

## Nature

PERU

**Craig Tansley** sidesteps pumas and spiders from his lodge in the middle of the Peruvian Amazon.

**M**y guide, Pedra Lima, and I like to play games with each other in the Amazon. The one we're playing now is called "If I Get Lost In The Jungle, What Would Eat Me First?"

Lima knows: "Mosquitoes," he says with a snicker. "No, Pedra," I insist. "If I get lost in the jungle, what would eat me whole first?"

He looks at me and his eyes widen: "The puma," he says with awe. "The puma would eat you and you wouldn't see it coming; you only see the puma when the puma wants you to see the puma."

Lima and I are spending a wonderful afternoon in the jungle looking for creatures that can kill us; although here in the Amazon Basin that doesn't really require much effort.

Earlier, I'd almost sat on a wandering spider (which, according to Lima, is 18 times more poisonous than the Black Widow spider and is one of the world's most dangerous spiders).

"What would you have done if it bit me?" I ask. "Say goodbye to you," he says without a trace of humour. "There is no anti-venom. But these spider bites are not common."

I hadn't seen its web in my path because my focus was on the thousands of leaf cutter ants marching near my feet: did you know that in 24 hours they can defoliate a whole tree? The Amazon is crazy.

Then there were the red-bellied piranhas, though their carnivorous habits have been excitedly embellished by Hollywood for nigh on a century. All the same, when Lima throws a small piece of fruit overboard as we paddle across the perfectly still Lake Condénado, I'm not expecting the sudden bombardment of piranhas beside my outstretched hand.

"Don't worry," Lima tells me. "They are only dangerous if you are bleeding. The blood makes them crazy, like sharks." Lima tells me I should really be watching out for the electric eels in the lake. "They're the most dangerous," he tells me. "They can kill you, they can shoot 700 watts of electricity into you and around here they grow to 2.5 metres long. They give you a heart attack, then you drown."

But it's as we're playing the game: "What Would You Do If You Came Face To Face With A Big Cat" that things get really interesting. We're on our way back from the lake to the lodge Refugio Amazonas. We'd stopped to climb the 32 metre-high staircase to the forest canopy. By the time we'd



In the wild: (Clockwise from main) a jaguar; indigenous canoe; Refugio Amazonas; a red howler monkey. Photos: iStock, Refugio Amazonas

descended, the forest was almost completely dark, though fire-flies lit our way home.

And it's now, as we make our way through the suddenly silent rainforest – the birds having found their beds for the night – that Lima drops to his knees in the mud. He's studying something on the ground.

"Look at this," Lima shines his torch on the spot. "It was not there when we walked through here before," I look down.

"It's a jaguar, or a puma, it was here not long ago."

We walk, Lima keeps me talking, he says it's best, though his choice of topics – all things considered – is fairly ordinary: "It was on this trail three years ago walking back from the lake that I saw the only puma I've seen here," he says. "It was 20 metres away, it crossed my path, then it faced me, it walked like a cat – like this." He gets down on all fours on the path.

Through the canopy I can make out a rising three-quarter moon, and I sniff fresh earth and the

sharp tang of tree bark, and though my heart is beating fast I'm completely lost in this moment. And so it is that elation mixes with disappointment when I spot the dull lights of home; my haven deep in the Amazon. Voices carry from the four-corner, open-air bar,

**The sounds of the jungle temporarily stun me.**

where guests are busy crossing creatures off bucket lists, over icy cocktails and clammy Cusquena beers, valiantly battling the equatorial humidity under ceiling fans; with the jungle so still, it's the only breeze.

But then Refugio Amazonas never did promise air-conditioning and chocolates under your pillow. While the lodge is certainly luxurious, it's a kind of luxury that

comes with rooms open to the forest, where tiny wires that look like spider webs occupy the upper reaches of your ceiling, so as to stop birds and bats from nesting above your head at night. And don't expect to sleep beyond dawn, unless your ear-plugs block out the murderous screams of the world's second loudest animal, the Red Howler monkey. Electricity shuts off each night at 10, so bring a torch lest you trip in the dark. Though relax, there's a whistle on the wall to attract attention if an anaconda makes it through the thick mozzie screen – your last line of defence.

But then, isn't this the way living in the Amazon should be? It's low impact, to encourage full immersion so we feel a part of the ecosystem, whether we like it or not. And if you don't; then why would you fly all the way across the jungle and the Andes to the frontier town of Puerto Maldonado, and take a bus down a mud track past where locals live in tiny villages in the shade of papaya

and banana trees, to an old wooden jetty where a longboat takes you two-and-a-half hours down a mud-brown river that slices its way through impenetrable jungle?

Our journey down the Tombatapa takes us past nothing that even slightly resembles the modern world; the only signs of life I see are fishermen in canoes and a small group of miners on a riverbank panning for gold. The sounds of the jungle temporarily stun me; the Amazon is never silent for a moment. Just a few metres from me, a group of tiny tamarin monkeys leap from tree to tree, scuttling down branches, wrestling for fruit.

Each guest is assigned their own naturalist guide who'll accompany them on any excursion they choose. Pedra Lima is an Amazon expert, he was born near here. Most days Lima and I will walk through the rainforest looking for creatures. I discover he's one of those rare types who on hearing any noise can identify the animal which made it by both its common and scientific name.

Each time I return to the refuge, I take my usual seat at the bar and listen to the stories. But as I hear them all from within the presumed sanctity of a jungle bar in a jungle refuge built without walls in the wildest rainforest on this earth, I can't help wondering who's really watching who here. **T**



## TRIP NOTES

**MORE INFORMATION**  
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## GETTING THERE

LATAM Airlines operate seven one-stop flights each week from Sydney to Santiago with onward connections to Puerto Maldonado, and four non-stop flights a week in codeshare

partnership with Qantas. Phone 1 800 126 038; see latam.com

## STAYING THERE

Stay at Refugio Amazonas for four days/three nights from \$939 a person, including all meals, guided

jungle excursions and transfers from Puerto Maldonado Airport. See perunature.com

*Craig Tansley travelled courtesy of Refugio Amazonas and LATAM Airlines*