

PARADING PERU

BEHIND THE MOSQUITOES, PERU IS BURSTING WITH BEAUTY.



Peru is the type of destination where you ask yourself, “What the hell am I doing here?”

I found myself wondering this thought for days aloft the Amazon River in the Northeast region of Peru, aboard the Amatista cruise ship. It’s hot (near the equator), so hot that water bottles — even fresh out of the cooler — perspire faster than the average human, whether or not you are uncomfortably wearing long-sleeves and trousers in 90-degree weather to armor your skin. There are billions of mosquitoes, enough to populate solar systems, seemingly unpenetrated by 100 percent deet, offering that welcome bite again and again until your hands sore from slaps. At night, we’re dodging bugs and bats in our skiff, susceptible to crawling creatures you can’t see and random intervals of rainstorms. The food is heavy and usually fried and my stomach questions the vegetables and fruits and meats that seem to linger in my belly for days. I try to enjoy stargazing at night, but the mosquitoes bully me back into my air-conditioned cabin. I couldn’t help but wonder... if I had joined the luxury-driven Aqua Expeditions (high-end design, leading chef) would it have been a completely different experience? I found that, however, the Amazon will always be the Amazon and a boat simply a vehicle.

So again, “What exactly am I doing here?” Because there’s no other place I’d rather be.

The Amazon River, the largest river in the world, had me at Iquitos, where we embarked on our journey. I chose International Expeditions as the tour operator and have no regrets — they were the first to officially traverse these waters 30 years ago, so street cred ensured. Furthermore, most of the guides grew up in these necks of the woods and know the jungle like the back of their caiman-bitten hands. Our cabins are much larger than depicted on the web site (with air conditioning, mind you)



and showers bigger than any cruise ship I've sailed. The naturalists have explored the waters as much as the Amazon changes topically, so whether low or high or rainy or dry, they still know all the hot spots for tracking the wildlife, like squirrel monkeys, wooly monkeys, three-toe sloths and an unlimited number of the 1,800 species of birds. We fish for Pirhanas that, when hooked, bare razor-sharp teeth as if making a statement. We take 14-passenger skiffs deeper into the lagoons and channels to get closer to the wildlife, sailing the brown river as grey and pink dolphins fling themselves out of the water at irregular intervals. At one point, on a black river, the driver kills the engine as the sunsets to our right — something so marvelous, so unreal — just as the full moon manifests to our left. My friend Matt (who doesn't exaggerate), while absorbing this moment, turns to me and says, "This is the most beautiful place I've ever been."

It's here in our skiff, flanked by jungle, that we have three minutes of silence. We listen to the voice of the Amazon, the squawking birds and chirping crickets, frogs sliding on oversized lily pads, the slithering of snakes, the shaking of branches upon the monkey's bounce... and so on.

It turns back time, this moment,

conjuring the journey of Francisco de Orellana, who first sailed the river. There are dilapidated villages tucked away shore side, every once in a while you'll see a low-lipped canoe bearing the weight of fishermen and farmers. The Amazon is no longer a myth but a reality, providing a history that speaks for itself. Not much has changed here, except the ecology, the erosion and the fact that our entire ecosystem will change without the existence of the Amazon river. But that's the beauty of the Amazon. Our footprint is subtle. We are simply eyes just like the wild.

When we headed down to the well-established historic sites of Peru, insects were no longer the concern. The altitude is more than 10,000 feet in Cusco, Machu Picchu and the Sacred Valley, so walking the smallest flight of stairs had me close to fainting. Plenty of preventable measures are available before you arrive (an obvious oversight on my part) but it introduced me to the beauty of cocoa leaves, the traditional, local method of relieving the altitude issues. Somewhat high as a kite, I explored Cusco's Plaza de Armas, a majestic scene at night, the square lit up by golden lanterns, locals and backpackers camping on the benches, the central fountain



cast in blue hues as towering cathedrals set the scene for a complete throwback to the Spanish conquistadors. Right on the square is La Casona, which was recently designated Relais & Châteaux, an intimate 11-suite, 16th century colonial manor house (some say the first to Spanish construction in Cusco). Local luxury operator Inkaterra tricked it out with heated floors and an impressive, oversized bathroom (just as large as the guestroom). Across the street, the Monasterio, a member of Orient-Express hotels, also delivers history — a former monastery is now a 126-room hotel. For something a little quirkier, Fallen Angel restaurant, which is on the same block of this square, recently added five hotel rooms that literally seem to have fallen out of the pages of a David LaChapelle photo book.

Avant-garde, however, is the last thing you'll find in the Sacred Valley, a sublime town between Cusco and Machu Picchu. It is here the Incas came to find riches and — if nothing else — admire the surrounding beauty. I was obsessed with the brand-new Tambo del Inka. A member of Starwood's Luxury Collection, this 128-room hotel is flanked by the roaring Urubamba River (a tributary of the Amazon River, if you never make it up north) and the majestic, snow-capped Andes mountains, making this location

prime, unforgettable real estate (Tambo at night at such elevation... there's no other place you'll find stars so close you can almost flick one). Tambo embraces the local culture with "earth" designs and vibrant-color textiles, but nothing is as authentic as Moray, the site of the original salt mines the Incas (or Inkas) used for almost a millennium. Like most attractions in Peru, there are really no roped-off areas or "risk" signs, so visitors can explore to the fullest. We actually walked along the rim of the mines, setting foot where the Incas stepped, imagining a day of work for a villager.

The mother of all sites, however, is Machu Picchu, recently reopened after the massive floods closed the park for months. Here, the attraction is so breathtaking, it justifies the lack of oxygen and instead of asking, "What the hell am I doing here?" you'll be asking, "Why hadn't I come here sooner?" The Machu Picchu Puebla hotel, a comfortably rustic hotel option in Machu Picchu town, awaits your reservation.

JIMMY IM