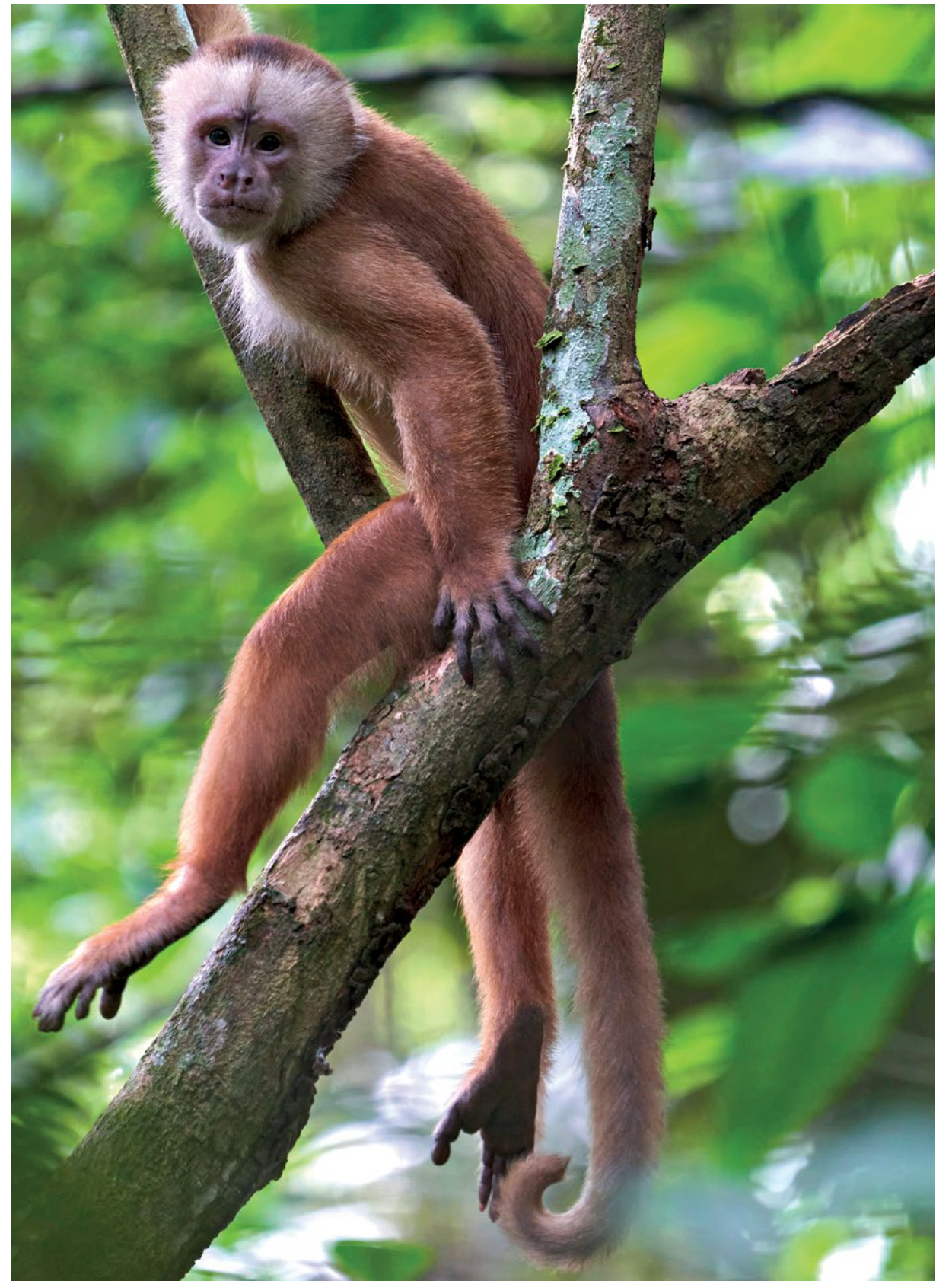


EYES on the WILD

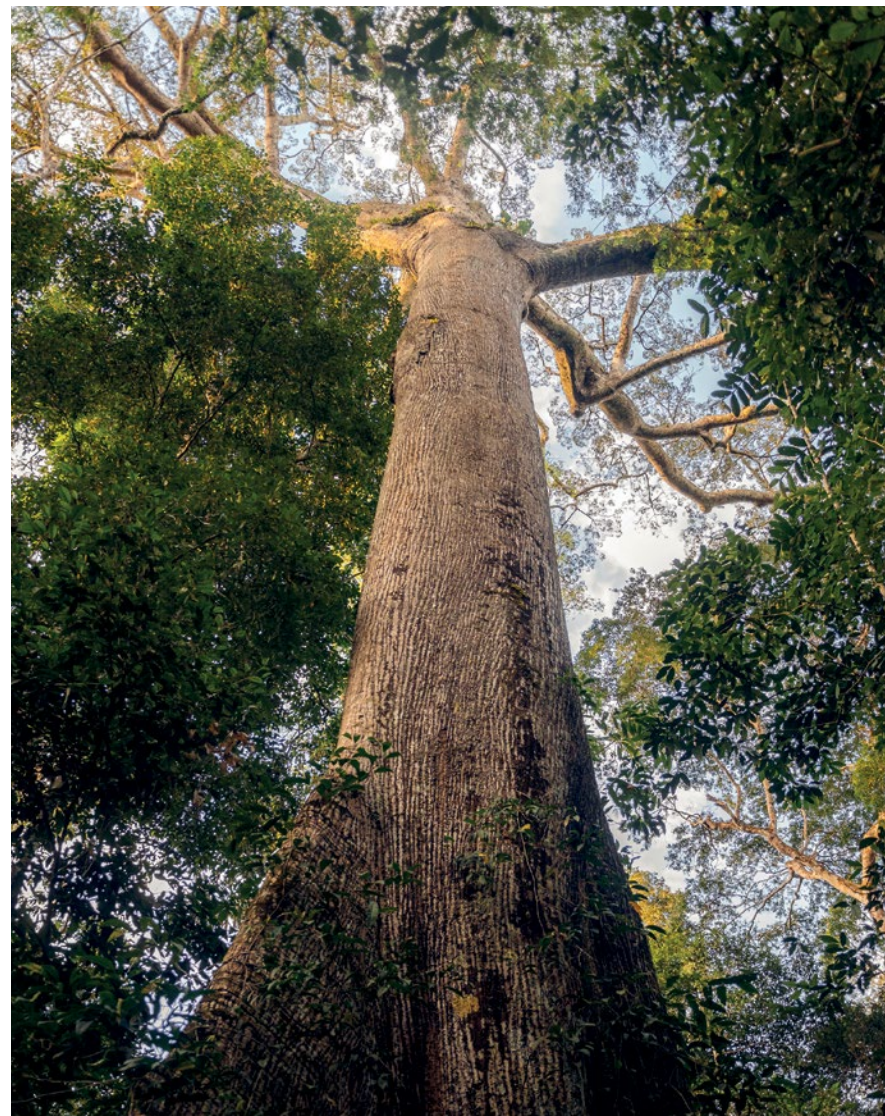
Prachi Joshi takes us into the heart of the Peruvian Amazon, where elusive wildlife, lush landscapes, and the winding river come together to create an immersive experience

COURTESY OF ALEXIS HUERTAS



COURTESY OF PAUL BERTNER

Left: The Amazon river branches into numerous tributaries, feeding a six-million-sq.km. rainforest.
Above: Capuchin monkeys are often found in the Amazon rainforest.



Clockwise from left: Experience a delicious buffet of Amazonian and Peruvian dishes; Ceiba trees are massive trees that can reach 70 meters in height.

GET MY FIRST GLIMPSE of the mighty Amazon from the air as my flight from Lima descends into Puerto Maldonado. The river twists and turns like a brown snake cutting its way through the thick rainforest. A bumpy hour-long drive from the airport brings me to the Tambopata tributary of the Amazon. Once my luggage is loaded into the motorboat, I hop in and don a life jacket. “Don’t put your hand in the water—there are piranhas and anacondas in there,” says my guide Victor; I don’t need to be told twice. Over the 45-minute boat ride, we spot many animals, including a bunch of turtles sunbathing on a log and a caiman (a semi-aquatic reptile related to the alligator) slithering on the muddy riverbank. But the highlight is seeing several capybaras feasting on reeds and grass on the riverbank. All this even before I reach the lodge.

Into Amazonia

The Amazon River originates in the Arequipa region of Peru, making its way through Colombia and Brazil, before emptying into the Atlantic Ocean. Along the way, it branches into numerous tributaries, feeding a six-million-sq.km. rainforest, considered to be the world’s richest and most varied biological reservoir. The Tambopata National Reserve, located in Peru’s Madre de Dios region, is but a small part of the vast Amazonia. Here, Refugio Amazonas, an ecolodge by Rainforest Expeditions (rainforestexpeditions.com) is my home for two days. Spread over 200-plus hectares in the buffer zone of the reserve, the lodge—built with natural materials and powered by limited generator use—stands amidst a Brazil nut forest, its 32 rooms and suites spread over two thatch-roofed blocks raised on stilts. I settle into my expansive, open-to-nature deluxe suite, which is one of the four newly launched suites in 2025.

Monkey Business

I jolt awake from a brief afternoon siesta by what sounds like

King Kong roaring in the jungle. When I meet Victor for our evening excursion, he informs me that it’s the Red Howler Monkey, which produces one of the loudest sounds among all land animals and can be heard up to 5 kms away. We promptly set out to track the monkeys, following the sounds and plunging deeper into the rainforest. “Howler monkeys live in groups, and these sound like at least 5-6 monkeys,” says Victor as we go a bit off-trail in pursuit. Eventually, the howls die down as the band of monkeys retreats into the forest (although we do spot a couple of Capuchin Monkeys on the way).

We return to the trail and head towards the 35-metre-tall Canopy Tower. Its scaffolding-like ‘safe staircase’ makes the observation tower fairly accessible, even if you don’t have a head for heights. From the topmost deck, I get a bird’s eye view of the dense rainforest with Brazil Nut trees, Acacias, Ironwoods, and Ceibas, the last with their umbrella-like canopy towering over the others. The sky is splashed a stunning blood-orange and the forest is filled with bird calls. By the time I descend the tower, it’s almost nightfall. The



Clockwise from top: Copoazú is a fruit from a wild amazonian cocoa plant; Refugio Amazonas serves as a base for the Wired Amazon programme, a pioneering citizen science initiative that gives guests an opportunity to engage in research activities.

30-minute walk back to the lodge in the dark, illuminated by a single torch, is an adventure; I chance upon a couple of Night Monkeys (or owl monkeys with staring large eyes), nearly trip over a mid-size turtle on the trail, and try to ignore the rustling sounds in the jungle.

Jungle Feast

Considering the 4 a.m. wake-up call next morning, we have an early dinner—a delicious buffet of Amazonian and Peruvian dishes like *papa a la huancaína* (boiled potatoes in a spicy, cheesy sauce), corn cakes, cassava fries, local preparations of fish and chicken, *arroz chaufa* (Peruvian-style fried rice), tropical fruits, *alfajores* (Argentine-origin soft biscuits with caramel centre), etc. The next morning, bleary-eyed, I join other guests in the waiting boat. It’s pitch-dark and the wind whips my face as we motor upstream. As dawn breaks and the fog lifts, the ghostly shapes lining the banks give way to trees. The muddy-brown river is dotted with white specks—tree sap that falls into the water and foams up due to the current.

Nearly two hours later, we arrive at our destination, a small river island across from which a reddish-brown clay cliff looms up. Almost immediately, shrieks and caws fill the air as scores of macaws, parrots, and parakeets swoop

FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF MARLON DEL AGUILA; COURTESY OF CARLOS GONZALES

COURTESY OF CARLOS GONZALES (2)



Clockwise from left: One will find large Scarlet Macaws, captivating Blue-and-Yellow Macaws and Red-and-Green Macaws, stubby-tailed Southern Mealy Parrots, and small Blue-headed Pionus Parrots in the rainforest. Below: The Red Howler Monkey produces one of the loudest sounds among all land animals and can be heard up to 5 kms away.



COURTESY OF MARLON DEL AGUILA. OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM TOP: COURTESY OF JOSELO BARAZORDA; COURTESY OF RAINFOREST EXPEDITIONS

down to the clay lick (locally called *collpa*) to munch on the nutrient-rich clay (to augment a diet poor in sodium). There are large Scarlet Macaws, captivating Blue-and-Yellow Macaws and Red-and-Green Macaws, stubby-tailed Southern Mealy Parrots, and small Blue-headed Pionus Parrots; it's certainly the most colourful (and noisy) wildlife spectacle I have seen. Whilst the birds feast, we too have our breakfast; the hotel staff has brought in a huge buffet on the boat, with bread, eggs, avocado, cereals, plantain chips, cake, tea, coffee, and more on offer.

Farms & Farewells

Refugio Amazonas serves as a base for the Wired Amazon programme, a pioneering citizen science initiative that gives guests an opportunity to engage in research activities. Guests can learn about medicinal plants, join research activities that monitor wildlife and preserve the rainforest, help field researchers set up camera traps to monitor wildlife, fly a drone from the Canopy Tower to record the incredible diversity of the rainforest, or go on a night forest walk to a light trap where you might discover a new moth species. One of

CHECKLIST

- The dry season from April to November is the best time to visit. January and February are the rainiest months, and a few lodges are closed during this period.
- While electricity and Wi-Fi are limited to certain hours and areas, the experience encourages unplugging from the digital world.
- It's advisable to consult a travel clinic for recommended vaccinations such as yellow fever, and consider anti-malarial precautions before your trip.
- Temperatures are high, as is the humidity. You may be tempted to wear shorts and sleeveless tops, but remember there are mosquitoes, bugs, and other creepy-crawlies. Full-sleeve cotton shirts and long cotton trousers are the best way to go, ideally in light colours.
- Ankle-high hiking boots or trainers with a good grip are required, although some lodges loan high rubber boots for jungle activities.
- Bring a small backpack, sunscreen, sunglasses, broad-brimmed hat, raincoat or poncho, and insect repellent.
- Binoculars, torch, and camera gear (with long lens) are good-to-have accessories.



The Tambopata River in the Amazon Basin of Peru is a major tributary of the Madre de Dios River and the Amazon River.

GETTING THERE

Several airlines including **Air India** (airindia.com), **KLM Royal Dutch Airlines** (klm.com), **LATAM Airlines** (latam.com), and **Emirates** (emirates.com) operate regular flights from major Indian cities to Lima, via hubs such as Amsterdam, São Paulo, and Dubai. From Lima, take a domestic flight to Puerto Maldonado. From here, an hour-long road trip and a 45-minute boat ride will bring you to the Tambopata National Reserve.

WHERE TO STAY

Refugio Amazonas (rainforestexpeditions.com) has 32 spacious rooms and suites with private bathrooms. *All-inclusive* doubles start from ₹65,000.

Clockwise from left: The Canopy Tower gives you a bird's-eye view of the dense rainforest; Refugio Amazonas has 32 rooms and suites spread over two thatch-roofed blocks raised on stilts.



my favourite activities is the evening visit to a jungle farm on the other side of the river from the lodge. Here, local farmers grow a variety of crops, from coconut, banana, papaya, and orange to coffee, cacao and its cousins *copoazu* and *macambo*. Victor plucks the fruits from the tree and I get a taste of these exotic fruits—the *copoazu* tastes like custard apple with lemony hints, while the rather funky-tasting *macambo* is somewhere between jackfruit and durian.

Refugio Amazonas is deeply rooted in its surroundings, working with the local Ese Eja community of Infierno to ensure tourism supports both livelihoods and conservation.

On the last morning, as I wrap up breakfast, a band of Tamarins descends on the trees around the lodge. While I'm photographing these black-and-brown long-tailed monkeys, a movement on the ground catches my eye. The agouti, which looks like a large brown rat with long legs, feasts on a nut it finds on the forest floor. The Brazil nut is its favourite, and in this native forest, it's assured of a steady supply. I hop into the boat one last time as I begin my return journey to Puerto Maldonado. By now, the river seems like a familiar road, complete with a sunbathing caiman and a family of capybara munching away. I leave the forest behind, but its rhythm lingers in me—wild, winding, and whispering like the Amazon itself. 🌿



COURTESY OF RAINFOREST EXPEDITIONS. OPPOSITE PAGE: PRACHI JOSHI