

# Peruvian adventures from the Amazon to the Andes, Lake Titicaca to Lima



THERESA STORM

Published on: October 21, 2017 | Last Updated: October 23, 2017 10:26 AM MDT



A month spent in the rural areas of Peru brought many incredible sights. Photo, Reid Storm CALGARY HERALD

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World travel writer Theresa Storm has been journeying throughout Peru for a month. A country of vast differences in terrain, she'll be blogging about her experiences there. This is Part 1.



### South America in a nutshell

Even though Peru is not quite twice the size of Alberta, this South American country is richly diverse. Fly or drive a short while and everything changes, including the weather, topography, plants and





animals, and even the peoples' culture and clothing.

Save Ecuador, nowhere else have I gone from the heat of the rainforest to being nestled hours later in the mountains with a hot water bottle tucked under my toes. These are but two of the country's eight natural regions, which are defined by climate and altitude.

Peru also nurtures one of the planet's 35 biological megadiversity hot spots: more than 20,000 species of flora and 5,585 of fauna, including over 1,800 birds (120 endemic), 500 mammals and more than 300 reptiles.

It was to see this diversity that my husband, Reid, and I set off on a month-long trip traversing the southern half of the Andean nation, exploring the Amazon, the Andes and Lima on the Pacific coast.

With so much natural beauty and diversity of terrain — plus the famed Inca site of Machu Picchu, Peru attracts outdoor enthusiasts the world over. While there are plenty of tour operators and accommodations, check that guides are qualified and ecotourism claims are genuine, including low environmental impact, contributing directly to local peoples and educating guests.

## A taste of the rainforest

Puerto Maldonado, a rambling frontier town that harkens back to the old Wild West, is the capital of the Madre de Dios region and the gateway to Peru's southern Amazon.

We opt for our first nature infusion at the Inkaterra Hacienda Concepción (<http://www.inkaterra.com/inkaterra/inkaterra-hacienda-concepcion/the-experience/>) eight kilometres from town between the Tambopata National Reserve and the chocolatey Madre de Dios, a wide river that serves as the local highway.

We travel downriver by motorized canoe as the sun sets, disembarking on a walkway lit by torches that winds through Jurassic-sized tropical vegetation. I feel like I've arrived at Fantasy Island (remember that TV hit?).

At the two-storey, wooden main lodge, screened in to keep insects out and topped with a peaked thatched roof, we meet Explorer Guide Plinio, who details our twilight river excursion to look for nocturnal animals such as capybara, the world's largest rodent. We don't find any, but we do see plenty of small caiman with bulging eyes, who slither back into the river at our approach.

Later, we enjoy a gourmet, candlelit dinner with menu offerings like patarashka, white fish wrapped in bijao leaves, with mashed yucca spiced with sacha cilantro. It is one of the best meals of our trip.

In the morning, some guests go to Lake Sandoval, home to howler monkeys, caimans and giant river otters, while our group heads to the Tambopata Butterfly Farm (<http://perubutterfly.com/en/>). Here we learn the country boasts the world's highest number of butterfly species (over 4,000), which is more than 20 per cent of all those known. The colourful winged mariposas delight, landing on my face and nose.

Where we're staying:

In Lima: Wyndham Costa del Sol Lima Airport Hotel (<https://www.wyndhamhotels.com/wyndham/lima-peru/wyndham-costa-del-sol-lima-airport/overview>), which is conveniently connected to the airport.

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In Madre de Dios: Inkaterra Hacienda Concepción (<http://www.inkaterra.com/inkaterra/inkaterra-hacienda-concepcion/the-experience/>) on a 380-hectare private ecological reserve — 19 private cabanas on stilts with a screened-in sitting area facing the forest or lake, and six rooms in the main lodge. Packages are all-inclusive except alcohol and tips and most excursions are included.

Also, this June the Inkaterra Guides Field Station (<http://www.inkaterra.com/guides-field-station/tambopata/the-experience/>), which previously only accommodated guides in training, opened for overnight stays.



Refugio Amazonas in Peru. Photo, Reid Storm *CALGARY HERALD*

## Into the jungle

Next, we're off to the Rainforest Expeditions (<http://www.perunature.com>) welcome centre, where we board a shiny bus named Capibara — a harbinger of rodents to come — for the 45-minute drive to the Infierno Community Port. Here we hop aboard a motorized canoe for the journey to Refugio Amazonas in the buffer zone of Tambopata National Reserve, one of Rainforest's three lodges in the lowland Amazonian rainforest.

Our private guide for the week, Oscar Mishaja, grew up in Tambopata so he knows the land and local fauna and flora intimately. His native community of Infierno works closely with Rainforest Expeditions (RFE) and now owns one of the lodges, Posada Amazonas (which we'll visit later in the week). Together they have operated the lodge in a strategic alliance since 1996, one of the world's most successful tourism joint ventures. Profits are shared among the households and RFE employs many.

On the 2.5-hour journey up the Tambopata River, one of the Amazon River's 1,200 tributaries, we lunch on fried rice with chicken wrapped in a heliconia leaf, washed down with local copoasu juice from a cocoa-like tree. Along the way we see a side-neck river turtle, a greater yellow-headed vulture and two massive horned screamers — weird birds with a unicorn-like horn that sound oddly like a donkey. Best of all are a trio of cute capybaras, covered liberally in oozing mud.

Perched in the jungle, Refugio Amazonas ([http://www.perunature.com/amazon\\_lodge/refugio-amazonas/](http://www.perunature.com/amazon_lodge/refugio-amazonas/)) is a gorgeous open-air, two-level lodge constructed of gleaming wood and thatched roofing. Rooms are in wings connected to the lodge by wooden bridges and have a half-open wall for nature viewing, which makes me a bit

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nervous — can things crawl in, I wonder?



Collecting tiger moths for Wired Amazon Project. Photo, Reid Storm CALGARY HERALD

## Holy insects! Discover a new species

After dinner, we join resident biologist Daniel Coucerio for a taste of the Wired Amazon Project (<http://www.perunature.com/wiredamazon/>), a citizen science initiative which allows guests to be amateur scientists and help with species collection for research.

“The X factor is insects,” explains Coucerio. There are one million known species but some think there are 20- to 30-million species worldwide. “We’re just scratching the surface of the biodiversity. It’s an endless world.”

His team is collecting tiger moths. While the moths I know are grey, dark and boring, here they sport astonishing colours.

To the accompaniment of cicadas, a gaggle of guests troop behind Coucerio through the jungle darkness about 15 minutes to the light trap, a big white sheet lit by a bulb powered by a generator, which attracts an incredible variety of insects.

Plucking a hawk moth gently off the screen, he opens its mouth with tweezers to show us its teeny, tiny tongue (who knew that moths have tongues?)

Tiger moths are kept for DNA analysis. Those believed to be a new species are sent to the University of Guelph for genetic sequencing. If a guest collected the new species, they can name it.

“We have discovered five new species in 90 days, so far,” says Coucerio.

His team is also studying jaguars and peccaries with a grid of camera traps and phenology with a drone. The latest addition to their project portfolio is the world’s first harpy eagle camera, which is recording a video diary of the eagles’ nest. The largest and most powerful raptor in the Americas, it’s no surprise these big birds are the apex predator of the canopy forest.

Early the next morning, en route to Refugio’s 27-metre-high canopy tower with Mishaja, we catch a rare sighting of a harpy, a near threatened species. We are so lucky!

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You can volunteer to classify data posted on [zooniverse.org](http://zooniverse.org) for the Amazon Aerobotany and AmazonCam Tambopata (which includes the HarpyCam) projects, earning travel credits for a visit to RFE and helping to conserve the Amazon.



## Deeper we go

Getting to Tambopata Research Center (TRC) ([http://www.perunature.com/amazon\\_lodge/tambopata-research-center/](http://www.perunature.com/amazon_lodge/tambopata-research-center/)), the most remote lodge in the Peruvian Amazon, requires journeying upriver another four hours. One-and-a-half hours into the ride, we enter the uninhabited Tambopata National Reserve (TRC predates the reserve, so is allowed to remain). At nearly 275,000 hectares, it numbers among the Earth's most biologically diverse areas, boasting more than 100 species of mammals, around 600 of birds and hundreds of trees and plants, many of which have disappeared from other parts of Amazonia.

Our first stop is the Chuncho clay lick, which we have to ourselves. Although scientists aren't sure why (perhaps mineral or sodium deficiencies), parrots by the hundreds flock to licks — steep red clay riverbanks — to eat the clay, particularly in the morning.

At first, the lick is dotted mostly with blue-and-yellow macaws, but then some red-and-green and scarlet macaws join them. Although their numbers aren't great and there are no parrots or parakeets, we are thrilled. It was to witness this spectacle that I most wanted to come to TRC.

Tomorrow, Mishaja promises, our eyes will feast on scores of birds at Colorado clay lick, the world's largest. It attracts 16 macaw and many parrot and parakeet species, more than any other lick. It was made famous by Sir David Attenborough, who filmed it for the BBC.

We are not disappointed when we arrive at TRC. Situated in a forest clearing away from the river, it is intimate and cosy, much smaller and simpler than Refugio.

## Bountiful, beautiful birds

Birdwatching is for the birds! This I once wrote in an article on the increasing popularity of this leisure activity. Today, I am going to eat those words.

### Canadian Conservation

While the legacy of Grey Owl may be up for debate, one thing is for certain: his work at Manitoba's Riding Mountain National Park marked one of the earliest conservation efforts in the country

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I'm no morning person, yet we are up well before dawn (groan) and on our way to the Colorado clay lick near TRC.

As we quietly settle into a camouflaged area across from the lick, binoculars and cameras swaying around our necks, we are rewarded for rising early by a blue-headed macaw — a bird that is very rarely seen and which scientists know little about.

As a gorgeous sunrise lights the heavens, birds begin to fly over and roost in the trees. Mealy, yellow-crowned, orange-cheeked, and blue-headed parrots, then white-eyed parakeets and chestnut-fronted and blue-and-yellow macaws. A few fly to the lick and disperse.

"They are testing the clay to decide which part of the lick to go to," explains Mishaja. "More come out on a sunny, rain-free day," he adds.

Soon the cecropia tree near us is alive with colourful, gregarious macaws, parrots and parakeets. As on cue, from every direction they fly to the lick, their wings beating in a whoosh over our heads. The vast number filling the sky is like the flying keys scene in Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone! At the least provocation, the nervous avians take flight, squawking raucously and settling back into the trees to wait. Until it begins again.



## Macaws, macaws!

Back at TRC for breakfast, a pair of naughty avians pay us a visit, swooping into the open-air dining room and perching on beams above the tables. Chuchuy and Inocencio are "chicos" (chicks), scarlet macaws who were rescued and raised here in the early '90s when the TRC was founded as a macaw research centre (in '93 RFE was born with the idea that tourism can support scientific projects like this one).

Sensing their chance, they swoop to the buffet, one stealing a pancake, the other knocking the syrup to the floor. Guests find them amusing while staff scold, pretending they are annoyed (but it's clear that the birds are endeared by all).

Back in our room, which has a half-wall open to the outdoors, the social pair pay us a personal visit, first perching on the railing and then hopping onto the mosquito net platform above our bed. We are delighted with their antics and get great close-ups of the gorgeous birds.

In the evening, Liz Paipay, field manager of RFE's Tambopata Macaw Project (<http://www.perunature.com/about-rainforest/macaw-project/>),

gives a talk. We learn RFE's co-founder, Eduardo Nycander, wanted to research whether the third- and fourth-born macaw chicks, which always die, perish because of lack of food.

During the study, the rescued third and fourth chicks were hand-fed. Thirty-two chicos survived and were reintroduced to the wild, though some, like the cheeky pair, still come back to visit and pinch snacks.

While research continues today, the macaws are not intervened with. Volunteers aid Paipay and her staff in checking 15 nests per day during breeding season, mid-October to March or April, which are reached by climbing towering trees up to 38 metres high with an ascender (it's tough physical work). Chicks are brought down for a vet check and banding, and data is gathered for ongoing research. Then they are returned to the nest.

What you can do:

Volunteer. No scientific background is required. "We are aiming for people who really want to change things," says Paipay. Volunteers also monitor the clay lick and cameras installed in nests. If you are interested email [sales@rainforestexpeditions.com](mailto:sales@rainforestexpeditions.com) Or volunteer to classify data posted on [zooniverse.org](http://zooniverse.org) for the AmazonCam Tambopata project, earning travel credits for a visit to RFE and helping to conserve the Amazon.

Visit — tourist dollars fund much of the Macaw Project and a white-lipped peccary project at TRC.

## Big paw prints

The next morning we find fresh jaguar prints in the sand! We also see a howler monkey with a roar much bigger than he is, stinky peccaries, and squirrel and capuchin monkeys. In the bird family, we sight a spectacled chachalaca, rufescent tiger heron, very rare Orinoco geese, and a hoatzin — nicknamed "stinky turkey" for its cow-like smell. As for reptiles, we unearth a ruby poison dart frog but, fortunately, no snakes.



Little but very sharp teeth on a piranha. Photo, Reid Storm *CALGARY HERALD*

## Indigenous insights

Back down river, we settle into Posada Amazonas ([http://www.perunature.com/amazon\\_lodge/posada-amazonas/](http://www.perunature.com/amazon_lodge/posada-amazonas/)), another stunning lodge the likes of the Refugio. An evening talk informs guests of the partnership between RFE and the Ese Eja Indigenous people, which Mishaja's father was very involved in.

Here highlights include boating on an Oxbow Lake to view the antics of giant river otters and fishing for piranhas (I caught one!) and a visit to the Ñape Ethnobotanical Center in a nearby Ese Eja village to learn how the shaman uses medicinal plants.

Where we're staying:

Rainforest Expeditions' (<http://www.perunature.com>) three lodges. Rainforest runs a top-notch operation with all-inclusive packages (except for alcohol, tips and personal items):

Refugio Amazonas ([http://www.perunature.com/amazon\\_lodge/refugio-amazonas/](http://www.perunature.com/amazon_lodge/refugio-amazonas/)) — a 32-bedroom luxury lodge four hours from the airport on a 200-hectare private reserve. It is perfect for families and very affordable compared to similar lodges.

Tambopata Research Center ([http://www.perunature.com/amazon\\_lodge/tambopata-research-center/](http://www.perunature.com/amazon_lodge/tambopata-research-center/)) — recently renovated and upgraded, there are 24 rooms with private bathrooms.

Posada Amazonas ([http://www.perunature.com/amazon\\_lodge/posada-amazonas/](http://www.perunature.com/amazon_lodge/posada-amazonas/)) — a 30-bedroom rainforest lodge 1:45 minutes from Puerto Maldonado owned by the Indigenous Ese-Eja community of Infierno and managed in partnership with Rainforest Expeditions. It is in the Ese-Eja's communal reserve, next to the Tambopata National Reserve.