

PERU



Welcome to the jungle

After a rain-forest river cruise goes awry, during a night hike when her guide turns out the lights, and when she's asked for her passport number before heading into anaconda territory – The Globe's **Carolyn Ireland** realizes anything can happen deep in the heart of the Amazon

PUERTO MALDONADO, PERU

Our guide promises us a gentle twilight cruise on the Rio Madre de Dios.

After half a day of travelling, my husband and I have just arrived at our lodge in the Amazon rain forest. We're knocked sideways by the tropical heat. A sedate outing sounds appealing.

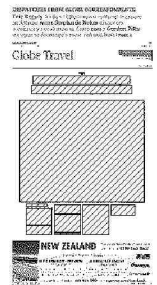
"It will be very relaxing," says Alan Ruis de la Pena as he introduces himself as our leader for the next four days.

So we join eight other travellers aboard a wooden longboat and set out to spot white and black caimans, night monkeys and maybe a jaguar slipping down to the water's edge to drink.

After just a few minutes, we run aground on shoals in shallow water. The second the motor stops, we see dark shapes slide down the nearby rocks, followed by gentle splashes.

Every childhood nightmare I've ever had is coming true.

But I'm determined to overcome my fears of the Amazon at



night because I don't want it to stop me from experiencing the splendours of the rain forest during the day.

We sit in stillness and listen to the cacophony of night creatures. The helmsman and his deputy make several attempts to power us forward – then backward.

Eventually, they slip barefoot over the side and into the water. My mind drifts to the hazards lurking under the surface of a river whose name translates as “Mother of God.” It turns out the boatmen need our help.

Amazon, Page 4

Keep your camera ready on a ride through the Tambopata Reserve, a sanctuary for some of the Amazon's most endangered creatures.

CAROLYN IRELAND/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

» All of us on board must rock the boat in order to slip free. We lunge back and forth – some so energetically it seems the aged watercraft will capsize or break apart. Then suddenly – amazingly – we are free and back on our way.

“All part of the adventure,” says Alan, as he turns to casting his lantern on the banks and trees.

With that bout of excitement behind us, the night sky and the inky water do seem more tranquil. By the time we make it back to the warm torchlight of our lodge, we've spotted the promised caimans. I am relaxed – but also exhilarated – as we gather around the bar.

Our home base for this rain forest adventure is Hacienda Concepcion. It's an eco-friendly lodge opened last year by the Peru-based Inkatererra group on a former cocoa and rubber plantation.

The Hacienda is aimed at travellers who find Inkatererra's five-star Reserva Amazonica (a little farther down the river) too tame. This resort is smaller, less expensive and set deeper in the jungle.

To get here, Jim and I have flown to Puerto Maldonado in

south-east Peru, then boarded a boat for a 20-minute trip downriver, followed by a short hike. Our room is one of eight in the two-storey main lodge, while members of our group stay in private cabanas down by the lagoon. The light cedar construction of the lodge makes it feel open to the jungle, but we're well-protected behind screens. Ceilings soar to a roof of hand-tied thatch.

At breakfast, we get a better look at our group from last night.

Since all 10 of us arrived the day before, we will do all of our excursions together. We're a diverse bunch, including young honeymooners from England, a couple from the U.S. Midwest and a trans-Atlantic pair rekindling their romance after 30 years.

“It's like summer camp for grown-ups,” my husband, Jim, says as we set off for Lake Sandoval.

Back on the river, we board the same wooden boat for the trip to the Tambopata Reserve, a closely protected area of biodiversity and a sanctuary for some of the Amazon's most endangered creatures. The sun is an orange ball above misty treetops, and, as we travel downstream, the landscape that seemed so threatening the night before is ethereal in the morning light.

At the ranger's station, we register our passport numbers before we trek for three kilometres into the forest.

About one kilometre in I realize why. Alan stops, and points out the marshy territory underfoot and the dense canopy above.

“This is ideal territory for anacondas,” he says, adding that the world's largest snake can reach a length of more than nine metres and weigh more than 225 kilograms.

With that image fresh in my mind, Alan continues to lead us on, making frequent plunges

into the bush to see red-bellied macaws, blue-headed macaws and woodpeckers.

Against all odds – as far as I can tell – we make it to our next adventure, which is a canoe ride through an estuary to Lake Sandoval.

The oxbow lake was formed when a portion of Rio Madre de Dios was cut off from the main river and therefore created an eco-system unique in the world, Alan explains. This too, he adds, is a favoured spot for anacondas.

Fortunately, we don't encounter any. Instead, we see a sloth in the treetops and a rare poison dart frog. The reeds surrounding the shore pulsate with bird life. Herons, ibis, hoatzins and a grey-necked wood rail all make an appearance. A family of endangered river otters frolic in the water.

When we arrive back at the lodge, we feel as if we've had a week's worth of experiences – and it's only 11 a.m. The heat has become oppressive. Most of our group heads to the organic cotton hammocks for a nap. I spend about an hour watching a man knock lemons from a tree with a stick.

After a buffet lunch, it is time for our next outing: the Anaconda Walk at the Inkatererra Reserva Amazonica. (I am beginning to think Alan has a death sentence. Or just doesn't like us.)

We climb stairs to a height of 10 storeys, then cross a series of six bridges high up in the canopy. For once, I'm not the most phobic one in the group, though I do recall flipping through a book at the airport and reading about a green tree viper which is particularly lethal to humans because it's well-positioned to strike at heads and necks.

Many people in the group are afraid of heights. The elder statesman of the group – an architect from England – talks one person after another across the narrow, swinging bridges.

It's a beautiful walk in the treetops – but the creatures

remain hidden.

Sometimes, Alan says, they see emerald tree boas. Or a monkey will pop out. "You have to be patient in the Amazon," he says.

Back at the lodge, we're becoming increasingly full of bravado. Then Alan tells us about our next outing. After dark, we'll go for a night walk in the jungle. That way we'll have a better chance of seeing spiders, insects and snakes, he explains.

"Spiders, insects and snakes," says the young groom on honeymoon. "That pretty much sums up everything I don't like about the jungle." He opts to stay at the bar.

The rest of us meet in the lodge's research centre, where Alan displays deadly snakes in jars. One of the pickled specimens is a coral snake that almost got him when he didn't notice it curled up in the centre of a plant.

Alan seems obsessed with Anacondas so I ask him about one of the other fearsome serpents of the Amazon – the Bushmaster. It's large, aggressive and armed with lethal venom. "Yes, we see them and sometimes we capture them around here," Alan says, gesturing to the blackness just beyond the circular beam of our flashlights.

And with that, we head off down a narrow path.

Lit by the artificial light of our torches, the jungle feels almost like a film set. We push through the foliage to see a praying mantis, a golden orb spider, a poisonous caterpillar and two stick insects mating. Our beams catch the bright eyes of an opossum.

After 30 minutes or so, Alan asks us to turn off our flashlights so that we can experience the full darkness and intense sounds of the rain forest.

We stand frozen for an eternity of about 20 seconds. "If you feel something slithering across your feet," Alan says, "try not to move."

The lodge has never seemed so warm and welcoming as

when we make it back that night. We sit in the glow of the candlelight and trade stories. But we head to bed early because we have a predawn wake-up call.

The sun is barely a glimmer in the sky when we board the boat for a trip to a clay lick. More than 200 birds show up for breakfast. Parrots, parakeets and macaws will fly as much as 11 kilometres each day for one piece of mineral-rich clay.

We watch the birds chatter, socialize and pick up clay in their beaks.

It takes almost hypnotic concentration to spot the two orange-cheeked parrots and handful of dusky parakeets among the riot of blue-headed parrots.

But as we turn to head back to the lodge, I realize that this is what Alan means when he says the Amazon requires patience. Nature forces us to slow to its rhythm.

Later that day, we gather for our last excursion. We don't have to go far. Alan leads us to the steamy green swamp near the lodge. We climb into two canoes and slowly paddle under the hanging branches along the banks. The strange brown birds called hoatzins are thrashing around in the bushes and one turtle pokes his head out of the water.

When we get to the deepest part of the swamp, Alan has us stop and pull the canoes close together. He tells us the local legend: if a body of water like this never drains, that means it has a very large anaconda living in it. I concentrate on taking photos of the birds. After another half hour of slow paddling, we make our way back.

Jim is so disappointed at not seeing a snake, he takes the canoe out for another circuit by himself.

I, meanwhile, retreat to a white cotton hammock back at the lodge. We will leave the following morning and I'm grateful

for all the creatures we did see – and the ones we didn't.

IF YOU GO

Once you arrive in Peru, venturing into the Amazon is much easier than it used to be. Sure, you can do it the hard way by travelling overland by bus, but it's quicker to fly into Puerto Maldonado on one of the domestic airlines such as LAN or TACA.

Puerto Maldonado is a sprawling settlement with a bit of swagger. Illegal gold mining operations on the Rio Madre de Dios are sometimes run out of this frontier town. There are a few hotels, but many travellers quickly board a boat for jungle lodges on the Rio Madre de Dios.

The weather is hot and humid year-round. The hottest and rainiest months are December to March.

WHERE TO STAY

Hacienda Concepcion The lodge is set in more than 800 hectares of rain forest and promises an authentic jungle experience. Amenities include hot rain showers, Peruvian cotton linens and guided excursions in English, Spanish or French. Meals are buffet-style and a farm provides organic fruit and vegetables. The National Geographic Society has endorsed the lodge for its efforts in conservation and education. Rooms from \$280 a night. 1-855-409-1456; byinkaterra.com/hacienda-concepcion

Reserva Amazonica Adjacent to the Tambopata National Reserve, the upscale Inkaterra lodge has 35 private cabanas, each with their own screened porch and hammock. Guests can also spend the night in a treehouse room in the jungle canopy. There is also a spa on-site. Meals and excursions are a la carte. Currently a three-day "Family Expedition to the Amazon" package is on offer for \$712.00 (U.S.) per adult and \$316.00 per child under 12. 1-855-409-1456; inkaterra.com/en/reserva-amazonica - C.I.