



COME OUT, COME OUT,
wherever you are!

Head deep into the Tambopata National Reserve, in the heart of Peru's Amazon Basin, and discover a diverse world of spiders, snakes and surreal creatures — many of which would sooner stay hidden

Words: Stephanie Cavagnaro

IMAGE: GETTY

Ready or not, here I come. We're playing hide and seek, and I'm 'it'. My opponents have a distinct advantage — some are small, others only want to play in the dark, but all are masters of camouflage.

It's game on but I'm stumped. The lake is silent, except for the whining of a bee. With the mercury climbing steadily to 35C, activity is considerably low. It's not even 9am and, without moving, I'm sweating everywhere. "The heat today is called *sol de lluvia* ['sun of the rain']", explains my guide Alan, noticing my flushed face. "The humidity means it will rain soon."

We glide towards the shores of Lake Sandoval, breaking the stillness with the slosh of paddles. Turbid, tea-coloured waters reflect billowy clouds, and pond skaters slide away from our dugout canoe as we approach the banks. On the shady side of a palm sleep a row of long-nosed insect bats. I spy a big blue-faced, mowhawked *hoatzin* as it attempts to balance on a too-thin branch. The bird teeters like a tightrope walker, honking wildly. "Excellent climbers, but not great flyers," Alan chuckles.

A local from Puerto Maldonado — the dusty timber and rubber outpost where I landed a day earlier — Alan is a walking rainforest encyclopedia. We first met in the half-light of 5am for this trek — an excursion from Inkaterra Hacienda Concepcion. I'm staying in one of the eco-lodge's 19 luxury thatched-roof cabanas, and there's no wi-fi or phone signal and limited-hours electricity. Within my first hour there, several local animals come out to greet me — a giant river otter teases me with loud splashes in the lake at the foot of my cabana; a formation of army ants nearly meet the bottom of my boot as they march across the forest floor; an *agouti* (a rabbit-like rodent) nibbling fermenting fruit startles me, before blending back into the brown forested background.

There's an incredible amount of biodiversity in the Tambopata National Reserve, but it's often incognito. Beneath us, the lake is home to schools of sharp-toothed piranhas, electric eels, black caiman and 9ft-long catfish. "According to legend, where there is water that never dries out, there's a giant anaconda," says Alan. I move away from the edge of the boat. "People are scared when they see a small snake — imagine seeing one that's 30ft long."

This oxbow lake was formed by the ever-changing course of the Madre de Dios River, and is now a calm refuge for wildlife. Lanky palms sprout from the boggy edges, while broccoli-like trees bulge from terra firma, hemming us in on all sides.

Following Alan's gaze, I squint and spot a family of four red howler monkeys motionless in the canopy. The female is splayed across a branch, her face pancaked onto its cool surface. In today's heat, I know how she feels. These little ginger vegetarians may look cute, but they make the most terrifying noise. "They sound like a dinosaur or something — when you hear them close, it's pretty scary," Alan explains, telling me they're the loudest land animal in the world.

Broccoli-like trees bulge from terra firma, hemming us in on all sides



Amazon River boat trip,
Tambopata National Reserve

IMAGE: GETTY



I realise that must have been what woke me up this morning. I was jerked from my slumber by what sounded like the roar of a plane taking off — a bewildering noise in an area this remote.

Our attention is constantly drawn elsewhere: a blue *morpho* butterfly claps past, so iridescent it looks like one of the cartoon creatures in *Mary Poppins*; the cocoa heron — one of the largest birds in the Amazon — takes off from a clump of reeds; a group of green parakeets squawk and fidget above us; and a Neotropic cormorant splays its wings wide like a cocky Kanye.

It's growing hotter and Alan decides it's time to head back. It's a two-mile slog through dense jungle to the Madre de Dios River, where a motorised canoe is waiting to take us to the lodge. At the end of the rainy season, the path is thick with mud. Even in wellies, my feet gloop grudgingly through the slippery sludge.

It's tough going. I keep my eyes down to avoid sliding or tripping over the meandering roots of ancient *kapok* trees. I instinctively reach toward trunks to provide balance, but Alan quickly warns me to look first, as I realise I've nearly impaled my hand on spike-covered bark.

Another tree — the *palo santo* — is crawling with fire ants, and a short while later I nearly walk into a spiderweb that doubles as a highway for black army ants. I've run out of water and my face feels flushed from dehydration. Another group passes, looking shattered. "Buenos dias. Como estas?" Alan asks a woman dripping with sweat. "Sobrevivo," she says, wiping her brow. Surviving.

Canopy calling

A hanging bridge dangles between a snarl of treetops. I brave a glance beneath my trembling feet, but the canopy I'm walking through is so thick that I can't see

the ground. With each step, the bridge shakes and sways above primeval forest.

I've left my base for the final two nights, the Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica, to Tarzan my way across a 100ft-high treetop walkway through the rainforest. The section I'm gingerly negotiating is one of seven hanging bridges, linking observation platforms and towers. Created in 2005 by the Inkaterra Association (a National Geographic-sponsored non-profit that promotes conservation in Peru), it was designed to make studying wildlife in the loftiest reaches of the forest less treacherous.

I'd left my cabana in the early afternoon to meet my new guide, Juvenal. The 20-minute walk from the lodge to the walkway was through thick jungle, much of it flanking the Madre de Dios River. According to Juvenal, the river looks muddy due to sediment from the Andes, which contains small pieces of gold and silver. This naturally attracted illegal prospecting. The area has been better policed in recent years, but it's still taking place along the riverbanks.

As we zigzag around trees, spiders and snails suckling palm fruit, we start talking about conservation. "Every June and July, these forests are covered in smoke from Brazil due to deforestation to create cattle farms," Juvenal tells me. With ongoing threats from mining, logging and farming across the Amazon, he believes eco-tourism offers a solution that supports both conservation and local livelihoods. "Inkaterra is very good — the conservation here is high," Juvenal tells me. "For guides, there are special rules," he says, motioning towards the understory. "Try not to cut."

The area is thick with green brush and scattered splashes of sunset-coloured heliconia paradise flowers. I pass walking palms, which, with their roots

FROM LEFT: Inkaterra Canopy Walkway; chestnut-eared araçari toucan perched on a branch



outstretched like a maypole's ribbons, seem to stroll with me.

The steep and sweaty climb to the treetop walkway leaves me feeling unusually unfit. From above, I can see how the *escalara de mono* ("monkey ladder") — an undulating, woody vine — drapes across the forest like bunting. Then there's the webbed work of a strangler fig, which attaches to a host tree, eventually replacing it. Alongside me, troops of bulky-bodied Hercules ants use the bridge's rope for their elevated commute.

But up here, it's really a sanctuary for birds. I've made it across the wooden-planked bridge to the third platform, where Juvenal tells me in hushed tones to stay still. And slowly, the canopy comes alive. A russet-backed oropendola sends out its waves of sonar, while four gilded barbets suddenly stream past, inches from my face, humming like motors. More appearances are made: trogons, toucans, red-headed nuthirds, yellow-rumped caciques and yellow-throated woodpeckers.

Along the bridge stretching out before me, a woodcreeper juts between rope and mid-air, in pursuit of bugs. Once it's suitably filled, it darts off. Further on, epiphyte plants burst from thick trunks — ferns, mosses, bromelias and philodendrons. I notice the broad leaves of a cocoa tree, which stretch to 50ft high here. As we begin the descent to solid ground, the trees are sprinkled in afternoon sunlight.

Next, we head to a swampy area to search for wildlife. On the way, I see something that makes me jump — a hairy, eight-legged beast the size of my hand gripping onto a trunk above Juvenal's head. "Good eye!" says Juvenal. It's a pinktoe tarantula, he explains. It's a ghastly-looking mass, albeit with delicate, ballerina-like feet. "Their toxins cause paralysis of the nervous system. After that they're happy and take blood like soup," Juvenal laughs. The joke's lost on me.

Into the dark

Night creeps in velvet-black, and a cacophony of cicadas and hyla tree frogs ensues. We've assembled at the eco-centre and are about to venture deep into the jungle to hunt for the creatures that emerge after dark.

Before we even leave the lodge, Juvenal points out another tarantula on a tree, mocking me with its dainty pink toes. I'm already feeling antsy, and we've not yet wandered into the wilds. Four of us tiptoe after Juvenal into the black hole of the rainforest. Lit by our torches, the jungle feels like a film set as we scan the underbrush for glowing eyes.

Fumbling through foliage, we find stick insects, a moulting grasshopper and a bullet ant, whose bite is akin to being shot. "They're the most poisonous in the Amazon," Juvenal mumbles, his attention clearly elsewhere. I hear the rustling that's distracting him. A light falls on a bicolour porcupine noisily traipsing across palm fronds. We follow him with our beams, his eyes occasionally set alight like the Cheshire Cat.

Leaving him to the night, we tread on, and Juvenal nearly walks into a golden orb-weaver spider's web.



FROM TOP: Guide Alan wielding a machete; pinktoe tarantula ascending a tree trunk





Inkaterra Hacienda Concepción

“Every night this spider has to spin a new one,” he says. While it looks sinister enough, apparently it’s the spiders without webs that are the most dangerous — they’re hunting spiders. And almost on cue, Juvenal spies the hairy bulk of a leg inching out from beneath a tree root. He picks up a small stick and scrapes at the bare ground. A chicken tarantula jerks out of its lair and I immediately feel the urge to run. I stumble backwards, nearly tripping on the roots of a 700-year-old arrowwood.

As we move on, my survival instinct kicks in and I scan the ground and trees frantically. My light stops on a trunk beside the path. “Snake!” I blurt. The gang have already hotfooted it past. “Good eye!” Juvenal says again, turning around, “It’s a boa constrictor.”

I quickly sidle past, my torch darting from ground to canopy. Everything looks dangerous — the monkey ladder vine morphs into a prowling anaconda, knotted tree roots seem to hop like poison dart frogs, reflections in trees become the hungry eyes of jaguars...

I’m so absorbed by the light of my torch that I nearly walk into the man in front of me. Juvenal has spotted another boa — twice as big — and this time it’s corkscrewed around a tree that’s leaning into the path. Juvenal looks concerned, saying we’ve gone too far to turn back. He produces a knife from his pocket, and starts to cut another path through the underbrush — immediate danger seems to be the only instance where this is acceptable.

The snake begins to hiss and madly flick its tongue. Its arrow-shaped head slowly extends over the path, patiently willing its victims to move closer. But with a new path carved, we scurry past. I’m filled with fear, but it’s thrilling how exposed we are.

Just minutes later, Juvenal asks us to turn our torches off to appreciate the rainforest at night. The lights go out. Night blankets me in a vulnerable blindness. Come out, come out, wherever you are. □



ESSENTIALS

Getting there & around

British Airways has recently launched the UK’s only direct flight to Lima, from Gatwick. Or, fly from Heathrow or Manchester via Madrid with LAN or Iberia; Heathrow via Miami with American Airlines; Heathrow, Glasgow, Belfast City or Manchester via Amsterdam with KLM; or London City, Manchester and Glasgow via Paris with Air France. From Lima, there are regular onward LAN flights to Puerto Maldonado.

ba.com aa.com iberia.com lan.com klm.com airfrance.co.uk
Connect with LAN from Lima via Cusco to Puerto Maldonado, where most lodges include a transfer as part of the package. Inkaterra provides a guide to escort guests to the lodge — a 10-minute coach trip to the port, then a longboat river trip.

When to go

May–October is dry season (around 24°C). November–April is rainy season (around 30°C), when flooding can make trails muddy and difficult to traverse. On the other hand, prices are at their lowest.

More info

peru.travel
inkaterra.com
The Rough Guide to Peru. RRP: £11.99.

How to do it

RAINBOW TOURS has seven nights in Peru from £1,890 per person, based on direct flights to Lima from London with British Airways, with one night at the Ramada London Stansted Airport, flights with LATAM to the Amazon rainforest, three nights at Inkaterra Hacienda Concepción and three at Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica. Includes all Amazon transfers, meals and excursions. *rainbowtours.co.uk*