

READERS' CHOICE THE WORLD'S MOST DIVERSE ECOSYSTEM

Inside, luxury. Outside, nature on steroids

A cruise along the Amazon's headwaters means cabernet and king-size beds, along with pink dolphins and piranhas

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 NAUTA, PERU

Pink dolphins arc gracefully through the fast-flowing river as two-metre-wide water lilies pose on the surface like broad serving trays, waiting for saucer-size butterflies in psychedelic blue to alight.

I'm on a four-night cruise of the Amazon and its tributaries aboard the ultra-luxurious, 24-passenger M/V Aqua, floating through a world that looks like nature on steroids – everything is bigger, brighter, greener and edged with a hint of danger.

The trip began as nightfall dropped a black curtain over Nauta, Peru, the embarkation point. Our skiff moved along the Marañon, one of the great rivers of the Amazon Basin, in search of the cruise ship. Only the occasional flicker of a kerosene lamp broke the darkness.

We rounded a bend and spotted the M/V Aqua docked on the opposite bank, ablaze with light. After boarding, I scoped out my 230-square-foot cabin, king-size bed, divan, sleek bathroom and window wall.

The dining room featured menus created by one of Lima's star chefs, Pedro Miguel Schiaffino. There was freshly caught catfish or filet mignon and a lovely Chilean cabernet. I got word that we had arrived at the confluence of the Marañon, Ucayali and Amazon rivers. Where the Amazon is born, my waiter solemnly explained.

We were at the headwaters of the world's most diverse ecosystem, home to more species

of fish than in all the Atlantic.

The surrounding rain forest provides nearly half the world's medicines.

Our twice-a-day off-ship excursions were filled with quiet pleasures, and shocks. We climbed steep mud cliffs and hiked to small villages. Once, a fuzzy tarantula appeared, bigger than I would have thought possible, waddling across the mud toward me.

Just in time, a grandmotherly lady wearing a New York Mets T-shirt and a homemade skirt reclaimed what apparently was her pet.

Between excursions, I lay on my vast bed, watching life on the river pass through my picture window, or wandered up to the air-conditioned lounge to sip a pungent pisco sour.

Late one evening, we hunted for black caiman, their luminous ruby-red eyes inevitably giving them away. Squirrel monkeys, some just babies, leaped through the treetops across seven-metre gaps. A sloth inched along the underside of a branch. Our guide, Daniel Vasquez, who grew up in the Amazon rain forest, swore the indolent mammals lie on branches waiting for shoots to grow.

In Pacaya Samiria Reserve, a thinly protected area the size of Belgium, we saw almost no one. At Yanayacu Lake there, many of us stripped down to our underwear and jumped in. As we swam, a fin appeared to the right, another to the left – playful pink dolphins. Later, we fished with rickety poles for

sharp-teethed piranhas.

As we explored, Vasquez told us about his belief in the power of shamans. He said every tree has a spirit, even the tiniest shrub. He showed us the bark that can beat malaria, the vine that cures kidney stones, the cat's claw that is good for cancer, and worried aloud about deforestation.

Aqua Expeditions founder Francesco Galli Zugaro, who honed his tourism skills in the Galapagos Islands, invested \$3.7-million to build the M/V Aqua, which made its maiden voyage in 2007. Plans for a second boat are in the works.

Galli Zugaro said his company is more than a business. It's his attempt to help the Amazon jungle from being deforested and destroyed.

"If we can demonstrate that the Amazon Basin has real value as a tourist attraction, it will generate interest in preserving it," he said. The M/V Aqua houses a 7,000-litre on-board water treatment plant, to protect the river.

The ship operates all year. I went during the dry season, but I'm told that the wet season, when the river rises so high that the skiffs float through the flooded forest, is equally spectacular. I plan to go back to see for myself.

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The M/V Aqua's picture windows reveal the Amazon. BLOOMBERG NEWS