

It's not Rio but it is a carnival of the animals

There seems to be a lot about Brazil in the papers these days: pages full of football's classic cocktail of hope and despair. So let's have some despair in this column; and let's have some hope as well. And let's talk about dragonflies. The greatest dragonfly hotspot in the world lies just 70km north of Rio — a recent audit found more than 200 species there. It's a relict patch of one of the most efficiently destroyed habitats on earth, the Mata Atlantic, the Atlantic coastal forest of South America.

The place is the Reserva Ecológica de Guapiaçu (Regua), and talking of classic cocktails, it's there I tasted the world's best caipirinha — so fresh I had to wait while they picked the limes. Later I rode a tough little horse high into the remotest chunk of forest, boggled at the ridiculous birdlife — 466 species

have been recorded there — and watched the capybaras, the world's biggest rodent, doing their stuff in the wet hollows. A place, then, of serious fabulousity. It was founded in 2001, owns 12,000 acres and manages another 7,000.

There's just 7 per cent of the Mata Atlantica left, which doesn't sound much. But let's not give up on it — there's still 100,000 square kilometres left. The problem is that it's viciously fragmented. If you want the bits left to retain long-term meaning, they must be joined up, expanded, safeguarded and where possible, replanted. Which is a fair summary of what Regua is doing. There are plans for reintroductions of important species: tapir, red-brocket deer, red-billed curassow, black-fronted piping guan.

Let's have some numbers. The remaining Mata Atlantica is still one of the top five biodiversity hotspots on the planet. At Regua, studies have found 74 species of amphibian, 42 reptiles, 38 arachnids, 103 orchids, 360 butterflies and 61 mammals, included puma and the southern woolly spider-monkey, or muriqui, South

America's largest and most endangered primate.

Rio is famous for carnival, life-affirmation, beauty, spontaneity, gorgeous females, handsome males, colour, noise, excess, joy and wonder. All this can all be topped by driving a little more than 90 minutes, on a good day, out of the city.

After the World Cup in Brazil will come, two years later, the Olympic Games in Rio. As we know very well, such events leave their mark, and one of the marks all this sport will leave on Brazil will be better roads, especially around Rio. This makes remaining areas of the Mata Atlantica much more accessible, much

more vulnerable and much more expensive. So a good time to buy up areas of forest is — well, about now, really.

Regua has identified 11 neighbouring properties totalling 1,500 acres. It's all available, and it's all vulnerable. The organisation needs to raise £392,000, and so far it has managed



Brazil has the best dragonfly hot-spot

£224,000, with possibilities of a further £42,000 from the International Union for Conservation of Nature, Netherlands. The plan is to get control of the entire water catchment area, which would keep the valley safe for as long as it's possible to predict.

I visited Regua in my capacity as council member of the World Land Trust, a British-based organisation that has been a supporter of Regua since the beginning. I love rainforest because it is so difficult to understand. It teems all right, but insects apart, it always seems to be teeming behind your back. The birds are high in the canopy, giving occasional piercing and enigmatic whistles, or lightning-swift flashes of unanalysable colour. The big mammals heard you coming and keep out of your way. It's not, then, the individuals that get to you — it's the wonderful totality. So much lost; so much still left.

