

out there

# The river wild

*The elusive giant otter and a prehistoric bird are among the highlights of a canoe excursion in the Peruvian Amazon. Words: Stephanie Cavagnaro*

There's a sudden splash. It reveals nothing — the lake's as still as bathwater. I'm searching for the elusive giant otter deep in the Tambopata National Reserve, a protected area in Peru's Amazon basin, and this morning the animal is nowhere to be found.

I'm in a dugout canoe sloshing through a *cocha* (swamp). My eco-lodge, Inkaterra Hacienda Concepcion, edges up to these waters and offers daily guided excursions. Earlier this morning, my guide, Alan (from the nearby city of Puerto Maldonado) and I had set off into the steamy swamp. Its turbid surface reflects lush tropical plants and is littered with leaves, but beneath lurk sharp-toothed piranhas. There's another splosh near a tree with limp boughs, which turns out to be a jumping fish. "There are over 350 types of fish in this area," Alan says.

It's a veritable buffet for giant otters, which were once abundant in the Amazon basin but are now endangered due to extensive hunting for their fur; there are said to be fewer than 5,000 left in the wild, so it's no surprise we're unlucky. Still, the area's a twitcher's paradise. There are white-banded swallows, yellow lesser kiskadee flycatchers, striated and capped herons, ringed kingfishers and noisy red-bellied macaws. Alan loves his birds. "In Peru, we have over 1,800 types," he proudly discloses.

The area's oldest winged residents are also here — the big, blue-faced hoatzin. Their signature mohawk has given them the nickname 'punk rock chicken.' A group of these clumsy prehistoric birds attempt to balance on a flimsy branch, which sends one of them honking and flapping wildly.

Alan stops rowing and stares at the treetops. He's spotted a family of red howler monkeys lazing in the heat. These primates may be small, but they're the world's loudest land animals; Alan speculates their terrifying growl must sound like a dinosaur's.

We glide to the deepest area of the *cocha* and stop beside the skeleton of a steamboat. Metal appears to melt into water around a smokestack. It was used to transport rubber and other natural resources to Brazil and



Bolivia along the Madre de Dios River. "This channel used to be connected to the river, but it took another course, and this boat's been stuck in the mud for 60 years..." Alan's voice trails off.

Something is moving in the canopy. Alan points towards the lobed leaves of a cecropia tree, where a three-toed sloth sluggishly walks upside down. But before we get a good look, a furry head emerges from the swamp. There's a snort and it's beneath the murky surface again. It's the giant otter. We paddle quickly towards him, and find he's popped up on the other side of the channel, quicker than a Whac-A-Mole. He surfaces again further along the water — mouth agape, whiskered like an old man — just long enough for a playful glance before sinking. We get close enough the fourth time to spot his cream-coloured chest. It's fleeting. The otter disappears as quickly as he came.

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## DID YOU KNOW?

Giant otters can weigh up to 75 pounds, eat between six and nine pounds of food a day and grow as long as 6ft — more than twice as long as a North American river otter