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Fishin' with a Mission

It's not only the size of your fish, but the size of your heart

By Steve Mayer

It's not only the size of your fish, but the size of your heart...

I didn't fully grasp the meaning of this concept *Fishin' with a Mission*™ until I found myself in the Amazon rainforest holding a prehistoric 130 lb pirarucu. The next day I'm in the middle of an idyllic jungle lagoon, landing a monstrous 19 lb trophy peacock bass. On another day, I'm in a remote jungle village surrounded by the natives, giving small gifts in exchange for heart-warming smiles and gratitude.

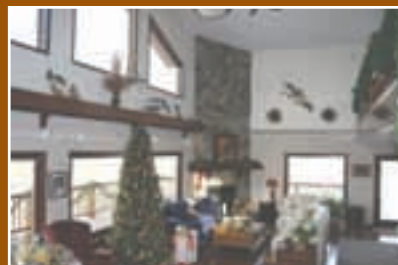
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Steve Mayer grappling a 130 lb pirarucu in the Amazon.

photo by Wayne Crowder

South Dakota — A Bird Hunters' Paradise



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FISHIN' WITH A MISSION

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That's what makes Big Amazon Fish who they are—they're *fishin' with a mission*. They dedicate themselves to helping their guests catch big fish (and I mean REALLY big fish) share in cultural experiences, explore the rainforest and contribute small acts of humanitarian services throughout Brazil's rural Amazon. Their seven day trip is truly the *real* Amazon experience.

Let me tell you my story...

When the opportunity came to fish and experience the mighty Amazon with Ben Nolte and Naldo Esteves, co-owners of Big Amazon Fish, I jumped on it.

As a child, I raised tropical fish for aquarium shops. To see these fish in their native habitat has been a lifelong ambition. Now it was a reality.

The peacock bass or "Tucunare" as they are called in Brazil, are legendary for their explosive strikes and tackle-busting propensities. The more I talked to Ben about the trip, the more pumped up I became. Aside from offering their *fishin' with a mission package*, Big Amazon Fish is also unique because it is both an American and Brazilian owned business.



photo by Wayne Crowder

Mariana taught Steve how to say VERMELHO in Portuguese.



photo by Big Amazon Fish

Russ and Mike insist on fishing through Amazon downpour.



photo by Mike Gatz

Naldo Esteves and his beautiful Surumbi.

Naldo is a native of the area. In fact, he never even saw a car until he was 10 years old - and now he speaks English fluently. More importantly, his *insider knowledge* of the culture, wildlife and heartbeat of the Amazon, his willingness to share this information and his willingness to take you to his *secret spots of the Amazon*, is what really makes this adventure special.

And Ben, who finishes his MBA at the University of Utah this month, used to



photo by David Gatz

Ben Nolte with his saber-toothed salmon, Payara.



photo by Big Amazon Fish

George Jorgensen was the king of Amazon photography.



photo by Big Amazon Fish

The Amazon is a bird watcher's haven.

live in Brazil and has a deep understanding of the Amazon culture, adventure and fishing. He is a man of his word and respected by all. He is the kind of person that every international angler hopes to book with—*he goes the extra mile and does what he says he'll do*. They are the outfit to book with for catching big fish and discovering the wonders of the rainforest.

In fact, *Sportsman's News* has designated **Big Amazon Fish** as a **Platinum Approved Outfitter**. They are the only guide service in the Amazon that has achieved this elite status and they strive to keep improving their service. Come see why "jaws are dropping," Nolte says.

There are three packages:

1. *Jaw Droppin' Sportfishing*, which includes all the guided sport-fishing you can handle, including the quest for world record peacock bass.

2. *Ben and Naldo Fishin' & Adventure*, which combines Sport-fishing and Eco-adventuring—exploring the jungle, visiting jungle villages and observing the beauty and abundance of exotic plants and animals.

3. *Fishin' with a Mission*, which combines fishing, eco-adventuring, visiting native villages and small acts of adventure giving. All guests interact with the native villagers and learn their way of life. More importantly, everyone helps to assist one another with community development, medical supplies, food, education, simple gifts, service or micro-lending. This half day opportunity is an incredibly rewarding way to un-



photo by Wayne Crowder

Steve is holding a baby manatee. "See how his jaw is dropping!"

derstand the Amazon and the native people that inhabit the small villages on the riverbanks.

Bigamazonfish.com is a very comprehensive website and has a great Trip Preparation Guide. There are immunizations and a Brazilian visa required prior to the trip. There is also a list of tackle and gear to bring. I printed the list and was off to Sportsman's Warehouse, to gear up for the jungle adventure.

I arrived in Manaus, Brazil a day earlier than the rest of the group. It was time to explore the city and get a taste of the local fare. I was met at the airport by Naldo and taken to the Tropical Hotel. Manaus at one time was one of the richest cities in the world, exporting over 85% of the world's rubber. Now it is a major river port and trading center of the Amazon. The outdoor marketplace was loaded with all kinds of goods and trinkets. I found a vendor selling all types of tree bark and leaves used for medicinal purposes. The rain forest supplies the natural materials that are used to produce 25% of worlds' pharmaceuticals.

Accompanying me on the trip were Ben and Kelsey Nolte and Naldo and Nancy Esteves, the owners of Big Amazon Fish. From the Sacramento Valley in California, came the dynamic duo of Mike Wilson and Russ Moss who entertained us with their humor and love of the outdoors. George Jorgensen from northern Utah brought an impressive array of digital cameras to capture the abundant and exotic bird life.

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Last, but not least, professional bass fisherman Wayne Crowder from Salt Lake City came along. Wayne is known throughout Utah as "Utah's Mr. Bass" and fishes as *Team Crowder*. I commend these people and have not fished with a finer group. We got to know each other and shared jokes, laughter and camaraderie.

We departed Manaus early in the morning on a short flight to the river city of Nova Olinda. We then took a short drive to the river, where our mother boat was waiting.

We transferred our gear and boarded the 92-foot tri-level riverboat, The Maanaim, destined for high adventure and Big Amazon Fish! The Maanaim was our home base for the trip and is equipped with air-conditioned state-rooms, including private bathroom/shower facilities. There is a full kitchen with separate dining room, indoor relaxation area with television to watch

the day's videos and plenty of deck space to relax.

We were introduced to Francisco, the owner and captain of the boat. His knowledge of the river system, with all its tributaries and backwater lagoons is quite impressive. The efficient crew took care of everything, including excellent hot meals, three times a day.

Our first stop was a private lodge, with a series of lagoons where we fished from small wooden dugouts for Tambaqui (a relative of the piranha family and some the tastiest fish in the Amazon). These fish were between 12 and 20 pounds and were like guided missiles when hooked.

We also shore fished a neighboring lagoon for the huge Pirarucu. The Pirarucu is one of the largest freshwater fish in the world and can grow to 15 feet in length. Russ and I were each lucky enough to hook and land a Pirarucu, both over 100 pounds. What a battle and what a beautiful prehistoric looking fish! They have fins down the entire length of their body, making them incredibly hard to turn and control once hooked. They are almost im-



photo by Big Amazon Fish

Clockwise from the front: Steve Mayer, Wayne Crowder, George Jorgensen, Mike Wilson, and Russ Moss enjoying a Brazilian meal aboard the mother boat.



photo by Wayne Crowder

Comfort aboard the Maanaim.

possible to land when they are large and are truly an exotic fish.

We once again boarded the dugouts for another go at the Tambaqui and were hard at it when we were treated to our first Amazon rain storm. What a rain it was! IT POURED!

We scrambled to try to keep camera gear dry and bailed the dugouts that were rapidly filling with water. We frantically paddled for the entrance to the lagoon in the deluge. We retreated to the lodge to dry out a bit and enjoy the fine food they had prepared. There was a baby manatee in a pond by the lodge and I got to pick it up and hold it. The little feller was all black with smooth skin and reminded me of a black lab puppy. (How many people get to hold a manatee?)



photo by Wayne Crowder

Close-up of black piranha.

The next day, we were to fish a pair of private lagoons that the small boats had to be portaged to. The lagoon was filled with small fingers of water filled with braches, stumps and snags, which looked like ideal habitat for peacock bass.

My first peacock hit hard and abruptly launched into some aerial acrobatics. They are not anything like any freshwater fish I have ever caught. They hit like an explosion and then take off like a freight train. These fish are unbelievably aggressive. They are very territorial and may strike your lure just because it is in their area.

We caught and released peacocks between three and 10 lbs and in a myriad of colors. These are some of the most beautiful fish in the world. To top it off, I caught a huge three pound Black Piranha. This became interesting a few minutes later when Naldo wrapped yet another lure around a tree on shore. He let out a Portuguese expletive, just as two young natives paddled into view. I bent over laughing and fell off the boat into the water out of which I had just pulled the razor-toothed meat shredder! Here I was, swimming with the piranhas! I clambered back into the boat in record time. That will wake you up!! Come to find out later, the natives swim in the water all the time.

We traveled mainly at night while we slept aboard the Maanaim and fished a new area by day as we traveled to and down the Madeira River—The River of Wood. We traveled down river until we reached an area where it was quite shal-

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but the size of
your heart...*

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your secret spot on the Amazon

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BUILDING A PERSONAL PROTECTION KIT

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dropped or can even be used as a striking implement, if needed.

There are a variety of techniques for integrating a detached flashlight into your shooting grip and these can be taught to you by an able, certified firearms instructor. Additionally, some flashlights have optional or integrated plungers that give the user a better grip-

ping surface and better control of the on and off switch.

Always Bring A Knife To A Gun Fight

For a variety of reasons, anyone concerned about personal protection should carry a good-quality folding knife. The knife should be easy to open, lock, unlock and close with only one hand. It should be sharp and hold a good edge. It should be made of a material that won't get slippery when your hands begin to sweat in a stressful situation.

Knives have many uses, the least of

which is as a stabbing weapon. Knives can be used to cut restraints if you or others are being held captive. They can be used to cut an attacker and even disarm him by "defanging the snake" or cutting at his arms to make him drop his own weapon or his legs to prevent him from pursuing you as you get away. They can be used to pry out a jammed shell casing and get your gun back in the fight in case of a malfunction. They can be used to jimmy open a locked door or the trunk of a car if you are trapped inside. These are only a few of the uses of a knife in a defensive situation.

Even the smallest penknife can be a devastating weapon if nothing else is available. However, the optimal knife is one with a blade from 2.5 to 4 inches long that locks open. Some localities have restrictions on knife blade length, so check before you buy to see what is legal where you live.

Ideally the knife handle will incorporate a pocket clip that allows it to securely clip to your pants pocket or to the inside of your waistband. Like your gun, a knife needs to be easily accessible to be effective.

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low. There was a huge network of trees, stumps and fallen timber. I was fishing with the captain, Francisco, in his favorite spot. The water and trees reminded me of the bayous of southern Louisiana.

We really got into the fish amidst the stumps and then I saw a boil right on the shoreline and cast my Zara Spook right at it. The fish hit incredibly hard and I set the hook. The fish exploded and started stripping line and heading across the bay. I tightened the drag and tried to turn him. Francisco grabbed my line with his hand and stopped him just shy of a tree. I regained control and after a heated battle, I landed the brute and weighed him at 19lbs. Now that is what I call a bass!!

We caught over 100 fish between us that day and I will never forget the great fishing in that dense flooded area. I had the opportunity to fish with Wayne Crowder, one of Utah's top anglers. Wayne Crowder can cast with accuracy and finesse just like clockwork—a FAST

clock. He would pitch a plastic frog perfectly on the shoreline or over a rock and just tease it into the water. This drove the Tucunare crazy and..... another one on the hook.

Ben and I had a double hookup with a 12 and 14lb peacock that was an unbelievable explosion of water, fins and color. After hooking up on the double peacocks with Ben, all in all, I figured that I caught 13 different species of fish... Wow!

Naldo's wife Nancy, asked him to teach her how to fish. Well, she caught on quickly and then she out-fished him for the rest of the week!!! (More Portuguese expletives!)

On the return upriver, we stopped at the small native village of Cacoal. Ben and I were the first to arrive on shore. We stood on the bank, clapped our hands as a greeting and waited... We started to see faces in the bushes and the children were the first to dart out in the open.

New faces kept appearing...then disappearing. After about five minutes of this furtive behavior, we were invited into the village by the elders. With permission, I photographed the children



photo by Big Amazon Fish

Kelsey Nolte and her petite peacock bass.

with my digital camera and showed them their image. They were fascinated and clustered around me in wonder of this magical device. We all met in the main building for a formal welcome by the chief. Ben acted as interpreter and we introduced ourselves as did the chief and other elders in return. Wayne had brought a suitcase full of gifts and had a great time sharing them. What a great feeling to meet them and assist them with things they need.

Their lives are so much different than ours. Their lives are very simple and a little goes a long way toward helping



photo by Wayne Crowder

Native villagers greeting us upon arrival.

them. We were *fishin' with a mission!* As Ben's wife Kelsey says, "It's not only the size of your fish, but the size of your heart." Indeed it is.

The Amazon and its mighty Rainforest is a huge living ecosystem and I have just scratched the surface of its depths. I feel compelled to return again to explore more of its raw beauty.

I for one will be back *Fishin' with a Mission* next year with my new friends Ben and Naldo.

I suggest you do the same.

Ben can be reached at 801-921-3311 or through their website BigAmazonFish.com. You can also check them out on the Platinum Approved Outfitter section of SportsmansNews.com.

For \$4,900.00, Big Amazon Fish is offering premium packages, including roundtrip international airfare from Miami to Manaus during the prime October and February seasons while supplies last... Exact dates are posted on BigAmazonFish.com. To get inclusive airfare, all reservations must be completed by April 30, 2008. This is the year of the Amazon you won't want to miss. 🌿



photo by Big Amazon Fish

Wayne Crowder's frog enticed a small caiman. This guy can catch anything!



photo by Big Amazon Fish

Nancy RaNae with beautiful speckled peacock bass.



photo by Steve Mayer

Ben and Kelsey Nolte in native-built dugout canoe.