

FORKS & THE ROAD

IN VANCOUVER,
THERE ARE ALMOST
AS MANY FOOD CART
TOURS AS THERE
ARE FOOD CARTS



Vancouver's street eats are so good, last year it was named the third best street-food city in North America by *Travel + Escape Magazine*, putting it just behind Portland and Austin. Food carts, which currently number 114 and will expand to nearly 150 by 2016, go far beyond sausages and fries. There are Belgian waffles, French crepes, Filipino fusion, tandoori chicken, fresh fish and famed Vancouver chef Vij's curry just to begin. The hippest craze for locals has now spawned guided tours including Vancouver Foodie Tours "World Best Eats Tour," Off the Eaten Track's "Downtown Food Carts Tour" and the Tour Guys "Eat Your Cart Out" tour. On the Vancouver Foodie Tour I ate Berkshire pork hot-dog slathered with secret sauce and topped with seaweed flakes at Japadog, sampled fluffy Indian naan bread topped with fine butter chicken at Soho Road Naan Kebab, devoured a savoury lettuce wrapped hoisin chicken at EAT Chicken Wraps and sipped homemade tomato soup along with a meatloaf sandwich at Mom's Grilled Cheese. To find who's cooking check streetfoodapp.com/vancouver *Margaret Swaine, National Post*

ALYSSA SCHWARTZ

Small fish on a big river

An intimate
cruise proves the
best way to meet
Peruvian Amazon
wildlife is by boat



The 16 passengers aboard the M/V Aqua are given a pocket-sized wildlife checklist — nine pages of animals broken out by species with their scientific and local names and the probability of seeing each.

The first time I watched TV on my parents' super-fancy new ultra HD TV, it was surprisingly disorienting. Backgrounds, normally flattened, pulsed with colour and action and I found myself not knowing where to put my attention. My first day in the Peruvian Amazon was a little like that. When a flock of crimson-masked tanagers, birds slightly larger than my hand with luridly hued heads and upper chests, swooped by, I felt like I had to readjust my lifelong understanding of what the colour "red" meant. The underside of the outstretched wings of a pair of blue-and-yellow macaws, brighter and even more unbelievable than the colour of French's mustard, made me gasp, while the blue morpho butterflies that fluttered in front of our skiff leading the way through the canals were a shade of azure to which my computer screen hadn't done justice when I looked them up before my trip.

And that was just the visuals. Motor in an aluminum skiff between submerged trees, warm woody smells changed into a sweet floral gust, and then chivey green, just seconds later.

Located nearly 200 kilometres from Iquitos, the largest city in the world that can't be accessed by road, Pacaya-Samiria National Reserve is the second most sizable protected areas in the Amazon. It's also prob-

ably one of the least visited tourist attractions in the world, especially as you get deeper into the 20,000 km-squared mass of dense rainforest, lakes, streams and rivers, bound by the Marañon and Ucayali rivers, which come together to form the mighty Amazon.

Until Aqua Expeditions launched its small, luxury cruising concept in 2008, visitors typically stayed in rustic lodges in Nauta, the closest town to the reserve, taking day trips into its fringes. Even now, there are less than a handful of operators that run cruises into Pacaya-Samiria, the largest of which carries 32 passengers. On my trip aboard the M/V Aqua there were just 16 passengers, and in four days of touring Pacaya-Samiria's channels and waterways — some so narrow our guides had to machete a path through the foliage — we didn't lay eyes on a single tourist outside of our small group.

As exotic as this all feels in the beginning, the dreamy rhythm of days on the Aqua starts to feel like the best kind of routine. Each morning, after a breakfast buffet laden with rainforest fruits I've never seen or heard of before and sweet Peruvian cakes, we divide into three groups and board the skiffs accompanied by naturalist guides. All three grew up in tiny villages on the river, giving them, whether by nature or nurture, a Spidey-like ability to spot things like three-toed sloths, hanging some 100 feet above the water, and knowledge of the

specific pools where the highest concentration of the Amazon's celebrated pink dolphins like to play.

Before we set out on the first day, Daniel, one of the guides, offers that anyone who spots an animal before the guide does will earn 10 points. "Fifty points and you can go straight to the bar and get a free Pisco sour," he says. I don't think anyone was able

IF YOU GO

Aqua Expeditions offers three, four and seven-night itineraries aboard the M/V Aqua. The 130-foot boat feels a chic, luxurious floating river lodge, with comfortable California king beds, roomy showers and local art throughout its public spaces. Aqua's sister ship, the M/V Aria, offers a comparable experience. Prices start at \$2,850 USD, including excursions, meals, wine and beer; gratuities extra. aquaaexpeditions.com

GETTING THERE

Depending on the itinerary, Aqua departs from Iquitos or Nauta, about an hour's drive through the rainforest from Coronel FAP Francisco Secada Vignetta International Airport in Iquitos (transfers are included in the cruise price). There are nearly a dozen flights to Iquitos from Lima daily, served by LAN and Peruvian Air Line. Air Canada offers direct service to Lima three times weekly.

to take him on.

Passengers are given a pocket-sized wildlife checklist, nine pages of animals broken out by species with their scientific and local names and the probability of seeing each in high water (December to May) and low water (June to November) — we're there in May — each with a tiny check box beside it. We check off birds like rapid-fire but other, highly anticipated animals are slower going.

"Monkey, monkey, monkey, monkey," our guide for the day, Johnny, calls as we glide through a clearing close to lunch, having yet to see any. The silence is as thick as the 90% humidity, but Johnny pulls us into a cluster of trees, saying "I hear something." Sure enough, when we look up the perfectly round, alien eyes of a family of four owl monkeys, so-named for being the only nocturnal monkeys in the world, are peering down at us.

"How did you know we'd find them here?" I ask, wondering what sent Johnny into this particular grove.

"I look for the hollow trees," he says. "You can always find something inside."

We return from morning excursions to frozen face towels and icy glasses of bright pink camu camu juice, an Amazonian berry, starfruit or white tomato juice, which tastes remarkably like OJ. Each day, the variety is startling and new. Lunch is a spread of Peruvian and Amazonian specialties — ceviche, probably

the best known Peruvian dish, is the tip of the iceberg — with menus designed by Pedro Miguel Schiaffino, known as the "jungle chef" for his unusual focus on Amazonian food and whose Lima restaurant Malabar is in the top 10 of the Latin American edition of the San Pellegrino Best Restaurants in the World list. There are 3,800 different types of potato in Peru (and Schiaffino puts them to good use in dishes like causa, tasty little patties filled with chicken salad), proving that when you're in the Amazon, even the most comforting, familiar thing in the world, is still completely new.

After a two-hour siesta, which guests typically spend in their cabins watching the river float past via floor to ceiling windows, it's back out on the skiffs for a late day excursion and a visit with the animals that only come out at night. As the sun starts to set and hidden insects thrum a percussion beat much like a snare drum, we join our skiffs together and the guides pass out mimosas and little bundles of nuts — inchicapi, macambo nuts, and Amazonian peanuts, roasted and tossed with Maras salt, all wrapped in maranta leaves. Happy hour taken jungle-style; the perfect caper to a trip that makes the most exotic place in the world feel like your backyard, if only for a few days.

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