



By William Ecenbarger
FOR THE INQUIRER

QUITOS, Peru — Life is everywhere in the upper Amazon wilderness. Life that creeps, life that crawls, life that slithers, sprouts, burrows, scurries and slinks — and dies. The dank odors of alternating rot and genesis rise from the mulching forest floor. My insect spray battles swarms of blood-mad mosquitoes to a draw. The air fat with syrupy humidity, and I am sweating like a icicle in the sun.

Nature is on fast-forward here. Trees — palms, arels, kapoks, mahoganies, bamboos, acacias, figs, Isas, cedars — jostle one another for a share of the sunlight; they grow to enormous heights and read their foliage like a green umbrella at the top. Anas, tropical vines, wind themselves like boa constrictors around the tree trunks and arch themselves in great loops as they too struggle upward for a glimpse of light. The trees become parasites, and giant orchids seed themselves in branches 60 feet from the ground. The general effect is of an impenetrable, fecund, living wall.

Amid this vast assortment of life, creatures use stunted flimflam to befuddle or repel predators, lure prey, duce mates and gobble food. Caterpillars masquerade as snakes, plants imitate the smell of rotting meat to attract flies as pollinators, and trees rely on fish to distribute their seeds when the rivers flood. It's a jungle out here.

Not all cruises are on oceangoing palaces where hundreds of passengers flop in deck chairs between all-you-can-eat buffets and shore excursions to trendy shopping venues. There are alternatives, such as the so-called niche cruises, which use smaller ships that go to remote destinations inaccessible to the bigger vessels. Fewer guests — far fewer — afford a more intimate experience that emphasizes history, culture, and respect for the environment. Niche cruises go to the Arc-

tic, remote Pacific islands, the rivers of West Africa, and Alaska's Inside Passage.

And to the Peruvian Amazon, where I was one of 24 passengers aboard La Amatista, a 127-foot replica of the riverboats owned by 19th-century Amazon rubber barons. In a one-week program developed by International Expeditions, we visited rain-forest villages, fished for piranha, and watched a shaman display his arsenal of herbal cures. We sailed 300 miles on the Amazon and its tributaries; along the way we spotted exotic birds and animals, but no other tourists.

My perception of the Amazon had been largely colored by old documentaries and fanciful tales of lost cities, 60-foot snakes, and Indians with blowguns and poisoned darts. I was in for a surprise.

It began in this town known as the gateway to the Amazon with a warning from Robinson Rodriguez, one of our two naturalist-guides: "The Amazon is not a zoo. We do not know what we will see today. Every day is different out here, and we will see what we see. We never know."

The Amazon experience is quite different from an African safari, where big game is easily spotted. Amazon animals are well camouflaged. Indeed, Rodriguez says that, in 17 years as a nature guide, he has never seen a jaguar.

The next morning, our group boards two 40-foot, steel-hulled skiffs and zooms toward the shore. It is dawn, nature's rush hour. Everywhere, birds are flapping, hovering, hopping, fretting, strutting around like little Napoleons, leaving alphabets of footprints in the muddy banks. Water birds, scavengers, birds of prey, cuckoos, kingfishers, woodpeckers, flycatchers, and weird birds like the hoatzin, an evolutionary throwback with a fright-wig crest and claws on its wings. No one knows for sure how many birds are in the Amazon, but there are well over 1,000 species.

Among our first non-ornithological sightings is the sloth — the world's slowest mammal. It stared at us — with beady eyes set in a flat face and a round head, anchored with long, curved claws — upside-

down in a tree. "Once a week, the sloth climbs down the tree to defecate at its base," Rodriguez says, squinting into his binoculars. "It does this to nourish the tree from which it eats the leaves."

We would see dozens of other creatures throughout the week — otters, turtles, monkeys, crocodilian creatures called caimans, and the fabled pink dolphins of the Amazon. But after the first day, it became apparent that the most interesting species was *homo sapiens*.

Riberenos — "people of the bank" — make up 85 percent of the Peruvian jungle population. They are mestizos, mixed Spanish and Indian, whose ancestors came to work on the rubber plantations in the 1880s. You'll never see a *ribereno* in a tourist brochure for the Amazon rain forest. They don't wear colorful costumes, they're not headhunters, they don't wear strange lip ornaments — and if they're not overly friendly, it's because they're busy making a living. Mostly, they raise chickens and fruit to sell in local markets, and it's not easy.

Rivers are the roads of the Amazon jungle, and a stream of vessels passed La Amatista all week. Ferries with people who strung hammocks on the deck. Dugout canoes, their gunwales a half-inch above the water, carrying families — fathers paddling, mothers bailing. Rafts laden with people and plantains. A skiff, its bow mustached in green algae, taking a soccer team in striped jerseys to a game in the next village. Barges loaded with pickup trucks and three-wheeled motorized rickshaws. Tankers with crude oil headed for refineries.

The banks are lined with villages of neat thatched-roof houses on stilts. Each village has a school and a soccer field. Men fish, women wash clothes, children swim, pigs wallow. At the village of Nuevo Curahuaytillo (population about 50), we watch barefoot boys dribbling soccer balls around a makeshift field with goals fashioned from logs. Copper-brown women walk erect under water pots. The community consists of a small huddle of dwellings surrounded by exuberant tropical foliage. In the dis-

ance, harvested rice paddies bristle with stubble.

The school is an open wooden



Hoatzin birds, an odd evolutionary throwback with fright-wig crests and claws on their wings.

building whose faded color is more a memory of blue. A teacher named Carmen invites us to join a classroom of 19 primary pupils, who shyly swap giggles. They introduce themselves and sing songs, including the Peruvian national anthem. Their innocence seems shining and intact, and if there is a sadness here, we brought it with us.

We have come bearing school supplies — pens, pencils, tablets, notebooks, rulers. Before entering each village, we are cautioned not to give the children money. "Our Amazon children are not beggars," Rodriguez says, "and we don't want them to become beggars."

In the village of Huacaraico, we are introduced to Tito Armas Panaito, a shaman, or rain-forest healer, who is wearing cargo pants, a striped T-shirt, and Reebok running shoes. "My mother left me the gift when she died," he tells me, with



WILLIAM EDENBARGER / For The Inquirer

A skiff at sunset. Rivers are the Amazon's roads, and a stream of vessels passed La Amatista — ferries, dugout canoes, rafts, barges, tankers, carrying people, plantains, vehicles and crude oil.

Rodriguez as a translator. "I was 10 years old. After many years of study, I began practicing."

Panaito passes us his botanical remedies — lemon juice for insomnia, wild basil for *saladenas* ("bad luck"), mistletoe for healing broken bones after they are set, wild garlic for gallstones. Though he doesn't show it to us, he is also carrying ayahuasca, the centuries-old concoction of Amazon plants that has hallucinogenic properties and is illegal in the United States.

Like most Amazon shamans, Panaito has no successor in sight. "Each time one of our shamans dies without passing his arts on to the next generation, the world loses thousands of years of irreplaceable knowledge about medicinal plants," Rodriguez says. "It's as if a library has burned down."

The next evening, in gray, creeping twilight, we board the skiffs and head up the River Pacaya. The boat slices through meadows of surface plants — a floating green carpet that keeps clogging the motor's propeller. The bats have left their daytime hiding places, and a flashlight reveals their rust-red bellies and long, narrow ears. One of them dips into the water, snares a fish with its feet, and flips it into its mouth. These are fishing bats, one of more than 100 bat species in the Amazon.

The skiff glides smoothly, bow-first, into the bank. We walk down a jungle path, wearing leather gaiters

on our shins as protection against poisonous snakes. The night thickens, and we inch our way with flashlight beams. The air is rank with decay.

We stop in a clearing, and Rodriguez tells us to turn off all lights and listen. In the inky void, our ears focus on the night-hum of the forest. The relentless sibilation of insects. Cicadas grinding their scissors. The bic-bic-bic of frogs. The excited jabber of monkeys. An owl fills the night with questions.

On the return trip to La Amatista, the dark sky is veined and forked with lightning before it unleashes a rain of biblical proportions. We go to our cabins drenched but happy.

Exploring the Amazon

International Expeditions'

10-day Amazon Voyage trips this year start at \$3,048 per person, double occupancy (single supplement, \$1,598). The in-country round-trip air fare from Peru to Iquitos is \$300.

In addition to the Amazon, the company offers small-group tours to Brazil's Pantanal, Costa Rica, Antarctica, India, Egypt, west Africa, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda.

American Airlines, Continental, Delta, LAN Peru and Northwest fly to Lima, Peru, from Philadelphia

Peru, from Philadelphia International Airport, with one stop. The lowest recent round-trip fare was about \$877.

For more information, go to www.ietravel.com or call 1-800-633-4734.



The Philadelphia Inquirer

This is not a cruise for luxury and relaxation, but the facilities were more than adequate for comfort. The cabin crew was extremely attentive. Our dirty clothes were laundered every day, and our muddy boots were dried and cleaned after every outing. The rooms were pleasant and air conditioned.

There were three meals a day —



simple fare served buffet-style. The honor-system cash bar was open 24 hours. Dinner was preceded by a happy hour, with music by the two

guides, the bartender, and two cabin staff.

And, of course, we were in the middle of the largest, most biologically diverse wilderness on Earth.



With just 24 passengers, a voyage to **Peru** is a rare immersion in real **jungle life** – and there are **no other tourists** in sight.



WILIAM ECENBARGER / For The Inquirer

Passengers from La Amatista take a walk in the jungle. They spent a week aboard the boat, top, seeing such exotic sights as the blue and gold macaw.



Peruvians wait for a ferry boat. Once aboard, they might string hammocks on the deck.