



PO Box 16545 Portal, AZ 85632
Phone 520.558.1146 Toll free 866.900.1146 Fax 650.471.7667
Email info@naturalistjourneys.com

Amazon Voyage Trip Report
August 9 – 19, 2012
Guides Carol Simon & Howard Topoff, with eight participants
Report by Carol Simon and Howard Topoff

Friday, August 10 -- Swissotel, Lima, Peru

Today was at leisure, with most of us arriving in Lima late the night before. All ten Naturalist Journeys' participants managed to assemble for a late dinner at the La Locanda Restaurant in the hotel. Our reunion was joyous, with many connections among the ten travelers, and all our meals were absolutely delicious.



Saturday, August 11 -- Leaving the Swissotel, a City Tour and a Flight to Iquitos and our River Boat

We left the lovely Swissotel, in the heart of the San Isidro district of Lima, and boarded a bus that delivered us to the Historic City Centre. Founded by Francisco Pizarro in 1535, this section of Lima is among the most important tourist destinations in Peru. Leaving the bus at the Plaza Mayor, a special UNESCO site, we embarked upon a one-and-a-half hour walking tour. One highlight was the well kept

square itself, dotted with colonial churches and mansions. The Cathedral was closed due to church services on this Saturday morning, but we did enter the Montasterio de San Francisco, viewing a 17th century library, an impressive collection of religious art and the underground catacombs, containing hundreds of human bones, stored in compartments by type.

Next we walked through the Casa de Aliaga, the oldest colonial mansion in Lima, perhaps even in all of South America. The house has been owned and lived in by the family Aliaga and their descendants since Francisco Pizarro granted the land to Jerónimo de Aliaga in 1535. The extravagant courtyard, salons and colonial furnishings would soon stand in striking contrast to village homes we would see in the rain forest!

Arriving at the airport, we checked in for our flight to Iquitos and had a nice lunch at an adjacent airport restaurant. There we began to get acquainted with the other ten passengers that would travel with us on the Aquamarina. The two hour flight over the Andes landed us at Iquitos, 2300 miles from the mouth of the Amazon River at Belem. Amazingly, from Iquitos the Amazon River drops only 384 feet to meet the Atlantic Ocean. Met at the airport, we had a brief city tour of Iquitos, once a rubber-boom city. It currently has 600,000 inhabitants and can be reached only by boat or plane.

Arriving at our home for the next seven nights, we were met by our expedition leader, Angel, by our two naturalist guides, Johnny and Useil, and by the Aquamarina crew. Howard and Carol were thrilled to see Johnny, a favorite guide from past trips. We got settled in our cabins and had dinner aboard.

**Sunday, August 12 --
Onboard the Aquamarina
-- Along the Amazon
River**

Early in the morning we spent some time looking for wildlife from the deck of the Aquamarina. Gray Dolphins were sighted and just a few of the birds included Yellow-hooded Blackbirds, Neotropic Cormorants and Black Terns. A man scattered rice seed along the recent alluvial deposits, possible because of the dropping river levels at this time of



year. This was a banner year for flooding, with the rivers rising as much as 50 feet above their low points, resulting in many villages being under water for several months.

After breakfast, two smaller skiffs comfortably carried the twenty passengers, two naturalist guides, two drivers and the expedition leader. We were still on the Amazon and we saw our first primates, Squirrel Monkeys. These diurnal and omnivorous monkeys travel in large groups and are easily seen moving through the the forest canopy. Large Green or Crested Iguanas were also spotted, basking on upper tree branches. These huge lizards are herbivorous as adults, but the juveniles eat insects. Riders in one skiff saw a Roadside Hawk pick up a Black-skinned Parrot Snake.

Several plants were spotted along the waterways, including the Strangler Fig and Moriche Palm. Strangler Figs send down long roots from tree limbs where seeds are deposited by birds that eat the figs. Gradually these roots increase in number and size until they kill their host tree, resulting in a free-standing Stranger Fig.



Many birds were observed this morning. Some of the favorites were the Amazon Kingfisher, Ringed Kingfisher, Great Potoo, Roadside Hawk and Black-collared Hawk. The nocturnal Potoo spends its days doing a wonderful imitation of a stump!

And there was more! After lunch and a siesta, we boated to a short trail where we walked to an oxbow lake. A large Red-tailed

Boa Constrictor was resting high on a tree branch along the path. These non-poisonous snakes constrict their prey and swallow them whole. The lake housed enormous Victoria Waterlilies, named for Queen Victoria. A few were in flower. The flowers are white the first night and pink the second. They are pollinated by scarab beetles.

Birds seen included the Yellow-headed Caracara and the Black Skimmer. (Consult the species list for all birds seen on the trip.)

The evening, back onboard, was jam-packed with activities. First there was an illustrated presentation by Carol and Howard: "An Introduction to the Rain Forest." Next we heard an invigorating selection of Peruvian music by Useil and the Chunky Monkeys. Finally came dinner. All meals were absolutely delicious with a selection of salads, sauteed vegetables (every meal,) and either fish, chicken or beef dishes. Dessert was usually ice cream and fruit. Occasionally there was a birthday cake or pie.



Monday, 13 August -- Onboard the Aquamarina -- Along the Ucayali

During this low water season it rained from 1:30 a.m. to 8:30 a.m. so we did not go out early, as we had planned. At 9:00 a.m. Useil oriented us on the map, showing us the confluence of the Mara  n and Ucayali Rivers at the Amazon, and how the special preserve, the Pacaya Samiria, sits between those rivers. We all looked forward to visiting that preserve.

Our morning excursion in skiffs was along Supay Creek, a small tributary of the Ucayali. We were all excited to see our first Three-toed Sloth. This one was a female as she did not have an

orange patch on her back. These sloths are mainly folivores, living high in the canopy and descending to the forest floor once a week to defecate.

The water was receding and we could see many, many holes in the river banks. These were made by nesting walking catfish when the water was high and are used by a variety of animals once exposed.

More bird species than we could count appeared this morning. The polyandrous (one female, many males) Wattled Jacanas were prevalent, walking on the river vegetation. Greater and Lesser Kiskadees, Greater Ani, Red-capped Cardinal, White-tailed Trogon, and Jabiru Stork were some of the birds added to our list.

After lunch and a siesta we again jumped into the skiffs for an afternoon of exploration. More Green Iguanas and Three-toed Sloths were spotted as Red-bellied Macaws and Osprey sailed overhead. Some other new birds were the Capped Heron, Yellow-rumped Cacique and the Laughing Falcon, a snake specialist.

Prior to dinner Howard and Carol presented an illustrated talk about the local primates and a “new” band, the Bloody Piranhas, entertained us with their well-practiced music.

Tuesday, 14 August -- Onboard the Aquamarina -- Ucalayi River and a Night Excursion

We were rained out of another early departure today but not much was lost. This morning the Aquamarina was sailing on the Puinahua Canal of the Ucayali River. We ate our “picnic” breakfast on the deck, boarded the skiffs and headed out on a narrow tributary, the Sapote River. Here we saw our first Monk Saki Monkeys in two groups, one with a baby. Shy and wary, these primates are totally arboreal, living high in the trees but sometimes descending to lower vegetation. They are diurnal and move in pairs or small family groups, feeding on fruits, berries, honey, some leaves, small mammals and birds. The female gives birth to only one young.

Another sloth, plus many new birds, such as Blue-and-yellow Macaw, Anhinga, Mealy Parrot, Black-fronted Nunbird and Great Egret, entertained us until we reached the spot for piranha fishing. Using a simple rod, line and hook baited with meat, we pulled up numerous Red-bellied, and a few Silver, Piranha for dinner. Pete M. was the fishing expert, seeming to have the best technique. We learned that most species of piranhas are NOT ferocious predators, and some eat fruits that fall into the river. It seems that the only time people are actually bitten by piranhas is when the fish are flopping around in the bottom of a boat! (Or when someone is trying to take one off a hook.)



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Next came a short walk in the forest where we saw Rubber Trees and the Common Forest Anole, a small brown lizard that eats insects. On the way back to the Aquamarina we saw five more Monk Saki Monkeys. It was a very good morning for primates indeed.

After lunch and a siesta we waited until 4:30 p.m. to go out again, this time intending to stay until after dark. It gets dark at around 6:00 p.m. near the equator, so we wouldn't have long to wait. We were all wearing ponchos as it was raining. We hoped it would stop soon, but if it didn't, we still had a good chance of seeing Spectacled and Black Caiman after dark. We never did see a black one, but Spectacled Caiman proved easy to spot due to flashlights plus guides and boat drivers with eagle eyes. The largest caiman was about four feet in length and was a handful. The boatman, Gene, was suspended well off the boat for this muddy capture. These crocodilians can grow to more than six feet in length but they are hunted by local people so most are much smaller. A very small creature, the Polka-dotted Tree Frog was also captured. Fishing Bats, a Great Potoo, Jabiru and Wood Storks were also highlights of this trip.



Upon return to the Aquamarina we had a late dinner and fell into bed.

Wednesday, 15 August -- Onboard the Aquamarina -- Pacaya River -- Ranger Station No. 2

Today we headed for Ranger Station No. 2 on the Pacaya River, a distance of 25 miles by skiff from the Aquamarina. The ranger station is deep into the Pacaya Samiria National Reserve. This is the largest reserve in Peru and the second largest in the entire Amazon region. Along the way the guides saw White-fronted Capuchin Monkeys and everyone saw several groups of Red Howler Monkeys. Useil is ready to join a Howler troop with his perfect imitation of the deafening sounds they make. A few of the other species we saw were Hoatzins, White Egrets, scavenging Black Vultures, White-necked Herons, the huge Horned Screamer, Green Ibis and the Festive Parrot. This parrot is easily recognized because it dances on the branch, swaying back and forth. Although we did not see Capybara on this trip, we did see their feces and footprints.

Lunch was served by the boat staff at Ranger Station No. 2. It provided a nice outing for them but they worked hard to set up and clean up our lunch. An ongoing project at the ranger station involves collecting Yellow Spotted Turtle eggs, burying them in enclosures and then releasing the hatchlings.

We returned to the Aquamarina at 2:00 p.m., just in time for a siesta. Later in the afternoon we had a cooking demonstration. The chef, with passenger assistance, wrapped rice, chicken, a hard boiled egg and olives in leaves, with the whole package to be steamed. This concoction is



called Juanex, and was tried at dinner. Next Johnny did a first run through of our species list and then it was time for more music and dinner. Carol and Howard presented "Animal Coloration" after dinner.

Thursday, 16 August -- Onboard the Aquamarina -- Two Village Visits

Today was village day. At Neuva York (seriously) we were greeted by the mayor, who is elected every four years. The village has 27 dwellings with six to eight individuals living in each one. The

very simple, elevated wooden houses with

thatched palm roofs must be replaced every six to seven years because they rot. Furniture is minimal. The Riberenos, mestizos that are a mix of European and native peoples, sleep on the floor, under mosquito netting. The mayor's family also eats on the floor, with food served on large banana leaves. Fish is served at every meal, an advantage to living along rivers.

This village plays soccer every Sunday, rotating the location with other local villages. New couples often form at these games as girls and boys from the same village usually do not date. If a permanent alliance is to be formed, the girl usually goes to the boy's village to live. Most Riberenos are Catholic but Nueva York has an Evangelical Church. Once a month the government sends a doctor to the village. Children are vaccinated.



At Neuva York we also visited the school, where the children sang songs to us, and we returned the favor. The classroom contained absolutely nothing except for desks and a blackboard. We left behind some school supplies that we had brought with us.

We had the opportunity to buy some more local crafts on our way back to the Aquamarina, which was conveniently docked at the village.

It rained again during our lunch and rest periods but that didn't stop us from our afternoon visit at San Jose de Paranapura. Here there are 40 families

with 180 people. Their village was under water during the unusually high water period early this year. There is a church in the village but it is not used. The animal spirit is strong here.

We had an appointment with the local Shaman, Juan, who is responsible for many villages. He doesn't charge anything for his services as he believes he has a gift. Shaman training takes a difficult eight years and Juan had five apprentices but only two finished, one male and one female. Because most young people are not interested in becoming shamans, much information is being lost. Juan is also a farmer and fisherman. He is concerned about deforestation and the lack of a cure for cancer, which he hopes to find.

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Our visit ended with more rain, but nevertheless crafts were available near where the Aquamarina was docked. Once again the boat's musicians entertained us before dinner. After dinner Carol talked about the poisonous amphibians and reptiles of the rain forest and how their toxins are being used to provide medications for us.

Friday, August 17 -- Onboard the Aquamarina -- The Marañon River and Terra Firma

Now on the Marañon River, we set out in a light rain for a walk on the terra firma. This is land that is NOT seasonally flooded and has a different assortment of wildlife. We came ashore near the village of San Jose de Sarapanea and headed for the property called Casual. Scrambling up a very muddy bank, preceded by local men hacking a trail to the main trail with machetes, we were greeted by a Bldr-eating and a Plnk-toed Tarantula, both on tree trunks. This was a place to see little frogs and toads and we saw quite a few. The Dead Leaf Mimic Toad was true to its name, and everyone was amazed to see how tiny the dart poison frogs were. We saw both the Red (or Orange) Backed and the Yellow Legged Dart Poison Frogs. We had already learned from Carol's lecture that these frogs use their bright colors to advertise their toxins to potential predators and that the toxins are acquired from the environment.



Insects seen included the inch-long Bullet Ant, which has a powerful sting, and the Armored Millipede. We saw the prop roots of the Walking Palm and the philodendron used to treat snakebite. This was a favorite walk for most us.



Returning to the Aquamarina we rested and then completed our species list with Johnny. We took a final sunset cruise on the skiffs and then returned to hear our musicians one last time before dinner. After dinner Howard gave the last presentation, on social insects, concentrating on the Leaf-Cutting and Army Ants in the region.

Saturday, August 18 -- To Iquitos and Lima

With hugs all around, we left the Aquamarina in Iquitos after breakfast and boarded a small covered boat, this time traveling on the Itaya River, a

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tributary of the Amazon. It took us along the outskirts of Iquitos, past the floating community of Belén. Some houses were perched on stilts while others floated during high water. Five thousand people live here, in a very small area.

Next we were delivered to the Iquitos headquarters of International Expeditions where we boarded a bus for the Las Malvinas School. This school is supported by IE and has an enormous garden, turtle pond and fish pond. Here city students can learn about rain forest plants and animals and participate in projects. After a brief city tour we were taken to the El Dorado Plaza Hotel for lunch and day rooms. Several of us swam in the beautiful pool.

A late afternoon flight took us from Iquitos to Lima where we waited for our evening flights home. A nice touch was our passes to a VIP lounge where we could use the Internet, snack and relax. Saying good-bye to each other, a perfect trip ended. A great time was had by all.

All photos by Carol Simon and Howard Topoff