



John

from Woodstock
to
Argentina

“Crazy Caiman”

My time in Argentina has been a bit of a rough ride. It started when I arrived without a lick of Spanish. For the next few weeks it was learn and float through my days trying to understand how my life was going to work. I was fed empanadas, (pastry stuffed with meat), asado (Argentinian BBQ), Milanese (flat breaded meat) and was told many things about Argentina that I entirely didn't understand. I imagined this would be my greatest adversary on exchange, but while the language barrier does complicate things, it has been far more difficult to make connections with others. Although, these are just the challenges of facing a great adventure, and I couldn't be more grateful for all that have made this opportunity possible for me, and there's no other mountain that I would rather be climbing.

Honestly, life in Argentina is rather slow, I go to school in the morning and sometimes attend ceramics classes afterwards if I'm not having a siesta (nap around lunchtime). The rest of the day is usually up to me. So rather be defined the day to day life, my experience is more sculpted by the big experiences and the grand travels.



For example, on November 11th I was invited to a Rotary event all suited up in my exchange blazer I had no idea where I was or what I was doing there until I was told to walk out onto a runway. I was put in a fashion show unbeknownst to me, and that is a hilarious memory I will never forget. I experienced something I had never before, and it couldn't help but make my exchange just that much brighter.

Better than my fashion walk, one of those defining experiences was my trip to Pantanal and Bonito and especially my experience with a certain caiman (reptile like an alligator) that I will now tell.

In the first weeks of November, with thirty some odd other exchange students, I struck off to Pantanal and Bonito to experience a Brazilian excursion. The first part took place in a beautiful hotel in Pantanal filled with spots to relax and kick back. It was truly a paradise, but if there's one thing you should know about Pantanal and where we stayed, its that it is alit with caiman. The alligator-like reptile could always be found on shores, swimming through the rivers, chilling in marches, even at night beside the road. There wasn't a day that went by in Pantanal where we didn't see a caiman. They watch you with their beady eyes, unmoving like the Queens Guard of nature. One caiman in particular caught our groups attention. A well sized creature about five feet in length was stationed next to the boat we would use to tour some rivers of Pantanal. He moved not an inch when we boarded, or when we departed, or when we returned, preferring just to sit there with his mouth slightly agape as if waiting for something to crawl in it. As exchange students, we as a group tend to push boundaries and bend the rules in the face of adventure. If there is a stone to throw, we will do so. If there's a tree to tip we will get it done, so you could imagine what kind of opportunities such a seemingly stationary wild animal might bring up.

Hats Off

It was the second day in Pantanal and the caiman games were on. At first it was just sticks. We would toss them to see if our new caiman friend enjoyed a game of catch. He, lets call him Ricardo from here on out, Ricardo was excellent at catching, but the returning was a somewhat new aspect to him. Ricardo eventually stopped biting when he realized that he couldn't eat the sticks around his mouth, so the next game began. We inched closer to Ricardo, seeing how near we could get before he hissed and took a step back. We stopped toying with him as soon as his head was almost entirely submerged in the river. If you have ever spent some time with crocodiles, alligators or caiman you would know the telltale signs of an upset reptile who didn't want to be the butt of a joke. Unfortunately, we were lacking such experience, so as Ricardo glared at us from the shore, we devised one last hurrah. If Ricardo wanted nothing to do with sticks anymore, we would give him something new, something that he had never eaten before; a hat. A hat we offered to Ricardo, from the safety of a sticks length away a hat slid next to Ricardo's mouth. Already primed to bite, Ricardo swung his head without hesitation, grabbing the hat and trying to escape into the river, unbeknownst to him trying to drag a reluctant Dane with it. Considering how it was his hat, he didn't want to let Ricardo steal the blue-white hat that was provided to us by Terra Brazil (our travel agency). Fortunately for my Danish friend, he chose a weak stick that broke under Ricardos powerful jaws. Three bites. Three bites were what it took to 1. Secure the hat, 2. Taste the hat and 3. Realize what a hat is and let it go, returning to his stoic state on the shore of the river. Ricardo almost seemed grumpy eyeing the hat as it lazily drifted upwards. Perhaps upset at not getting a meal out of the cap, or maybe a deeper sorrow for the inability to wear such a hat to protect his eyes from the blazing sun.

Either way, we needed to get that hat back. What better a souvenir than a cap with real caiman bite marks? Lucky for us there seemed to be an unlimited supply of sticks on the beach meant for teasing caiman.

Once again, we approached Ricardo, for whatever reason much more cautiously than when we were approaching the caiman with only our limbs out rather than sticks. The operation was a tricky business, the hat floated just centimetres over Ricardo's head. The stick needed to get under the hat so we could lift it, but not so close to our caiman that he would decide to give synthesized fabric another taste. The margin of error was small and while we my be steady on one end of the stick, any movement was amplified drastically on the



other end of the stick. It wasn't long until the shaking of the bed didn't matter, until any of our plans didn't matter. As we reached for the hat it didn't matter that we had a perfect entry with exemplary aim, because we realized all along Ricardo wasn't looking for a meal. He never wanted to eat the hat and he didn't intend on trying to eat it again. He didn't want it at all. He just didn't want us to have it. Then it went as we hooked our stick so cautiously underneath that hat, Ricardo leapt up at it, snapping it up from below as we watched the hat become enveloped in his jaws. Splashing down, Ricardo took off to the other side of the river where he knew we would not chase him in his territory. As a caiman, Ricardo was never the brightest animal. Suffice it to say that as a collective caiman are top notch hunters and powerful beasts, but not too intelligent. Ricardo was no exception to this rule, a reptile not a criminal mastermind. So that the cap that Ricardo so rigorously defended just happened to slip out of his jaws as he sped away, lost in the thrill of a plan gone well. So it went as we groaned at the thought of the hat gone forever, it bobbed up from under the ripples before us, Ricardo's miscalculation. Quickly and quietly we extracted the hat that was left behind and made our exit lest Ricardo returned to reclaim his prize once more.

Clash of Caiman

It was day three in Pantanal, revisiting the shoreline for piranha fishing. It was thin pickings for me, just a single piranha all morning and a small one at that. We were finishing out the bait bucket only to have the meat nibbled off our hooks. The dismal results were quickly brightened by my friend from Denmark's idea to spend the rest of our fishing time catching a caiman. With a little foresight, we realized that our rods and fishing wire weren't very strong, considering they were meant to catch piranhas and not large lizards. To minimize that chance of our equipment breaking we opted to look for a small caiman along the shore. We found our candidate sitting in a bush stationary as always and just waiting to be caught.

Since it was my friend's idea, I gave him the first shot, which he blew almost immediately. He caught the caiman, who didn't even hesitate to bite the bait, but he got



spooked at the idea of pulling in a snapping thrashing biting animal, so he made the mistake of giving it too much slack. When he broke free, the caiman slunk out to the middle of the lake making me wait fifteen minutes before he was confident enough to return. When he did, I was waiting for him. He snuck back to the shore where my hook was loaded with fresh bait to eat which once again the caiman didn't hesitate to bite. Catching him with the first bite, the caiman didn't mind very much in the beginning. It was only a few tugs, until it realized that it was really stuck, and then how it trashed. It was like a fish just pulled out of the water, using all its energy to roll around like a maniac. The tail and head were a blur, flailing around its body. Holding fast, I abandoned the pole and was forced to hold the line so the rod wouldn't break, the bamboo was not enough for the river monster. Unfortunately, in the river, a thrashing animal is like a beacon to other animals, a sign for a free meal. While the little one was thrashing around, who else but Ricardo came

around to check out the disturbance and see what he could scavenge. Ricardo then took it upon himself to steal my catch, snap my line and hiss at me before taking my caiman "out to lunch" without me. In the end I did get to try a caiman. Not the same one I caught mind you, but a caiman nevertheless. It wasn't as good as I had hoped, which made the whole fishing endeavor seem somewhat fruitless. Either way, I did get something out of my fishing adventure. It wasn't a meal, but it was tastier; a juicy story.

What amazes me about my exchange is how I realize that life stays the same wherever we go. Everything that I have experienced so far (save for some caiman hunting) is so like my life in Canada, yet at first glance entirely different. People still go to school, still play sports, still eat pasta. It is only the details that change, the spices used, the weather. It is odd to see how we such individuality between countries and continents, but fundamentally we are equal to the rest of the world staying different on the surface.

John