100 km of river channels upstream from Porto Jofre. We ensure information flow by having radio-equipped boats on the river, talking with one another about sightings of Jaguars and Giant Otters.

Our accommodation is a unique, floating hotel near the mouth of the Tres Irmaos River, with 9 double-occupancy rooms equipped with silent, split air conditioners and private bathrooms. The flotel is operated as a Jaguar research and tourism base by Charles Munn, Oxford- and Princeton-trained biologist, and for years a senior field scientist in the Pantanal and the Amazon for the New York Zoological Society. On board the flotel is an impressive and ever-growing photo dossier of Jaguar faces, and guests become, in effect, guest researchers. We have photos of more than

70 Jaguars that have been seen and photographed since 2005 in the 100 km of river channels that we use. If a guest provides our team with a good face photo of a previously un-photographed Jaguar, then he or she has naming rights!



The flotel is the only accommodation in the centre of the Jaguar Zone, which could also be called the Giant Otter Zone, as these 100-km of river channels are by far the best place in the world to see either of these otherwise shy and elusive top predators. The benefit of being based here in this zone is that Jaguars and Otters have even been seen from the decks of the flotel, including an August 2012 sighting of a Jaguar only eight feet from the riverbank side of

the flotel! Naturetrek guests will have a major advantage over distantly-located lodges or camps, which start 15 km or more away from this sweet spot for Jaguars and Giant Otters. This location means that Naturetrek groups have more private time alone amongst the fauna, before and after other boats arrive from far away. Additionally, you have the benefit of having a comfortable base to return to during the day.

Days 11 - 13

Jaguar Flotel

Our three full days in this area will largely be spent exploring the most Jaguar-rich sections of the Cuiabá, Piquirí, and the Three Brothers rivers by boat. In the afternoons we will start around 3pm in order to spend the late afternoon checking the sandy banks, dense stands of forest and rush-beds along the water's edge in search of the Pantanal's largest predator. These excursions will always be subject to change, following suggestions by local guides and depending on the appearances of other mammals in the area. These might include the gorgeous Margay or the curious Brazilian Porcupine. Six half-day boat trips are scheduled during our stay.

An adaptable and versatile predator, the Jaguar once occurred much more widely in South America but conflict with man has reduced its range by 40%. Always unpredictable and secretive by nature, it is no easy task to find a Jaguar in the wild even where the animal occurs at world-record densities such as this. Even though we have found Jaguars on every past tour, there is no absolute guarantee.

Searching for these wary creatures requires real patience and occasional discomfort, with absolute silence and stillness often required to avoid frightening wildlife away. If we do find a Jaguar, viewing time may be brief, but spending a few moments in the company of this wonderful animal is an unforgettable experience.

While searching for Jaguars, we will doubtless meet a tremendous range of other fauna. Capybara, Crab-eating Fox, Azara's Agouti and Tapir may feature among the mammal sightings, while birds could include Maguari Stork, Magellanic Horned Owl, Blue-crowned Parakeet, Large-billed Tern and a host of passerines.

Maned Wolf Opportunity

An opportunity became possible late in the 2024 season to try to see the spectacular Maned Wolf on an outing from the Flotel. One afternoon from the Flotel, we will attempt to see this iconic creature, the largest canid in the Americas and the tallest canid in the world! We will leave the Flotel at around 2pm and travel by motorboat for around two hours, wildlife spotting as we go, to a remote lodge. This lodge, which is often used as a research station and where tourists cannot stay, is on the banks of the Piquirí River and beyond the lodge are areas of cerrado (vast tropical savannah) which the Maned Wolf particularly enjoys and relies on. Each evening between around 5pm and 8pm, one to three different Maned Wolves have been visiting the grounds of the lodge, where a small offering of food is left for them. Maned Wolves are omnivorous, feeding on small rodents, fruits and seeds. After a short time around the lodge grounds, they will continue on their way. The lodge staff can monitor the small population here and provide them with a small helpful offering of food. Water is also available to them in the lodge grounds. Maned Wolves are under great threat across their range, chiefly due to degradation of their habitat. Not only will this outing provide us with a unique and privileged opportunity to see this normally elusive canid but we will also have the chance to see other wildlife as we travel to and from the site. Jaguar, Tapir, Neotropical Otter, Agami Heron and Sungrebe are just a few of the key species that we may see as we travel. At the lodge itself, we can scan the area for wildlife. White-lipped Peccaries may be seen around the grounds and Hyacinth Macaws are a frequent sight here.

Photography of the Maned Wolf is very much possible. An animal may appear before dark, or if they appear after dark, there is some lighting in the grounds which allows excellent views and the chance for photos using this light rather than flash. There are toilets, air conditioning, cold water, hot drinks and snacks available

at the lodge while we wait. Depending on the time the animal(s) visit, we will either journey back to the Flotel for dinner or have dinner at the lodge. This is sure to be an exciting outing and another highlight of our visit here.

N.B. Should the Maned Wolf stop visiting the grounds of the lodge, or if the opportunity to see them becomes very small, we will continue with the usual outing to try and see Jaguar and other species.



Maned Wolf taken at the site by leaders Marcos Felix and Tom Mabbett

Day 14

SouthWild Pantanal Lodge

After breakfast at the Flotel, we will retrace our steps, back along the Transpantaneira for two and a half hours to the SouthWild Pantanal Lodge one more. We will stop for any special wildlife or congregations along the Transpantaneira and arrive at the lodge for lunch. We will have an afternoon exploring the surrounds of the lodge and enjoying its abundant wildlife, before another opportunity to try to see Ocelot from the viewing area.



Ocelot

Day 15

Fly London

After a leisurely breakfast, we leave the lodge and drive for 3 hours to Cuiabá Airport to catch our flight back to São Paulo and our onward flight to UK in the evening.

Day 16

Arrive London

We are scheduled to arrive back in London at midday (timing subject to later confirmation).

Grading

Grade A/B. This is a standard wildlife-watching tour. Some of the excursions may take place at night through uneven terrain and there will be river outings in small boats. There will be opportunities for more strenuous but optional walking in Torres del Paine NP.

Transport in the Pantanal

The Safari Truck will be used around the lodge grounds. When on the main Transpantaneira Road we will be using an enclosed minibus. There may be some occasions where we use the open sided safari truck on the main Transpantaneira Road but with the increasing traffic on this road and likely very dusty, hot conditions, it is better to use an enclosed, air-conditioned minibus. The leaders will make the best judgment call. We will still stop and get out to view wildlife, and sightings have been prolific in recent seasons. In a minibus it also gives us longer to walk in lodge grounds to break up the longer journeys. In recent years, the general increase in temperatures and the increased flow of traffic on the Transpantaneira means that even if one car passes, it can leave a long trail of dust. We recommend taking a face covering with you just in case.

Focus

Our main focus is to find and observe the big cat species named in this itinerary in the wild; however, these elusive mammals are often exceedingly hard to find and success cannot be guaranteed. With the aid of local expertise every effort will be made to locate these target species, but even on the most favourable of days it is unlikely that the animals will be viewable for more than a fraction of the time spent searching in the field. At all times, including during the searches for these species, due attention will be paid to the wider natural history of the country; birdlife will be the most conspicuous and widespread of the area's fauna, so it is probable that a significant amount of time will be spent looking at birds.

Avid birdwatchers (birders) should carefully note, however, that the principal focus of this holiday will be on finding and observing the big cats: Jaguar and Puma, and that, whilst a good selection of birds is likely to be seen, this is not a designated 'birdwatching tour' as may be found elsewhere in the Naturetrek programme. The itinerary will not include detours to search for specific bird species if this might be detrimental to the main aims of the holiday. Please do not hesitate to talk to the Operations Manager if you have any doubts about the suitability of this tour.

Food & accommodation

Accommodation is in small but comfortable and well-situated tourist hotels with private facilities; single rooms may be available on request.

All food is included in the price of the tour, except after leaving the Southwild Lodge on your last day in Brazil, snacks or meals eaten at airports in transit.

Climate

We can expect a variety of weather conditions ranging from hot (or very hot and sunny in the Pantanal with temperatures in the daily range of 25-35°C) to very cold so layered clothing will be advisable. It is invariably windy in Patagonia and thus the wind-chill factor can be high especially in exposed locations. During the

river trips in the Pantanal, cooler conditions can prevail at times and sweaters, winter coats, raincoats and so on could be required. Precipitation can occur any time.

Extensions

Should you wish to spend longer in Brazil, you may choose add an extension either to the beginning or end of your main group tour. There are various options including the spectacular Iguazu Falls, Rio De Janeiro, Harpy Eagles of the Southern Amazon or Giant Anteaters around Bonito. We can also arrange extra nights along the Transpantaneira Road if you wish. On the main tour webpage under "tour downloads" there is more information on some of these popular extensions and should you wish to discuss these options the tour's manager Tom Mabbett will be more than happy to help. Please email tom@naturetrek.co.uk or call 01962 733051.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

