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ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS

Feature Story

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TOURISM AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN BONITO, THE BEAUTIFUL

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Photos (color and b/w) by Itamar Miranda/Agência Estado

Bonito is the Portuguese word for beautiful. It is also the name of a small municipality 257 kilometers southwest of Campo Grande, capital city of the State of Mato Grosso do Sul, in Brazil's centralwest region.

Bonito deserves its name. It is blessed with a wealth of biodiversity both because it is relatively unaffected by human intervention, and because it is an ecological transition zone, where the Atlantic rain forest meets the savanna-like plains of the cerrado. Its fertile soil is irrigated by the Formoso River (formoso is another word for beautiful), with over 70 waterfalls along 120 kilometers of clear green water, before it flows into the muddy Miranda River.

The uniqueness of the area can be measured by the fact that the World Wildlife Fund has agreed to provide \$20,900 dollars as funding for an environmental conservation project, lasting two years. The main aim is to educate the local population of 25,000 and the 10,000 people who visit Bonito every year, about the benefits of looking after the area's natural resources, said Ivan Baptiston, a forestry engineer coordinating the project.

"There is no reason why the social and economic benefits of development should adversely affect the environment," he pointed out.

Adventure

"Ecological tourism" is a buzzword in many parts of the planet, but in Bonito, it is still the privilege of a few. Heidi Knost, an agronomist, and Kathy Robinson, a nurse, are both from California. They have been travelling around Brazil since April.

"Bonito is a really special place," said Heidi, "Nature is so luxuriant here _ wading along the river is like bathing your soul." Kathy, who has been to 20 countries in different parts of the world, said the experience of taking a shower in the Aquidabam falls is a unique adventure.

To reach the falls, visitors must drive 54 kilometers along a dirt road, then continue on foot for three hours along a forest trail strewn with boulders and tree trunks. The Aquidabam falls are 120 meters high, and plunge down to the forest floor over rocks of many varied shapes.

Baptiston recommends a hike of about seven kilometers to the south of the town, from the municipal spa to Baía Bonita, through dense forest and the banks of the Formoso. In Baía Bonita, the crystal-clear lake is a natural aquarium filled with ornamental plants and fish species. The fringing forest along the river contains pepper trees, perobas, and other characteristic species of the Atlantic rain forest and cerrado systems.

"If you come early in the year," said Baptiston, "You'll find many different kinds of berries to eat on the way, including wild guava." Observant hikers will notice the transition between the river fringe and the open bush, with yet another kind of vegetation when they emerge into the natural meadows, where temperature and humidity change.

In the transition zone, there are over 850 different species per hectare, while in the rain forest, there can be as many as 1,500. In the wetlands that stretch down into the foothills of the Serra da Bodoquena, many important rivers rise, before flowing into the Paraguay River basin. They are populated by colorful bird species, such as the wood ibis, the jacana and the cormorant phalacrocorax.

Bonito is off the beaten track. The bus trip from Campo Grande takes five hours or more. Besides, local roads are treacherous, with many rickety wooden bridges over rivers and streams.

Spelunking wonders

One of the major tourist attractions in Bonito is its many caves, caverns, grottes, and sinkholes. It has 16 listed grottoes, according to José Airton Labegallini, chairman of the Brazilian Spelunkers Society, and there are reports of at least 100 caverns in the area.

The best known site in the spelunking province of Serra da Bodoquena is the Blue Lake Grotto, discovered by a member of the Terena indian tribe, in 1924.

Located in a 25-hectare ecological reserve, only 22 kilometers from the town center, the grotto was listed as a historic site in 1979, by the federal department of listed sites and buildings, and placed under the responsibility of the Mato Grosso do Sul tourist board. Since then, both bodies have been shut down, and there is no one officially responsible for the area now.

"The only way we've found to guarantee the preservation of Blue Lake Grotto is to keep it fenced-off with a padlock on the gate," said Sérgio Ferreira Gonzales, a local guide. "Even so, since it's the only grotto tourists can visit, it may not be possible to preserve it completely," he added.

According to Gonzales, many people treat the area "as if it were private property, and fail to realize the link between tourism and ecology."

A panel in the town square contains this poetic description of the grotto, written by Lélia Rita Figueiredo Ribeiro: "It is a strange world of baroque and gothic arabesques, with monuments, faceless virgins, and medieval turrets keeping watch over the tranquil lake. It is reminiscent of a journey to the center of the earth, vibrant with energy, enigma and fascination."

Sea Bed

The mouth of the grotto is 40 meters wide and 70 meters high. The distance to the lake at the bottom is 180 meters in a plumb line, but to reach it, visitors must descend 292 steps covering 345 meters.

"It used to be tougher," Gonzales recalled, "Because you had to climb down by rope." Ten years ago, before the fence was built or organized visits had begun, the local frequented the grotto to swim in the lake. "They used to leave litter everywhere, and would take potshots at the stalactites to take the shards away as a souvenir," recounted the guide.

About 40 meters down, the guide stopped and explained: "This area used to be the sea bed _ when it emerged as dry land, marine segments left behind gave rise to limestone formations." He said that the rocks in the grotto have been dated to 400 million years.

The lake can be glimpsed after a descent of 85 meters. Sunbeams reach it in Deember and January. Analysts from the federal government say its waters are high in magnesium content, and range from 15 to 80 meters in depth. Another grotto, and a sinkhole connected to it are not open to visitors since they lack the necessary infrastructure.

Marble reserves

Another of Bonito's natural treasures is its marble. Three reserves have so far been located, with 47 million cubic meters altogether. They contain marble of many shades, from pink to light gray to pure white. No quarrying is permitted, but engineers estimate a productive life of 1,000 years, if the reserves were to be comercially exploited. Although, for technical reasons, only 40 percent of the marble contained in the reserves could actually be quarried.

The reserves cover 627 hectares, said mining engineer Luís Antonio Fróes Canesco, in charge of a federal government economic feasibility survey of the region. Marble has been found in smaller deposits, in an area covering 10,000 square kilometers around Bonito.

River Trips

The Formoso River is a festival for fishing buffs. It teems with minnows and dozens of freshwater species, including pirapuatanga, pacu, pintado, dourado and surubim (*Platystoma fasciatum*). Almost all the tourists who visit the area spend their time enjoying the river's many delights.

Three years ago, Murilo Sebastião Alves, a 28-year-old native of Rio de Janeiro, decided to move to Bonito after taking a vacation there. He is a partner in the town's only travel agency, Hapakany Tour, and rows inflatable dinghies up and down the Formoso. For about \$14 dollars a piece, tourists can enjoy the eight-kilometer ride to Padre Island, passing a succession of rapids and waterfalls, watched by toucans, monkeys, and macaws, on the margins.

Padre Island, named after a Catholic priest who owns the land, is in fact a cluster of 22 islets and 24 waterfalls or rapids covering 4 hectares. It is currently leased to a Portuguese lawyer, who plans to open a fully-equipped campsite there by the end of the year. There will be space for 30 tents, as well as ten cottages and several sports facilities.

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The owner of Fazenda da Barra, a 600-hectare farm 35 kilometers from the center of Bonito, is also building a tourist complex on his property. "But I don't want to be an ecological gigolo," quipped Jaime Augusto Paniza. "We will have accomodation for only a handful of guests, in order to guarantee their privacy," he said.

Paniza's hotel will consist of four brick thatched roofed cottages. Visitors will be shown around the farm, where the cattle is treated with homeopathic medicine. "We'll have horseback riding, heath food, and natural liqueurs and wine - all the best thing the countryside has to offer," Paniza said.