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Strolling Through the Amazon, Nervously

Determined to catapult himself out of his comfort zone, an urbanite ventures deep into the jungle of the Peruvian Amazon



ILLUSTRATION: WENJIA TANG

By David Farley

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THE GUY whose task it was to guide me into the Amazon was named Ruber León Sánchez. “Like ‘lion,’” he told me after firmly gripping my hand and shaking it as if it needed to be wrung out. The named seemed fitting; the manager at my hotel had the last name of Puma. I wondered if later on I’d meet a woman named Anna

Conda. “Let’s go,” said Ruber, whose confident stride, forest-green fatigues and 2-foot machete swinging from his belt made him king of the jungle in my eyes. I didn’t particularly want to be traipsing through the rain forest. After reading “The Lost City of Z” by David Grann and enduring films like “Jumanji,” I viewed going to the jungle at best as a health risk and at worst a death sentence. I travel frequently, but I’m much more of an urban explorer than a wildlife wanderer. I woke up one day last year, however, and decided I should start getting out of my comfort zone when I’m traveling. The first thing that came to mind was the rain forest. And then the spiders, snakes and other calamitous creatures that lurk in it.

And so here I was, having booked a couple of nights at the Peruvian lodge Inkaterra Hacienda Concepción, which can only be reached via a short boat ride up the wide Madre de Dios River from the town of Puerto Maldonado. The hotel offers several free excursions and diversions for guests, including bird watching, a walk across chain bridges atop the canopy of towering trees, or just relaxing in the midst of the forest’s fauna and flora inside one’s net-walled cabana. If I was going to plant myself in the rain forest for a few days, though, I wanted to really experience it. So I signed up for a half-day jungle trek to Lake Sandoval with an on-property expert guide.

The day before when I met Rueben and he fitted me and two others—hotel guests from Los Angeles who had signed up for the excursion—with some Wellington boots, he warned that if it rained that night, the excursion could get a little messy. “There will be mud,” he said, “Maybe a lot of mud,” he added, putting his hand at his waist, as if to indicate how deeply we might sink into it like quicksand. I wondered if I would seriously regret this. After all, I had just texted a friend: “I hate it here. It’s too humid. Too many mosquitoes. And too many things here that can kill you.”

The next morning, the four of us began our journey to Lake Sandoval. The sojourn required us to head up river in a motorized boat for 10 minutes and then undertake a 3-mile stroll to the lake where a rowboat would be awaiting our arrival. It had, in fact, rained all night. Ruber promised we’d spy otters, caiman and maybe even a frighteningly plus-size anaconda or boa constrictor at or near the lake.

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As we traipsed through a narrow path flanked by verdant shrubbery, diminutive beasts made high-pitched sounds to announce their existence and Ruber cleared up a myth, perhaps sensing my trepidation: “The rain forest isn’t dangerous,” he said, waving his open palm at the wall of green around us. “The big city is more so. People are dangerous. Not the forest.” Before I could disagree with him—after all, I feel perfectly safe living smack in the center of New York City—he tacked a few addenda onto his attempt to reassure me I’d make it out of the jungle alive.

“You have to look out for falling Brazil nuts. If they hit you on the head, you could die.” My eyes shot up to the forest canopy looking for nature’s cannon balls. “And don’t touch anything while we are walking,” he added, stopping to point out a tree whose trunk was made up entirely of one-inch thorns, like some kind of medieval torture device. “Touch that and your hand will puff up like a beach ball.” A few moments later, he stopped to show me some citrus fruit on the forest floor. “This fruit,” he said, “is probably okay to eat. But never pick fruit from the tree. It’s probably not ripe and it will kill you just like that.” He snapped his fingers. I felt like I was playing a game of Amazonian roulette.

We stopped at a massive 80-year-old ficus tree; its aboveground buttress roots looked otherworldly in their size, like huge muscular thighs spreading out on the ground. He pointed at a root-like parasite that had twisted itself around the trunk and said that the parasite was slowly killing the tree, like a boa constrictor around a guinea pig. Everything dangerous, I said to him, is a plant or tree. “This is not Africa and the savannas,” he said. “The animals here are stealthy and small. You hear that”—he cupped his ear and we listened to a loud clicking noise echoing through the forest—“that creature is this big,” he said, his thumb and index finger an inch apart. “Yet hear how loud it is.”

We turned onto a wider path, which was when things got messy. My pace dramatically slowed, as I was suddenly ankle deep in mud, my feet sloshing through the terrain. As I stopped chatting with my fellow travelers to concentrate on getting through the muck, I heard the aggressive cock-a-doodle-doo-doo of Amazonian chickens and the heehaw sounds of donkey birds. The earthy, musty smell of the

wet ground penetrated my nostrils. I'm in decent shape but I could feel my legs getting tired from yanking myself out of the mud with each step. Suddenly nearly knee deep, I lost my balance and tipped over. When I ripped myself away from the miasma of dark gunk, I looked down to see that I was caked in sludge from the waist down, just as Ruber had predicted.

After another 45 minutes of trudging—Ruber assured us it's not always like this—we made it to Lake Sandoval, its placid waters reflecting the thick green ramparts of jungle on its circumference. Ruber paddled our boat around the lake. We rowed up to a tree spotted with sleeping bats. We saw giant river otters (among the most endangered species in the Amazon) playing by the shore. And we watched a 7-foot black caiman float by. Piranhas and electric eels swarmed just below the surface of the water. Squirrel monkeys danced in the trees overhead. I felt myself starting to relax.

Later that night, while enjoying a much-deserved pisco sour back at the lodge's bar, I listened to the sounds of the jungle through the protective screen walls as the ceiling fans overhead made a valiant attempt to whisk away the humidity. I realized that maybe the rain forest wasn't at all as bad as I feared. I regretted texting to friends that I hated it.

Suddenly, Ruber appeared in front of me, his machete hanging from his belt, his arms akimbo. "There's a night walk through the forest starting in five minutes. We are certain to see a big snake and maybe some large spiders. Are you coming?" I looked down at my clean jeans and then my pisco sour, I'd gone this far—to Lake Sandoval and back. I wasn't going to press my luck any further.

THE LOWDOWN / The Peruvian Amazon on Foot



PHOTO: INKATERRA HACIENDA CONCEPCIÓN

GETTING THERE Reaching Puerto Maldonado isn't a straight shot. Avianca offers the most frequent flights from several U.S. airports with at least two layovers along the way. avianca.com

STAYING THERE Inkaterra Hacienda Concepción, a 25-minute boat-ride up the Gran Madre Dio River, picks up guests at the airport and shepherds them via shuttle and boat to the hotel. The 25 comfortable net-walled cabanas give guests a real feel of staying in the middle of the rain forest. Free guided excursions for guests include a hike to Lake Sandoval, a twilight boat cruise, a night walk in the Amazon and a trip to a local farm, among others. *From \$363 per person with a two-night minimum, inkaterra.com*

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