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Peru's new rainforest lodge is the closest you'll get to becoming David Attenborough



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The Inkaterra Guides Field Station has opened its doors to ordinary travellers for the first time

It seemed wrong to have my fingers locked around the delicate, downy throat of a black-faced antthrush no bigger than a starling, but this was the approved handling method. In less than seven minutes (the approved handling time), biologist Andreina Mendez and technical assistant Noe Huaracca had weighed and measured the 1.7oz bird, looked for signs of moulting to determine its age (about a year old) and tagged its leg for future identification. It was then my job to release it back into its home in the wild.

“Keep your fingers like that,” Andreina said, “then kneel down and release the bird on to the grass. It will fly off into the rainforest.”



A tiny bird is weighed, measured and tagged CREDIT: WWW.ALVARO.PE

My fear was that the antthrush would fly straight back into the trap we had set earlier, a gossamer-like web of nylon filament strung between poles like a 40ft-long badminton net, almost invisible in the crepuscular light; it was just after 6am. Luckily, the bird sped off down a different forest trail and vanished.



Close encounters with wildlife are par for the [COURSE CREDIT](#).
WWW.ALVARO.PE

This was my introduction to working life at Inkaterra Guides Field Station, which opens on June 26 in the Madre de Dios region of the [Peruvian Amazon](#). Set up as a training facility for the “Explorer Guides” employed by Inkaterra – a Peruvian ecotourism company with a portfolio of luxury lodges – it has until now hosted research scientists and volunteers, but not paying guests. Today it will open its doors to “travellers eager to engage in different projects and experience the Amazon rainforest in an intense and scholarly way”.

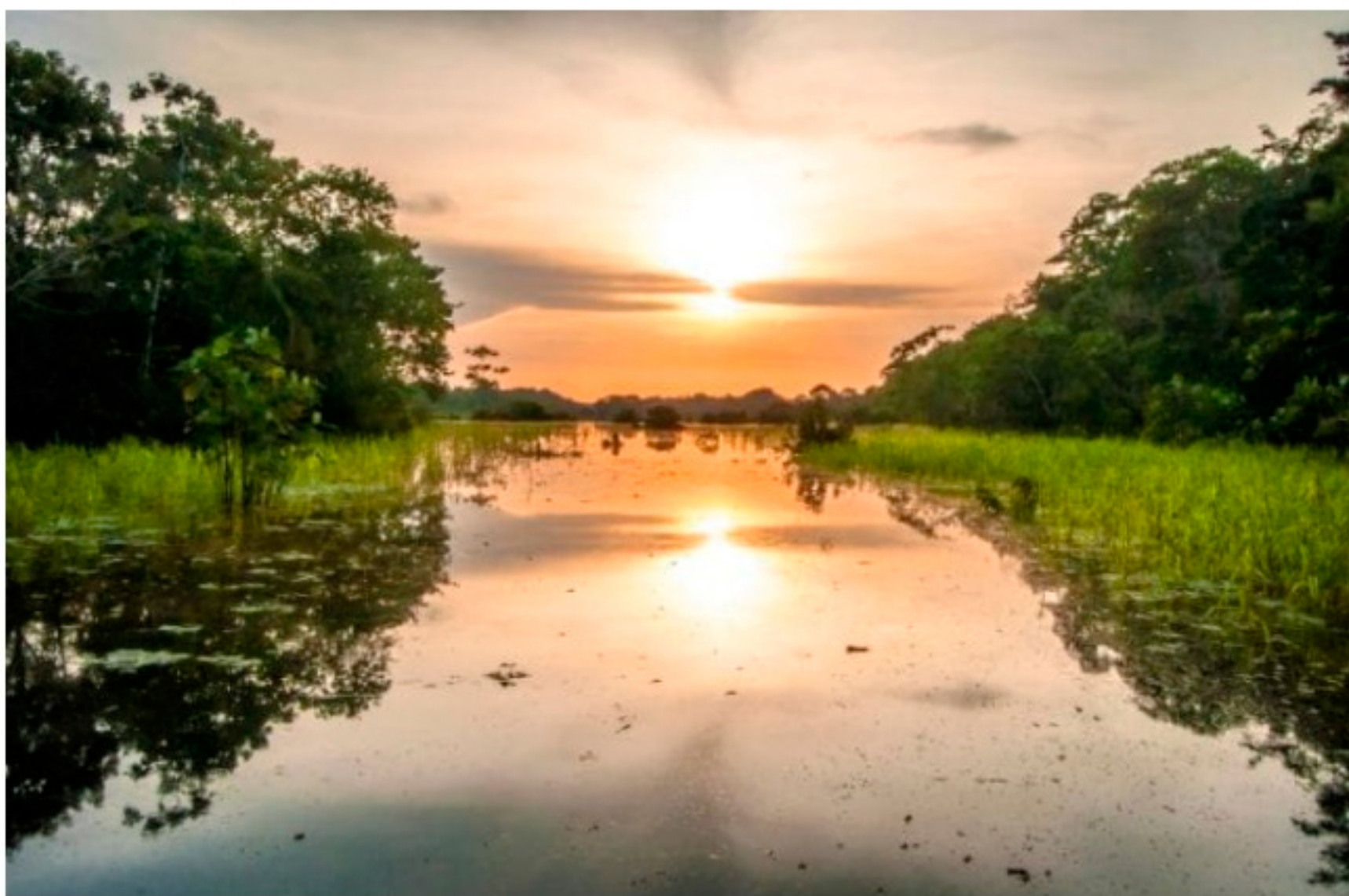
- [Ultimate Peru: how to have the perfect holiday](#)
- [14 reasons why Peru should be your next holiday destination](#)

Intense and scholarly pretty much sums it up. On most mornings I was up at 5am to walk the forest trails in search of wildlife before the sun super-heated the air to 88F (31C) with 100 per cent humidity. Over four days, I recorded more than 60 pages of notes on everything from the plumage, song and scientific names of birds to the symbiotic behaviour of monkeys, how to identify animal tracks, the dizzying variety of rainforest trees and the exact taxonomy of chilli peppers grown in Inkaterra’s “bio orchard”. If you’re looking for hands-on experience of conservation work in the company of experts, this is the real deal.



"If you're looking for hands-on experience of conservation work, this is the real deal"
CREDIT: WWW.ALVARO.PE

Be warned, however, that this is not a five-star hotel but a working field station – albeit with a restaurant serving traditional Peruvian food cooked to a high standard. I stayed in one of four sparsely furnished, thatched cabañas grouped around a grass quadrangle, comprising two double rooms with only an 8ft-high shelving unit separating me from my neighbours, with very little privacy; it's probably best to book an entire cabaña with two people you know well.



The camp is remote and electricity and Wi-Fi is rationed CREDIT: Å©KLUBLU - STOCK.ADOBE.COM

Electricity (and therefore internet access) is rationed to a few hours per day and during my stay there was no hot water for showers, though I was assured this was a rare malfunction. On the plus side, I had as my mentor Adolfo Schmitt, co-ordinator of investigations and conservation with Inkaterra Asociación (ITA), the non-governmental organisation (NGO) that is funded by Inkaterra's ecotourism activities and runs research projects at the company's properties. So far it has protected 15,000 hectares of rainforest in the Madre de Dios river basin, slowing the march of deforestation, monitoring dwindling wildlife numbers and helping communities relearn traditional forest ways.



While accommodation is rustic, food is of a high standard

“I’ll show you the animals we’re protecting,” said Adolfo, plugging in his laptop in the Main House, the field station’s refectory-style dining area. “We’ve three camera traps,” he explained, “one in the forest 150m (490ft) from here and two in a wildlife corridor linking the forest and the wetlands.”

On his screen was a grainy black-and-white image from one of them – of a margay or tree ocelot, a small cat with a richly marbled coat which is increasingly rare in Amazonia. Next up was a tapir, similar in shape to a pig and hunted for its meat, eyes glowing white in the infrared camera flash. Adolfo clicked through a gallery of other animals caught in the limelight: armadillo (recorded almost nightly), white-lipped peccary (like a wild boar), tayra (a member of the weasel family), tamandua (a type of anteater), paca (a 2ft-long rodent with dots and stripes down its sides) and pale-winged trumpeter (a large ground-dwelling bird).



Howler monkeys CREDIT: PABLO E. NEGRI - COPYRIGHT ©/PABLO NEGRI EDWARDS

“How likely am I to see these animals while I’m here?” I asked, and Adolfo shrugged. “We can never guarantee it,” he said, “but we like to say we minimise your chances of not seeing them. One of our guides, Frank, is very lucky. He was relaxing by the river one day and a tapir strolled by. That’s very rare, but he had his video camera and filmed the whole episode.” As we watched the footage, I asked the obvious question. “Is Frank available tomorrow?” And so I found myself early next morning on a trail walk to the nearby wetlands, inspecting a column of army ants equipped with fearsome mandibles and capable of carrying birds and bats.

“Have you ever seen a tarantula?” asked Frank, ushering me towards a hole at the base of a tree. With a twig he wheedled out first a litter of furry spiderlings, then the mother – the size of a large crab, wrestling with the twig just 2ft from my boot. “It’s a chicken spider,” said Frank, “and it has 20, 50 or maybe 100 babies. It’s only a little bit poisonous.”

I asked Frank how he knew the spider was there. “I noticed a movement on the path,” he said. “I feel everything, I smell everything... It’s just practice.”

A pile of half-eaten fruit alerted Frank to the presence of white-lipped peccaries, just through the trees. I could hear a grunting and a crack as the animals crunched on bark. The air was filled with a musk-like scent and minutes later we found the hoof prints of dozens of the animals in the mud.

They proved elusive and we moved on, emerging from the forest on to a timber walkway lancing out across a lagoon flanked by 100ft-tall aguaje palm trees bearing blood-red fruit; macaws and woodpeckers are attracted by the food. In the dry season, heliconias thrive here and butterflies lay eggs on the leaves. Frogs, grasshoppers, herons, egrets and hummingbirds are regular visitors and black caimans and anacondas up to 12ft long were spotted by workers building the stilted walkways. “Brown capuchin monkeys,” Frank whispered, and we spotted them in the trees 100ft away. “There are tanagers too,” he enthused, but I had no idea what they were – until the following day.



A tanager CREDIT: Å@WILFRED - STOCK.ADOBE.COM

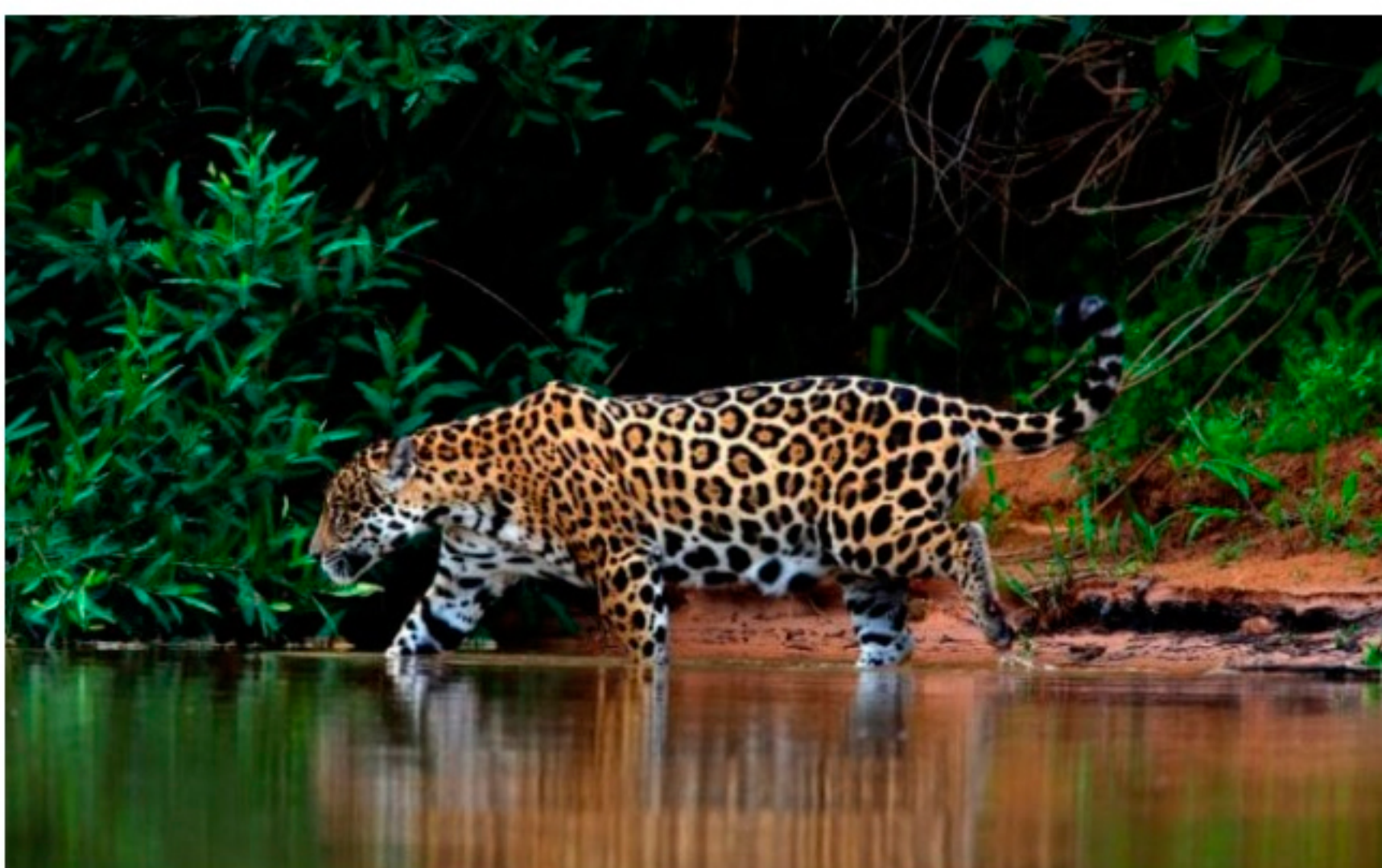
My bird education began in earnest on the canopy walkway, a network of slatted bridges slung between 100ft-tall towers. It was a giddy-making climb to get there. I froze as the wooden walkway creaked and swung from side to side, but the reward was time on the platform with Noe and Andreina, peering through binoculars at a range of Technicolor birds. As we stood there, three red-bellied macaws flew past at eye level and a pair of yellow-crowned parrots settled on a branch 30ft away. There followed green mealy parrots, blue-headed parrots, a golden-green woodpecker, emitting a blood-curdling screech, a russet-backed oropendola and a mixed flock of “at least 10 species”, said Noe, including tanagers – like psychedelic bluetits, flitting from branch to branch.

All were recorded by ITA researchers, but the NGO’s activities go beyond wildlife. In Puerto Pardo – a 3½-hour boat ride away, near the Bolivian border – field workers are helping schoolchildren in a project to keep hunger at bay. “We asked these children and their families what they like to eat,” said Jan Brack Faura, chief of projects at Inkaterra Guides Field Station, “then devised an agroforestry system to provide all their nutritional needs.”

He showed me a diagram of trees planted at 16ft intervals with food crops growing in between. These included uncucha (a type of potato), frejol (beans), zapallo (pumpkin) and pepinillo (gherkin).

The genius of the project is that each plot is small enough for the children to maintain themselves. “This is a community which in the past destroyed the forest,” said Jan, “but now they are preserving it – and this is a model that can be replicated. Others can copy it with different crops which they want to eat.”

I pondered this over quinoa pancakes the next morning in the plusher surroundings of Inkaterra Hacienda Concepcion, a second property a short motor west along the Madre de Dios river. From there I struck out with guide Juvenal Quispe Ccohaquira on my final outing. On the forest trail to Sandoval Lake, Juvenal halted us in our tracks. There in the mud was a print left by a jaguar. “It was here a few hours ago,” said Juvenal, raising the possibility of a sighting.



Jaguar sightings are possible

It was not to be, but what happened next was almost as rewarding. First, we heard a noise like the whine of a jet engine, rising to a crescendo. “Howler monkeys,” Juvenal said, but we were heading in the opposite direction. As we walked along a forest trail, a rustling in the treetops swelled to a cacophony and hundreds of squirrel monkeys swept overhead. Some feasted a few feet from us. Then came brown capuchin monkeys, with stronger jaws capable of breaking open fruit which the squirrel monkeys scavenge. For half an hour I stood with primates chattering around me. This was my David Attenborough moment.

Need to know

Jacada Travel (020 7619 1380; jacadatravel.com) can include one night at Inkaterra Guides Field Station as part of its Inca Trail and Amazon Tour, which also includes stays in Lima, Cusco (for Machu Picchu) and at Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica, a few minutes’ boat ride from the field station; the package costs from £4,700 per person, excluding international flights.

Longer stays at Inkaterra Guides Field Station (inkaterra.com) start at £250 for four nights.

