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CYNTHIA



NIXON

FROM SEX AND THE CITY TO GOVERNOR?

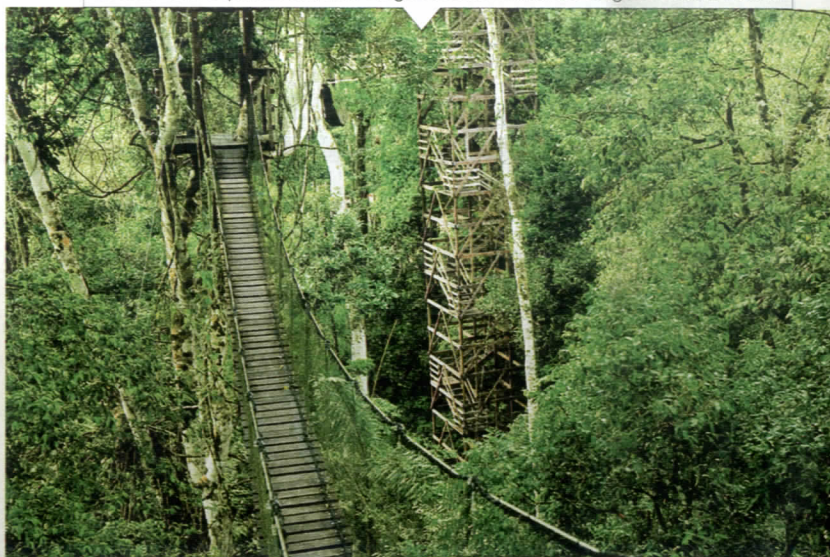
Robbie
Hodges

SNAILS. MUSHROOM-COLOURED squidgy things. No one expects much of them. But in Peru, a new scheme set up by Inkaterra – the pioneering luxury hotel group committed to environmental conservation – is touting snails as a new source of hope for the Amazon, its people and wildlife.

In 1975 Inkaterra's founder José Koechlin launched Reserva Amazonica, now the longest-established jewel in an empire that spans 42,000 acres of Peruvian forest, mountain and rolling countryside. It's a well-manicured enclave from which guests head out on early-morning hikes, returning to their private riverside cabañas to sway in hammocks and recover from the previous night's pisco sours.

For a grittier taste of the Amazon,

Below Inkaterra's canopy walkway, one of South America's largest, is more than a quarter of a mile long. **Bottom** Inkaterra's lodge at Machu Picchu



SAVED BY THE SNAIL

Undoing the damage of the Amazon gold rush – one mollusc at a time

you can climb into a dugout canoe and float 10 minutes downstream for a night or two at the Inkaterra Field Guides Station, a recently opened research centre from which many of its conservation projects are launched. The journey is punctuated by howler monkeys racing macaws in the upper canopy; capybara (a sort of large guinea pig) rustling in the grass below; and the odd polystyrene box or vagrant chip fork.

'It's the gold miners,' explains Erick Arguedas, gesturing to the rubbish. At 17, he got mixed up in the dangerous and illicit world of gold-mining. Today, he's

the manager at Inkaterra Field Guides Station and is committed to combating the punishing local practice, which is thought by many to be the greatest challenge facing the Amazon. 'We have a record of 450 species of bird, 350 species of ant and 150 species of butterfly here at Inkaterra Field Guides,' Arguedas continues. 'But every year it's fewer and fewer.'

But back to the snails: kept cool under a tarpaulin canopy are six barrels of Apple Snails, soon to be served up for dinner with a delicious peppery garnish at Reserva Amazonica. The idea is for

snails to become a regional speciality, one which can be exported profitably. It is one of many sustainable models that Inkaterra hopes local communities will embrace, in place of gold-mining, which is responsible for both deforestation and river pollution. Guests at Inkaterra Field Guides Station are invited to learn more about preservation of the environment by spending time with its forest-dwelling researchers.

While the dorm-style jungle accommodation is pretty rustic, it's a unique opportunity to witness and even contribute to the protection of the Amazon. Healing and medicinal plants conjured from the forest's floor are harvested in the 'bio-orchard'; an array of fruits can be plucked from its model farm; while the green-fingered can get their hands dirty helping out on Inkaterra's reforestation scheme – which sees 3,000 native saplings planted each year.

Most food is grown on site or sourced locally: paichu fish steamed and served in palm-leaf packages, purple potatoes, and pancakes frothy with quinoa, embalmed in syrup and dripping with papaya. Proper feel-good food in a kaleidoscope of flavours.

An 11-day holiday to Peru – visiting Lima, Sacred Valley, Machu Picchu, Cusco and the Amazon – starts from £4,062 per person. This includes flights, transfers, excursions, breakfast and full board in the Amazon, staying in Inkaterra properties – Reserva Amazonica in Puerto Maldonado and Wyndham Hotel Costa del Sol in Lima. For further information, contact Journey Latin America (020-8600 1881; journeylatinamerica.co.uk). For more information on Peru, visit peru.travel

