

FAMILY TRAVELLER

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Amazonian adventure - toucan play that game

Amazon delivers

JO KESSEL heads to deepest, darkest Peru for a thrilling mother-and-son adventure of a lifetime, encompassing tropical treats in the rainforest and incredible Inca ruins

My 13-year-old son Gabriel and I are on a motorboat cruising along a tributary of the Amazon in Peru, sitting so low to the taupe-coloured waters that if it weren't for the piranhas lurking beneath we would drape our arms in.

It feels surreal to be on the river which carves a 4,500-mile trail from Peru's Andes, through dense tropical rainforest, towards the Atlantic. We're here after flying direct from London to Lima, followed by an overnight stay in the capital and a short domestic flight to Puerto Madonaldo - gateway to the southern Peruvian jungle.

We're en route to Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica, a luxury boutique hotel in the heart of the jungle with 35 thatched-roof cabanas (their walls are made from surrounding trees) that are hard to spot from the boat. Once there we're told our visit is carbon neutral (electricity is low-impact and limited in the evenings).

We plan our itinerary for the next 48 hours, choosing from the list of guide-led excursions included in the price - jungle treks and river trips, all offering flora and fauna-viewing opportunities.

After lunch in the main lodge we find our cabana. Gabriel lowers himself into a hammock, lazing as he watches brown-furred agouti (they resemble giant guinea pigs) scuttle across the jungle floor while tropical butterflies flutter past.

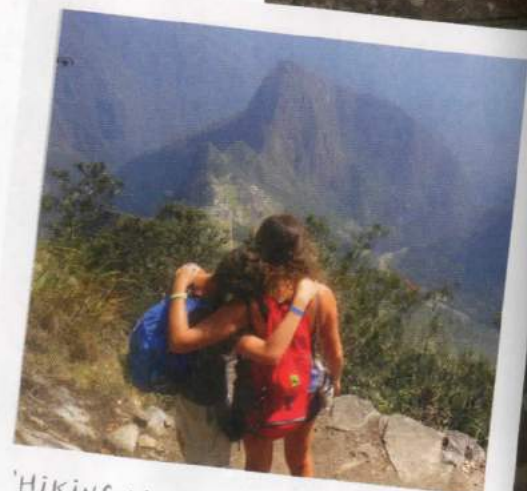
Our first adventure is a twilight river excursion. Boarding a motorboat we're soon shrouded in an eerie blackness - the

only light is a dazzle of constellations in the inky sky. The driver uses a heavy-duty torch to guide his path and pick out wildlife. First a posse of baby white spectacled caimans, whose eyes glare in the dark; next the world's biggest rodent, a capybara. The driver cuts the engine. The noise of wildlife communicating is deafening - a multi-layered nocturnal symphony punctuated by hooting.

Next morning we wake to a similar, thrilling sound and a scratching noise beneath our cabin - an agouti, perhaps? A fiery blood-orange sun rises above the Amazon and flares into the cabin.

After breakfast - freshly baked breads and coffee - we're taken to a 30m-high walkway up in the rainforest canopy. We see monkeys bouncing from branch to branch, a wasps' nest the size of a punch bag and vividly coloured birds. The guide's illustrated book means we can match sightings to pictures.

Excursions are fun and intimate (no more than eight guests) with time in between to chill out or enjoy a meal. Cuisine is tasty and inventive, using local, organic ingredients such as quinoa, used in salads, pancakes and breads. My favourite is paiche, a large white-meat river fish. It comes served in a palm leaf or in a spicy stew similar to bouillabaisse. →



'HIKING MACHU PICCHU MOUNTAIN TOOK TWO LONG-BUSTING HOURS'



From main: Gabriel and Jo stayed late at Machu Picchu to avoid the crowds; the llamas were uncooperative when it came to selfies



GABRIEL'S TEENAGE TAKE ON PERU

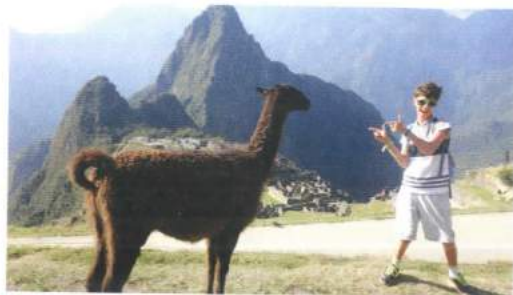
Peru is really cool, with three different ecosystems: mountains, rainforest and coast. Lima, on the coast, was great but when we got to the jungle was when the real adventure started for me.

From walking on 30m-high suspension bridges seeing everything from macaws to wasps' nests bigger than I am, to canoeing on a lake watching the sun set. Mum spotted a tarantula on a twilight walk and she was terrified. I managed to get bitten by a fire ant and the bites feel like fire! Under a 500-year-old Ironwood tree, which was over 60m tall, we were told that a single tree in the rainforest has more ant species on it than there are in the whole of the UK.

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After a night in the Sacred Valley, we found ourselves at the Machu Picchu ruins, where the Incas lived. We walked around taking in the 500-year-old history. The stonework is amazing. It is one of only a few spectacular ruins in the world where cement was not used - instead they put tiny rocks into the gaps between the big ones.

After exploring the ruins for three hours we realised that we were the last people left on the site at closing-time and that was very special. The next day we did a two-hour trek up Machu Picchu mountain, 3,000m high. Mum was huffing and puffing but I was fine. After an exhilarating week it was time to go home, but don't worry Peru, I will be back.



Clockwise from top left: Gabriel and a llama at Machu Picchu; Cusco in the Andes; Jo and Gabriel enjoying the Amazon; suite at Hacienda Urubamba



The next two days are thrilling. We cross the jungle for miles on foot and by boat, spotting different monkey species, caimans, tarantulas, toxic toads, giant turtles, otters and cormorants. We eat star fruit and cashew nut fruit fresh from trees. Our guide insists termites are excellent protein so Gabriel tries one. 'Tastes like bark and mud.'

Inkaterra has six luxury hotels across Peru and our third night is spent in its smaller jungle hotel, the Hacienda Concepcion, a 15-minute boat ride away. We go piranha fishing using primitive rods and beef for bait. Within minutes (beginner's luck) we've hooked one and examine its scarily sharp teeth before throwing it back in.

After three days we head towards another Peruvian treasure: Machu Picchu. To reach this ancient Incan citadel high in the Andes requires a 40-minute flight to Cusco, whose 3,400m elevation leaves us light-headed and breathless. Our tour operator Aracari provides coca tea (a local remedy for altitude sickness) in the car ride to our hotel, Hacienda Urubamba. Halfway between Cusco and Machu Picchu in the Sacred Valley, the hotel is surrounded by dramatic, arid peaks.

It's the perfect place to acclimatise and the next morning we're raring to go. It's possible to do a three-day hike from here to Machu Picchu along the notorious 26-mile-long Inca trail, but we take the scenic train journey through the Andes.

Then, after a short bus ride, we're staring at this epic, 15th-century marvel. We take in the 2,400m-high mountains circling us, all carpeted with cloud forest. No surprise it was voted one of the new seven wonders of the world in 2007.

How did the Incas clear the vegetation on these sheer slopes, let alone build a city? Fredy our guide shows us how they constructed walls without cement, and how their architecture and terraces were in harmony with the mountains.

Machu Picchu is known as the 'lost Incan city' because the Spanish (who conquered the Incans) knew it existed but never found it. Gabriel is fascinated not just by the history, but by llamas roaming the ruins, though they are uncooperative when he tries a selfie with them.

Our final day is equally exhilarating and memorable – a vertiginous hike up Machu Picchu mountain that takes two lung-busting hours to summit. Afterwards we barter for alpaca socks and gloves at a local market before returning to our base, the Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel, to visit its tea plantation and bear sanctuary. The Andean spectacled bear is endangered and the hotel rescues neglected animals to release back into the wild.

For our last supper Gabriel tries cuy – guinea pig – and declares it tastes like duck. I drink a Pisco sour, Peru's national drink, and we toast our amazing Amazonian adventure, vowing to return and hike the Inca Trail. ✈

THE LOWDOWN

HOW TO GET THERE

British Airways (ba.com) flies direct from Gatwick to Lima twice a week from £516 return. The flight is 12.5 hours but there's plenty of onboard entertainment to occupy the children. Tetanus, typhoid and hepatitis jabs are recommended, as are yellow fever and anti-malarial pills for the jungle.

GETTING AROUND AND WHERE TO STAY

Peru luxury travel specialist Aracari (aracari.com/+511 651 2426) organises tailor-made trips. A seven-day trip to Peru including stays at the JW Marriott Lima, Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica, Inkaterra Hacienda Concepcion, Inkaterra Hacienda Urubamba and Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel costs £3,986 for one adult and one child under 11. Includes ground transfers, trains, guides, activities, a private guided tour of Machu Picchu and some meals. Domestic flights for the whole trip from £526 per person.