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One Life, One River ∴ **FINDING INSPIRATION**
Gradual Untangling ∴ **Gold Rush**

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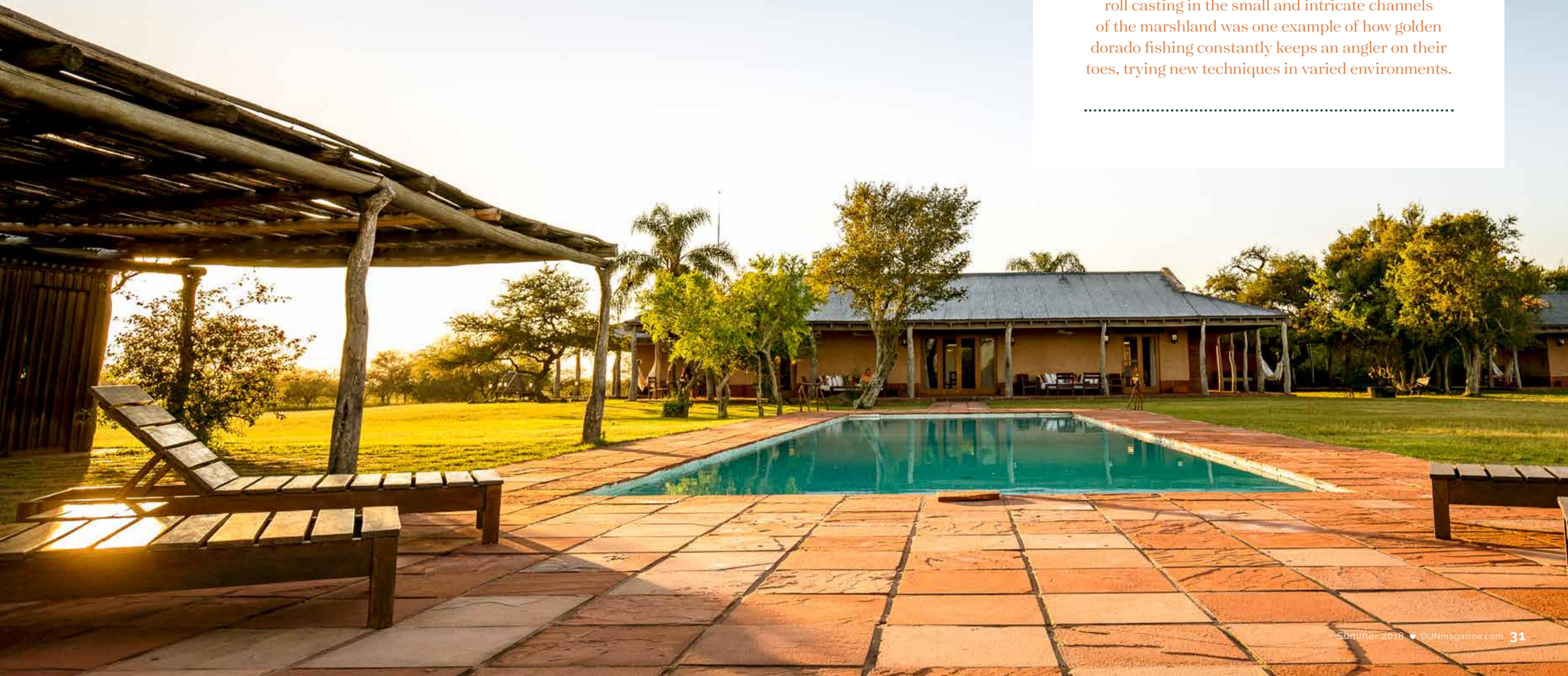
Gold Rush

story Kathryn Fensterstock
photos Fly Fishing Nation

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Quietly crawling through marshland with my rod balanced on my shoulder and doing my best to stay out of sight, I was reminded of stalking chalk stream trout in the British countryside, not a technique I had anticipated when fishing for the aggressive golden dorado in the Ibera Marsh of Northern Argentina. But, I was in fact after *salminus brasiliensis*, and this morning's delicate roll casting in the small and intricate channels of the marshland was one example of how golden dorado fishing constantly keeps an angler on their toes, trying new techniques in varied environments.

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In preparing for my trip, I contacted Gordy & Sons, the premier hunting and fly fishing outfitter based in Houston, TX that is considered the ultimate one-stop-shop for any expedition. I have many friends who are prolific outdoorsmen from all over the world who highly recommended them. It is their unrivaled knowledge in my opinion that sets them apart. They want to know you, understand your passion and drive, and then outfit you in order to see those dreams realized. I couldn't wait to discuss my trip and get their feedback.

I spoke with the fly fishing manager about golden dorado. "The first thing I like to ask when my clients want to know about golden dorado is have you fished for pike or bass? The aggressive take, the importance of the retrieve, and the imperative sharp set are all akin to those aggressive freshwater fish, and they offer incredible acrobatics," he explained. I had fished for pike, but not bass, and grew excited at such potential aggression, hard fights, and powerful jumps. "The best part of golden dorado fishing, however, is the unexpected. You will be faced with scenarios where you need to fish these species in ways you don't anticipate. The diversity of their habitat means they behave in all sorts of ways. Even as a seasoned angler, this fish will keep you on your toes." This piece of advice excited me the most. It sounded like I would learn a great deal from this one fish. As we wrapped up our conversation, he asked that I call him when I returned to recap the trip. I promised him I would certainly be in touch to tell my story.

I must admit, I was a little nervous that I was embarking on a trip in search of a species I had never fished for, but I was determined not to let my insecurities get the best of me. After an overnight bus ride where we met members of the Pira Lodge team to drive us from the

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provincial town of Mercedes to the lodge, we finally made it to the lush landscape of the Ibera Marsh. This ecosystem has, without a doubt, one of Argentina's most impressive biota. The extensive system of wetlands, with its remarkable diversity of plant and animal species, constitutes a substantial part of the natural heritage of Corrientes Province.

After unpacking, we enjoyed a lavish breakfast and fueled up for our fishing. We were dying to get on the water after our long trip. After rigging up our outfits, we set out. As our guide expertly navigated the winding marshland channels, he explained we would start with a special spot he had explored earlier in the season and was confident it held results.

We traveled for miles over diverse marshland, pockets of overgrown brush and leaves teaming with wildlife. The boat navigating nimbly through the roughage; Pira is the only golden dorado lodge in South America to be equipped with Hell's Bay flats skiffs. We finally came upon a series of channels deep in the marshland, with water smooth and quiet as glass. As we polled through a channel barely wide enough to fit the skiff, I was sure I hadn't heard right when our guide asked me to get out of the boat and stand bank side. Fishing for golden dorado from the bank?! The advice from Gordy & Sons echoed in my mind, "expect the unexpected." My chalk stream brain switched on and my trout-stalking instincts came alive. Approaching the bank edge quietly, my heart was beating so loudly I was sure it would disturb the serenity of my surroundings. I was amazed at how crystal clear the water was, able to make out the distinct flash of gold with a black stripe: The dorado calling card. I had barely started my fishing adventure and had been thrown in headfirst, kept nimbly on my toes from the word go, but I was certainly along for the ride.







I focused on a gentle roll cast to maintain the glassy, undisturbed water in order to lift my fly and haul for distance. But similar to shallow-water salt pursuit and dealing with picky species akin to permit, it was hard to land the heavy streamer delicately. Our target took one look at the fly and was off without a trace. Without a hint of dejection, our guide simply led me back to the boat to try our next spot. As we slowly motored to the main channel, the sun was sinking and I stopped for a moment to admire the rosy glow. The surroundings reminded me of a prior trip to Zambezi, when the early evening sun bathed the river in this distinctive peachy tint. Argentina felt just as wild and remote, where the only sounds to be heard were the zipping of fly line, the pole in the water, and local birds chirping nearby.

In completely new water, much deeper and more diverse now that we were poling through the channel, our guide suggested I cast long ahead of the skiff, working the water from left to right to cover every inch. I worked a double haul as he instructed, stripping long and fast in this more complex water. We were racing

against time, as we were miles from the lodge and had to beat the light. Just as I thought I would have to wait another day before meeting my first golden dorado, I felt the eat. Without a moment to spare, I kept stripping, desperate to hold the line tight. "Wait for the jump!" he called, as giddy with excitement as I was. In a slightly over-dramatic fashion, I bowed as I had watched anglers do with leaping tarpon. Despite my theatrical flair, the hook held and I had my first golden dorado in the boat for a quick picture. It was just in time, as the sun was disappearing behind the horizon. We enjoyed a celebratory beer, and sped back to the lodge to share the exciting news.

Having had the taste of success, I was eager for more. I was fortunate enough to have a few days with a friend from Buenos Aires who came to fish with us. Upon his arrival, we gravitated to the bar to sample expertly crafted cocktails and well-known wines from the Mendoza region, discussing fishing, travel, and the distinctive features of the local area. He announced that he and the guides had carved out an exploratory expedition, news I could barely handle.

Exploration of this magnitude is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and I was desperate to witness such pristine landscape never tinted by the human hand.

We embarked on a route the following day to this secret spot that was so remote we had to get out and push the skiffs to traverse the channels. As we poled through a series of lagoons, I nearly jumped out of my skin when I watched a golden dorado swim by that could have easily weighed more than 20lbs. Buzzing from this encounter, we quietly moved into a pool. I had never experienced sight fishing like this before. The visibility allowed me to really take in the bizarre nature of the golden dorado. Some takes were sudden and out of nowhere, and some takes the fish were absurdly close, having followed all the way in. Frustratingly, I lost two over 10lbs which would have been my record to date. I was taught to not let my strip set get lazy! I felt annoyed that I couldn't connect but experiencing such intricate sight fishing was just as exciting. I had never seen such detail.



For a relatively new angler like myself, an experience that offers a whole host of different scenarios is invaluable for honing personal skills. I was still waiting for my personal best, the trophy fish that would tip the scales. My moment resulted a few days later, when we decided to fish the river system that housed faster moving water adjacent to the marshland. Reflecting again on the advice from the experts, I found myself fishing this water like I would for salmon, casting as far as possible, letting the line sweep across the water, and mending to let the fly sink. My guide this day was attentive and focused as he instructed my technique carefully, advising that I wait until the very last minute to strip in, allowing the fly to move along the bank side where he was confident the fish would sit. Sure enough, I was into a number of smaller dorado, but I wanted that big one landed.

It was when I decided to fish deeper, letting my fly sink a bit longer with bigger mends, that I felt a jerk which was harsher than anything I had experienced before. Desperate not to lose the fish I had come here to catch, I put my head down and focused on making strong methodical strips that would set the hook. As my guide and our neighboring boat cheered me on, I did not let my team down, and finally had an 11lb dorado in the net, submerged in the water to protect this beautiful bar of solid gold.

Golden dorado become more golden as they grow and this fish did not disappoint. The early afternoon sun sat high in the sky, and the rays caught the glinting scales perfectly, sending beams into the crystal-clear water, bouncing off and creating a mirror image of dancing light. Sitting there in the water with this gorgeous fish glowing in my arms, it really was a magical moment. After so many encounters where I was forced to learn quickly how my targets were to behave, this achievement felt more well-earned than any other fish I'd ever had. ♥

