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A scenic view of a river in the Amazon. The water is calm with gentle ripples. In the background, there is a dense line of tropical vegetation, including several tall palm trees. On the right side, a portion of a boat is visible, showing a wooden upper deck and a white railing. The sky is overcast with soft, grey clouds.

Cruising the AMAZON

After a hot day riverboating the Peruvian river in search of piranhas, shamans, and howler monkeys, it's good to sit back with a cocona juice cocktail.

BY FREDRIC HAMBER





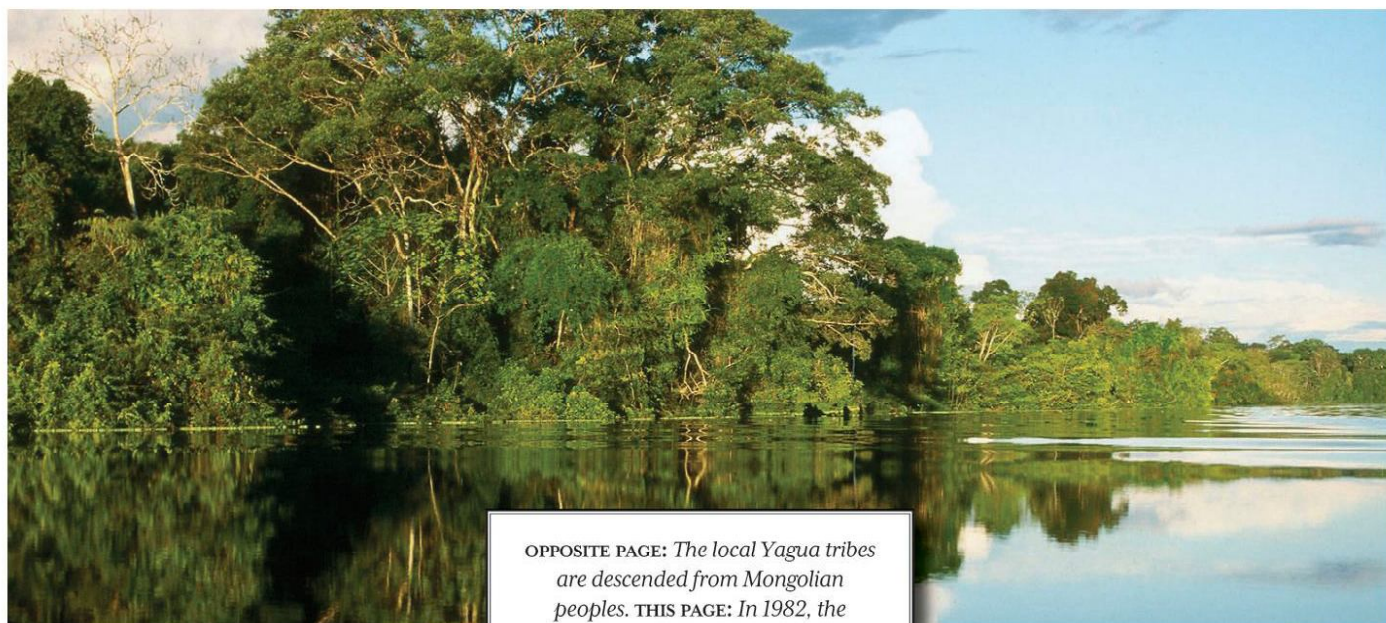
The Peruvian Amazon is an area of shamans, fishermen, palm-thatched roofs, and ever-changing waterways that inspire fleeting daydreams and grand, improbable schemes. It is the region that moved filmmaker Werner Herzog to produce his classic movie “Fitzcarraldo,” about a 19th-century rubber baron who sought to build an opera house in a town reachable only on foot or by boat.

One reason for the remarkable biodiversity is that the area was unaffected by the last ice age. There are plant and animal species that have survived millennia, and that have had eons to evolve and differentiate themselves. The daily panorama is one of endless banks of native grasses and rainforest trees, flocks of egrets in flight, and pink dolphins breaching.

and a nearly one-to-one ratio of crew-to-pampered passengers.

Days are spent exploring the flora and fauna of countless tributaries around Nauta and the Pacaya Samiria National Reserve in small motorized skiffs. Natives of the area who understand the natural cycles of the place can glance at the sky and tell how soon it will rain, and for how long. They can spot the difference between a strong-billed woodcreeper and her cousin, the straight-billed woodcreeper. They know where to find the best piranha fishing.

Yes, gentle reader: piranha fishing. A highlight of our Amazonian journey was a goofy hour spent baiting hooks with small chunks of beef and learning the key trick: you need to jostle the water’s surface as you drop your bait. Unlike most species of fish that are repelled by motion, piranhas are attracted to it. If fishing’s not your thing, just relax and enjoy the scenery. That particular tributary is called Caro Curahuate and was named for a



OPPOSITE PAGE: *The local Yagua tribes are descended from Mongolian peoples. THIS PAGE:* In 1982, the Peruvian government established the Pacaya Samiria National Reserve with the purpose of preserving the wilderness resources and the beautiful landscapes of the area.

The river town of Iquitos, Peru, today remains inaccessible by road, but is served by a small airport with daily flights from Lima. The favored mode of transportation around town is the tuk-tuk, the three-wheeled taxi, scores of which are readily available for hire. Iquitos is the natural starting point for a sojourn in the area.

One splendid option for a visit to the Peruvian Amazon is a waterborne safari with Aqua Expeditions, whose small luxury riverboat, the *M/V Aqua*, features just 12 cabins, each with huge glass windows to watch the environment as you float by,

shaman in the area who was believed by the natives to have particularly effective medicinal skills, and whose fee, therefore, was particularly “caro” (expensive).

Upon boarding, we were welcomed by the charming hostess, Ana. Then soon, it was time for dinner. Menus on board are overseen by Pedro Miguel Schiaffino, who was a featured chef at the James Beard House, and whose Malabar restaurant in Lima is famous for Schiaffino’s “nouveau Andean” cuisine. We dined on local pumpkin and tangerine cream soup, paparete fish with stewed daikon, and shrimp with



The Peruvian Amazon is home to plant and animal species that have survived millennia, and that have had eons to evolve and differentiate themselves.



coconut-corn sauce. The multi-course dinners, complemented by South American wines, always include a palate-cleansing sorbet of local fruit, a different flavor each night.

Morning expeditions start early, when the animals are still lively. Highlights include hoatzin birds, howler monkeys, and *how did that iguana get to the top of that tree?* A small overnight ferryboat passed by, filled with people bringing chickens, fruit, and fish to the nearest town to sell at market. Here and there we saw small palm-thatched houses, intended as shelter for a family but not meant to be permanent. The flood cycles of the river mean that whole villages are periodically forced to relocate.

As our visit took place during high water season, we were eight meters above ground and, therefore, closer to the tops of the trees, making for superb bird-watching. The skiff drivers keep a machete close at hand for the times they need to hack through branches blocking their course. Now and then we would duck our heads as we passed under a tree branch while exploring a creek or small river. Was Disneyland's Jungle Cruise ever such fun?



to display his hairless forearms. We met a woman threshing grain, and the braver of us took turns holding the village's pet anaconda around our necks, one hand firmly holding the reptile below its head to keep it from turning to bite.

While the morning rides are best for viewing monkeys in the trees, the late afternoons/early evenings provide the best moments of atmosphere and quiet reflection. One afternoon, we parked our skiffs in a field of lily pads—those huge round saucers of floating leaves that are a symbol of exotic Amazonian flora. A jacana bird hopped from one to the next. As the sky turned to pink, the guides

surprised us with a champagne cocktail service, starting with chilled cinnamon-scented hand towels, and we offered a toast to the moment and the day.

Sunsets are not long in that part of the world, so soon the sky darkened and we headed back in our little boats to the *Aqua*. En route, the guides kept a lookout with portable searchlights over fields of water hyacinths for anything new to point out. Soon our guide Ricky shouted to the boat driver to stop and head toward the riverbank a couple hundred yards

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Then it was back on board the ship for a lovely lunch, a nap, or just relaxing with a book in the beautiful upper-deck lounge. Peruvian architect Jordi Puig designed both the ship and the interiors, giving the comfortable, airy spaces a unified feel. Interiors blend as beautifully with the ship's design as the ship itself does into the river environment. A series of huge framed photographs of Amazon scenes by French photographer Jean Claude Constant decorates the walls of public spaces and cabins.

Itineraries generally include a visit to a native village. The local Yagua tribes are descended from Mongolian peoples who crossed the Bering Straits and migrated south tens of thousands of years ago. One of our guides, Roland, who was raised in such a village, pointed to his own Asiatic eyes and rolled up his sleeves

away. It was dark then, and we couldn't imagine what he could have seen in the distance, but somehow his skilled native eyes had spotted those of a caiman reptile looking back into his searchlight. We approached gingerly, and then, with a quick thrust of both hands, Ricky scooped up the creature, nearly two feet long. Ricky was delighted, the caiman less so, wriggling to get away and back to the comfort of its water home.

And before long we, too, were back in the comfort of our own water home, greeted by Aldo the bartender, who stood waiting with a tray of cocona juice cocktails the very moment we stepped back on board. ♦

For more information, visit www.aquaexpeditions.com.