



Amazon River Cruise

Participants: Alice, Bill, Denise, Dottie, Erica, Helen, Livia, Lori, Marcia, Morty, Paul, Robert and Shirley

March 17-26, 2017

HOST GUIDE: Woody Wheeler



Day One: Arrive in Lima, Meet Group at Hotel

Everyone arrived on schedule to the comfortable Swissotel in Lima. Some who arrived early were able to visit Lima's outstanding museums and impressive downtown historic district, as well as the lovely and "birdy" Bosque Olivar, just blocks from the hotel. In the evening, we became acquainted and made plans to meet early the next day to depart for Iquitos.

Day 2: Travel to Iquitos, Manatee Rescue Center, Indigenous Peoples Museum, Board Amazon Star; Begin Cruise

After a comfortable night at the Swissotel, we departed early Saturday morning for Iquitos. It was a short flight. We touched down under partly cloudy skies in Iquitos. This rapidly growing river city of 600,000 people that has gone through several boom eras starting two centuries ago with the rubber boom, followed by lumber, oil and eco-tourism booms.



Our first stop here was at the Manatee Rehabilitation Center, a non-profit organization. Although Manatees are the star attraction here, this center also rehabilitates other wildlife such as monkeys, turtles and caiman. We walked through tropical rainforest to the creatures' abodes. They seemed as curious about us as we were about them. One White-faced Capuchin monkey reached through its cage and tried to grab one of our guides as he walked by.



The Manatee Center also boasts ambitious educational programs designed to teach children and villagers to conserve wildlife instead of capturing them as pets, or in the case of Manatees, killing and eating them. These programs have reached tens of thousands of people. While hiking the center's trails, we could not help but notice the wild birds about: Fork-tailed Palm Swifts, a Striated Heron, Chestnut-eared Aracaris, Wattled Jacana, and a Boat-billed Flycatcher spotted by Dottie. Flowering plants like the Lobster Heliconia and Candlestick Ginger decorated the grounds.

We then bussed into Iquitos' main plaza where we walked a short distance to the Museum of Indigenous Peoples. Multiple tribes of Amazonia were represented there via maps, artifacts and excellent live interpretation by young adults who came from local tribal villages. From here we strolled along Iquitos' riverfront, birding as we went, finding Great Kiskadee, Yellow-browed Sparrow, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Red-capped Cardinal, and Orange-headed Tanagers along the way.



After a welcome cold drink and a tour of a restored historic rubber baron hotel, we boarded our ship, the Amazon Star, and moved into our comfortable rooms - each with a small deck overlooking the river. The boat features a sheltered but open on the sides top deck with a bar in the center. This, we could tell, was going to be a great home base for exploring the Amazon for the next week.

The excellent multi-course dinner showcased regional dishes including fresh fish, fruits and vegetables, which confirmed our initial positive impression of the boat. The crew was extremely hospitable as they guided us through safety procedures and boat protocol.

After dinner, Guillermo, one of the guides, took us stargazing on the top deck. There he identified the Southern Cross, a “life constellation” for a number of us, shaped like a sideways kite. A very large, lingering shooting star arched over the Amazon River for dramatic effect.

Day 3: Rio Ucayali and Yarapa River

Under overcast skies, most of our group gathered early at the bow of our ship on the top deck. Naturalists Segundo and Usiel identified bird species at a rapid clip: Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture, Yellow-headed Caracara, Large and Yellow-billed Tern, White-headed Marsh Tyrant, and a Roadside Hawk Lori spotted were among the many sightings from this excellent vantage point. While eating breakfast, a Pink Dolphin surfaced just outside the dining room windows.

After a sumptuous breakfast, we headed out in two skiffs to explore a side channel of the Ucayali River, just above the confluence with the Marañon River where the Amazon begins. Bird and wildlife sightings were nearly continuous in this biologically loaded fresh water marsh and riparian forest habitat. An Oriole Blackbird lit up the marsh vegetation, and a Capped Heron spotted by Bill, wowed us with its silky elegance. Short-tailed Parrots flew by and a large Lineated Woodpecker perched on a snag.



As we moved through the wetlands (dry land is not visible during the wet season – 90% of lands are submerged here for several months), the sightings continued apace: Laughing Falcon, a snake-eating specialist; Amazon Kingfisher, Blue-winged Parakeet, and a Greater Ani that Lori found. As we continued up-river, a Red-capped Cardinal flew out of a Yellow Ceiba Tree. An Argon Sulfur Butterfly fluttered by, and several Black-capped Donacobius perched conspicuously and called in distinct tones. Numerous small Chestnut-bellied Seed eaters foraged through the wet grasses.

A Great Black Hawk flew directly in front of our boats with a snake dangling from its talons. Segundo pointed out a small flock of Scarlet Macaws with such enthusiasm that he sounded like a highly animated sportscaster calling a futbol game: “*Scarlet Macaw, Scarlet Macaw, Scarlet Macaw!*” Segundo repeated until everyone saw these stunning parrots.



We then encountered our first monkeys: Dusky Titi Monkeys perched high in the riverside tree canopy with their long tails dangling down. Segundo got excited again when he found several Horned Screammers – huge goose-like

birds - flying above the opposite river bank. Nine Snail Kites circled in a small kettle just as we turned into a narrow side channel. Soon we came upon a lake where we found two species that shared striking red coloration: a Red-faced Caiman Lizard and several Masked Crimson Tanagers.

We then found a White-eared Jacamar, a White-tipped Dove and a Streaked Flycatcher. Segundo found our first trip hummingbird: a Black-throated Mango. A group of Smooth-billed Anis perched close together on the same branch along with another shockingly red Masked Crimson Tanager. Camera clicks and expressions of joy followed.



On our way back to the main boat, new sightings continued. A Fork-tailed Butterfly came into the boat and took turns perching on Lori, Morty and Woody. Common Squirrel Monkeys moved through the foliage, their rufous bodies and white-accented faces visible through openings in the vegetation. The highlight of the remaining skiff tour was a small group of Blue and Yellow Macaws. In total, we saw 60+ species of birds, two species of mammals, two butterfly species and one reptile during this two-hour skiff tour. Or, as Denise pointed out, about two species per minute. This is what you find when you are with expert guides in the heart of the world's most biodiverse area.



It was time for lunch and a siesta prior to the next foray in skiffs. At 3:30 PM, we set out once again, this time up the Yarapa River. At the confluence of the Ucayali and Yarapa, Gray Dolphins surfaced, revealing their dorsal fins. As we entered the Yarapa River, we soon encountered Black-fronted Nunbirds singing loudly in chorus, which is how they got their name. Several Slender-billed Kites soared overhead, while Amazon Kingfishers plied the waters below.

At this point we encountered other mammals, including a group of roosting Long-nosed Bats, plastered to a tree at the water's edge. A Common Woolly Monkey crashed through the brush and made a

Tarzan-like leap some 20-feet in the air to another branch.

Next came the parrots: first flying overhead were Yellow-crowned Parrots and White-eyed Parakeets. Then, after hearing their loud raucous calls first, we found Yellow and Blue Macaws high in the tree canopy – a spectacular site. A Squirrel Cuckoo flew across the river with its lovely russet tones plainly visible, and a Long-billed Creeper worked on the lower portion of a tree, surprising us with its large size for a creeper. Segundo then led us to a perched Common Potoo looking very much like a part of a tree snag where it rested, awaiting unsuspecting insects.



More monkeys came into view, including Equatorial and Monk Saki Monkeys. Later, we found Common Squirrel and Pygmy Marmosets, making it a five-monkey species day! As the day wound down, we marveled at a gorgeous tropical sunset accented by massive cumulous clouds on our way back to the Amazon Star.

Before dinner, we were thoroughly entertained by another form of monkeys: The Chunky Monkeys – a boat house band that performed Peruvian music on traditional instruments with great skill and passion. What a fitting way to conclude our first full day on the Amazon!

Day 4 – Yanallpa Creek, Village of Nuevo Aucayacu

The day began at first light when we gathered on the top deck at 6 AM to watch birds as we slowly cruised along the shore of the Ucayali River. This provided good looks at a variety of perching birds at eye-level given our lofty perspective, especially Macaws. The first of these seen were Red-bellied Macaws. Soon afterward, we found scores of Blue and Yellow Macaws atop dead fig trees – an amazing “bouquet” of tropical colors! Then raptors joined the party, including Greater Black Hawk, Osprey, Roadside Hawk, Plumbeous Kite and two Bat Falcons that gave chase to a Macaw.

A Speckled Chacalaca perched conspicuously in the tree canopy and two Yellow-tufted Woodpeckers foraged high on a tall thin snag. At this point it was still early (7:30 AM), so we jumped into the skiffs and headed up Yanallpa Creek where we soon encountered a flock of Orange-winged Parrots, Cobalt-winged Parakeets, Green Ibis, and a Piratic Flycatcher – the latter named for its piratic behavior, such as taking over other birds’ nests.



Farther up-river, Guillermo called for an abrupt stop at a place where two Ladder-tailed Nightjars perched in resting/sleeping mode near the water’s edge. Segundo also found a Scarlet-crowned Barbet, and Bill, a Buff-throated Woodcreeper. We were not done yet: Segundo called out in excited tones: Red-throated Caracaras, a Swallow-winged

Puffbird and a Hooded Tanager. And then came another showstopper: a vivid turquoise Plum-throated Cotinga!

The guides kept turning up new species at a fast and furious pace. Within a half-hour, they found a Lettered

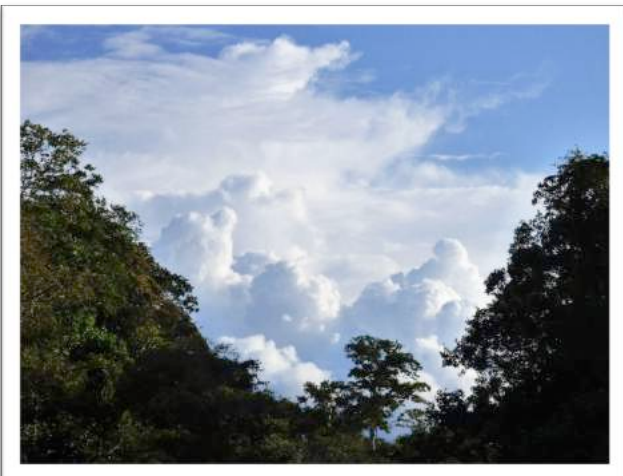


Aracari, White-throated Toucan and a Black-headed Parrot among others. Mammals and reptiles were part of this amazing show too. Red Howler, Dusky Titi and Pygmy Marmoset monkeys moved through the canopy, often causing the tree foliage to shake dramatically, thus revealing their presence. A small cluster of Night Monkeys peered out of their nest hole at us through sleepy eyes with great curiosity and extreme cuteness.



The village elder invited us into his home and spoke to us about the construction of the thatched roof buildings and the village lifestyle. This was still a hunter-gatherer existence supplemented by vegetable gardens when there was land to grow things on. The elder demonstrated to us how tree sap and termite nests can be burned to repel insects from homes. His wife toured us through her kitchen where meats – primarily fish, but also deer, monkey and armadillo – were prepared on an open grill.

We took a break for breakfast before setting out once again to visit a riverside village – the hamlet of Nuevo Aucayacu. A group of children accompanied by parents a schoolteacher and an assortment of dogs and chickens greeted us. The people all spoke Spanish and were very receptive toward us. We came equipped with gifts of school supplies.



We then walked through the center of the village past the church to the school where students gathered to meet us and sing songs. After a few interactive songs including 'The Itsy-Bitsy Spider' and the 'Hokey Pokey,' the kids were introduced one-by-one by Usiel – each to applause. Then they came around in a circle to give us high five hand slaps. The villagers spread out crafts for sale and we shopped before departing from this friendly, fascinating place.

The skiff ride to our home boat, the Amazon Star, although swift was not without remarkable sightings, like a Great Potoo and a Paradise Tanager, aka "the seven-color bird." These concluded a full, eventful morning of nature and culture on the Amazon.

An impressive thunderstorm rolled in during our early afternoon siesta. We watched it from the comfort of our rooms. After siesta, Usiel gave an informative presentation about the history and geography of the Amazon.

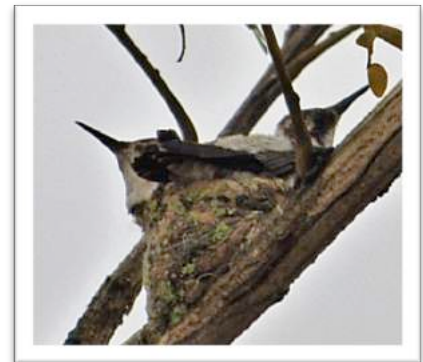
Among other things, we learned that the Amazon has 1,100 tributaries that extend into a massive watershed comprised of nine countries.



Soon we were back on the river itself in skiffs exploring side channels, lakes, and bogs. We came upon several Red and White Spinetails flitting through the marsh grasses. Soon afterward, we were searching for an owl that flew across the river, but Usiel found instead

another Great Potoo. Not too far away, Usiel also found our first Hoatzin, followed by sightings of half-a-dozen more. This charismatic peacock-like bird eats leaves and emits a steady grunting sound like heavy-breathing.

We then shifted our attention to smaller birds, like Black-throated Mango Hummingbirds, including two babies in a nest together. Usiel and Guillermo spotted a Caqueta Seed-eater and Cinereous Becard. A Green Kingfisher lighted in a shrub only 25 yards distant.



On the way back, a spectacular tropical sunset unfolded, made more beautiful by the remnant storm clouds above. To add to the magic of the evening, parrots and parakeets flew en masse to roost on Parakeet Island where our boat was parked.

Day 5 – Zapote River, Pacaya River, Night exploration of Pacaya River Wetlands



After another delicious multi-course breakfast, we boarded the skiffs to explore the Zapote River. An Osprey marked the entrance of the river. Soon we were in parrot land, including White-winged Parakeet, Cobalt-winged and Titi Parakeets; and Mealy Parrots. In a tree opening, we saw several Amazon red-tailed Squirrels feeding on nuts.

Then we came upon a stretch of monkeys: Saddleback Tamarin, Monk Saki, Squirrel and Red Howler. The alpha males kept wary eyes upon us as we approached their troops. Near a small village, we pulled into a leafy cove to watch two Ferruginous Pygmy Owls gazing at us with their intense yellow eyes.



As we headed up-river, birds and monkeys put on a nearly continuous show. The cast included Scarlet-crowned Barbets, Horned Screammers, a Dull-capped Attila, a White-tailed Trogon and a troop of Squirrel Monkeys.

Segundo pulled our skiff beside a tree with slashes in its

bark. It was a Cauche or rubber tree. He told the story of the rubber boom and demonstrated how to tap rubber from the tree. Segundo made a small gash in the tree with his machete. A milky white fluid oozed out. This was the substance that transformed the Amazon during the 1800s.



Although the rubber boom did not do lasting damage to the trees, it severely impacted the native population through disease, slavery and brutal treatment.

We motored further up-river to a place where Lori thought she had spotted a Yellow-crowned Brush-tailed Rat (we had seen one the day before). Although this turned out not to be the case today, it led to our finding a Black-tailed Trogon at close range (30 feet).

As we continued along the Zapote River, we encountered kids from the local village

paddling dugout canoes. Segundo called to them. They paddled over and showed us the fish they had caught: several species of catfish and piranhas.

When you see indigenous peoples such as these kids, living in thatched huts along the shores, it gives you a sense of living history. This cultural experience combined with the extraordinary natural history of the area makes the Amazon a unique place on earth.



In the afternoon, we heard another informative talk by Usiel about the Pacaya Samiria Reserve. We learned that this massive reserve is as large as Belgium, it has 495 species of birds and during the wet season (now) is 90% under water.

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Following the talk, we ventured into this massive reserve up the Pacaya River. At the confluence with the Ucayali, Pink and Gray Dolphins surfaced. We amused and at times frustrated ourselves trying to photograph them breaching the surface. This was a nearly impossible task; it was better to just watch these playful creatures.



As we headed up river, we came upon two Three-toed Sloth, hanging from tree limbs like hammocks strung between branches. Band-tailed and Sand-colored Night Hawks fluttered about, feasting on the abundant insects. We pulled up beside a tall tree in a swamp filled with aquatic vegetation. A Pink-toed Tarantula clung to the bark of the tall tree, clearly visible us all.

As night fell, we remained in the marshes travelling by skiff with lights, searching for frogs, caiman and snakes.

A luminescent pair of eyes peered at us from a distance. Segundo identified these as belonging to a Common Pauraque. Then came the first of two Great Potoos, including one that calmly sat on its perch while we admired it.

Segundo then became determined to find a caiman. He stretched out on his stomach, reached over the boat and grabbed a young caiman with his bare hands. He brought it into our boat to show to us. After we marveled at he released it to its watery habitat. We returned in darkness to our boat through a maze of Amazon waterways teeming with life.



Day 6 – Pacaya River Further Exploration; Swim in Yanayacu Lake; El Dorado River Fishing



We set out early up the Pacaya River and its surrounding wetlands in our trusty skiffs. Temperatures were comfortably mild. Birds that were becoming familiar to us appeared again, like Amazon Kingfisher, Black-collared Hawk, Yellow-rumped Cacique and Horned Screamers. As has been true each day of this trip, we also found new species, like a Rufescent Tiger Heron, Gray-headed Kite, Cinnamon Attila, and the brilliantly-colored Bluish-fronted Jacamar.

We learned how Festive Parrots got their name; by dancing. We watched them doing their side-to-side swaying dance steps in the treetops.

Monkeys put on a good performance too. A large Red Howler male fed on tree fruit and climbed into an open perch where we could see him well. Then a large troop of Squirrel Monkeys followed one-another in single file on a horizontal route, which entailed making a

20-foot leap from tree-to-tree. Much to our delight, they did this in succession eliciting wows, photo clicks and videos from us.

We reached the second ranger station in the reserve and learned that there are 13 rangers and a handful of volunteers that live in these remote areas to patrol them. Their primary task is to apprehend those poaching fish or timber from this immense, flooded area.

Near the ranger station, many of us joined Segundo for a refreshing swim in Yanayacu Lake. Pink Dolphins breached only 25 yards from us, and Horned Screamers flew overhead. This was truly memorable, and literally an immersion experience.



On our return trip to the boat we passed through a tropical downpour as hundreds of perched egrets and cormorants watched us from their soggy perches on the shorelines. Back on the boat, Usiel gave another fine presentation on Amazon geography and species

seen thus far. Then we embarked upon a fishing expedition. Equipped with “Huck Finn” styled wooden poles with hooks, line and beef chunks for bait, we fished in a secluded forested wetland overhung with tree limbs. Segundo had to use his machete to hack our way into this spot.



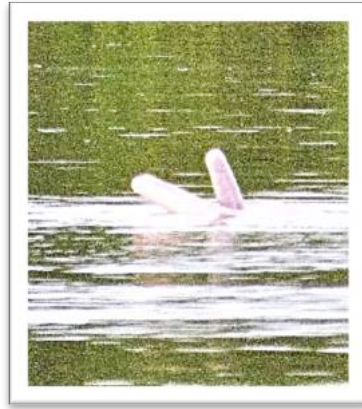
Once lines were in the water, the fish commenced biting. Some caught fish like Silver-hatched Sardine and Red-bellied Piranha. Others had their hooks cleaned repeatedly by the crafty fish. It was all good

fun that yielded a half dozen fish. Especially impressive were the teeth of the Piranha when viewed at close range. These teeth are mainly employed to eat fruits and nuts that fall from trees into the river.

On the return trip to our home boat Segundo turned off the boat motor and requested silence. We listened to the multiple sounds of the jungle as we drifted. This was such a nice way to end another day in this tropical paradise.



Day 7 – Sapuena Creek Kayaking, Visit to Village of San Jose Paranapura w/shaman



Pink Dolphins Cross Snouts

We had become accustomed to awaking to the sights and sounds of Pink Dolphins surfacing and expelling exhaust through their blowholes. We might have to convince ourselves after the trip that this was actually a daily occurrence and not a figment of our imaginations.

In the early morning, we paddled kayaks down a stretch of a small tributary on a partly cloudy, calm and comfortable day. We

came across noisy Chacalacas, a Little Blue Heron, and Swallow-tailed Puffbirds that Shirley and Bill found. Usiel called us over to see a Southern Tamandua Anteater in dark morph high on a tree snag. This was the first anteater that most of us had ever seen in the wild.



Our next boat excursion also took place on the Sapuena Creek. As is typical here, the nature sightings come early and often. Swallowtail Butterflies flew by. Around the first bend in the river, two Dusky-headed Parakeets perched on a snag just above their nest hole.

Usiel spent some time discussing trees that were within our reach, including Maquita, Salvia and Rosewood Trees. He passed around the blossoms of the coveted Rosewood Tree, which emitted a thick honey-sweet aroma.



Wire-tailed Manakin – photo by Loretta Wikander

Our skiffs then headed into the woodsy wetlands in search of Manakins. After patiently watching and listening for fifteen minutes or so, a Wire-tailed Manakin appeared. This gorgeous bird with a brilliant red head and yellow breast resembles a miniature but even brighter version of a Western Tanager. Manakins are so brilliantly colored that they appear almost to be illuminated from the inside.



On the way back to the Amazon Star, we spotted a Laughing Falcon perched on a snag in excellent lighting. While we were admiring this majestic bird, Usiel shared a Polka Dot Tree Frog he had captured for all to see prior to releasing it to its wetland habitat.

In the late afternoon, we took a short skiff ride to another village, San Jose Paranapura. This one was larger than the first, with electricity and a water purification facility. We first toured the town and its various buildings as hoards of kids ran and played beside us.

Then we went with the Shaman to learn about his profession and the medicines he uses. He made the rounds with Sangre Degrado (Blood of the Dragonfly) ointment that soothed insect bites and other skin irritations. This author can testify that it worked after applying it to my bug bites. Later the Shaman blessed each and every one of us, which was kind and generous of him.



A full-fledged craft market had been assembled with very attractive items. Segundo, with his charming sense of humor, said that they had set up a “Walmart” for us. Quite a few of us made purchases before bidding a fond farewell. We literally sailed into the sunset to our home ship.

Day 8: Nauta Market/Tuk-Tuk Tour; Rainforest Walk; Amazon Confluence; Iquitos return



Early in the morning we landed our skiffs along with dozens of other boats at the busy port city of Nauta. Some had thatched roofs, many had cargoes of bananas and other items. This was market time. People from near and far were on hand to buy and sell. Once we landed, we walked on the first paved streets we had experienced since Iquitos.

We strolled through the extensive market that included meat, fish, produce, clothes and dry goods. Food items for sale ranged from chicken to deer, turtle and caiman meat.

After the market, we walked to the town square where we boarded Tuk-Tuks and took a delightful city tour to city limits and back, passing by schools, sports stadiums, night clubs, and houses. Kids were dressed in school uniforms. Tuk-tuks are basically motorcycle-drawn covered trailers with seats. They are the dominant vehicles on the streets of Nauta and Iquitos.

On this trip of so many contrasts, we went from Nauta’s bustling market to a skiff ride leading to a walk through



the tropical rainforest. This was one of the few times we were on “Terra Firma,” or dry ground in this area, which is 90% submerged during the wet season.



Soon after stepping into the forest, our local guide Dennis motioned us to a small stream. There he had found a 10-foot long Anaconda. It swam in the stream, slithered up a tree, and wound around a stick that Dennis extended its way. We had a front seat at this live nature show with one of the Amazon’s iconic species.

Just a few steps farther down the trail, Dennis came to us with a large leaf holding a Bird-eating Spider, which resembled a tarantula.

Dennis kept finding things. Next, he brought us a Scarlet-red Poison Dart Frog. As we started back on the forest loop trail, Denis called us once again, this time with a Red-tailed Boa buried and well camouflaged in leaves on the trail. When Dennis moved the leaves slightly, the boa rose in anger, coiled and hissed. This 5-foot snake with an attractive black, burgundy and cream pattern on its skin, continued its threatening posture until we departed.



Some trees were enormous, with ferns, epiphytes and the buttressed roots typical of a tropical rainforest. The buttresses are a unique adaptation of the trees to absorb dissolved nutrients at the surface level and to provide stability.

At the trail’s end where our skiffs were parked, villagers had assembled a small but very nice crafts market. We partook in these keepsakes from the Amazon jungle before riding our skiffs to the Amazon Star and the return trip to Iquitos.

At dusk, we toasted to a great 680-mile round trip with numerous skiff side trips, including one by kayak, through the biodiversity capitol of the world – the Amazon. The house band “The Chunky Monkeys” entertained us for the last time with their delightful blend of Peruvian folk, country and rock and roll.

At dinner, the entire ship staff was introduced and thanked. They did a superb job making our trip enjoyable and memorable. A spirited triple-birthday celebration followed led by several of the Chunky Monkeys who sang and played instruments with their customary skill and flair.

Day 9: Disembark from Amazon Star in Iquitos; Return to Lima

At the break of day, we stepped off the Amazon Star, our home on the river for the past week, and boarded a bus to the Iquitos airport. Even though it was early on Saturday morning, Iquitos was already buzzing with activity related to its huge market. Soon we arrived at the airport and boarded our plane for the relatively short flight to Lima. There we received a guided tour of Callao and the portion of Lima between the airport and the restaurant in the Pueblo Libre district. We feasted on a multi-course lunch that was a review of the Peruvian cuisine we had had for the past week. In addition, the restaurant featured a special demonstration on how to make Pisco Sour drinks. Two volunteers from our group, Bill and Shirley, each made one. They were entertaining to watch and their drinks, delicious.

Our Amazon adventure came to a close when all were dropped off at their day rooms conveniently located within walking distance from the airport. Most were going home soon, a few were continuing on to Cuzco and Machu Picchu.

During the past week, we had the privilege of experiencing the Amazon's phenomenal natural and cultural attributes up close and personal. And we did so with outstanding guides who were raised in villages just like the ones we visited. We boated, hiked, kayaked and swam – each providing a unique way to experience the magic of Amazonia.

