

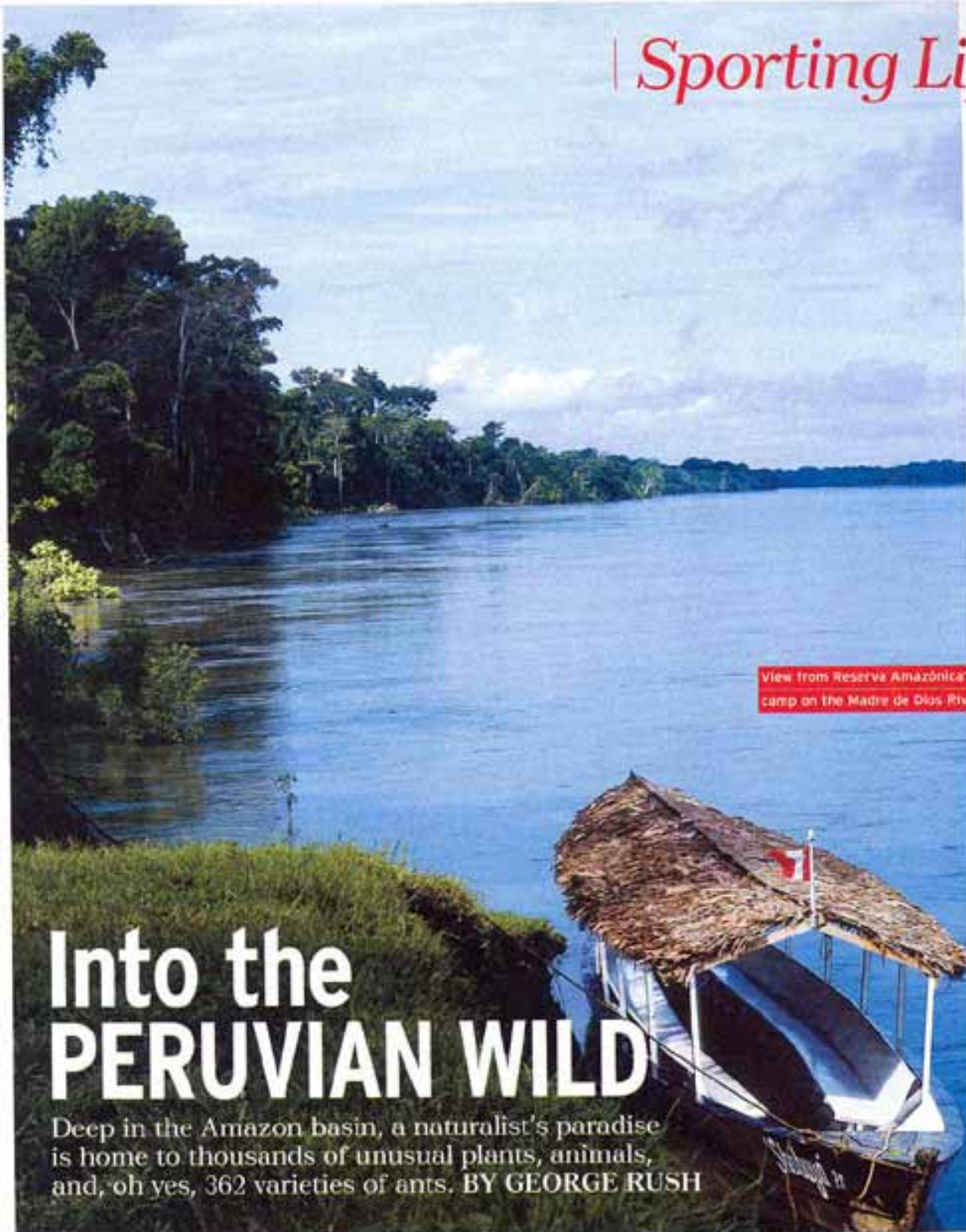
DEPARTURES

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Sporting Life



View from Reserva Amazónica's base camp on the Madre de Dios River

Into the PERUVIAN WILD

Deep in the Amazon basin, a naturalist's paradise is home to thousands of unusual plants, animals, and, oh yes, 362 varieties of ants. BY GEORGE RUSH

THE YEAR WAS 1992. PERU'S PRESIDENT, Alberto Fujimori, had just suspended the country's constitution and closed down congress. The press was referring to the situation as an *autogolpe*, or "a coup from within." The United States was threatening to cut off foreign aid. With opposition leaders branding him a ruthless dictator, the Mr. Moto-ish

former agricultural engineer turned to one man: ecoresort owner José Koechlin.

"What are you doing this weekend?" Koechlin remembers Fujimori asking.

Koechlin was taken aback. As the vice chairman of Peru's National Chamber of Tourism, he'd gotten to know Fujimori during several trips to Washington, D.C. But given the current national crisis, Koechlin

couldn't imagine why he was calling.

"I'd like to go fishing," Fujimori explained.

Every reporter in Peru wanted to talk to Fujimori—so what better time to visit Koechlin's Reserva Amazónica, a rainforest hideaway two hours by plane from Lima? "I try not to get involved in politics," says Koechlin, 59. "But he was the president! I said, 'It would be a pleasure to have you.'"

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Fujimori stayed at the resort for two days and managed to catch a few fish and evade the press while he was there.

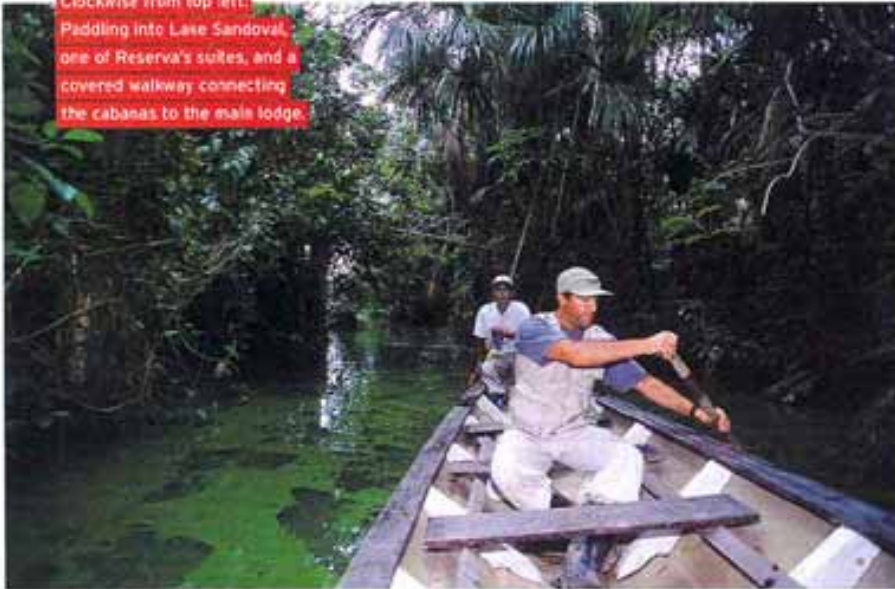
EVEN IF YOU ARE NOT A PRESIDENT on the lam, Reserva Amazónica makes a good refuge. The private 24,710-acre preserve is located in Peru's southeastern Madre de Dios region, where exuberant vegetation spans an area one and a half times the size of Costa Rica. The many trails around the lodge provide access to more than 1,000 species of flora and 1,727 species of fauna. Koechlin, who grew up in Lima, first heard about the wilderness when his father told him tales of his great-uncle Ernesto Rivero, who

owned a rubber plantation in the vicinity. Whenever he visited the family, Koechlin's father said, Uncle Ernesto would describe the area's miners, Indians, and explorers, among the latter Carlos Fermín Fitzcarrald, a rubber baron who in 1893 discovered a new route leading to untapped rubber trees via an isthmus between the Ucayali and Madre de Dios rivers. (Years later Koechlin told the German filmmaker Warner Herzog about Fitzcarrald—how he'd moved a ship overland through dense jungle. The conversation inspired Herzog's epic and famously bedeviled film, *Fitzcarrald*, which Koechlin helped produce.) Uncle Ernesto's stories also led Koechlin to his own mad scheme: carving a resort out of the jungle.

Machiguenga people. Reserva Amazónica opened in 1976. Soon Koechlin was inviting professors from Harvard and Berkeley to catalogue the preserve's wildlife—recycling tourist dollars into academic papers on the jungle environment (and having new species of frog, butterfly, and orchid named in his honor). Today there are more than 30 ecolodges in Peru's Tambopata Province, but Reserva Amazónica has set the standard in the region for combining serious science with boondocks comfort.

TO GET TO THE LODGE, VISITORS fly into Puerto Maldonado, a century-old frontier hub for rubber tappers, trappers, and prospectors. Reserva Amazónica offers thatched-roof lunches, ferrying guests 45 minutes down the clay-stained Madre de Dios. From the lodge's dock, you climb 35 steps (or, during rainy season, when the river is high, just three). A walkway of tree-trunk slabs leads

Clockwise from top left: Paddling into Lake Sandoval, one of Reserva's suites, and a covered walkway connecting the cabanas to the main lodge.



"Roads came late to the region," says Koechlin, who first visited the Amazon basin in 1956. "So much of the primary forest had escaped loggers. Back then you had about six thousand people living on fifty-two thousand square miles of land. The government said in effect, 'If you can do something with it, take it.'" Koechlin received Peru's first private ecotourism concession. (He says his company, Inkaterra, pays an annual fee of slightly less than one dollar per 2.47 acres.) Picking a spot along the Madre de Dios River, Koechlin and his team cut a small clearing and trails and built 15 thatched-roof cabanas modeled after the dwellings of the local Ese-Eja and

to a circular two-story pavilion, the heart of the lodge. Conceived by Koechlin's wife, Denise, the soaring room is built around the trunk of a weathered Remocaspi tree.

When I arrived for a recent visit, a piglet-size rodent called an agouti was sniffing the freshly clipped lawn outside, as guests cooled down with a hibiscus-festooned glass of star-fruit juice. Lunch was fillet of dorado, served with passion-fruit sauce and an ear of corn, its kernels as big as a beaver's front teeth. Afterward, I headed to my cabana. (The lodge now has 35 of them, five of which are larger suites with solar-heated water.) The screened-in huts are masterpieces of rustic carpentry. Even the twin sinks are carved from stone-hard quinilla wood.

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The walls have no pictures or decorations to distract from the emerald tapestry outside. The huts also don't have electricity, but the lack of modern amenities seems somehow unimportant, especially as you notice the lodge's custom touches, like baskets filled with Inkaterra's homemade organic soap, citronella lotion, and shampoo.

After some postlunch lolling on our perch hammocks, some other Reservists and I decided to find out what was prowling in the trees. We started on the Oje Trail, one of four paths that weave through the 494 acres surrounding the lodge. Our guide, Aldo Málaga, and another employee, Erich La-Gasse, pointed out the quiet battles raging around us. A strangler fig vine slowly tightened its garrote around an ironwood tree. Wood-munching termites erected towers comparable to Gaudi's spires in Barcelona.

couldn't stop barking." We passed a lupuna tree, which had survived upwards of 200 years—perhaps because, as locals believe, spirits dwell inside it. In fact, legend has it that the whole forest is protected by the *challachaqui*, a Peruvian cousin to Ireland's leprechaun. Presumably we had nothing to fear from the mythical guardians. Still, as dusk awakened the tarantulas and ocelots, the time seemed right to return to the lodge.

As we relaxed in the pavilion, a chef turned bamboo tubes stuffed with chicken, onions, peppers, tomatoes, and spices over a barbecue pit. The resulting feast went well with a crisp Chilean Chardonnay. Clearly, jungle living had come a long way since Herzog made *Fitzcarrald* in the early eighties. Pled

recalled after dinner. "And he would never speak to anyone." Mick Jagger, who played Fitzcarrald's half-wit nephew, "would talk with everybody," reported another *Fitzcarrald* survivor. A concert tour eventually forced the Rolling Stone to abandon the movie as well—but not before "he'd tried all of Peru's natural resources," the production source said with a wink.

Gorged with gossip, some of us agreed to try one of the preserve's evening pastimes: caiman staring. With an Inkaterra biologist, we piled into a launch and drifted along the riverbank, using a klieg light to help us spot the reptile's hooded eyes. A black caiman can grow to 12 feet long, but the best we could do was a baby white caiman. Our expedition recorded the goggle-eyed infant's weight and location, marked its abdomen, then sent it back to its unseen mama.

Reserva residents, from left:
An emperor monkey, tarantula, *Hyla koehlii* frog (named after Inkaterra's founder), and scarlet macaw.



There was also evidence of cooperation: Harvard professor E. O. Wilson reported at a Smithsonian symposium ten years ago that Reserva Amazónica holds the world's record for numbers of ant species living together. Among the 362 varieties are fire ants that inhabit the hollow tangarara tree. They pay rent by devouring foreign seeds that fall at the base of the tree—making sure no rival plant horns in on the tangarara's sunlight. These insects also sink their pincers into any creature that touches the tree—which is why locals have been known to tie wrongdoers to the tangarara's trunk.

Aldo and Erich showed us beneficent plants as well. The juice of the sangre de grado tree is used to stop bleeding. The roots of the "erotic palm" are said to work better than Viagra. Erich mentioned ayahuasca, a psychotropic plant used by shamans in religious ceremonies: "I heard of a girl who took it and

QUIET BATTLES RAGED AROUND US. A STRANGLER FIG VINE SLOWLY TIGHTENED ITS GARROTE AROUND AN IRONWOOD TREE; TERMITES ERECTED TOWERS COMPARABLE TO GAUDI'S SPIRES IN BARCELONA.

with a few pisco sours, Koehlin and his senior staff can now laugh about the ordeal. It started with Herzog's determination to drag a 320-ton steamship over a hill—even though the real Fitzcarrald had possessed the sense to disassemble his much lighter, 30-ton vessel. Stalled by weather, plane crashes, and unfriendly Indians, Herzog had to halt the production when amoebic dysentery sent star Jason Robards back to New York.

When Robards refused to return, Herzog brought in wild-eyed Klaus Kinski. "Kinski would only bathe in bottled mineral water," one veteran of the production

You don't need to look far to find wildlife at Amazónica. It will find you. After the caiman caper, I returned to my cabana to see a giant moth fluttering around a kerosene lamp. (I herewith confess to ziplocking the sweater eater as a specimen for my son.) A host of birds provide wake-up calls for Amazónica guests—but none gets you out of bed like the *avopandola*, "golden oriole" in Spanish. Broadcasting from a dangling nest, this yellow-tailed morning prankster can hit you with about 25 songs. At times, one bird had guides convinced it was a ringing cell phone and an abandoned baby.

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The only creatures more mischievous are the preserve's monkeys. After breakfast we took the launch to Rolin Island, in the river opposite the lodge. There, two miles of trails allowed saddle-backed tamarins, white and brown capuchins, and squirrel monkeys to observe their distant relatives as we sprayed mosquito repellent on ourselves.

Back at the lodge, we headed into the forest to inspect Inkaterra's latest embellishment—a \$400,000 canopied walk. This 1,050-foot-long cable bridge gives guests an opportunity to glimpse the birds, monkeys, and other wildlife that seldom come down to earth. Sixty percent of the bridge toll (included in the price of *Amazónica* packages) is donated to local conservation projects. Working with the National Geographic Society, Inkaterra has established a study facility for the Amazon Center for Environmental Education and Research.

On our final afternoon we slogged down a trail connecting the Madre de Dios with Lake Sandoval—the very lake where President Fujimori had wanted to go fishing. As we trudged through the mud, I wished we had grabbed a few of the 60 pairs of rubber boots kept on hand at the lodge. After passing several rooting peccaries, we finally reached a creek. There we slipped into a canoe and began paddling through a sunken forest. When we at last broke through to the lake, we felt as though we had uncovered a secret passageway to the Stone Age. Not another boat was in sight. The dark water was ringed with submerged Aquaje palms. Roosting in them were some hoatzin—blue-faced prehistoric-looking birds that can't fly very well but whose foul odor keeps predators at bay.

Three screaming macaws seemed to be warning us that the clouds were ready to burst. The air was moist and thick and the wind hit us like the breath of a volcano. It was then that we came upon one of the rarest of sights: the endangered giant river otter. And not just one, an entire family. The mother barked at us to go away. But her offspring frolicked so joyfully that we could not resist joining them. We somersaulted into what felt like bathwater.

The rain never did appear. That day was unquestionably our favorite—an experience that Fujimori, now exiled in Japan, can enjoy only in his dreams. ■

Rates, \$190–\$240, including meals. 800-442-5042; www.inkaterra.com.

AT THE RUINS OF MACHU PICCHU



Nestled in a cloud forest beneath the famous lost city of the Incas is Reserva Amazónica's younger sister: the **Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel**. Inkaterra founder José Koechlin began to assemble the land for his second resort in 1976, but it was not until 1991 that the first guest checked in. In the interim, Koechlin put many of the Aguas Calientes residents to work turning boulders into elegant pathways, just as their Incan ancestors had done centuries before. They erected one- and two-story cottages by utilizing white-washed stone and rough-hewn beams. Local artisans crafted low-slung furniture and traditional textiles. The colonial-style hotel, which

has 74 rooms and nine suites, offers visitors a snug lounge decorated with pre-Columbian artifacts, a soaring restaurant that overlooks the Vilcanota River, a popular café, a spa, and an Andean sauna hut.

The hotel makes a fine base camp for (or recovery room after) exploring the ruins, which are a half-hour's bus ride up the mountain. (Some of the town's better archaeological guides are on the hotel staff.) The Machu Picchu Pueblo also presents its own diversions. Three miles of paths weave through gardens where one can observe hundreds of orchid, butterfly, and bird species; among the latter are 16 varieties of hummingbird, equal to the total found in the continental United States. Easy treks take visitors through a landscape of waterfalls, hot springs, and petroglyphs. If you have the knees—and the nerve—to climb a 141-rung ladder up a sheer rock face, head for the 8,000-foot summit of Apu Putucusi.

Rates, \$375–\$520, including breakfast and dinner as well as birdwatching and other nature tours around the property. 800-442-5042; www.inkaterra.com.

