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Amazon Voyage aboard *La Estrella Amazonica* March 20 – 28, 2015

Host from Naturalist Journeys: Peg Abbott
Expedition Leader from International Expeditions: Dennis Osorio
Guides: Segundo Mesia and Usiel Vasquez

26 Participants: Charlene, David, Ed, Beth, Bud, Gingy, Chuck, Paul, Barbara, Betty, Mary, David, Terri, Sue, Lanny, Bob, Becky, Sheila, William, Joseph, Dave, Ed, Joanne, Bill, Cheney, and Sally

Friday, March 20 Lima, Peru

Our group assembled in Lima at the Swissotel, near one of the large olive tree parks. Breakfast opened at 6:00 AM and was a lovely buffet with fresh fruits, cheeses, yogurts and hot dishes, including eggs and even a chicken and a creamy potato creation. We were to be checked and ready to go by 8:30, and promise of a companionable group emerged right from the start; the lobby was festive with chatter.

This morning our focus was culture, seeing a bit of Lima. They drove us around several impressive plazas, showing off large public sculptures and ornate buildings. We visited two very different Catholic churches: St. Francis of Assis and the official Cathedral, complete with the crypt of Francisco Pizarro, the Spanish conquistador who overthrew the Incan empire, surrounded by amazing mosaics that depicted historical scenes of the conquering.

We saw the Lima version of *The Last Supper* from the Quito School of artists, where Jesus is joined by locals, and dinner includes a platter with Cui, or guinea pig, a prized delicacy today. Our amazing guide, Miguel, could synthesize so much history that we learned a lot, and Ed and Beth commented that he seemed to know exactly what we needed to know and delivered knowledge in a way that was in-depth, while not overdoing it — a master of interpretation and a great start to the trip.

Many of the group walked through the catacombs at the adjacent monastery. A few, like Peg, lingered in the fresh air, watching Bananaquit and West Peruvian Dove in the courtyard. Time passed quickly and we experienced something unusual for Lima: a rain shower! Locals seemed totally unprepared for the rain, and seemed to quite enjoy it.



We ducked out of the shower and hopped on the bus to go check in at the airport for our flight to Iquitos. They had a great system in place for handling our luggage, so we checked in with ease and were escorted over to a very nice lunch at the Ramada Hotel across the street. We then returned to complete the near two-hour flight over the Andes to Iquitos.

Our first view of the rainforest was from the air. The pilot banked as we flew in to show off the wide meander of the Nanay River, cloaked in a never-ending swath of forest. After we landed, we drove across town, admiring myriad store fronts of roadside businesses, the scores of motorcycle tuk-tuks loaded with gear and people and the general Saturday merriment of markets, barbecue preparation and families coming together.



Our beautiful boat, *La Estrella Amazonica*, was waiting. We arrived just as they were turning on the lights to show off our large cabins — very welcoming! We all cringed as strong young men grabbed our all-too-heavy suitcases, two or three at a time, to carry down the narrow stairs — on their heads! Peg said, “Now that image should be placed first on the packing list!”

The first moments of our cruise were just at dark. We watched lights coming on in boats that were

moored in the river and heard sounds of the city, all of which faded away as we started upstream. Our welcome drink was a Pisco Sour, and a mighty fine Pisco Sour it was. They served them in a meeting hosted by Dennis Osorio, our cruise director, and Cleever, the hotel manager for the ship. We learned a few dos and don'ts: what to do in an emergency and where the coffee stations would be for those of us that liked to get up early. Dennis showed some lovely photos he'd taken on past voyages, conveying excitement for the week ahead, and educating us on what to bring, including ponchos. We would soon learn that it rained only in brief spurts, but these showers could be quick and powerful.

The bar was an immediate gathering ground and would remain so!

Our first dinner was a treat, fish and chicken



being the main dishes. The fish was local catfish, served with a parmesan cheese finish. The salad had long strings of heart of palm and we enjoyed a tightly-minced Pico de Gallo. The chicken was Mediterranean-style with tomatoes, onions and olives. Strawberry ice cream with fudge sauce was an instant success.

Sunday Morning, March 22



Several of us were up on deck to greet the dawn around 5:45 AM. It was light enough to see, and sounds alerted us to HUGE flocks of parakeets. With precious little light, we could not see which species, but soon learned by call that they were White-winged. Groups of hundreds at a time emerged from the canopy, flying from night roosts to feed. Chuck spotted the first Red-bellied Macaw; these came a few at a time in groups of three or four, often just over the tree crown. The White-winged Parakeet started coming down to where we could see them well; it was like an aerial ballet as we watched them mingle with abundant Fork-tailed

Flycatcher, a migrant that had just arrived over the last few weeks, present by the score.

Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture joined Yellow-headed Caracara on the near shore, and mid-river we caught sight of Large-billed Terns — some approached the boat quite closely. We also found a Black Caracara and two Green Ibis in the canopy, seen from the Observation Deck — a good find on this first morning.

We had our first outing in the skiffs, departing after breakfast for San Joaquin de Omaguas, an area of Queen Victoria lily pads, palms, cecropias and many animals. We were soon immersed in our quest, right away finding a hotspot where we had to choose: look at the Chestnut-eared Aracari, the Pink River Dolphin or the Green Iguana, all coming into view instantaneously — wow! A Three-toed Sloth was next, peeking his face out from behind large Cecropia leaves, a favorite food. The Iguana was a young one, but to us seemed large, spiny and alert. We also enjoyed watching a pair of Scarlet-crowned Barbet, a species we would encounter again.

We followed the river's edge, never getting very far



because we kept seeing so much. We angled to boat in for views of another sloth and then found our first Black Nunbird, which had a large insect it devoured while perched on a horizontal limb.

In the area with the lilies, we found a quiet spot to park and feasted our eyes on behaviors and our ears on sounds as the Yellow-rumped Cacique bent over to flare their wings and gurgle out courtship news, broken by Russet-backed Oropendola making their queer blowing-through-a-bottle sounds. Greater Kiskadee chimed in and we found a highly cooperative pair of White-winged Parakeet at close range, hanging out to keep their eyes on a possible nest locale in a termite mound low on the trunk of a tree. Usali spotted a real prize: a roosting Ladder-tailed Nightjar, close enough for many of us to get photos. Lovely blooms of Brazilian Magnolia caught our view. Ed spotted a Red-capped Cardinal, and in the tree nearby we came up with Yellow-throated Plushcrown feeding on quite large orange fruits, along with a Hooded Tanager.

Time sped by, and as *La Estrella* was steaming up the river, we decided it would be a good idea to keep up, hopping back on board in time for lunch. The dining room had such big windows that there was no break in sightings as we lined up for a wonderful selection of vegetable sushi (mushrooms and hearts of palm), fresh salad, yams, broccoli and Carne Saltado (jumping beef: a popular Peruvian dish made in a wok, the influence of Chinese culture, they explained). There was also more fresh fish, so tender it melted in your mouth; it was delicious with garlic and fresh lime. There was also rice and beans (red) and pico de gallo — yum! Desert was ice-cream and very fresh melon.

Officially on the schedule was “Power Nap,” but some of us hung out on deck, watching the sky turn a dark navy blue as more rains came in. In the morning we had a quick but intense shower, lasting only a few minutes; this one seemed it might prove stronger. The advantages of the rainy season are cool temperatures and the ability to explore far and



wide since water levels are high, so navigating becomes easier and faster and more ground can be covered.

Within an hour we were at the junction of the Marañon (Cashew Fruit) River and the Ucayalli, two rivers that join to officially become the Amazon. So we turned off on to the latter, leaving the main river for one of its major tributaries.

A Week of Exploring the Amazon



For the next week we all fell into a rhythm that, for over thirty years, has worked well for cruising Amazonian travelers: half-day outings, broken up by time to cool off, enjoy meals, relax and watch life go by from the deck top, followed by more time to explore. Early mornings were magical atop one of two observation decks; if we remained parked we had a canopy platform, and if we were moving we had a lovely sense of motion, a cool breeze and a variety of sightings since we traveled close to the edge of the forest much of the time. We began to notice nuances of subtle habitat change and understand what species to expect there.



La Estrella Amazonica was remarkably comfortable. Built locally, and employing the many years of experience of having groups, the ship's architecture made the best use of space, giving us a spacious feeling with a high arching canopy that shaded the open-air deck. Big windows in the dining room made us feel like we had never left the outside. The bar was a most popular spot, and they even had a small boutique with local handicrafts. The meals varied a lot and we marveled at what they could do with a limited number of ingredients. They obviously purchased local fruits and vegetables during the voyage, and the presentation was lovely, often a kaleidoscope of color. We looked forward to every meal, and no one went hungry!



Segundo and Usiel were our main naturalist guides, and they were truly fountains of knowledge. Each had his own style, so by changing

boats we could mix and match our experience. Each had a ready smile, and often interacted with the locals as we passed by on our cruise, pulling to shore to see what a fisherman had caught or to observe someone building a boat. Dennis was our patient cruise director, knowledgeable, flexible and fun.



One day we went to a local school and Usiel had the whole class singing their hearts out for us, coaching them to sing louder and faster, ending with the Hokey Pokey and all of us dancing in and about, and shaking it all about. They led us through a local market, where we found fruit juices and smoothies being mixed up like fast food in the USA, along with lovely little pre-set portions of tomatoes, onion and garlic and cilantro on the local leaf they use like a taco, ready to just add fish and go.



Some areas we visited were pristine, and we saw no one along the way. Others were obviously village canoe routes — it was fun to see the variety of boats and the confidence of paddlers, young and old. Even the school bus here is a boat! Segundo especially seemed to love the machete work and often was called upon to carve our pathways. Sometimes on lakes we got to rev it up and travel quickly, however most times we motored along quietly, always alert for sightings.



When we pulled over to observe, if mats of vegetation were present, we'd find a delightful mix of frogs. The more we looked, the more we found — every color of the rainbow.



We spent a lot of time watching two species of dolphin, Pink River and Gray, which seemed bent on eluding our cameras. They were around a lot, especially where tributaries met the main river. They would emerge several times to breathe and then take a leap for us to see. Sloths were found on several days and the ones we watched were fairly active, which was nice to see. Yellow Bush Rats and Night Monkeys peeking out of holes were favorite sightings.



Toucans were also a favorite species for many of us; Chestnut-eared Aracari was one we saw the most often. We also heard them, mainly White-throated toucan, deep in the forest, barking loudly at dusk and dawn. There was a whole lineup of parrots and parakeets to sort through, sixteen species in total, including the big macaws. The density of parakeets was a surprise to all; at times we literally saw flocks

of thousands. Another species that we just caught in migration, also in the thousands, was Fork-tailed Flycatcher — wow! We found some outrageous woodpeckers, including Crimson-crested, Yellow-tufted, Lineated and Cream-colored. Herons and egrets were everywhere, ten species in total, and we all loved the challenge of finding five species of kingfisher. Chuck was particularly keen to find Green-and-rufous Kingfisher and he passed his enthusiasm on — we saw it several times in some of the small tributaries. Horned Screamer were also fun to find, as were Hoatzin. We were able to see one Hoatzin on her nest ... amazing! We also found several family groups.



Fishing is the livelihood of almost everyone living there, and our patient guides helped us try our hand at it. They loaded up hooks with small bits of meat, and piranhas and sabalos were soon in our boats. It was good fun and always a surprise to find out who was the most skilled at catching.



The staff had a great way of mixing up the days — serving breakfast in beautiful picnic baskets; getting us to a safe place to swim; visiting a village to interact with locals and buy some local fruits or handicrafts; and going out at night to experience the night birds, stars and mosquitoes. We did not find an Anaconda in the wild, but were fortunate to release one that had been turned in by a villager to the rangers. It was



a big snake and we were pleased that through

education, villagers are asking for relocation rather than killing them in the reserves. We did see a good number of large Caiman lizards, some with heads of an intense, deep red; Christmas colors on display. They were often sunning on very high branches, occasionally dropping into the water. Heavy-bodied, they were still really good swimmers.



On Supay Creek, some explored by kayak. Plants were fun to observe — the Victoria Giant Water Lilies were quite popular — and on the night excursion we got to see a flower bloom. Amazon Magnolias were pretty remarkable, and fruiting trees were great to find as they hosted mixed flocks of birds. Many bromeliads were in bloom. The pampas grasses were favored night roosts for parakeets, with clouds of them bursting to the sky at dawn. Dead trees posed like sculptures at several tributary junctions and served as favorite

places for Turkey Vulture and Large-billed Tern. Floating trees carried Spotted Sandpiper and both species of terns along the current; twenty or more could be on these floating rest stations.

The sheer mass of trees, and the way they differed in composition, was fascinating. Many palms were observed. In tall-standing palms we found macaws nesting. On our terrestrial walk we saw some very large trees, as we did on some of the finest small tributaries.

Monkeys were seen daily, the most common being spider monkeys, often with Black-fronted Nunbirds accompanying them, benefitting from the insects that the monkeys' rapid feeding motions stir up. We saw Monk Saki several times and admired their thick, curly hair. We saw Brown Capuchins two or three times, and lively, small Saddle-backed Tamarins as well. We saw Pygmy Marmosets on our last sunset boat ride and were also fortunate to spot Night Monkeys clustered near a roost hole.



They peered out and one raised his hand above the others, as if to wave. Lanny caught it on video! One of the most difficult to see, and the most skittish, was the Red Howler. Despite being protected in reserves, they must still be hunted strongly, because this species was very hard to find. We did, however, hear them a number of mornings, which was fun.

We encountered twenty species of raptors, a few very elusive, and others fairly common. Black-collared Hawk were perhaps the more common and we were fortunate to find a nesting pair up one of the tributaries. One excursion interrupted dinner, but the hawk just kept eating at close range. Seen every day in good number was the Yellow-headed Caracara, often in pairs and very vocal each morning.

Our group was most compatible, from all over the country and from all walks of life. Naturalist Journeys / Caligo Ventures travelers comprised about half of the group, but we mixed freely with everyone and made new friends we hope to see again. The natural history interest ranged from intense to casual, but somehow the crew seemed to know how to manage this. For those keen, the extra effort of sighting from the deck in the early mornings and between outings, resulted in finding

a good number of extra species.

People were good at shouting out special sightings. At Peg's request (and Chuck's urging) we were able to add another small tributary cruise one day while others enjoyed a cultural excursion. There was ample opportunity for photography and it was fun to see participants sharing and learning new skills. We are all especially grateful to Lanny and Sue, who put a good deal of effort into taking video; later sending us a marvelous DVD of the voyage; video footage interspersed with his still shots, mixed in with those of Sue, Jonathan and Peg.

One of the best mixers was the nightly music concerts on deck — lively renditions of Peruvian and American tunes — with lots of flute, small guitar and vocals. They made it fun by assembling different styles of music on different nights and appearing in different costumes as bands with different names. They were professional musicians, using good microphones with an ample sound system, and they had just put out their first CD. On our final night they hosted a "battle of the bands." Our party gals got us up and dancing, and one night begged the performance not to end. We had some sleepy-eyed breakfast cooks the next day!

We had several map orientation sessions up on deck, which were really helpful. The river map was under the glass of the tables for quick reference, but it was great to have the guides review our





stops and progress. We went onto two of the major tributaries and countless small ones. It was very special to know and understand this geography better. After a few days, the creeks we explored sort of ran together, so we really needed the review. The growing number of reserves and the system they have that involves locals as wardens for part of the year in exchange for the sustainable fish harvesting rights for export in other seasons, seems to work.

The kitchen staff did a session on local fruits, letting us taste varieties that we will never see in our groceries, as they do not hold up to export. We also had a hands-on cooking demonstration towards the end of the trip. We even learned how they folded our towels so creatively each day!

And then there was swimming, kayaking, lounging a bit, and cocktails....







Our bird list was impressive. Tallying it was a chore!

We had few biting insects to contend with other than mosquitos after dark. The cabins had individual



cooling units which were very quiet to run. It was so nice to be able to control your own temperature — so many ships have central cooling. We also had small porches off our cabins, so nature was always a step away.



The stars at night were amazing. We also had a few really grand weather events: big storms brewing up, gray turning to black skies and wind, then all blowing over with the sun returning. The sounds were wonderful, monkeys either chattering or, with the Red Howlers, howling. Birds often alerted us to their presence by call and at dawn some uttered songs only heard at that time. Some were musical, others

raucous, some persistent and others elusive. We had a good time, so in our boats there was often chatter, but sometimes we'd focus and just listen, quiet with attention ... magical.



Dennis was born to be an Expedition Leader, and he makes International Expeditions shine. The crew of *La Estrella* seemed like family; they made every effort to keep us comfortable and they worked hard to keep the ship immaculate. But they also had a lot of fun, and that was contagious. The boat drivers were excellent spotters, and they could certainly maneuver the small boats. Often we were so intent on what we were seeing or photographing, we forgot they had to contend with current, small branches and other critters!

Leaving the river is always hard! It was heartwarming to know that the voyages run by International Expeditions have such positive results for locals; all of our crew were people of the river, and much of our food was purchased locally. We all had the opportunity to donate to solar water treatment systems that can benefit a whole village, a school or an individual family — one of the best ways to promote good health. We had the rare opportunity to see a very different life, that of people choosing to remain in rural areas of the world's most amazing river. They have skills we can't imagine. We were there at high water time, a great time because it concentrates the animals, and we watched people cope by moving into community houses to just wait it out. Their cattle fended for themselves, riding on mats of vegetation like arks. Even the ranger huts were flooded at the reserves. We had little to do all week except soak it all in — what a privilege.

Amazonia, we will return!



Itinerary Recap

Friday, March 20

Lima, Peru – city sites

Saturday, March 21

Flight to Iquitos / Boarding *La Estrella Amazonica*

Sunday, March 22

Morning: San Joaquin de Omaguas

Afternoon: Yucuruchi — birding from the Deck / Rio Ucayali

Monday, March 23

Early Morning: Supay Creek with Machete track to a small lake

Morning: Nuevo Aucayacu Village and return by new shortcut — exploring by machete!

Afternoon: Requena Town / Tapiche River / Lake Yuracocha (crashing through floating vegetation where we found many Horned Screemers / Shortcut to palms with macaws / Faucett Channel

Tuesday, March 24

Morning: Zapote River Private Reserve with picnic breakfast. This is the private reserve where Nixon was waiting for us to collect fees and upon return, our treats from the breakfast fare. This was a lovely, wild stretch of river, free of high hunting pressure due to protection from this community — we were happy to support this ecotourism in action.

Afternoon: A small lake near Ranger Check Point 1, Pacaya Samiria Reserve. This is where we stayed into the night to see Great Potoo, nighthawks and the opening of Victoria water lilies. It was also a great creek to find a variety of small tree frogs on floating mats of vegetation.

Wednesday, March 25

Morning: Ranger Station 2, Pacaya Samiria Reserve. This is where we boated over twenty miles upriver to Yanayacu Lake for swimming.

Afternoon: Pacaya Samiria Reserve: El Dorado Creek. Fishing spot and Hoatzins, a blackwater river.

Thursday, March 26

Early Morning (6:30 – 8:30 AM) Yanallpa Creek, a place of Night Monkeys and aracarís.

Morning: Kayaking Irikawa Tributary with option for birding — Blue-Throated Piping Guan sighted here.

This outing was 10:00 – Noon / Mid-day navigation close to confluence, just before San Jose Village.

Afternoon: Visit to the Shaman and shopping / Across from San Jose de Sarapanea. An alternate activity was a boat ride across from the village on Yarapa Creek, a magical afternoon ending with Capped Heron. Highlights included Paradise Jacamar, Green-and-Rufous Kingfisher and Spotted Tody Flycatcher. A lovely river and lodges with local tourists, fishing and touring.

Friday, March 27

Early Morning: 6:30 AM Nauta Market visit.

Morning: Close to Nuevo de Octubre, Terra Firma forest walk at Casual.

Afternoon: Alfresco lunch and passing back by the confluence, officially back on the main Amazon River.

Saturday, March 28 Iquitos Dockage / Manatee Rescue Center / Return to Lima



packing instructions — true meaning to “pack light!”

We still had time before flying out to see some of the city, crossing it to visit a conservation program, the Manatee Rescue Center. There were thousands of tuk-tuks on the road (little motorized vehicles with awnings) that seemed to be the conveyance of choice. We wound our way through them, out towards the forest, and were greeted by a guide that showed us their work. Who could resist baby manatees! Their hairy muzzles were so soft; we encountered these babies at the end of our tour, when they let us feed them a few water cabbage leaves. We also saw turtles, a lively band of Spider Monkeys, a couple of Scarlet Macaw and an orphaned Three-toed Sloth. Environmental education is a key component to what they do, and we saw classrooms for the students, a lot of art and some fun garden sculptures.

Our final morning we woke to sounds of the city, parked up against the bank from which we had embarked on this journey a week ago. Blue-gray tanager fed on fruits at close range to the upper deck. This was a fun photography spree because the Amazon version of this species sports a broad white wing patch. We had one last breakfast of tropical fruits and other goodies, then watched (in horror) as the deck hands marched our giant suitcases up a very steep set of steps. They did so with ease, but Peg will put this photo in next year’s



departure. Then our flock scattered to homes far and wide.

What an amazing trip!

They graciously got us day rooms in Iquitos at a nice hotel, which let us repack and otherwise prepare for the flight home. Some of us then enjoyed a walking tour around the city and others caught up with the world by listening to the news or doing emails.

Our transportation fun of the day was personal tuk-tuk rides. At days end, our flight to Lima went smoothly and we had time for dinner at the hotel across the street from the airport, ahead of