

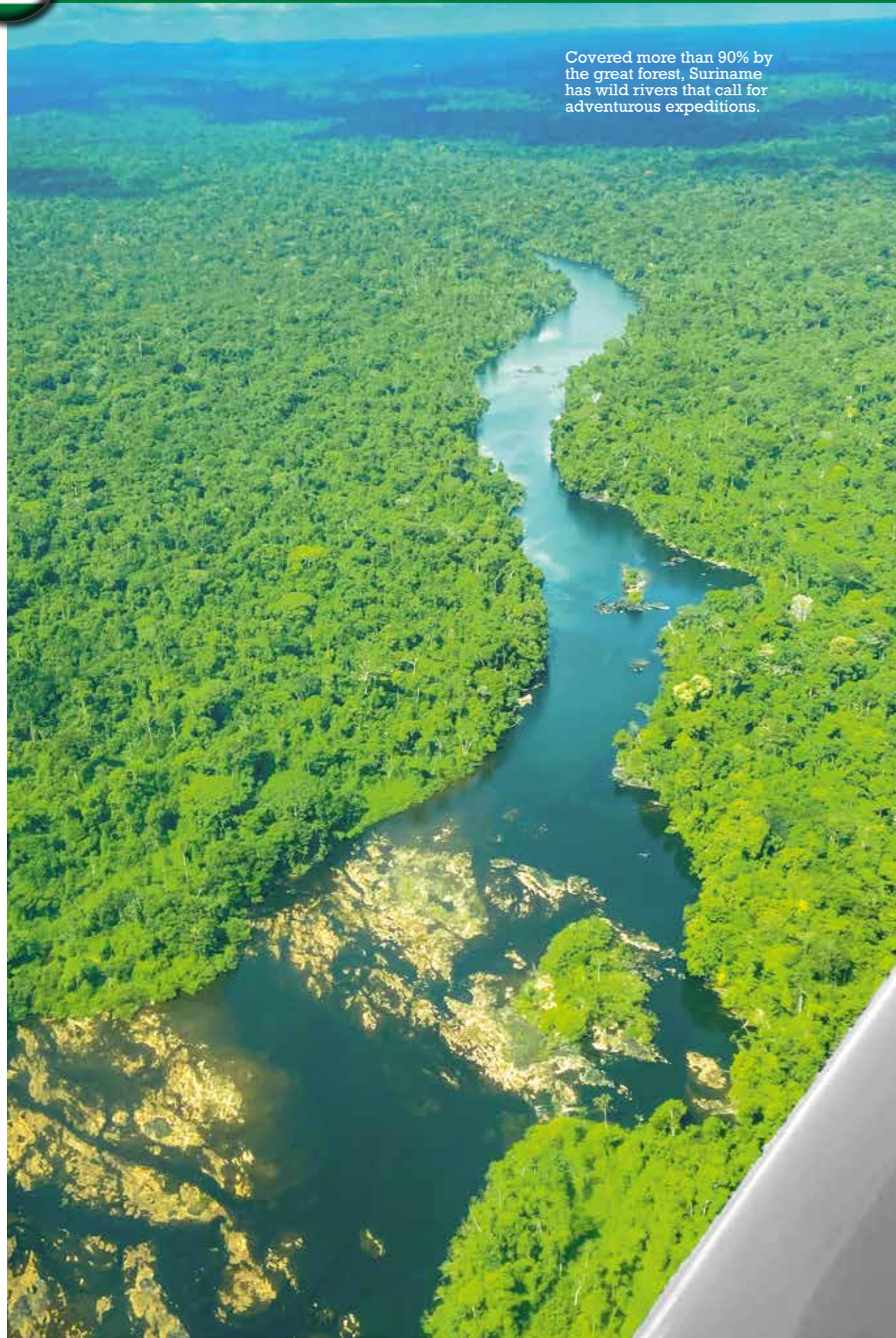


Amatopo region: **The Jurassic Park of wolfish!**

**Expedition in the great forest of Suriname in
search of the big wolfish of the Courantyne
River and its mysterious creeks.**

By Pierre Coupé





Covered more than 90% by the great forest, Suriname has wild rivers that call for adventurous expeditions.

▶▶▶ **T**ravelling to South America with my father, our destination was the Suriname forest during the dry season at the end of

November 2023. A two-week trip that began with a flight from Paris to Amsterdam, then Amsterdam to Paramaribo, then two hours by bush plane to the village of Amatopo (doing this journey by water transportation would have taken us 12 hours!) plus four hours by canoe to our first campsite.

So, here we are in a country that has fascinated us for many years because of its vast territory almost totally covered by dense forest and its numerous rivers. We had assiduously read several reports on this former Dutch Guiana published over the years in *Fishing & Travel* magazine. We had collected numerous lures reputedly effective with wolfish, a carnivorous fish combative to the tips of its fins, which would surprise us more than once.

A long journey that is worth it

Located in the heart of the Guiana plateau, neighbouring Guyana to the west, Brazil to the south and French Guiana to the east, Suriname remains complicated to visit due to its thick, almost impenetrable jungle for novice adventurers. We, therefore, needed a local guide who knew the backcountry and its every nook and cranny perfectly. This is how we enlisted the services of Paul de Boer, who organised our expedition along the Courantyne River (aka Corentyne or Corantijn) which forms the border with neighbouring Guyana.

Our canoe was well loaded by the two of us plus our gear, Paul the guide, Marcel the owner and pilot of the canoe and his young brother-in-law Marinaldo (nicknamed Marcelino - little Marcel), plus, by all the equipment, water and food needed to camp for 12 days.

The water was low and, on several occasions, the rocky shallows forced us to get out of the canoe and push it; but Marcel knew the river as if he had drawn it, he is also an outstanding pilot, always efficiently helped by Marinaldo, stationed at the bow with his paddle.

The first day, after four hours of travelling by canoe, first stop on a sandy beach about 10m wide. The deadly sun is now going down quickly, and we won't go any further today. Our kit which consists of Daiwa Travel rods and spinning reels loaded with 40lb braid, is quickly set up and the bites are almost immediate. The big black piranhas cannot resist the sparkling lures twitched in the brown waters of the river. While we're catching our first Surinamese fish, Paul quickly sets up a large tarpaulin, while announcing the arrival of dark clouds. Soon, a heavy rain began to fall on the stretched canvas and our tents... which appeared to be not so waterproof! The next morning, we left for five more hours of canoeing to set up our next camp in a strategic location where we could explore a multitude of fishing spots.

The wolfish: A gladiator of troubled waters

We came to the Amatopo region for the wolfish, a species with a prehistoric appearance that we had previously caught while in Brazil. A very robust species, with a very large and powerful caudal fin, it has thick jaws that can bend treble hooks and huge sharpened teeth that easily cut any braid or nylon. With its dark camouflage coat, it stays hidden between wooden snags and rocks, on the lookout for an unlucky frog, lizard, baby bird or rodent that enters the water.

On the second day of fishing, Paul takes us to a creek not far from the camp. The water is very low, the tree trunks lie half on the bank

and half in the water, leaving a corridor of water just wide enough for us to cast our lures. Our Whopper Plopper prop lures are rigged with an 80lb fluorocarbon leader and the attacks begin just like clockwork! Almost every cast produces a water eruption, a rod that bends violently under the brutal attack and the head butts of a wolfish. We land more than ten each, with 10kg-12kg being the largest. Our poor lures have been battered, the trebles are bent, the frames twisted or broken, and some have disappeared due to cut leaders! We then replace all the weak hooks for Owner patterns as well as fluorocarbon leaders in preference for wire.

We return to camp to tackle the second part of the day, in search of butterfly peacock bass (*Cichla ocellaris*) in the currents. Marcel and Marinaldo both manoeuvre silently using their paddles so as not to spook the fish. We hook half a dozen peacocks, but few will make it into our hands due to their ability to jump and break free. We venture further into a little branch of the river and hook three very large wolfish, that we lost, or our lines became snagged in the sunken trees!

In the evening, Paul suggested that we go night fishing for redbtail catfish (*Phractocephalus hemiliopterus*). This extremely powerful fish, of nocturnal habits, has a broad head and a large mouth capable of swallowing the largest baits in one go. We caught a few piranhas to use as bait for these voracious fish with long whiskers and a red tail.



Disembarkation of our equipment on the Amatopo runway. Four hours of canoeing still await us before reaching the first camp.



Giant kingfisher, caiman and jaguar tracks. Civilisation is far away from here!

▶▶▶ We soon had bites, but our lines were cut three times by black piranhas and twice on the rocks after amazing, powerful runs. We sadly realised that our gear wasn't strong enough for night fishing using bait and we returned to camp with our heads down!

Looking for new fishing grounds

Many branches of the Courantyne River are inaccessible by canoe and difficult to access on foot. Muddy banks are littered with dead trees and stumps or cluttered with rocks. But these areas are

home to monsters! So, we tried to go as far as possible into some creeks that Paul knew well. One afternoon, I left my father at the entrance of a small creek and I headed upstream, helped by Marcel who opened the way with his machete. It takes us 15 minutes to reach the first spot where the creek is deeper. While I am about to cast, I hear my father screaming in the distance. We joked that he'd certainly hooked a giant! I cast my Tyran 100, a lure that looks like a frog's head, with a small bib and rattling balls for added

attraction. Marcel tells me: "Hey, try it here between these trunks." I cast my lure where Marcel points and it gets instantly swallowed up in a huge boil and dragged into the dark depths! I am connected to a real monster, the biggest wolfish of the trip, a fish weighing 20kg that I will have difficulty lifting with my Boga Grip! After some crazy bites and spectacular fights with more wolfish weighing 10-12kg, we head back to my father and Paul to tell them about my exploits. They are all smiles, having caught two monsters of 30lb each!



Going up a creek in search of wolfish.



Summary camp on the banks of the Courantyne. For a good part of its course, this river serves as a border with Guyana.

In the lures box

You need incredibly strong end tackle when fishing for wolfish! 50lb braid, plus wire of the same strength is a minimum for taming these Amazonian beasts. When it comes to lures, you need to fish at all levels: on top with stickbaits, poppers, prop lures and wakebaits; mid-water with minnows, large spoons; and close to the bottom use longbill minnows, blades, vibration lures, soft plastics lures. The original armament of most lures - split rings and hooks - needs to be seriously upgraded!



The floating crankbait Digital Squad Tyran 100. It pushes water and the rattling balls give off a noisy attraction! This lure caught the biggest wolfish of the trip.



My 3D Suicide Duck worked well but it didn't survive the trip!



Noisy stickbaits worked slowly are effective. Here is a DUO Realis Pencil 130 and a Sakura Mousty 125.



A wolfish fight is brief but violent; bring spare trebles!



The trophy of the trip: a wolfish which would block the scale of the Boga Grip to 20kg!

▶▶▶ As our trip progressed, we went exploring several remote creeks, some three hours by canoe from our camp, and found one full of wolfish. Our lures keep getting smashed. Just for fun, I cast a Savage Gear Suicide Duck, a surface lure imitating a baby duck. It didn't last two rounds in the arena! Two other great lures - Clackin' Rap and Whopper Plopper - are smashed, too. In fact, nothing can tame the formidable power of the jaws of a big wolfish!

A night under the full moon

Our final days end with one to two-hour nocturnal outings in search of redbtail catfish. Marcel knows a pit several metres deep that holds big specimens. Catfish, although very curious, are also difficult to catch. During the day, bait fishing is impossible due to piranhas. The ideal period remains the very short window of late afternoon just as night falls, barely an hour. After that, the catfish disperse to hunt in shallower water and hide in rocky holes. One night, we had five impressive strikes in a row for a single fish brought to the boat, a superb specimen of about 60lb. All the other catfish cut our lines in the trees or on the rocks!

Caiman trouble

To conclude this adventure, we ventured to a fork in the river where I did some bow fishing with my Kamo Compound. It was great to spot surubi catfish with their long white whiskers contrasting

Pre-trip advice

SUITABLE CLOTHING:

- Long pants that are easy to wash and quick to dry (linen or Spandex fibre).
- Pelagic-type long-sleeved shirt or t-shirt with UV protection.
- Hat and Buff type neckwear.
- Light hiking shoes (you only travel on slippery terrain and through vegetation full of thorns).
- Waterproof jacket.

SMALL EQUIPMENT:

Knife, Leatherman pliers, cutting pliers (capable of cutting a branch of a treble hook). Long pliers for unhooking fish. A Boga Grip is truly essential for grasping wolfish with care. Headlamp plus spare batteries. Camera/smartphone battery and charger (there is a small generator at camp).

TRAVEL PHARMACY:

Antibiotics, painkillers, antiseptics like Betadine to disinfect small wounds. A scalpel (can help extract a hook stuck in a hand!) plus Lidocaine spray that is available in pharmacies without a prescription. Soothing ointment (insect bites). Toilet: No shower, you clean up in the river and do your business in a hole dug far from the camp.

CAMP LIFE:

Help set up camp, cut branches to clear the ground, pitch your tent and a tarpaulin over the tents in rainy weather; help in the kitchen if you wish, set the table and clear it, throw away perishable waste, etc. Respect the privacy of the participants: the fishing guide and the captain always take a nap after lunch, so we avoid disturbing them except in an emergency!

in the muddy bottom, dangerous stingrays and wolfish doing a siesta under the blazing sun. This is when a big caiman tried to steal the 10-kilo wolfish that my father was playing!

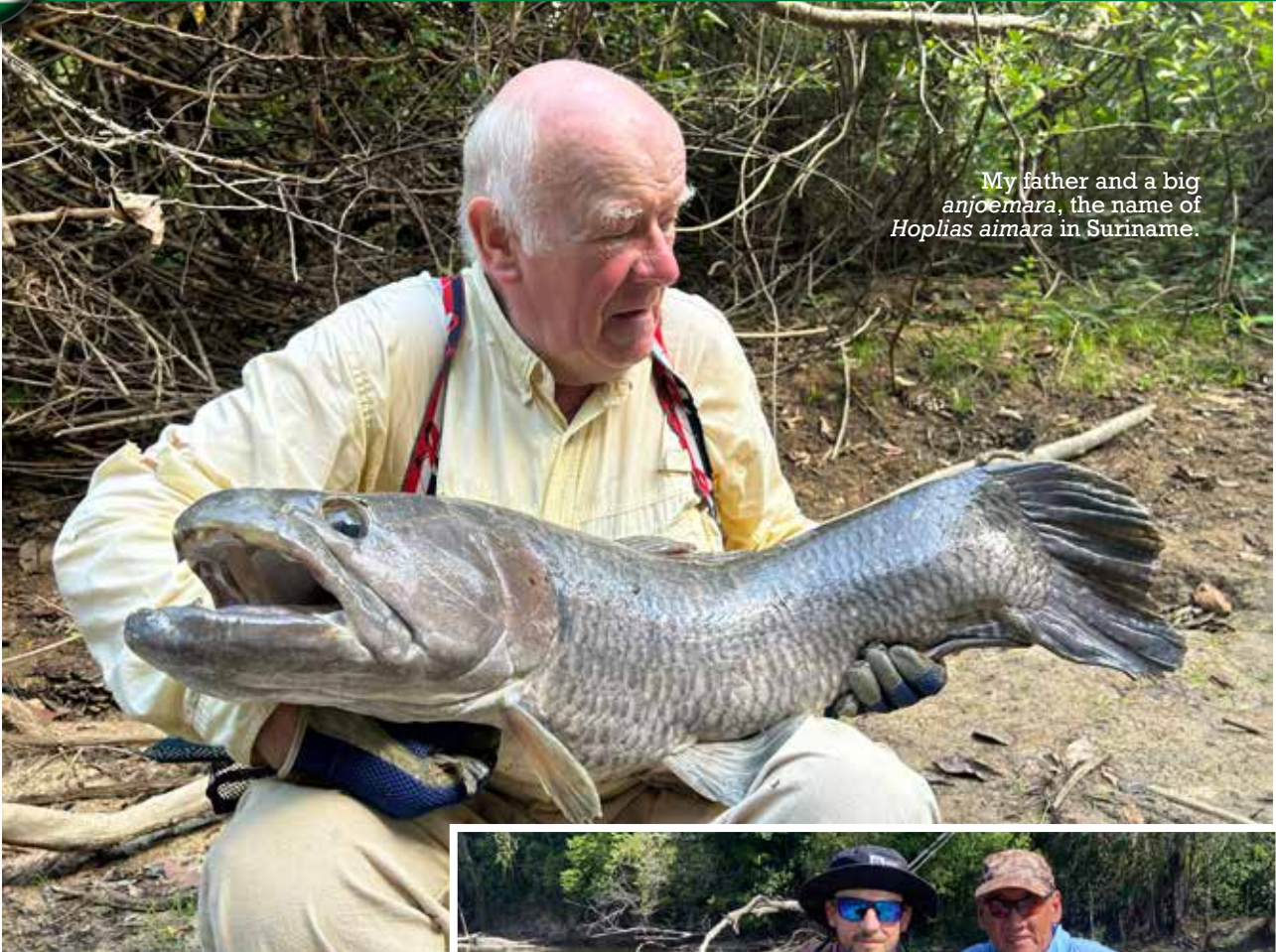
On the very last day, Paul and Marcel asked us to keep some wolfish to bring back for their wives. Through the thick tree trunks and dense foliage, we experienced our final explosive



Redtail catfish become active at nightfall.



Bow hunting to vary the fish menu.



My father and a big anjoemara, the name of *Hoplias aimara* in Suriname.

▶▶▶ fights with some very nice wolfs, the two largest weighing 16kg each! Once brought back to the camp, our catches were cleaned in the river and smoked for preservation. When we returned to Amotopo, we were all cheered by the kids who were waiting for our return impatiently. A sensational day to end one extraordinary trip! ♦



The Courantyne River is home to butterfly peacock bass which can reach 7kg.



Our guides prepare the wolfish which will be smoked and brought back to their village.

Suriname in brief

With the Atlantic Ocean to the north, Guyana to the west, French Guiana to the east and Brazil to the south, Suriname is the former Dutch Guiana having obtained its independence in 1975. It is the least densely populated country in South America. It extends over 163,000 km² covered in 95% Amazonian forest and its 550,000 inhabitants, of whom 250,000 live in Paramaribo the capital, are of very diverse origins, Hindustanis, Bushinengue (Maroons), Javanese, Syrian-Lebanese, Chinese, Indigenous Amerindians, Boeroes (descendants of Dutch settlers).

To see in Paramaribo: Fort Zeelandia on Independence Square, the wooden St. Peter and Paul Basilica, the central market, the Koto museum, and the natural parks.

