

TOURIST GOLD

by Abigail Rome

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Imagine gold, glittering brightly in the sunlight. Now, make that furry gold, add two dark black eyes, two arms, two legs, a shaggy collared head and a long curling tail. Look quickly because before you know it that golden-lion tamarin, a rare primate found only in Brazil's Atlantic Coastal Forest, will be swinging itself over to the next branch just out of view.

With the destruction of 93% of this forest type, this tamarin species almost swung out of existence. In 1974, fewer than 200 animals were known to exist. Now, there are over 800, and numbers continue to increase thanks to conservation initiatives of environmental organizations and zoos around the world. Their future is not yet guaranteed, however. In large part, it depends on tourism, on people like you and me who go to Brazil's coastal forests to catch a glimpse of the gold.

As a first time visitor to Brazil, I was anxious to see the *micos*, as the tamarins are locally called. So, immediately upon arrival in Rio de Janeiro I jumped into a car and headed 2 ½ hours east to the *Poço das Antas* Biological Reserve and a neighboring farm. My aim was not only to see these quizzical-looking animals, but also to learn about their natural habitat, experience the people of coastal Brazil, and contribute to protection of the forest and its wildlife.

I was the archetype of a good ecotourist, ready to support conservation and local communities through my pocket. I would spend my tourist dollars to enter the forest, rent a room for several nights, eat some meals, maybe even buy a t-shirt, dried bananas, or homemade fruit jam. By paying for basic needs and even splurging a little, I was demonstrating to local residents that money can be made by maintaining forest in the *Mata Atlantica*, the Portuguese term for this habitat.

In a region designated as one of the world's top biodiversity hotspots, areas with high numbers of species in urgent threat of extinction, the forest was once considered worthless by local people. It was chopped down to provide land for agriculture, grazing, mining and residential development. Now, however, the remnant patches of intact forest are considered gold mines, able to attract tourist dollars if they contain the rare tamarins.

Forest owners are clamoring to obtain these frisky primates. They request tamarins from scientists who translocate isolated groups, living in small remote forest patches, to larger natural areas. In return for a group of tamarins, landowners agree to establish forest corridors on their properties to provide continuous habitat between established reserves. This allows tamarins free passage from one forested area to another. The farmers are speculators, cognizant that tamarins bring tourists and tourists bring money - money which can go directly into their pockets if they develop environmentally and socially responsible ecotourism infrastructure and services.

At *Fazenda Bom Retiro*, I found an example of this type of thinking. Luis Nelson is a third generation farmer, an ardent nature lover and owner of nearly 1250 acres of intact forest. He has dedicated himself to protecting the tamarin habitat by welcoming people with natural inclinations to his farm, an officially recognized private reserve.

As a guest in the Garden of Eden-like surroundings he has created, I relished Luis's warmth and personalized attention. I slept in a small cabin with views of forest-clad mountains and chose to shower outside under back-pounding water that shoots out of a bamboo spout emanating from the adjacent green hillside. Although I was not there to participate in one of the meditation programs he occasionally hosts, I was pleased to see the palm-thatched structure used for sittings and other spiritual practices, as well as an open-air educational hall with a mini-museum. My favorite spot was the open patio next to Luis' house and the dining area he shares with his guests. It is surrounded by flowering ornamentals, which attract a variety of hummingbirds at almost all hours of the day.

At mealtime the 12-foot long table on the patio becomes a colorful sit-down buffet. No matter if you're one person or a group of twelve, there is always a variety of dishes made from locally grown vegetables, fruits, and herbs, many new to most visitors. The cook, Maria, passes plates through the open window from the kitchen, describing the contents of each offering as a great artist would portray her masterpieces. Acerola juice, coconut crepes and avocado cream for breakfast, spiced rice and chicken for lunch, and garlic *farinha* (manioc root flour) and *taio* leaf for dinner are a tiny sample of the delicacies I tasted. I only wished that I had the metabolism of the ubiquitous hummingbirds so that I could consume a respectable portion of the feast laid before me.

After the meal I was energized, and luckily so, since Luis was eager to show me what his land has to offer. First he took me on a tour around his garden to point out Maria's ingredients and to explain the medicinal value of each leaf, root and fruit. Then, barefoot as usual, he led me on a long walk along the trails on his land. As we passed through secondary forest, he explained how it was recovering from harvests carried out in his grandfather's time. We were able to compare it to the woods we came to further along, where no timber had been cut and the forest was taller and more open. After splashing about in a waterfall, I marveled at large spiders and colorful beetles, never forgetting to scan the trees above for glimpses of the golden-lion tamarins harboring in his reserve.

Since plants and food are two of my greatest interests, I was delighted to eat the fruit of a native banana tree. I knew that the bananas we eat, although long grown in plantations in Latin America, were actually imported from Southern Asia, but I had no idea that there are also species native to the Americas. Wild as they are, they contain hard, inedible seeds the size of small peas, but their flavor is strong and sweet. Taking the presence of this indigenous product as a cue, Luis recently established a dried banana factory to produce a unique edible product for tourists to take home with them as souvenirs. I noted that my host was adhering to one of the tenets of ecotourism. By employing local people to work in the factory, he spreads tourist dollars throughout the community.

Local residents who produce goods for tourists, own and work on forested farms such as Luis's, and serve as guides and researchers in the nearby *Poço das Antas* Reserve, see that the future of the tamarin may be their salvation. On my last day in the area, I went to the government-owned and managed reserve and met Otavio, who earns his living by tracking radio-collared tamarins through the forest. He spends his days scrambling through the bush with a radio receiver on his head and an antenna in his hand, listening for tell-tale tones which indicate where tamarins are and whether they're moving or staying put.

Today he was listening for the five tamarins which he and research team members set free into the forest two days before after transporting them from a tiny patch of degraded forest close to the rapidly developing beachfront. His excitement when he located them was contagious, even for a first time visitor such as myself. I shared in his thrilling outburst upon locating these *micos*, and marveled at the strong emotional responses caused by simple resonating tones emitted from a pair of headphones. We understood their message, a hopeful one for more members of a once-doomed species.

In order to fully comprehend the significance of Otavio's work and passion, I visited the museum and education center at *Poço das Antas*. The maps, dioramas and simple interactive displays clearly demonstrated the sad plight of the tamarin over the past 500 years, but the message is one of hope sustained by commitment.

The locally-based Golden Lion Tamarin Association has a goal of establishing a population of 2000 tamarins in the wild by the year 2025. Successful programs of research, captive breeding and reintroduction, translocation, protection of additional forest, environmental education and ecotourism are reasons for optimism, not only for the golden flagship of the forest, but for the people, plants and other animals who rely on a well functioning ecosystem.

I felt proud to be a part of the effort, but also realized that I'm only one small cog in the wheel of collaborators. The golden lion tamarin needs many more benefactors, including other ecotourists in quest of that shining flicker of gold in the forest.