

Tsimane Gold

> DAVE AND EMILY WHITLOCK
Photo By Joey Lin

Exploring Bolivia's clear and exotic jungle rivers



Photo | Dave & Emily Whitlock

LONG ROPES OF PURPLE-FLOWERED JUNGLE VINES HUNG FROM THE LIMBS OF A 200-FOOT TREE AND DOWN THE FACE OF THE SMOOTH ROSE, YELLOW, AND RUSTY-RED SANDSTONE BLUFF. The turquoise eddy rotating against the bluff was flecked with white foam collected from the rapids and riffles above. Only ten minutes before, Emily had landed a platinum-gold, 20-pound dorado and she was still glowing from her success.

I could see several leg-long, luminescent golden-olive backs steadily porpoising among the foam patches, and tried to quietly wade into the best position to make a 70-foot cast to reach the bluff side of the eddy.

I could sense the encouragement from my gallery—our guide Alejandro, Emily, Joey Lin, and the two native boatmen who poled us there in a long, stable dugout canoe.

Earlier that morning I hooked a 30-pound fish from the canoe but another dorado joined the fray and bit my leader about three feet from the tip, immediately freeing the giant. After that loss I was hoping for another chance, but how could I know that my next cast would be the one that I would never forget?

The opportunity for that cast was set in motion several months earlier when Joey Lin, owner of Far Out Fishing Trips (faroutfishingtrips.com), e-mailed us photos of huge, gorgeous dorado taken from clear, Bolivian-jungle mountain streams. The waters looked like classic trout streams you'd fish in Montana, Argentina, or New Zealand.

This remote fishery was discovered several years earlier by young, pioneering Argentine fly-fishing guides who created the Tsimane fishing operation, named after the local indigenous ethnic population. The operation now has two luxury base camps as well as outpost camps deep in the Bolivian wilderness.

Salminus maxillosus

Freshwater dorado averaging 8 to 12 pounds and reaching 60 pounds, are unrelated to well-known saltwater dorados. They are not related—as their scientific name seems to imply—to trout and salmon. Their native range is subtropical to tropical rivers in central and northern South America including northern Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Bolivia.

Dorado have a salmon-shaped body with soft-rayed fins. Their backs, sides, and bellies are varying intensities of olive-gold, platinum-gold, and the deepest cadmium yellow-gold I've ever seen on fish. Each scale on their backs and sides is tattooed with a black spot that creates the illusion of rhythmic, black pin stripes. Each large, perfectly shaped fin is a vivid yellow-gold, often bordered in blood red, and their golden tails have a rich, black center with red edging.

Dorado are migratory but not anadromous. They are on the move their entire lives, following large schools of their favorite prey—the suckerfish sabalo. They even spawn in concert with sabalo with the result that the ensuing dorado fry have sabalo fry to feed upon. Dorado females are larger than males. Spawning occurs during the peak floods of the rainy season in January or February. The largest dorado seek the upper portions of rivers and tributaries to spawn.

Tsimane rivers are mainly clear but most dorado rivers in other watersheds are turbid. This does not seem to hinder dorado feeding success. They have exceptional senses of hearing and smell and can unerringly detect food. They have small eyes, which seem to further necessitate their predatory reliance on hearing and smell.

Dorado feed most aggressively during low-light periods and at night. They mainly eat other fish, but are opportunistic and will not pass up foods such as crabs, snakes, birds, large insects, mice, lizards, and bats. In moving water they ambush, chase, and intercept foods, typically striking their prey head on, biting to kill, then swallowing it in pieces or even whole. Great caution must be taken to avoid contact with their chainsaw teeth and crushing strong jaws because they can inflict crippling hand and finger wounds.

In rivers, dorado prefer to rest and ambush from large structures like boulders, undercut ledges, root wads, logs, and tree limbs. In Tsimane rivers, they also hold under the swiftest riffles or just below foam lines or eddy foam accumulations. In these foamy areas they often roll at the surface, showing head, back, and tail much like tarpon. They often form small hunting pods of three to twelve fish, especially at sunup and sundown, and terrorize sabalo in the shallows of riffles, runs, pools, and tails of pools.

Their pound-for-pound strength, endurance, aerial leaping, awesome beauty, and preference for striking flies so decisively may well class them as the world's most exciting freshwater gamefish.

They have worked to improve these jungle facilities to share this one-of-a-kind fly fishing with fly fishers who could appreciate, respect, and help preserve its treasures. [For more information on the Tsimane operation, see untamedangling.com or U.S. agents such as faroutfishingtrips.com or flywatertravel.com. THE EDITOR.]

Getting There

After we confirmed our October 2009 dates, we prepared for almost two months by walking, biking, wading, and casting large flies on our 9-weight rods to get into shape for the opportunity. I spent days tying 4- to 10-inch dorado streamers, wakers, and divers. We packed our cameras, clothes, and gear, and joined our friend Ken Ewing for the first leg of our journey to Santa Cruz, Bolivia.

At the Santa Cruz airport we were picked up by a lodge hostess and escorted to a Santa Cruz hotel for a welcome overnight rest. We flew the next morning in a small Cessna with the fourth of our party, Don Johnston from England.

The 90-minute flight over miles of wilderness rainforest ended at a remote jungle airstrip where we were greeted by our Tsimane guides and boatmen from Asunta, a nearby native settlement.

Rounding a bend upriver, we were pleasantly surprised to see a beautiful lodge framed by giant trees and flowering undergrowth. Secure River Lodge, our first of two lodge stays, overlooks an expanse of river rapids, big boulders, and a looming, colorful, mountain bluff surrounded by dense jungle.

Two hours before sunset, Joey took us upstream for some afternoon fishing. On my fourth cast, with the first fly I'd tied for the trip, I hooked and landed an 18-pound dorado that jumped nine times.

For the next three days we experienced fishing and scenery like nothing we'd ever known. We started each day with a hearty breakfast and strong coffee, then got into canoes with our guides and boatmen. One group would head upstream and the other downstream.

All day we canoed and walked through spectacular country, finding deep-colored macaws in flight; leaping monkeys; fresh tracks of tapirs, jaguars, and other jungle cats; colossal trees covered with epiphytes; flowers and vines of all colors and descriptions; exquisite butterflies; and birds we'd never seen. And around every bend, we found another chance for big dorado, pacu, or yatorana.

Photo | Joey Lin



► **Transportation** on Tsimane rivers is by dugout canoes operated by boatmen from the indigenous population.

After three days at Secure River Lodge, we flew to Pluma Lodge, arriving there after a flight and a five-hour boat ride.

The three guides at Pluma—Ramiro, Fabian, and Alejandro—are expert fishers and boatmen and we fished a different river with a different guide every day.

Nearly every day we hooked and landed dorado between 8 to 20 pounds and lost more and larger fish to wrenching strikes, acrobatic leaps, headlong runs, and sharp teeth.

Despite their aggressive behavior,

the dorado were also wary and required stealth in each fishing situation. We were regularly forced to move to undisturbed areas.

After the rigors of canoeing, hiking, long casts with big rods, along with the exciting highs of dorado hook-ups and strong fights, we fell exhausted into bed each night with smiles on our faces.

One day, in the boulder-strewn upper section of the little Itirisama River, Emily sight-cast to, and landed a brilliantly

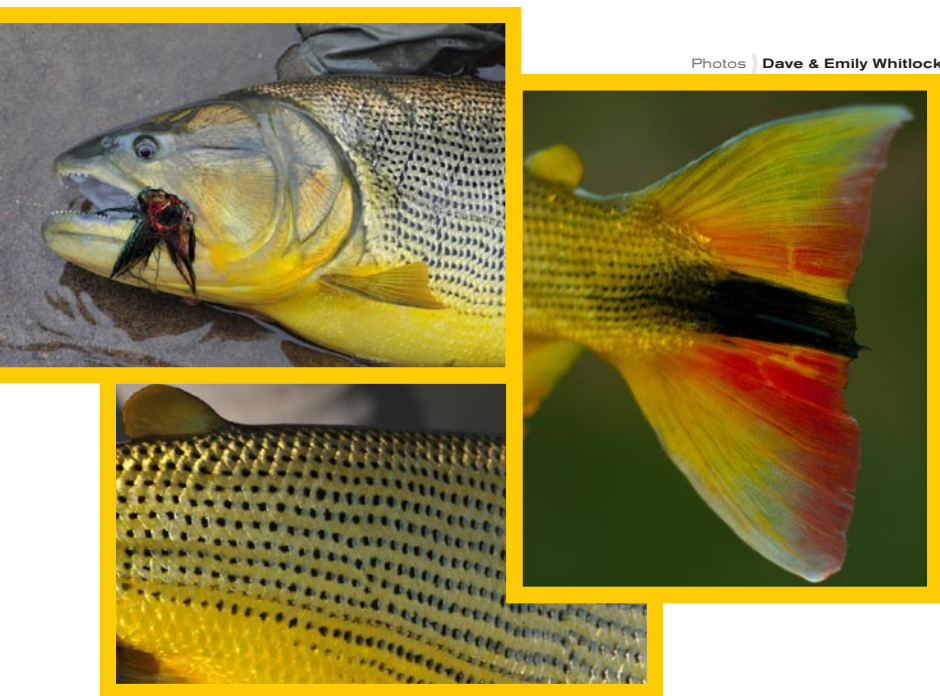
colored, 26-pound fish in pocketwater. I couldn't help feeling that we'd truly accomplished our mission. The fish's golden and crimson beauty had iced our cake, especially since Emily enticed the big dorado with the last fly I tied before the trip.

The fly was intended to simulate a jungle fruit that pacu feed on as

Photo | Dave & Emily Whitlock



► **Secure River** Lodge is part of the Tsimane fishing operation located deep in the jungle wilderness of Bolivia.



Photos | Dave & Emily Whitlock

Graphic | David Dels



Other Gamefish

Yatorana average 3 to 10 pounds and look like a cross between a dorado and a rainbow trout. They take dry flies, nymphs, and streamers and are hard fighters for their size. Bring a 6- or 7-weight rod for these fish.

Pacu average 12 to 18 pounds. They are omnivores and often eat flowers, leaves, and nuts that fall into the water. They do not jump but are strong, long-winded fighters.

Cachara average 24 to 75 pounds. These beautiful, exotic, vividly marked, black-and-white catfish take flies fished deep and slow. These catfish are for the strong, adventuresome types who have an hour to wage a long, hard tug-of-war.

it falls from towering bankside trees. After we'd discovered its irresistible appeal to pacu, it was dubbed "Dave's Forbidden Fruit."

The main prey of dorado are saba-lo, schooling sucker fish that move up the rivers by the millions to spawn, with dorado following them all the

way to the upper river sections. When dorado strike these baitfish, they try to bite, kill, and swallow them in one swift, powerful move. If the attack happens at the surface or in shallow water, it looks and sounds like bowling balls crashing to the water.

Happily for us, dorado attack a fly

the same way. At Pluma Lodge each morning at first light, hungry dorado woke us up pounding the shallows and devouring sabalo on the far side of the river. Two of those mornings, while poling across the river in a dugout, I interrupted their breakfast with great results.

The steely-hard mouths of dorado are studded with short, strong, razor-sharp teeth fortified with crushing, severing jaws. The shape of their heads is unforgettable, with hammered-gold and rose-colored gill plates. If your hook is sharp and holds, and your wire tippet is not bitten in two, you will experience a series of tarponlike leaps, and lunges toward river structure or distant parts of the river.

If you stay connected long enough to tire the fish, you can force it into the river shallows, but this often brings another series of mad leaps and lunges, compounding the ache in your tendons and muscles and increasing your anxiety about a last-minute loss.

My Dream Comes True

On my last, unforgettable day, as I began my cast to the eddy's far bank, a tingling sensation ran up my spine as I thought about the potential for landing my largest dorado ever.

I got off a strong backcast, let several more feet shoot back, and then hauled forward and shot to the eddy's far side. My loop carried a black, 7-inch deerhair Dorado Waker to the base of a sandstone bluff, and I made a quick upstream mend to straighten the line. I began to swim the big-headed fly over the long, luminescent shapes suspended in the eddy.

Photo | Noel Pollak



Photo | Joaquin Aracena



Photos | Joaquin Aracena



WHITLOCK'S DORADO WAKER (BLACK)

HOOK: #1/0-#3/0 Tiemco 600S.

THREAD: Fluorescent orange Wapsi Ultra 210.

CEMENT: Zap-A-Gap, Dave's Flexament, Zap Goo.

BODY FOUNDATION: Mason Hard Nylon - .035"

BODY: Black Schlappen, red and black bucktail.

FLASH: Pearl Flashabou lateral scale.

HEAD: Black elk hair.

EYES: Yellow on black Wapsi Solid Plastic Eyes.

After several two-foot strips, the water erupted. I remember the searing sensation on my wet stripping finger as the dorado grabbed my fly and tore downstream.

Somehow I managed two hook-setting strips and then, bursting through the surface in an exploding, body-writhing leap was a dorado that looked bigger than I'd even dreamed of.

I lost track of time, the number of jumps, and the length of its runs, and only returned to reality when the big fish tired and let me gain some control of the battle.

I recall our guide, Alejandro, with his hand on my shoulder telling me in his relaxed, Argentine voice that there was no need to rush or horse this trophy. Relax and take your time. Those were the words my frayed nerves and tired arm needed to hear.

As I guided the fish into the shallows, my mind quickly listed all that could go wrong: Would the hook hold? How badly is the wire chewed? Are the knots okay?

Finally, Alejandro cradled and raised my great fish from the water for our cameras: my once-in-a-lifetime 33-pound golden treasure.

Contributing editors Dave and Emily Whitlock operate a fly-fishing school in Oklahoma (davewhitlock.com).

Leaders and Other Gear

Dorado are not leader-shy. We started with 20-pound-test monofilament tippet sections but soon found that 30-pound-test is the minimum to set the hook properly and have some control over the fish in the rapids, boulders, and logs. The biggest problem we experienced with leader failure was with other competitive dorado or pacu severing the leader as we fought our hooked fish.

Use 12 to 24 inches of 30- to 40-pound-test wire bite tippet next to the fly. TyGer Wire, plastic-coated American Fishing Wire, and Malin Boa No-Kink Titanium Wire are excellent. Use an Albright knot to connect the leader to the wire, and a perfection loop to attach the fly.

Before I went to Tsimane I had the bright idea to use a heavy-duty snap on my wire leader for quick fly changing. Forget it. Dorado easily crush snaps and usually abrade the wire so badly that a new knot was mandatory after nearly each hook-up. Due to the limiting nature of the river, 100 to 150 yards of 30-pound Dacron backing is ample.

The season at Tsimane extends from mid-May until mid-October. It is a subtropical zone with daily temperatures ranging from 70 to 100 degrees F., depending on the month. Located in the mountains, the Tsimane area is also subject to occasional cold, rainy fronts through the season. At these times the temperature can drop to the high 40s and 50s, so packing clothes for layering is essential.

On warm sunny days, wear light and fast-drying long-sleeve shirts and long pants for protection from the biting gnats. Full-brimmed hats offer the best protection from the intense sun. Neck scarves, sun gloves, stripping gloves, two pairs of polarized sunglasses, sunscreen, and strong bug spray should all be included in your luggage.

Also bring sturdy wading boots sized for wet wading. Studded soles are not practical in the wooden canoes, or for long walking on rocky shorelines. Take a wading staff equipped with a rubber tip to scare fewer fish.

A lightweight vest or hip pack is useful but not necessary since the boats are almost always close by. You'll need a rain shell in a waterproof bag along with a fleece jacket, camera, and other accessories. You'll be traveling in wooden or aluminum canoes, and it can be wet.

Emily and I rigged four rods between us with different line and fly combinations so we could save time and take advantage of every opportunity. The best rod for Tsimane is a 9-weight designed for salt water, pike, muskies, or striped bass. We used 4-piece, 8- and 9-weight G.Loomis Cross Currents and Shore Stalkers. The Shore Stalker 9-weight was ideal for pinpoint casting to the nooks of root clumps, logs, and ledges. Take two back-up rods.

We used 15-foot, Scientific Anglers Clear Tips and Pike or Magnum Tropical floating lines, with excellent results. Take at least one extra line, as there is a good chance you might lose one in a wild fight when a pack of dorado or pacu slashes through the water. I also recommend a uniform, full-sinking line, as there are deep runs and holes that can hold both dorado and cachara.

Photo | Dave & Emily Whitlock



► **Emily Whitlock** and Alejandro Bianchetti show off a large dorado that was sighted and stalked in the clear waters of the Bolivian jungle.

Photo | Joey Lin

