

Staying calm on Brazil's Rio Negro, amidst a swarm of wasps

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ANAVILHANAS NATIONAL PARK, BRAZIL
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Brazilians have an expression: "*Pode ficar tranquilo.*" It translates literally as: "You can stay calm." It means take it easy. Relax.

It's an easy ideology with which to identify, sipping on a caipirinha on a shady balcony overlooking the lazy flow of the Rio Negro, watching the sunset, the only sounds the rustle of wind through the jungle and the occasional blast of a river dolphin coming up for air. *Pode ficar tranquilo.* Loosen up. Unwind.

It's also the reason, many say, that barely anything in Brazil ever gets done, or if it does, it often has to be done again. And why it often takes half an hour to get a beer at the bar. But hey, what's the rush? *Pode ficar tranquilo.* Be cool. Chill out.

It becomes a very difficult dogma to follow, however, when a great swarm of huge, angry wasps is rushing at you from the Amazonian bush while a loose piranha snaps at your shins in a small boat that threatens at any moment to capsize.

The Anavilhanas lies in the heart of the Amazon, a sprawling archipelago of forested islands and sleepy waterways. It's about the size of Prince Edward Island, and is home to countless species – monkeys, manatees and macaws, sloths and spiders, toucans and tapirs, caimans, jaguars, frogs and bats.

And piranha. And giant wasps.

We had been on a fishing boat for about half an hour. Small chunks of meat dangled from bamboo rods, and the idea was to yank hard whenever the line came tight.

The guide's name was Krishna, and he was a native of the river. Unsurprisingly, he was catching more piranha than anyone else. Each time he got a bite, he'd pull the line with more ferocity, more zest.

On one particularly enthusiastic yank, the boat itself shifted sharply, shaking the tree to which it was tied, disturbing a large nest of enormous wasps, which was now erupting into an apocalyptic horde of yellow anger and twitching barbs.

Krishna tried quickly to release his fish, but it slipped and fell to the bottom of the boat, where it flailed wildly amongst a dancing forest of shoeless feet and naked ankles, the snapping of its vicious little jaws audible even over the panic that had now set deep into all on board.

After a second of wide-eyed, stunned paralysis, Krishna snapped into action, kicking the piranha clear into the air, where it momentarily obscured the sun, before disappearing with a small splash into the murk of the Rio Negro. Then he slashed the bowline, kicked the engine into gear, and opened the throttle.

"It's okay, everybody," he said, the boat speeding from the scene, the cloud of wasps disappearing behind us. "*Pode ficar tranquilo.*"

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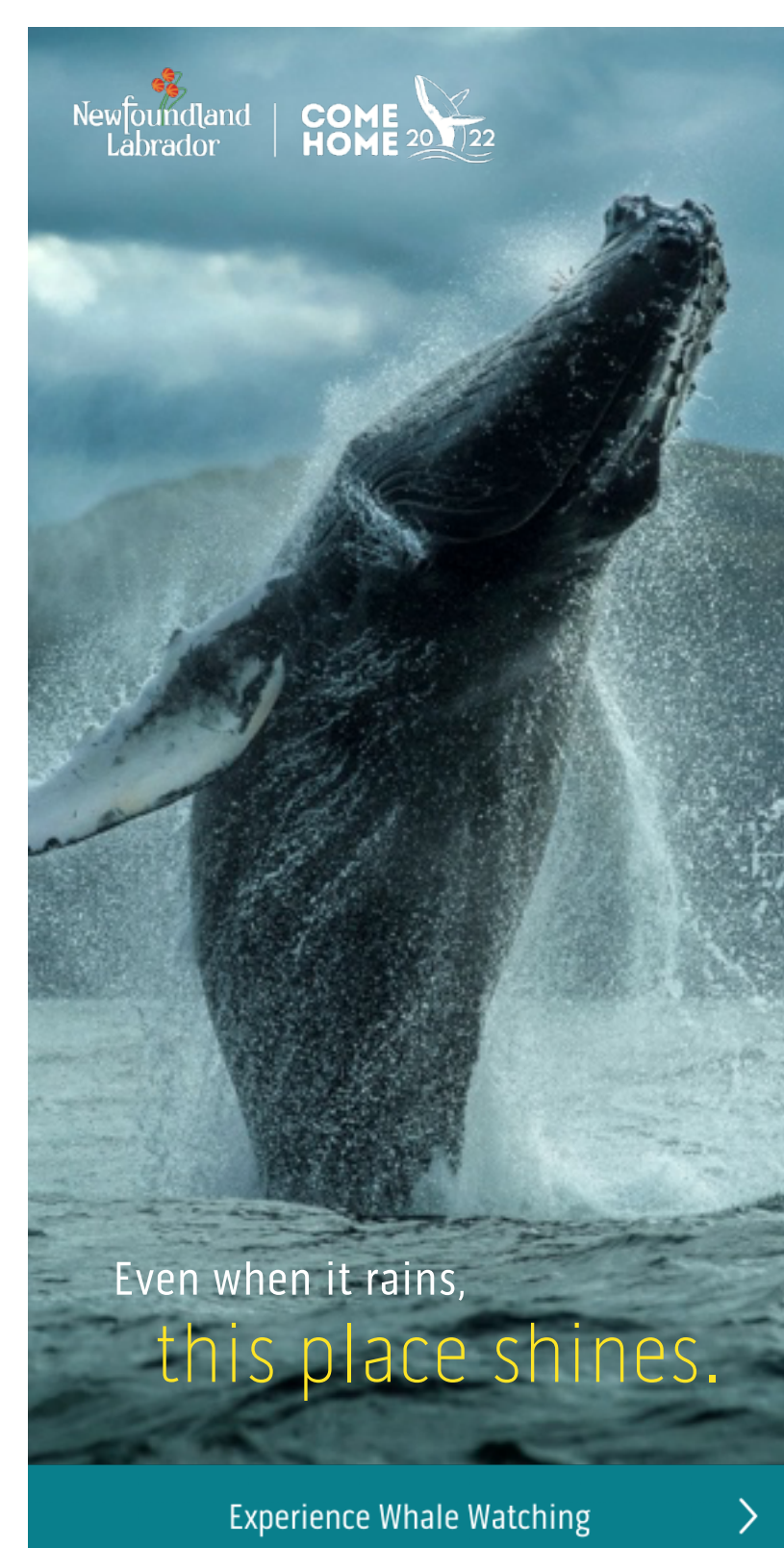
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