

An Amazon Star In My Room

Li Ruan

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New York City's cold winds blew my husband and me toward the Southern Hemisphere. Peru's sunny summer welcomed us as refugees from the chilly north. Our wanderlust in this captivating nation wove into an enduring album that still sings and shines, even more than a decade later.

Our inaugural destination was the newly opened Inkaterra Hacienda Concepción, nestled in the Amazon Basin. Within its sprawling three-square-mile grounds, splendid surprises fell upon us at every turn. One of them was a serendipitous, magical connection with an internationally acclaimed rock star.

The eco-themed property was ensconced within the rich rainforest, beside bubbling waters. It featured approximately a dozen cabana-style cottages arranged in parallel rows. Our secluded unit, situated at the end of one row, was a mere two steps away from the verdant foliage. The cabanas presented themselves as identical siblings – anchored by solid wooden columns, crowned with rustic thatched roofs, and enclosed by expansive mesh netting. The interior, adorned with rippling cotton curtains, deluxe bedding, and velvety towels – all in achromatic white – elegantly contrasted with the handsome, brown wood floors and minimalist furnishings. A gentle breeze choreographed a graceful dance

of draperies and netting, accompanied by the soothing hums of forest insects.

Each night at precisely 10 o'clock, the generator receded, conceding the stage to the celestial performers above. Stars embellished the dark blue sky, blinking their charming eyes. The distance between them and us seemed infinitesimal. If I had climbed a tall ladder, I might have touched the diamond-like crystals. Sterling silver moonlight bathed the sweeping landscape. Tranquil air carried the serenades of nocturnal bugs over to our ears, lulling us into a dreamland beyond ordinary dreams.

At the first light of dawn, red howler monkeys perched high in the mountain trees stirred awake, announcing the arrival of a new day with their screeching musical alarm. A troupe of varied birds, some visible, some hidden, joined the monkeys' marching band. They were the masters of invigorating us to rise for another extraordinary expedition – delving into the Amazon River's ecosystem, getting “lost” in the woods, or drifting on a glass-calm lake, punctuated by the occasional interruption of monkeys' singing – a slight glimpse of jungle's secrets.

The tantalizing aroma wafted from the kitchen, luring us to the nearby dining hall – the Hacienda, the grandest cabana on the premises, open on all sides. The castle-like “big house” lived up to its Spanish namesake. Dew-kissed flowers graced two long, tall console tables, in balance with large, handcrafted ceramic bowls and plates in bold, brilliant colors. The crockery on top struggled to contain the dishes' delicious smell as it permeated the air. Amid the absence of audio systems or musical instruments, synesthesia suddenly awakened as scent and sound merged in perfect sensory harmony.

The affectionately prepared home-cooked meal showcased a visual masterpiece – an array of fresh, locally sourced produce and fruit. Abundant in protein, beans, legumes, and potatoes displayed in unique shades, shapes, and sizes, evoking an artful and flavorful palette. These elements seamlessly integrated with the dining area's ambiance and the hacienda's magnitude. The irresistible Peruvian breakfast bewitched my saliva and stomach.

A colossal ceiling fan spun rhythmically with the zephyr swaying through. Together, they subdued the little organic singers outside. This set our conversations free as we savored our sunrise dishes with two couples who, like us, had escaped the harsh North American winter. We felt like, and possibly were, fortunate pioneers of a newfound utopia on Earth.

The amiable and attentive Hacienda staff proudly shared local history and stories, immersing themselves in our laughter and chit-chat. They all eagerly conveyed the special significance of our cabana to my husband and me.

Our unit had hosted Mick Jagger for a couple of weeks when the property first opened two months prior. This revelation added another layer of fascination to our already mesmerizing stay, fueling our curiosity and enticing a series of inquiries from me.

“Did he follow the ‘curfew’ too?”

“Yes, he did.”

“Was he by himself?”

“No, he came with his family and bodyguards, about ten people.”

“Was he nice?”

“He was so nice. He said hello to everyone all the time.”

“Was he very loud?”

“No, no, he was very quiet.”

“Did he come here for the meals, or ask for room service?”

“He ate here every day like you...”

The staff informed us that the rock star had departed from Inkaterra for Brazil. It made sense, as I recalled the widespread news a few months later about his overwhelming joy with his newborn son from a model in Brazil, whom he had romanced during his trip there, following his well-rest in the Peruvian Amazon.

Until that point, I had never considered myself a fan of Mick Jagger. In my perception, he was a flamboyant, eccentric, and unattractive figure, as reflected in one of his song titles, “Wild Horses.” The staff's affirmations altered my preconceived notions, portraying a kind, humble, and unassuming celebrity, much like any one of us ordinary folks.

Intrigued, I pondered whether the Amazon had captured Jagger's heart, or if he had been smitten by nature. Perhaps both; perhaps my preconceptions had softened amidst the beautiful hums and pleasant rustling, as marvels and melodies transformed me. The uber-famous star

deserved commendation for his venture into the wilderness, enraptured by the pristine world, and most impressively, for choosing our cabana.

The legend's presence lingered like whispered mystique in the lush rainforest. I kept playing his songs, realizing that I could now instantly recognize his distinct voice without needing to know his name. Some of his lyrics resonated deeply, echoing the ethereal air, untouched vistas, and the rhythmic pulse of life that I had personally experienced.

Above all, it was the first line of his song, “God Gave Me Everything,” that encapsulated my attachment to this exquisite place beneath the luminescent skies. The same stars that twinkled above me must have bestowed their glares upon his eyes. The shared jungle’s choral performances further connected us.

I surmised that he had tamed his roaring rock ‘n’ roll numbers to honor the pure hymns of the innate chorus in the woods. Like me, he must have fallen in love with this sacred land, teeming with natural wonders that surpassed our wildest fantasies. The bond to this heavenly space stirred my inner being and must have stirred his, as well.

Inspired by imagination, I speculated whether his music had paved the path for his Amazon journey. How else could his words and sounds align so perfectly with tangible reality? My mind buzzed with more questions and curiosity, caught up in the superstar's left-over soul.

The one-week exploration along the Amazon River served as a prologue to a chapter of travels that my husband and I embarked upon throughout the country. The crescendo of discovery continued, with each subsequent visit mirroring our initial profound encounter at Inkaterra. This could be attributed to the star's glint in our cabana, having sprinkled a pinch of luck our way!

When I speak of my time in Peru, I cannot help sharing my poignant experiences, weaving a cultural collage: the warmth and hospitality of the local people, the mind-blowing archaeological sites, the diverse and breathtaking topography, the vibrant and dynamic wildlife, the unforgettable fusion cuisine, and, of course, the unexpected mystical link with the rock legend in the Amazon – all fused into a divine composition.

As I draw my story to a conclusion, I relish my own colloquial notes – a childish bragging: “Just so you know, Mick Jagger stayed in 'my' room.”

Li Ruan, born and raised in Beijing, China, is a Manhattan-based educational consultant and an emerging immigrant writer. She felt a special calling to compose late in life during the COVID pandemic. Writing in English has deepened her intimate connection to the language and empowered her to promote cultural understanding. Her nonfiction and poems have appeared online in literary journals including Flora Fiction, Restless Books, Purple Pegasus Publishing's "Humans in Pandemic," Assignment Literary Magazine, and Persimmon Tree.

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