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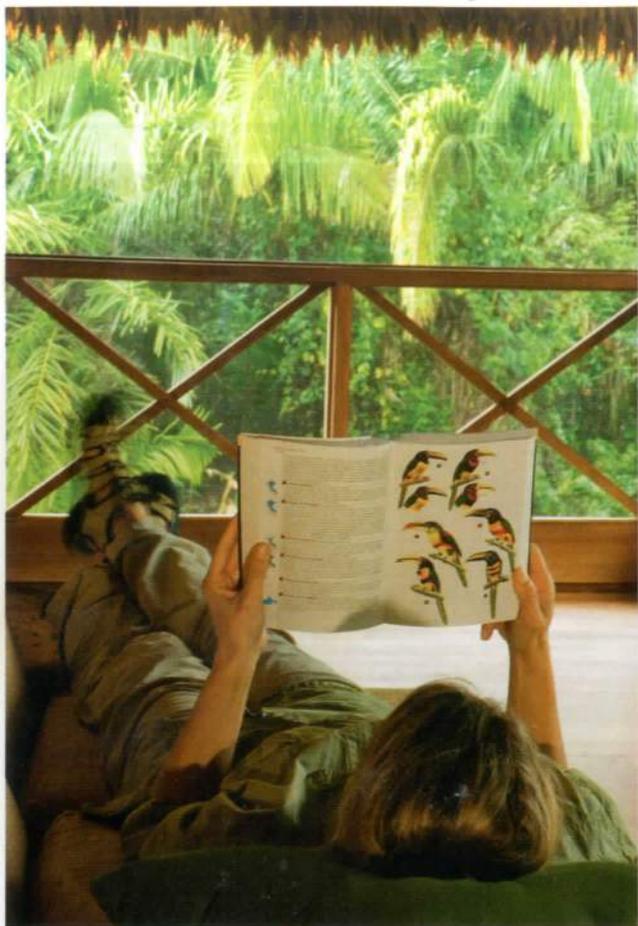
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"It's pleasing to be able to enjoy the Amazon with something of a clear conscience. In a part of the world where greenwash imposters can be as irksome as bullet ants, my trip has been organised with the Inkaterra Group, which has promoted ecotourism and funded scientific research for the past 35 years"



T R E A D I N G S O F T L Y I N P E R U

After just 24 hours in the Peruvian Amazon, I've come to the conclusion human beings are not particularly good at assessing risk. Before my departure, I'd been treated to several worrying traveller tales in which people were either munched by jaguars, drowned by a caiman, asphyxiated by anacondas or poisoned by the fer-de-lance — a venomous pit viper widely described as possessing an 'irritable disposition that strikes with very little provocation'.

I rest my hand on the trunk of a giant ironwood to steady myself as I follow my guide Geraldine over vast, slippery aerial roots. "No!" she shrieks, scolding me, like a parent pulling a toddler's fingers away from an electric socket. I stand back and stare at the terror I've been delivered from.

"Bullet ants," snaps Geraldine, pointing to a swarm of conjoined inky-black full stops marching down the tree. Their abdomens are unusually large, and rear upwards in a conspicuously pointy and unsettling way. If you were asked to draw a scary looking ant, this is what you would draw. The sting, says Geraldine, is shattering.

"Follow your eyes up the tree," she advises more cheerfully. Looking upwards through the broccoli-green, broccoli-shaped canopy, I pick out the flash of feathers, seemingly freshly painted in red and blue — a scarlet macaw. After just 36 hours in the Amazon, I'm feeling pretty smug, having ticked off a lengthy list of must-see animals, from caiman to river otters, monkeys and bats.

We plod on, deeper into the Tambopata Reserve, one of the most pristine, biodiverse areas of our planet. We reach Lake Sandoval and explore the waterscape in a small fibreglass boat. We pick out caimans lurking quietly by the water's edge, their eyes peeking beadily above the surface. Streaks of coloured plumage zip this way and that, but none escape identification by my eagle-eyed guide.

It's pleasing to be able to enjoy the Amazon with something of a clear conscience. In a part of the world where greenwash imposters can be as irksome as bullet ants, my trip has been organised with the Inkaterra Group, which has promoted ecotourism and funded scientific research for the past 35 years. My base is Hacienda Concepcion, set in the grounds of a 1950s Catholic mission, five miles downstream from Puerto Maldonado. Inkaterra has converted it to a two-storey lodge made of cedar, with a thatched roof of palm trees, a bar, restaurant and lounge. A path leads away from the lodge to seven stand-alone cabanas.

Even in a fan-cooled cabana sustained by the luxurious trimmings that comes with the Inkaterra brand — eucalyptus-scented soaps, sharp-lined wash basins, drinks of chilled, crushed lemon, and all the soft cotton linen you could wish for — it proves hard to sleep. The day's events rush through my head. Outside, I can hear movement: monkeys, perhaps, peccaries or maybe that un-cooperative jaguar.

Then, for an hour or so, there's silence. But before dawn the jungle chorus returns with a feverish beat. The birds are unseen, but now identifiable by their song: the screaming piha sounds like a wolf-whistling clanger, but my favourite is the oropendola, whose call — "who-o-ooop!" — resembles a submarine sonar. I sit outside my lodge — momentarily lowering my new-found vigilance for bullet ants — and pick out an oropendola as it flutters away from the roof of my lodge. True to its name, as it sings, it see-saws on a branch comically, like a pendulum.

Words: Mark Rowe ►



HOW TO DO IT

Journey Latin America offers a three-night stay at Inkaterra's Hotel Concepcion with full board and excursions for £1,274 per person, based on two sharing, including international and domestic flights. journeylatinamerica.co.uk

ALTERNATIVE

Pura Aventura offers four nights in the Ecuadorian Amazon as part of a 17-day trip to the Galapagos Islands. Prices from £4,600 per person, including internal flights and transfers, activities, excursions and guiding. International flights from £657. pura-aventura.com

Inset: Red and green macaws flying over the canopy of the Peruvian rainforest, near Tambopata. **Opposite, clockwise from top left:** Main house, Inkaterra's Hotel Concepcion; strangler fig tree, Tambopata National Reserve; cabana room at Hotel Concepcion