



Amazon River Cruise Trip Report 2016 Aboard *La Estrella Amazonica* March 25 – April 3, 2016

Trip Report, by Karen Worcester, with photos by Greg Smith

Thurs., Mar. 25 Arrivals in Lima

A long flight put most of us in Lima the Thursday before Easter, 2016. A quick walk across the street from the airport took some of us to the Wyndham Hotel. Our hotel was pleasant, close, and quiet and that was all everyone needed.



Fri., Mar. 25 Lima



After an enormous Peruvian-style breakfast, eight of us were picked up and transferred to the Swissôtel, where the rest of the group was waiting. This was a truly lovely place in San Isidro, with fabulous restaurants around the corner, including Tanta, where we had ceviche and paella and seafood stew for lunch. Then for dinner at Lima 27, we enjoyed a fabulous dining adventure, starting with a sampler of Pisco Sours (passion fruit, lime, grape, strawberry, and "sweet" passion fruit), a checkerboard of Habla Causa — fabulous little potato balls in green, orange,

and yellow, topped with dabs of tuna, sweet potato, olive, and ceviche. Duck confit salad, spicy with arugula and marinated onion and fig was the end of the main course, followed by an incredible cheesecake with some delicious tropical fruit relish.

Lima, now a town of 10-million people, was founded in 1535 by the Spanish at the confluence of three rivers, one of which is the Rimac, or River that Speaks. It speaks sad sounds now, as it is a channelized conduit for trash,



but it must have been an amazingly beautiful spot that the Spanish found here. Originally named the City of Kings, it was renamed Lima, as a derivation from Rimac. This is a rich area for both agriculture and fisheries, with the cold Humboldt Current flowing north past the city. It is very arid here in spite of the snow-fed rivers, with only a few millimeters of rain a year. Old, gnarled olive trees, hundreds of years old, shade the city parks and neighborhoods, and an ancient press is testament to the olive oil that was produced here. There are many archeological sites in the city as well, including the mudstone pyramids of the Maranga culture, used for sacred rituals and sacrifice over two thousand years ago. These were built mortar less, perhaps to better withstand the area's frequent earthquakes. Stone pyramids of the Caril people, nearer to the coast, are much older, perhaps 5000 years old (second only to Mesopotamia in terms of age). The Incan empire came much later, flourishing in the 1400s, with 25-million people in parts of Peru, Ecuador, Brazil, Chile, Argentina, and Colombia. Both Lima and neighboring Callao were once walled cities, and between them, in the vicinity of the high-rise condos and hotels of San Isidro, were orchards and plantations with beautiful haciendas.



The city has suffered many earthquakes; so much of the oldest architecture has been destroyed. But the beautiful La Iglesia de las Mercedes from the 1600s, has survived. There is some thought that buildings with large water wells beneath them may absorb the shock better. The balconies throughout old town give a clue as to the age of the building, with old, carved hardwood windows open to the air being from Colonial times and glassed-in ones being more contemporary.

After the 1600s, so many of the indigenous population had succumbed to disease that African slaves were brought in to replace them as a work force. During that time the native population dropped from 25-million to 2-million. Much later, in 1854, the revered president Ramon Castilla ruled that no babies could be born as slaves, and the government paid slave owners to free their African slaves.

Sat., Mar. 26 Iquitos / The Amazon River

We left early for our air transit to Iquitos, a city of 800,000 named after the "slippery people." There is a single 60-mile long highway connecting to Nauta, but no other roads connect to the rest of the country. All travel in or out is by air or by boat. We arrived in Iquitos by lunchtime, though we postponed that happy event with a very satisfying trip to an Amazonian Manatee rescue center. We got to hold hands with a Woolly Monkey, and feed a baby Manatee some Amazonian herbage. These Manatees are the smallest of the five species, about 3 meters at adulthood. They are gentle vegetarians, eating a third of their weight in water lettuce every day. They have a soft, velvety snout punctuated by stubby little white whiskers. So cute! This center conducts a huge amount of educational outreach to the communities, particularly to children in the area; and over the years they have reached out to over 80,000 kids. Manatees are hunted for food and are captured as pets. Many times, after a field trip, children will return the next day with monkeys, manatees, and turtles to return to the Center. We also got to see the impressive Paiche (Arapaima) — a giant prehistoric fish that mouth incubates its babies and is a highly desirable food item, the Mata Mata Turtle with a snake neck and a spade for a head, and Yellow-spotted Turtle babies, which are successfully hatched here and returned to the jungle when they are a little less vulnerable to predation.



We then enjoyed a box lunch en route to the other side of Iquitos, and once there, we spent time at a truly exceptional Indigenous Amazon Museum. The birds that gave their lives for headdresses — oh my! Beautiful green and gold and blue and red crowns, collars, and belts, and harpy eagle skirts. Necklaces of armadillo teeth and jaguar claws and peccary hooves, and tassels of beetle wings. The museum had black and red pre-Colombian ceramics 1800 years old or more, including ceramic "underwear," tied on with string — apparently made by the owner according to the presumed necessary size. There was a display of head hunter paraphernalia, including the heads themselves (some shrunken and some not) with mouths sewn shut to keep the spirits contained, eye

"pinchers" (long forks with tines just the right distance apart), and other gruesome tools of the trade.

A quick walk through Iquitos was colorful, with rickshaws (tuk tuks), open air buses, and fruit vendors. It has seen the boom days of rubber, lumber, and oil. The rubber boom lasted from 1880 to 1914, but rubber tree seeds taken to Sri Lanka contributed to the collapse of the industry here. Remnants of rubber baron lifestyle remain, including one house shipped intact, constructed entirely of iron. Many of the older houses have Portuguese "majolica" style tile, reminding us of their former grandeur. We enjoyed a drink at Fitzcarraldo's, named after the Klaus Kinsky jungle epic. Near the downtown center sinks an unfinished nine-story building — ill-conceived from the start in this modest town.



We boarded the *La Estrella Amazonica* on the tributary river Italya. It is a beautifully maintained, relatively new (2.5 years old), three-story riverboat. Hard-wood decking gleams, our comfortable room had a balcony, drapes, a small desk, and ample storage. The upper floor is a fabulous covered viewing deck with bar, potted palms, couches, and fans spinning gently. The weather had been overcast and the sky opened up briefly as we boarded, just enough for some to use their umbrellas. Our Expedition Leader was Guillermo, a knowledgeable young man from Lima, and our two guides were Segundo and Juan. In the end, this trip took us 320 miles up the Amazon River to the Pacaya River tributary.



Greg, our Naturalist Journeys' tour leader, managed to see pink and grey river dolphins in the few minutes he was up on deck with our local guides. After a little deck time, we had an orientation, and ate a delicious dinner of dorado (a type of catfish), vegetables, yucca, and a variety of salads. The catfish here is fantastic and apparently 50% of the fish species in the Amazon are catfish. There are also freshwater stingrays and a species of flounder!

Easter Sunday, Mar. 27

What an amazing start to the morning! At Porvenir, we took the boats out along the east bank in a forest dominated by cecropia, acacia, ficus, gourd tree, kapok tree, Amazon mangrove, yellow cassias, and the introduced breadfruit. There were blooming vines everywhere, including (also introduced) purple morning glory. Here and there a crop of yucca (cassava) was carved out of the pampas grass that lined the water's edge, and thatched houses were always nearby. Flocks of Barn Swallow careened overhead. The hollow ring of Oropendola calls announced their giant pendulous nests, which ornamenting Cecropia trees. We saw a healthy congregation



of Red-bellied Macaw and Short-tailed Parrot lined up perfectly in silhouette to frustrate the photographers among us. We were also treated to a rare sighting of Parker's Spinetail in the pampas at the water's edge. The Capped Heron may have been the most elegant of the many birds we saw today, with its blue and purple bill, pale yellow neck and chest, and tasteful feather headdress. Add in a Sloth, and those were the highlights before breakfast.

For our second outing of the morning, at San Joaquin, seeing the Saddle-backed Tamarin was one of the star events. This monkey is tiny (at about a pound) and darling, with rufous fur and a

distinctive "saddle back" of grey brindle. The Equatorial Saki is a larger monkey with a long brushy tail, was another favorite sighting this morning. They were hunted for meat and for the fancy table dusters made from those beautiful tails.

Along the river we passed the occasional village and a rum factory. We visited with a family on a raft, headed downriver to sell balsa wood, bananas, and other goods loaded on board. They had the whole family aboard including a Capuchin Monkey and a baby Chachalaca, and were filleting a big catfish to barbecue for dinner. Later we had a great look at a Sloth and the de-leafed cecropia he had for dinner. We learned that Sloths are a favorite food of Puma and Harpy Eagle, as well as that when they come to the ground to evacuate their bowels, the same moth that eats the algae growing in their fur lays her eggs in the fertile droppings.



A large portion of this area is in the Pacaya-Samiria National Reserve, which means the people can live there and make their livings, but hunting of many of the species is prohibited (Manatee, for example). This 2,800,000-hectare area includes 208 villages and 120,000 people. The Nature Conservancy has environmental education programs that are changing the awareness in the local populations, for example, about protecting nest trees. For our afternoon trip, we went up a side tributary, the Yarapa River. At the Yarapa and Kumaseba River confluence, we were told we

would see dolphins, and we did! The dolphins like the interface of black and brown water, and are a regular sighting in this area. It is bad luck to hunt them, and the people believe they live in villages underwater (maybe they do!). The males are much larger than the females — up to nine feet in length.

We also saw the tiniest of the Amazon monkeys, the Pygmy Marmoset (Pocket Monkey) on a Ybos tree. They little

primates scratch the bark and then eat the sap that is exuded. Shortly after, we passed by Long-nosed Bats,



hunkered like knotholes on the side of a tree trunk. This area is protected by several communities that came together and decided to ban timber companies from the area, after they were promised too many times about the schools that would be built, and in fact, were not. To cap off the day, we had a glimpse of a Hoatzin!

The evening surprise was a concert by the ship's employees, the "Chunky Monkeys," with Juan as MC and cajon drummer, Segundo on the maracas, Milton playing guitar, Merund on charango, and Elvis and on bongos, pan flute, and quena (bamboo flute). It was

such a treat, but alas, the last time we would hear them until the "Battle of the Bands" on our final evening.

Mon., Mar. 28

Via skiffs, we skirted around islands in the middle of Yanallpa Creek, which is entirely in the National Reserve. Despite the fact that the branch we traveled was up to 25 feet deep, in the dry season it becomes land for rice farming, as it is the shallower of the two channels. Enormous Horned Screamer, goose-like vegetarians that bray like donkeys, looked on from the tree tops as Guillermo wrangled a baby anaconda before breakfast. A Ladder-tailed Nightjar rested in a shrub over the water, trying not to peek as we passed. A Monk Saki, with luxurious tail dangling, perched in the very smooth-barked "firewood tree" and another Saddle-backed Tamarin posed from a branch, while three Night Monkeys (Owl Monkeys) crowded at the mouth of a tree cavity to get a look at us. These last three were far cuter than anything reasonably ought to be! A Chingadero also peered from his tree hole to see what we were up to. This is the Spanish name, sensibly given by the locals to the Yellow-crowned Brush-tailed Rat, for store keepers who sit at their shop windows.

In the later morning we visited Yanallpa village. We strolled on a long, mostly concrete sidewalk constructed during the Fujimori years that bordered the land and orchards of villagers. We saw cotton, Brazilian guava, grapefruit, mango, papaya, calabash, avocado, cacao, and corn being grown as we entered the village, as Leafcutter Ants scurried along with a mango leaf from their gardens. This area is in the lowlands, meaning it is flooded during high water season. In Peru that means the villagers pay no taxes, and the land, though government owned, is more or less homesteaded. There is a lovely tradition here: the village "gives" a piece of land to a new couple, helps them build a home and plants them bananas to get them started. Segundo noted that they don't actually marry here, but begin living together as couples around the age of 14 or 15. The villagers all have canoes, since during the height of the high water season the village itself is flooded. And of course, the houses are all on stilts, with bicycles and tuk tuks parked beneath. There is electricity from diesel generators; each family pays 20 soles a month for electricity or they get their wires cut!

We were met in Yanallpa by a village elder, wearing rubber boots to keep away the fer-de-lance (which are bad luck to see ... it means your wife may be having relations with your neighbor!). There were 65 families here, and we were lucky to see kindergarten in action. The charming young teacher had the children sang and said our names, and we, of course, sang back. Teachers are sent by the government and are obligated to stay anywhere from a year to an entire career, wherever they are assigned. They have been among the lowest paid of workers, but slowly are being treated more equitably. The children all look well fed, happy, and healthy, and the women work hard scrubbing clothes — laundry was hanging everywhere. We were fortunate to be invited into a home, which was a very simple structure with two open air porch areas for living, and an enclosed sleeping area and kitchen. Rain water was collected in a metal catchment coming off the roof, and hammocks swayed in the breeze. We bought a few handicrafts there ... I am quite pleased with my tarantula and lucky bean basket.



After some afternoon down time (and a siesta for some), we anchored near Requeña, a city of 35,000 on the black water Tapicha River near its junction with the Amazon. We again saw Pink River Dolphin where the two waters mixed — what a treat to see dolphin “footprints” on the water’s surface.

As we headed out on a tour of the Requeña waterfront, Juan regaled us with tales of his head hunter ancestry. He said his people used blow guns tipped with curare mixed with bullet ant toxin to hunt. The waterfront itself is a misnomer, as at this

time of year, all of the houses are flooded, and the long-shafted “peki peki” motors allow canoes carrying local families to skim along at speed.

This area has a lot of introduced pampas grass lining the waterways, but there are also areas where native and cultivated water plants are thriving. We saw camu camu, a rooted plant that can grow in water up to 10 feet deep, which is sold for juice — Juan said it is the new “Acai.” Wattled Jacana and Purple Gallinule are found here, and we again had great looks at dolphins, lounging at the surface during sunset, literally beneath a rainbow. They are indeed pink! The locals leave these incredible creature in peace; the legend is that the river dolphins will capture you and pull you into the river! We all enjoyed watching the legendary mammals as they foraged among the water vegetation for apple snails and other foods.



Bob got very excited to see a Lined Seedeater, one of the few remaining Amazon birds he was seeking. We also spotted a Chestnut Seedeater and a Sloth taking a sunbath in a dead tree (they enjoy the heat, given their very slow metabolism). The beautiful soft light of the late afternoon lit up hundreds (maybe thousands) of Fork-tailed Flycatcher, and Red-bellied Macaw stuck their heads out of their Moriche Palm homes to keep an eye on us. They prefer this palm, as its spongy center absorbs rain water, which keeps their homes from flooding.

We then motored back home to *La Estrella* and a fabulous performance by a new band, *Juan and the Village Boys*. Dinner continued to be outstanding, with fresh catfish every night, hearts of palm and other fresh and marinated vegetables, sweet potato, and homemade ice cream from a variety of tropical fruits (mostly unknown to us!).

Tues., Mar. 29

This morning we took a long excursion up the Zapote River, which traverses a 150-mile long island between the Ucayali River and the Purinaya Channel, and enjoyed a beautiful baskets full of a very robust breakfast on the water. We passed a cannonball tree, covered with enormous round fruits. Monkeys break open the fruits high in the trees, while Tinamou clean up the remnants below. The beautiful and huge Ceiba tree, another member of the kapok family, is harvested for plywood, while the sap of the Weeping Fig is used as an emetic once or twice a year to clean out intestinal parasites. The flora and fauna of this ecosystem are truly amazing.



A Spectacled Owl posed for us and we saw plenty of raptors this morning, including Slate-colored Hawk, Greater Black Hawk, Osprey, Black-collared Hawk, Crane Hawk with nest, and one boat caught a glimpse of a Harpy Eagle. The other boat was consoled with Dusky Titi Monkey, a favorite food of the Harpy Eagle. A favorite for the day (for those who missed the Harpy) was the Crane Hawk, which uses its long orange legs to pull frogs out of bromeliads.

We also passed a huge Yellow-rumped Cacique nest. We were fascinated to learn that Cacique



means "chief" — a nod to the male Cacique's colony of females. A large caiman lizard, in full color with russet head and green body speckled in yellow, sat still for an extended photographic session before dropping from his branch into the river. Caiman lizards are apparently quiet tasty — the other white meat — possibly because of their gourmet diet of apple snails. We then had another beautiful look at a Monk Saki. He was clearly an alpha male, and mad too — he shook branches vigorously at us, creating a leaf fall, and made all kinds of ruckus. Later we found a mixed group of monkeys that included Monk Saki, Common Squirrel Monkey, and Bolivian Squirrel Monkey leaping and climbing from tree to

tree. We also had great woodpeckers today, including Lineated Woodpecker and a pair of Chestnut Woodpecker.

Our excursion ended when water tobacco and other water plants filled the channel to capacity. We stopped there to inspect the flora and associated insect fauna, with Rainbow Grasshopper and Scarlet-tailed Dragonfly seeming showy until a Blue Morpho Butterfly showed up and stole the show. The Variable Clown Treefrog was pretty fabulous, too.

After a long nap time, we had a lecture by Segundo about the Pacaya-Samiria National Reserve that we were about to enter. The reserve is the size of Belgium — five-million acres and three basins included. It is bounded by the Marañon River and the Pacaya-Ucayali River. The names of these rivers are fascinating: Ucayali means "canoe breaker," named for its strong currents, and Marañon means cashew nut, which grows in these waters. Interestingly, the local people eat the cashew fruit, but not the nut, as the nuts need to go through a roasting process to be edible.

Ninety-five percent of this reserve is lowlands that flood during high water season; there are thousands of lakes to be found here. 24,000 people live in the reserve itself, and another 68,000 in the buffer surrounding it. Poaching is a problem, but conservationists are working with the locals with many innovative efforts to get the community to understand the advantages of protection. For example, some locals work as volunteer rangers and are paid in fish, to sell both for food and for the aquarium trade. Baby Arahuana go for over a dollar a piece in the aquarium trade. These acrobatic fish, also called water monkeys, jump out of the water to shake beetles out of overhanging shrubs. Turtles are collected, hatched, and kept safely until their shells harden, with an ensuing survival rate of 75%. Additionally a quota of turtle eggs is reserved for the tourist and pet markets. Tourist visitation fees bring in

income to run the park, and the World Wildlife Fund and Nature Conservancy donate funds. There is also a considerable amount of education going on, particularly of the village children.

Our night trip was wonderful. We traveled up the Pacaya River to the ranger station with stops for Pink River Dolphin at the river mouth, and White-fronted Capuchin and Squirrel Monkey acrobatics. We also had a good look at a Chestnut-fronted Macaw. The forest seemed relatively pristine, not invaded by morning glory or pampas grass, and there were many kapok trees, with heliconia and nectar-rich legumes beneath. We signed in at the station, where seven or eight rangers live under the direction of the Chief, who is a woman and a biologist (!). Then we plowed into the vegetation at the water's edge to find a small channel to a nearby lake. There we were dazzled by Amazon giant water lilies blooming in white and pink. The flowers turn pink after they are fertilized by the rhinoceros beetle that is attracted to their sweet scent. The leaves only last about six weeks before



disintegrating, and the pads are enormous (three to five feet across here, but up to 10!) with spines along the rim — newly growing pads are frilly red and green and crenulated. These lily pads are so substantial, that sometimes Jacana nest on them! We met a man fishing on the lake, who was also a ranger, and spent some time looking at his catch, which included Walking (Armored) Catfish (totally prehistoric), and large-toothed Tambaqui, a piranha-like fish of the vegetarian variety with molar shaped teeth instead of the expected sharp variety. These guys can get up to 35 pounds and 45" in length. While out and about, we disturbed a Horned Screamer on her nest with six eggs, which are huge (although not quiet Ostrich-sized).

We indulged on ginger tea and fabulous yucca and plantain chips while watching the lingering sunset and Pauraque as they began their evening excursions, passing Festive Parrot and terns returning to their roosts. After dark, Juan spotlighted the banks of the lake, searching for Spectacled Caiman. He found one (perhaps 40" in length) and wrestled him to the boat, where we got a close look — they are beautiful animals. We also found a good assortment of tree frogs (Polka-dot, Pygmy hatchet-faced, and Variable Clown), as well as an Amazon Blunt-

headed Tree Snake. The other boat was hailed, and as they arrived the snake vanished. After much bumping around and looking, the snake found himself, deciding to enjoy his fifteen minutes of fame ... he had slithered up onto our boat, and allowed himself to be caught and duly photographed!

We headed back to an amazing light show of spotlights sweeping the forest for eye shine, silent flickering lightening illuminating the clouds, and lightening bugs sparking the tree tops. Night Herons were on duty, and Long-nosed and fishing Bats were out foraging. It was a good night.

Wed., Mar. 30



This morning we traveled up Atun Posa, still in the Reserve. The ever informative Segundo told us stories about the forest while we watched Blue-and-yellow Macaw fly by in family groupings of three, and Screamer looked on from the tree tops, with an occasional "hee haw" commentary. We passed a perfect line of Long-nosed Bat on the underside of a tree overhanging the water, resting after the night's foraging efforts. This area was very marshy and there are patches of quick sand, and the forests are very diverse, with many figs, kapok, acacia, and firewood trees. Shreds of bark remained

here and there on the otherwise smooth firewood tree, which sheds its skin twice a year. The locals use the bark as fire starter, and the very hard wood (even when freshly cut) makes an excellent fire (as well as furniture). One of the palms that overhangs the water has a very small nut-like fruit that provides food for a fruit-eating piranha, which crushes the nuts with its powerful jaws.

We explored a side channel and scared a Hoatzin off her nest. She stretched her wings and displayed beautifully for us, as four others looked on from farther back in the forest — what a treat. Naked at birth, Hoatzin chicks are born with a hook-like claw at their shoulder; when threatened by predators, they hang underneath the nest using the claw, and if necessary drop into the water to evade capture, using the claw to pull themselves back up to the nest. They are leaf-eaters, and like cows are ruminants, with two stomachs. And apparently they can mate up to 30 times per day (which has nothing to do with having two stomachs ... or cows!).



We were just inspecting a tree covered head-to-toe in bromeliads, ferns and other epiphytes, when Guillermo called us back to see an Tiger Rat Snake, high up in a Pittosporum. This snake (about 5 feet long) hunts small birds and rats in the trees. He was a beauty, with yellow belly and black bands ... an impressive find by Guillermo. We returned to the bromeliad tree, to find a Great Potoo or “frog mouth.” He slowly turned his head once and took a careful slit-eyed peek at us, before resuming his “dead stump” pose with nose in the air. He stole the show from the otherwise charismatic Black-throated Mango, Blue-chinned Sapphire, and Glittering-throated Emerald hummers that shared his tree.

Juan gave a lecture on the "Source of the Amazon" before lunch. The Amazon is a watershed, albeit a very large one, and Peruvians (and M. Cousteau) have determined its source lies in Peru; a glacial stream on Nevado Misma in Peru which is 7,000 miles from the mouth of the river! Juan explained that before the uplift of the Andes, the Amazon actually ran east to west, and was essentially a giant salt water lake. With the uplift, it became a freshwater river system flowing to the east. This huge river is up to 180 feet deep in places, has 40 feet of fluctuation in depth from high water to low water season, and is 300 miles wide at its mouth. It has 1,100 tributaries and gets its name from the perhaps mythical Amazonian warrior women, who were believed to remove one breast so they could use their bow and arrow more effectively, hence “A mas” or “without breast.” The watershed is almost as big as our lower 48 states, at 2.7-million square miles, and supports perhaps half the world's biological diversity and 200 distinct ethnic groups. As Juan would say, “Wow!”



Up on deck we enjoyed a 3:00 PM cooking lesson by our master chef Ediberto, translated by Juan, with juane as the subject of the lesson. These wrapped bundles of maranta leaves look like the Head of John the Baptist, hence the name. This is picnic food for Peruvians, and a sturdy meal it is! First, the maranta leaves are slightly softened over a fire. Chicken is then half-cooked in oil with turmeric, garlic, onion, salt, pepper, cilantro, and bay. The cooking juices are then added in to half-cooked white rice, and then three raw, beaten eggs are stirred in. Two leaves are stacked crosswise to each other, with the underside of the leaf facing up and held in a cup shape. A



generous scoop of rice goes in, with a piece of chicken, a whole boiled egg, and three olives next, topped with more rice to cover. The leaves are brought together in a bundle with the top folded down, slightly twisted and tied tightly with string (they used plastic). These bundles are finally submerged in boiling water for an hour to cook. At Easter time they use fish, peanuts and hearts of palm in this hardy dish. Yum! For dinner we enjoyed the fruits of our labor, and they were darn good!

Some of us went on the afternoon fishing expedition, and oh my, what an unusual experience it turned out to be. We left for El Dorado Creek at 4:00 PM and the sky was ominously dark. It began to rain en route ... then it poured. Segundo used his machete to hack our way into the forest, and there we dropped our lines. The poles were of simple bamboo, just a line and hook. We baited them with chunks of meat, dropped them in, and splashed the water a bit to let the fish know it was dinner time. They took that seriously, and within seconds there were nibbles on the line (although much of the bait became an appetizer for hungry river fish). The first fish out of the water was a silver piranha. And then all heck broke loose with fish flying into the boat as they were hooked — some toxic, some with jaws you wouldn't want to run into, Segundo racing back and forth keeping us neophytes from losing a fingertip, all while the rain poured down. We landed plenty of fish, including three of the voracious Red-bellied Piranha and a Stinger Catfish that was too scary even to keep. We also had Spotted and Silver Piranha and Silver-hatched Sardine ... nine species in total and quite a pile of fish for dinner (to go along with the St. John the Baptist bundles). The night was capped off Segundo singing with "The Bloody Piranhas." What fun!



Thurs., Mar. 31

This morning, even before breakfast, Segundo was telling us stories. We'd found a Mole Cricket on the deck and he explained that the village ladies would keep them in jars, then hold them, kicking and pushing, against their pre-toddlers' knees to make them strong walkers — fascinating. At breakfast we were treated to an amazing Pink River Dolphin show right off the stern.

We kayakers were taken by skiff up Supay Creek, where



we found our kayaks already waiting for us. I paired up with Pam, and Greg with Teri, and we also had Aaron, Terry and Kary, with Guillermo and Juan as well. We had a lovely paddle down-river, cheered on by Chestnut-eared Aracari, a number of Green Iguanas, and Bolivian Squirrel Monkeys, among other pleasures. We were greeted at the creek mouth by an exceptional pink dolphin show; they love these river mouth areas where the black water meets the brown.



Segundo continued to share Amazonian tales with us: He told how to keep Jaguar away from the village chickens by capturing its footprints in a Maranta leaf, tying it in a bundle and hanging it in the kitchen where it is hot. Next time the Jaguar comes, its feet get too hot to go any further and it leaves your chickens alone. Or, if you are a young pregnant couple, you can tie sloth hair up in the bundle and give it to the grandmother to hang over the stove. When the baby is born, the grandmother burns the bundle of hair, and then holds the baby to breathe in the sloth smoke, protecting it from mosquitos and making his bones strong so when he falls from trees they will not break.

Another tale: The Pink River Dolphin wanted to visit with the People, so he made a suit of clothes from Arapaima scales, a belt from an anaconda, walking catfish for shoes, and a stingray for a hat. He came ashore and partied with the People, dancing with a beautiful girl and taking her into the River. The distraught mother visited the shaman, who saw in a trance that the girl was with the dolphin. Three months later the dolphin let her visit her mother. When it became clear she was pregnant, none of the local boys would fess up. And so, forever afterwards “the dolphin did it.”

In the afternoon we visited the shaman at San José de Paranapura, the oldest village in the area. There are few shamans anymore, and he is the only one between here and Iquitos. The village includes 17 families and 75 people. It has experienced serious high water, with houses needing to build second stories to survive the flood season. It was wet when we arrived, with a muddy track leading into the village. The shaman, 77 year-old Maestro Juan, is learned in medicinal plant use, and to keep in touch with the natural world, he drinks tea from the hallucinogenic Ayahuasca Vine on Tuesdays and Fridays. With the Shaman's guidance, his apprentices travel to the spirit world this way, where the plant spirits talk to them. If Ayahuasca, the master plant, accepts them, they continue their training. If not, they know they are not strong enough. The plant spirits rejected Juan (our guide) as shaman, but told him he would have an interesting life. He saw in his vision a large city, and ten years later he found himself traveling to Los Angeles.

Most children aren't that interested in shamanism anymore, though Maestro Juan has a few students. He showed us various medicines made from the local plants, which helped with respiratory problems, arthritis, immune strengthening, childbirth, and conjunctivitis. Then he used smoke to offer each of us protection, chanting over several of us at a time, and blowing the smoke in our hair and upturned palms. We saw the protection work for



Marty the following day, when her lost pack was returned to her intact, and our experience with rainbows at sunset that day seemed charmed as well.

In lieu of swimming in the afternoon, most of us traveled to the junction of the Ucayalli and Marañon rivers where they become the Amazon, to look for more dolphins. Here the river is wide and lined with broad marshlands. We were joined by several Grey River Dolphins there, in the sweetest light of afternoon, with thunderheads lit up at their edges,

and had the company of Little Cuckoo and Capped Heron and thoroughly enjoyed the evening.

Fri., April 1

An early start to market on April Fool's Day! Nauta has a population of 29,000, and its original name was Mauta, or "clay pot," because this town on high ground has good clay for ceramics. It's an old town, older than Iquitos, founded in the 1830s and is the town at the other end of the 60 mile road that connects to Iquitos but nowhere else. We disembarked into a flurry of market day activity, with tuk tuks being the primary form of transportation (we saw one car). We made our way past stores that sold housewares and hardware and all manner of goods, and then dove into the food market. Bags of spices and piles of peppers, bananas, camu camu, and



jungle beer (masato) were for sale, the latter made by chewing yucca and allowing it to ferment. In the butcher section was every kind of meat, from mounds of chicken to every fresh fish found in the Amazon, to jungle meat. This included Peccary, Yellow Spotted Turtle, Paca, and sadly, the endangered Razor-billed Curassow. The large, farm-raised chickens cost 20 to 40 soles (\$6 – \$13). In comparison, most of the handicrafts we bought (birds and animals made of basketry) cost between 10 and 30 soles. The protections offered to us by the shaman paid back mightily for Marty, whose lost pack (with money and credit cards intact) was returned to us by a tuk tuk driver. We all piled in these little three-wheeled moto-taxis (aka mosquitos) and returned to the boat in a great parade through town.

Later in the morning most of us went on a hike through an undisturbed forest at Casual. We geared up in gators since we would be hiking along what had been dubbed the "bushmaster trail." Two local village guides, Señor Miguel and Marlon, traveled with us, spotting frogs and lizards and tarantulas where most of us only saw leaves. The primary forests are incredibly diverse, with up to 326 species per hectare. There were many palms in this one, including fish tail, walking, and stilt root. The Palmito is the source of the shredded hearts of palm we ate throughout the trip. The roots of this tree are medicinal, with a "pepto bismol" effect, and it produces the popular



Acai fruit. We saw a beautiful, old red mahogany, no longer found outside protected areas. We learned from Juan that 20% of the rain does not hit the ground directly, but is caught up in the canopy, where it picks up nutrients and organic matter before working its way to the ground. It brings nutrients to the very thin layer of top soil (a result of the incredibly quick decomposition rate), an important source of nutrients for the lower forest.

One of the vines, the very slow-growing and flat clinging *Monteria*, never blooms until it reaches the treetops where it receives much more food energy. Another, the strangler fig, can germinate at the top of the forest and grow downward and engulf its host palm. In the case of the "Avatar Tree," the palm was barely visible in the monster tree the fig had become. This buttressed behemoth is home to an incredible number of species, including the Sac-winged Bat, which lives in the cavities formed between the trunks of the vines. We were also honored to meet the Ayahuasca vine, which brings plant wisdom to the shaman on his spiritual trips.

Our guides were adept at finding small crawling things to show us, and as a result we got great looks at Red-rump Tarantula (who made himself at home on

Señor Miguel's hand), Poison Dart Frog, Crested Toad, and Leaf Lizard. We also learned this incredible fact: the primary predators of the forest are Army Ants. They will consume anything, including humans.

There were huge termite mounds everywhere, growing directly on the tree trunks. Juan demonstrated the natural mosquito repellent provided by the Nasute brown termite by plunging his hand into the nest and letting them discharge their turpentine-smelling defense juice. He said the local people bring the nests in for chicken food, and burn them as a mosquito repellent. The temperature inside the termite nests is warm enough that some birds use them as egg incubators. Termites quickly consume dead wood, and without the smoke from cooking fires, Amazonian homes can be consumed in a few months.



Our last opportunity for purchasing the beautiful basket work and other handicrafts of the jungle was at our hike's end, and then we were whisked off by skiff back to the boat for another extravagant lunch and nap.

We had a towel folding class, to elucidate the mysteries of the towel creatures we found on our beds every morning — tortoise, dog, elephant, and others — and then a map and checklist update. Our final skiff ride at 5:00 PM was charmed by the shaman, with a cloud and sun-filled sky, multiple rainbows everywhere, and a glass of champagne to toast the trip. A Pygmy Marmoset came out to wish us well, a pair of Black Vulture tipped their wings, and a Green Iguana blinked twice in approval.

Then home to cocktail hour and “battle of the bands,” where “Chunky Monkey,” “Segundo and the Bloody Piranhas,” and “Juan and the Village Boys” squared off, each giving us a taste of their virtuosity. All that was followed by a feast of piranha, a drink on the deck while settling the bar bill, and a quiet night, engines off, at the port of Iquitos.

Epilogue

Our travels to Lima went smoothly. We set out early on trash day through the quiet streets of Iquitos, tidy piles of bottles and papers swept to each curb for pickup. We were in Lima by 9:30 AM, and took a quick look at Miraflores's Love Park, where a Gaudi-like mosaic wall, covered with love poems and the names of lovers, husbands and wives, snaked along a bluff-top parkway, and an enormous statue of a lovers' embrace dominated the view. Our last repast together was at Puro Peru, a remarkable buffet with every kind of ceviche, traditional Peruvian stews, yucca, beans, salads, grilled meats, and desert offerings that tested even our well-trained capacities. Three of us were dropped off at the Indian market to spend our last soles and I managed to find a bamboo flute similar to the one played with such virtuosity by our room steward, Elvis. It was a little sad to say goodbye to all our friends who we hope to see again someday in another magical place, far away.