

WING AND
A PRAYER

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The Sydney Morning Herald

Great journeys

Traveller

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ABOUT THE WRITER

It's a jungle out there, and travel writer Ben Groundwater is only too happy to explore it. Having tracked lions on foot in Zimbabwe, searched for mountain gorillas in the Democratic Republic of the Congo forest, spotted macaws in Peru and almost stepped on guanas in the Galapagos, Ben jumped at the chance to explore the famous Amazon and indulges aboard a luxurious river cruise.



There's an abundance of life both in and around the rivers of Peru's north-east, writes **Ben Groundwater**.

In the movies, piranhas eat people," says Chino, our guide, threading a lump of beef tenderloin onto a fishing hook. "But in the Amazon," he grins, "people eat piranhas."

With that he drops the hook over the side of the boat, leaving it dangling in the swirling waters of the Rio Doraño for a few seconds before giving the line a swift tug and hauling a flapping, snapping piranha into the boat. Just like that, the fish lies there in the hull, gills heaving, razor-sharp teeth grinding, as the rest of us stare and quietly consider the contents of the river below us. How many of those things are down there? Suddenly hands and arms are drawn inside the boat.

The thing is though, Chino's right. Piranhas, those famously flesh-eating Amazonian movie stars, don't really eat people out here in the Pacayo Samiria Reserve, deep in north-eastern Peru.

They're much more likely to be the victims, as they are today, being baited one by one with frightening regularity into this little boat floating on a river in the middle of the jungle.

There's so much to learn in the Amazon. So much to learn on this huge flood plain, a reserve the same size as Belgium, a patch of dense forest and rivers that for half of the year is almost completely

It's a jungle out there



submerged. You discover such an amazing amount about this part of the world in just a short few days. There are fish out here that have evolved to be able to hop out of the water to catch insects. There are prehistoric river

creatures that can breathe on land. There are manatees and pink river dolphins in the swirling, murky rivers; monkeys that roam the treetops. There's so much life, both animal and human, at the beginning of the mighty Amazon River. And we're here to learn.

LAWS OF ITS OWN
This huge area of forest, riven with sparkling waterways, seems to stretch on forever as you fly into the town of Iquitos, the plane soaring over the Andes Mountains before descending into the lowlands of the Amazon in Peru's north-east. Much of Iquitos is submerged during the rainy season - this is a wild town full of people who've learned to thrive under difficult conditions.

It certainly looks wild. Just outside the airport there's a sign advertising "Toro de Gallos" cockfighting. The traffic is a jostle of motorbikes and rickshaws, each with a rig of heavy tarpaulin ready to protect the riders from the area's torrential rains. Iquitos is like an island, with no road access to the rest of the country. You get the feeling it functions under laws of its own. Soon, however, you're whipped out of Iquitos and onto the road towards Nauta, the port town on the banks of the Ucayali River, just upstream from the beginning of the Amazon. That's where travellers board the Delfin II, a luxury riverboat that navigates the Ucayali and

Pacayo rivers, treating guests to a wild experience that ends each day with a return to plush private rooms and fine-dining meals. Night is falling as my group boards and the Delfin pulls away from the wharf, turning upriver towards the Pacayo Samiria Reserve. Our first sight of the local wildlife, it turns out, is on a plate. Tonight we're dining on doncella, a river fish much loved around these parts as a culinary staple. It's prepared, as all of the meals on this five-day cruise will be, as part of a slappable Peruvian feast that makes use of plenty of local Amazonian ingredients, as well as those from further away in the Andes and on the coast. Tonight, however, there are no piranhas.



It pays to be up early in the jungle, to awake at the same time as the creatures that surround you.



Wet wonderland: (Clockwise from main) The Delfin II on the Peruvian Amazon; the lecture room on board the expedition river boat; a blue and yellow macaw, one of the many spider species, an indigenous girl sits in the bow of a skiff navigating the river; City Square in Iquitos, Peru; a quiet afternoon in the heart of the Amazon jungle; a piranha that was just caught on the Amazon River. Photos: Getty Images



THE GREAT UNKNOWN

It's amazing to just sit and think about what's out there. To the untrained eye it's not much: dense forest, clear skies, murky waters. But out there in Pacaya Samiria, out there just past the glass of the huge picture window in my suite, there are 102 different species of mammals roaming the trees and the land; there are 449 types of birds in the air; there are 58 amphibian species and 256 types of fish in the river below.

Sometimes you can spot jaguars out here, if you're extremely lucky. Even more rarely, you can see marvells such as the arowana, a fish that can leap two metres out of the water to snaffle insects that have been resting on tree branches. And you'll probably never spot

paiche, those huge, two-metre-long river fish that have evolved to cope with the dry season, with a lung that allows them to breathe normal air.

What you do see out here is a tiny snapshot of jungle life, a brief glimpse of the world that lies within. You see birds, flocks of hundreds. You see the pink flash of river dolphins briefly surfacing near the boat. And you see monkeys. Of course you see monkeys: squirrel monkeys, owl monkeys and howler monkeys that peer with their beady eyes from high above.

On our first morning in the jungle, we're exploring those monkeys' world by kayak, paddling around a lagoon that sits adjacent to the Ucayali, listening to the

sound of birdsong, watching for flashes of colour as kingfishers, egrets and herons flit past. We can hear noises in the trees, see leaves rustle, but the jungle is slow to give up its secrets.

We spot the tiny painted faces of owl monkeys ... in the canopy.

By afternoon we're out in one of the three motorised skiffs that the Delfin crew uses to take clients up into the tributaries that feed the Ucayali River, deep into the heart of the reserve. We spot the tiny painted faces of owl monkeys

Five more wild Peru experiences

REFUGIO AMAZONAS

This wilderness lodge is set deep in the Peruvian Amazon, a three-hour boat ride up the Tambopata River from Puerto Maldonado. It provides a few of the creature comforts as well as the chance to explore, by day and by night, the surrounding jungle. See peruinstans.com

SALKANTAY TRAIL

A great alternative to the standard Inca Trail route is the Salkantay Trail, a spectacular and yet almost tourist-free path leading through the Andes near Machu Picchu. Bizarre it might be but there are also luxury lodges dotted along the trail in which hikers can rest weary legs. See mountainadventures.com

MANU WILDLIFE CENTRE

There are an incredible 576 species of birds that can be spotted in the treetops near the Manu Wildlife Centre, on the Madre do Dios River. Plenty of monkeys as well. The centre is a one-and-a-half-day bus ride from Cusco, a journey that's an adventure in itself. See manuexpedition.com

INKATERRA RESERVA AMAZONICA

Just because you're in the jungle,



Remote stop: (From above) the Amazon River, Iquitos, Peru; a common squirrel monkey or Saimiri sciureus walking on a tree branch. Photo (monkey): iStock

doesn't mean you have to be roughing it. This lodge was run by one of Peru's premier luxury hotel brands, which means the place has all of that wildlife you also get bathrooms, organic toiletries and access to a day spa. See inkaterra.com

CHAPARRI ECO-LODGE

Up in Peru's north-west lies Reserva Chaparri, an area of dry forest with a completely different ecosystem to those you'll find in the Amazon or the Andes. It's a much more straggled experience up here, with simple rooms meant to replicate the way the local population lives. See chaparrilodge.com



huddled high in the canopy. We see a caiman, a prehistoric reptile that looks a lot like a miniature crocodile, eyeing us from the shallows. But still, you feel there's so much more here to discover.

It pays to be up early in the jungle, to awake at the same time as the creatures that surround you. By day three we're rising before the sun, clambering into the skiffs and skimming over the water towards the riverbank as the birds begin to call and undergrowth begins to rustle. There are hawks out hunting this time of morning; herons are stalking the shallows.

We alight from the boat and trek across the jungle floor, exploring a damp, humid environment that is submerged under a good metre or two of water for half of the year.

Squirrel monkeys rustle branches high above.

Hundreds of hairy coatis and squirrels on a Chino, our guide, gives course in natural Amazon medicine, pointing out that can cure you, as well plants that will do the same, and a little

After some breakfast the Delfin II - huge, decorated with a smile - is the skiffs again, this time the Rio Dorado, another boat feeds the Ucayali. The local village, the boat cope with the yearly pulling into an inlet and halt up a few hooks a

Continued on page 20

Cover story AMAZON



From page 11

telling. There are six of us on board and with 11 children as yet we've all caught several of these nice fish. It's odd, each of us carefully unhooking them and throwing them back into the river. Far above, raptors circle in the air. They must have seen this show before.

NIGHT MOVES

Our days on board the Delta II are busy, despite the heat and boredom of the jungle above swimming to the shore. A half of us may be in charge of a half of us, as the boat's large air-conditioned cabin, with their wrap-around windows. But there is much more to do than just sit around. There are usually two skiff excursions a day on the skills, journeying up smaller rivers to spot monkeys in the tree tops and birds flying below.

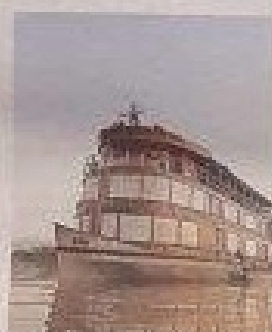
On day three we even make a third outing late in the evening, when the moon shines bright and the nocturnal creatures of the forest can be spotted by the glow of their eyes in the light of our guide's torches.

In between all the exploration, there are three hours to relax each day served on board that show us the best in Peruvian cuisine - everything from ceviche and trout to speakeasy Amazonian treats.

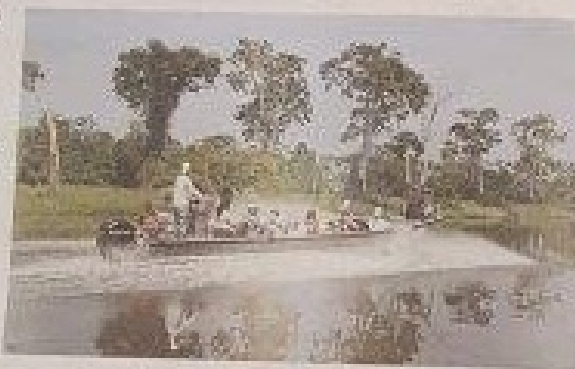
There are also informal lectures from the guides on the surrounding wildlife, and time to spend on the open upper deck of the boat, lounging with a piña colada and watching the river-wading jungle roll by.

By day four the jungle has begun to change, becoming sparser as we careen into the Tarma River, allowing glimpses of animals that have previously gone unseen. We spot jibara snakes in the tree canopies, the small red splashes of colour on their necks lighting the jungle.

We see huge flocks of



Wild wilderness: (Clockwise from start) Full moon over the Amazon River; over boat Delta II, passengers from the Delta II on an excursion; a boy taking from his boat. Photos: Getty Images; Ben Groundwater



condemns soaring across the river's surface, their wings flapping like in the mirror still water. Squared as they leap about in the trees.

Eventually, we come to a huge lagoon where the guides shut off the engines and let the skills glide to a halt.

It's perfectly still, perfectly quiet. We can see clearly, Chris says. It's too deep for catfish and there are no piranhas in this part of the river. Just the pink river dolphins that we've been spotting

from the boat for the last few days. We've dived into the cool water, enjoying the feeling of swimming freely in one of the most remote and beautiful places on Earth.

And then, of course, we jump back in the skills, motor back towards the river mouth and immediately spot the heady eyes of a similar reptile on the bank.

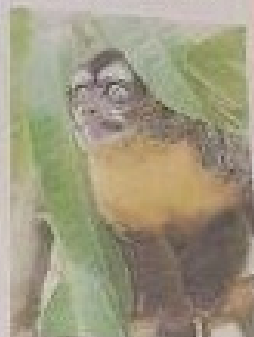
"I thought you said there were no cats around here?" I say to Chris.

He just grins. "Oh, maybe some. But definitely no piranhas." T

Five amazing facts about the Amazon

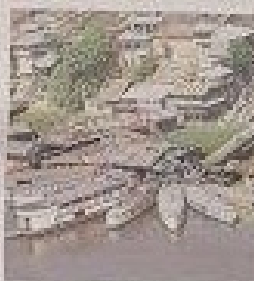
THE RIVER MAY BE THE WORLD'S LONGEST

It's definitely the world's longest, carrying a phenomenal one-fifth of the world's entire freshwater flow. However, there are scientists who also claim the Amazon River is the world's longest. If the system of islands around the river's mouth is counted as being part of the river, then it would add 150 kilometres to its length, giving it a total of 6750 kilometres - about 150km longer than the Nile.



THE RAINFOREST SPANS NINE COUNTRIES

The Amazon covers 6.8 million square kilometres - more than twice the size of Western Australia - and stretches across Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Venezuela, Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname and French Guiana. Brazil has the biggest chunk, with about 80 per cent of the forest residing within its borders.



THERE ARE PLENTY OF HUMAN INHABITANTS

It's thought that over the year 200 there were more than 2 million people living in the Amazon. That number has since risen to less than 200,000; however, there are still between 800 and 1,000 tribes who call the rainforest their home and it's believed that up to 50 of these have never had contact with the outside world.

Rich in wildlife: (From top) A night owl monkey near Iquitos on the Marañon River; Iquitos city in the Upper Amazon Basin; the Marañon River is a tributary of the Amazon River. Photos: Getty Images

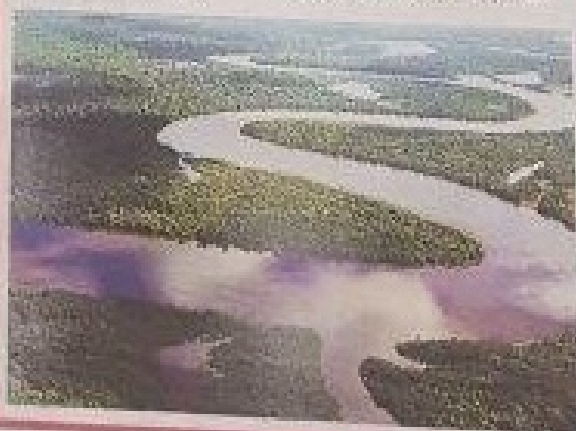
158 amphibians and 228 reptiles. And there are just the ones that have been scientifically classified.

IT'S A HAVEN FOR WILDLIFE

Across the entire Amazon rainforest system there are about 2.8 million insect species, 2200 species of fish, 1294 bird species, 427 mammals,

... AND FOR PLANTS

There's more than 40,000 plant species across the same rainforest system. One square kilometre of Amazon rainforest can contain more than 90,000 tonnes of living plants.



TRIP NOTES

GETTING THERE

LATAM Airlines offers seven one-stop flights a week from Sydney to Santiago, Chile, aboard 787 Dreamliner jets. There are then connections on LATAM to Lima and onwards to Iquitos. Phone 1800 126 038, see latam.com

CRUISING THERE

The Delta II offers four- and five-day Amazon cruises that depart from Nautim Pora, with transfers included from Iquitos. Cruises start from \$US2000 a person twin share and include full hotel service, three meals a day, non-alcoholic drinks and at least two skiff excursions a

day accompanied by an expert guide. Phone 1300 784 295.

TOURING THERE

There has been sporadic transmission of the Zika virus in Peru and the Australian Government's Smart Traveller website currently advises travellers

to "exercise a high degree of caution". All visitors should take extra precautions to guard against mosquito bites. See smtravel.gov.au

Ben Groundwater was a guest of Chimo Adventures, Rutas and LATAM Airlines.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
amazonadventures.com
nautimporatours.com