



Exploring the Peruvian Amazon with Inkaterra

11 Feb 2017

4 February 2017

Tambopata National Reserve, Peru

The Amazon is like nothing I've ever smelt. The olfactory tidal wave of ancient life/death/life, of plurality, and wildness, and powerful fecundity, washes over you like an animate atmosphere full of vibrant pheromones the very instant you step off the plane in Puerto Maldonado. The Amazon is the last of the three eldest forests on this planet that I had yet to sleep in, the other two being the Daintree and the Danum Valley in Malaysian Borneo.

It is the season of rain, and several times a day, a hush falls over the symphony of frogsong and insect percussion and howler monkey ululation. First the hush. And then the smell. The pheromone firmament begins to dance with the living, breathing scent of water. That is when you run for cover if you don't want to give yourself up to the rain, though many times I have. After the smell comes the sound and then it is only a matter of seconds until the world is a river of rivers. It starts as a whisper, almost in the back of your mind, and grows to a droning hum. And the hum becomes a chant becomes a full-throated heartbeat of keening becomes a roar. A crashing effervescent rush of wind-water-leaf-dance. And then it is upon you. And there is no other choice but to stop and breathe in the heartbeat of the forest and think of God.

The day I got here, I was lying on the daybed in my room looking down at the lagoon when the rain came in and my body had effortlessly synced to the tune of the world. I was tired from travelling from Cusco early in the morning after staying up all night playwriting and every single time I was taken by a yawn, the distant rumble of thunder would wax into life, and peak, and recede in perfect time with my intake of oxygen. Over and over and over, these synchronised thunderyawns brought me into perfect tandem with the heavens. I don't think that I was making thunder. I believe that the *sky* was controlling *me*.

I'm staying at **Inkaterra's Hacienda Concepción**, in a fully screened open-air hut with a vaulted thatch roof and impossibly stylish appointments. I have full room and board (and we're talking black tie dinner service even though everyone's lumbering around in mud-slathered wellies). At dusk when the torches are lit along the paths and the porch lanterns come on and the great lodge turns all aglow with hundreds of candles flickering through the woods, it truly looks like I live in Lothlorian.

I've seen a giant river otter swimming right beneath my cabin, a family of capybaras (they're like 60-kilo guinea pigs and they're hilariously chill motherfuckers, like, "Oh hello, flashing boat of humans, don't mind me, I'll just sit here and munch away looking stoned"), many caimans, howler monkeys, and more extravagantly costumed birds than I can count. I've been canoeing, twilight boating on the Madre de Dios, walking on a system of suspension bridges through the top of the canopy that sway with a sickening vertigo until you remember how to tread like a cat.

I find that divination works the best when I'm travelling, groundless, en route to the next great Somewhere, perhaps because the universe loves and lives in the flux of things. So I asked her a question, the Universe. A question about

B, the last night I slept in my bed in Cusco, and worked with the dream images that I received that night and the synchronicities that occurred on the way into the Amazon, and then with the animals who appeared to me in any way that felt significant. I know how to interpret these things as a constellation, a medicine wheel that points to a truth. But I still have to learn not to second guess myself. Rational thought is the final obstacle.

And so, on my way to the river at twilight, when a cloud of bats made a murmuration all around me, and I felt the final wheel of light in the constellation, I second guessed it. The rational cynic in me said, "Oh Layne, you're in the Amazon. You can't interpret every bit of wildlife you see as a piece of the answer, now can you?" And the truth was, I hadn't. Only the first, the giant river otter, and that's because it only appeared to me and no one else, and did so rather significantly, with a momentous sort of flourish that seemed to say, "Are you listening? I am speaking to you." My guide later told me that only 5% of visitors are blessed to see these otters. And this one swam up from the lagoon to greet me as I arrived. It looked into my eyes, which is rarer than rare, for they are shy, and it actually sang to me.

"Sometimes we are afraid that to identify more than one self within the psyche might mean that we are psychotic. While it is true that people with a psychotic disorder also experience many selves, identifying with or against them quite vividly, a person with no psychotic disorder holds all the inner selves in an orderly and rational manner. They are put to good use; the person grows and thrives. For the majority of women, mothering and raising the internal selves is a creative work, a way of knowledge, not a reason for becoming unnerved."

—Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run With the Wolves*

So, otter medicine was definitely given. But back to the bats. As rational Layne and spirit Layne were having their little argument, the murmuration passed me as one and settled on a giant ficus vine just left of me. And once my vision adjusted to the dark, I could see that the vine unmistakably formed a giant B, towering from shin level to well above my head. And every loop, line, and curve of that tree-writ letter was breathing with living bat magic. They literally spelled his name. End of argument. [Otters speak](#) of psychic awareness, curiosity, and receptivity. And [bats](#), because they use echo-location, refer to the ability to sense in the dark, to see without being seen, and also to the task of learning the rhythms of life/death/life. So Pacha spoke.

Today I hiked 6 kilometres through knee-high mud and grueling heat and curtains of bugs and wall upon wall of blanket-like humidity to reach Lake Sandoval. You're slipping and sliding up and down the hills and half of the things you could grab for support are either crawling with murderous giant fire ants or covered in poisonous spikes. We hiked until the trail of mud became a fen and then a swamp and took canoes from there, first through dense jungle, and then opening out into the lake. Another one of those adventures that was so hard I very likely wouldn't have attempted it if I had known what lay ahead. And so completely worth it. So beyond lovely. And yes, even when I was blinded by sweat and starving to the point of dizziness and covered in slop like a wandering mud monster, even then I knew that it was lovely. And I remembered to savour it completely.

Later we went on a night hike and the forest was lit with fireflies and bioluminescent mushrooms and crawling with wide-eyed owl monkeys. I love that none of this has the potential to be captured on film, at least not in terms of my very standard camera, and must be experienced live to be seen, like the touch-me-nots that contract and curl up their leaves when you touch them, or the way certain herons swim completely submerged, cruising with little more than their eyes above the surface of the water so they blend into the light. Or the walking trees. Yes, I said walking trees. And yes, they actually walk! Very slowly, but they do. These are the things that I am here for—on this earth—the things that must be experienced in the moment to be understood, and appreciated. The things, like theatre, and travel, that can't be captured on film or in words because the magic of them—their beauty and their power—lives in the essence of their motion.







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