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AMAZON: A RIVER OF PLENTY

An Amazon River expedition cruise is a perfect complement to your South American adventure. Roderick Eime battles wild alligators and hungry piranhas to bring you this report.

CUSTOM BUILT IN 2008 AND FURTHER ENHANCED IN 2013, MV AQUA IS THE PERFECT VESSEL TO EXPLORE THE UPPER AMAZON.

“Aqua Expeditions work with nearly 300 local communities to reinforce the importance of sustainability.”

THE CAIMAN'S EYES shine like LEDs in the torchlight. He freezes, head just above the water, unaware that our searching beam has revealed his hiding place among the debris on the muddy bank. We close in and I pounce. Snatching the deadly reptile behind the neck, I heave him into the boat.

“Very good,” says Roland, my guide, clearly pleased at my crocodile wrestling skills, “as you can see, this little guy is just a few months old. Mum is probably not far away.”

Okay, okay. In truth the 40cm baby black caiman was easily plucked from the bank and barely made a squeak. The blue tongue and stumpy tail lizards of my childhood were ferocious monsters by comparison. After a short lesson in reptile anatomy from Roland, our caiman is delicately placed back on the bank and quickly scurries away to find a new hiding place. Like our own crocodiles, the young caiman fend for themselves after just a few months, hunting frogs and small fish. While not truly threatened, Amazon caiman populations are still dependent on conservation to help them recover from earlier over-hunting.

Here in the Pacaya Samiria Reserve deep in Peru's Amazon rainforest the luxury river vessel, MV Aqua, transports inquisitive, adventure seeking passengers in total comfort along such evocatively named tributaries of the Amazon as the Yarapa (turtle), Yanayacu (blackwater) and Ucayali (canoe breaker) and home to more species of fish than the entire



THIS PAGE: THE AMAZON KINGFISHER, *CHLOROCERYLE AMAZONA*, PASSENGERS FROM MV AQUA SPOT BIRDS AND WILDLIFE FROM THEIR TENDER DURING AN AMAZON RIVER ECO-CRUISE **FACING PAGE** (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP): MAITRE DE OF MV AQUA, RICARDO, PRESENTS A DEEP FRIED PIRANHA, A SQUIRREL MONKEY, RELAX TO SUPERBLY PREPARED MEALS USING LOCAL PRODUCE IN THE DINING ROOM.



Atlantic Ocean. How's this? One third of all species in the world live in the Amazon Rainforest, including over 500 species of catfish alone!

Almost the size of Sicily, the reserve tries to protect the sensitive biodiversity within its nominal borders. Poaching and illegal harvesting is rife among the poor Ribereños (River) families looking to feed their average of six children. To assist the protection of the reserve, Aqua Expeditions work with nearly 300 local communities to reinforce the importance of sustainability. Villagers are often drafted as volunteer rangers in exchange for manageable fishing and farming rights. Hunting is forbidden.

In the wet season (Nov-Feb), the river level rises over 9m, flooding almost the entire reserve. This seasonal influx forms a várzea (freshwater swamp forest) and the wildlife, particularly mammals are easier to find. In the dry season,



like now, the river levels are so low some of the locals are dragging their canoes through the mud. There's a flip side to each season though. In the wet, there are more mosquitoes to contend with when ashore and while navigation is certainly more difficult in the dry, hikes are more rewarding and the fishing is a breeze.

One of the fun distractions on any Amazon cruise is piranha fishing. These little blighters are voracious and can smell our tiny slivers of Argentinean sirloin a mile away. The tackle is simple, just a piece of line tied to a stick with a little sinker and hook. Agitate the water with the tip of your stick before dropping in the bait and the razor-toothed rascals are onto you in a flash. You almost need to creep ashore and bait your hook behind a tree. Of the 35 known species, the short-nosed, red bellied piranha is the nastiest little brute in the family. His katana-sharp fangs are clearly visible and snap noisily in protest when he's hoisted aboard. Good eating? Sure, deep fry him whole and pick the light flesh off with your fingers or a small fork.

Unsurprisingly, the cuisine aboard MV Aqua features many dishes using the produce of the jungle like heart-of-palm soup, camu-camu fruit and the ubiquitous and delicious catfish. The soft, moist white flesh lends itself to numerous dishes and works perfectly with the rainforest-harvested wild tomatoes and kumera.

The vessel itself, while not a feat of glamorous marine engineering, is perfectly in keeping with the many traditional vessels we encounter on the river. Barges, skiffs, canoes and dinghies of all forms make up the local river fleet and their design brief is clearly based on function. MV Aqua's capacity is just 24 passengers in 12 spacious air-conditioned suites, each with quality amenities, fittings and furniture. Common areas are generous and dining is akin to an intimate restaurant environment. Tables can be arranged for couples, families or groups as you wish. In 2011, Aqua Expeditions launch a slightly larger second vessel, MV Aria, on similar 3- to 7-night voyages. Depending on the total length of your stay, four nights is enough.

Beyond tracking capybara, caiman and iguana in the vast Amazonian expanses, there are several opportunities to visit local communities and native villages. On one occasion, Roland takes us shopping in the markets at the little port town of Nauta and, laden with fruit, fish and vegetables, we turn up on the doorstep of a shanty family for an unannounced visit. This little heart-warming gesture leaves our small group glowing momentarily, but tomorrow we know they'll be back to square one. Sustainable tourism is growing in the region and beginning to bring benefits to these isolated populations, but there is still a long way to go. Aqua Expeditions, at least, are holding up their end of the bargain. **S**



ABOVE: A RED-BELLIED, SHORT NOSE PIRANHA, *PYGOCENTRUS NATTERERI*, IS REPUTEDLY THE MOST FEROCIOUS OF THE MORE THAN 30 SPECIES CURRENTLY KNOWN

DOING IT

Aqua Expeditions operate 3-, 4- and 7-night journeys departing Iquitos, Peru. Prices start from \$2250 per person twin-share for the 3-night expedition. Includes all excursions, meals, house wine and local beers. Gratuities are extra. Bring binoculars, camera with long lens, tropical strength insect repellent, sunscreen, sun hat and light, long-sleeved shirts. Don't forget village donations like exercise books, pencils and clean used clothing.
www.aquaexpeditions.com

LAN Airlines flies six times weekly from Sydney to Santiago, Chile, and offers service to over 50 destinations in 10 South-American countries. From Santiago, LAN flies daily to Lima, Peru, and on to Iquitos. For more information visit www.lan.com or call 1800 221 572.

Research: Fodor's Peru and www.peru.info
The writer was a guest of LAN and Aqua Expeditions.

Photos: RODERICK EIME, AQUA EXPEDITIONS



PRINCE HOTEL & RESIDENCE

Prince Hotel & Residence in Kuala Lumpur is just a few minutes walk from the prestigious retail and entertainment belt of Bukit Bintang, Petronas Twin Towers and the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre. This five-star hotel presents 445 spacious rooms and luxurious suites, and 157 full service apartments with spectacular views of the city. Relaxation facilities include an outdoor swimming pool, tropical garden, the Sompoton spa, a fitness centre with the latest high-tech equipment and a Kid's Club for the little ones.

Prince Hotel offers seven food and beverage venues to cater to a variety of palates. At the Eccucino Buffet Restaurant, you will be spoiled for choice with Malaysian favourites and International delights. Tai Zi Heen, their signature restaurant, serves contemporary Cantonese cuisine and delectable Dim Sum. Exclusive for apartment residents, The Residence Lounge provides daily complimentary Continental breakfast.

Business professional on the move will certainly appreciate the wireless broadband internet. Individual workstations, two private meeting rooms and professional secretarial and administration services are available at the Business Centre.

Business or pleasure, the Prince Hotel & Residence is ready make your stay in Kuala Lumpur memorable one.

Prince Hotel & Residence

4, Jalan Conlay
50450 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Tel: (603) 2170 8888
E-mail: enquiry@princehotellkl.com.my
Website: www.princehotellkl.com



RENAISSANCE KUALA LUMPUR

Whether it's for business or leisure, the grand Renaissance Kuala Lumpur Hotel is a five-star luxury accommodation located in the heart of the Golden Triangle. It is a short walk to the Petronas Twin Towers and is two monorail stops from the nearest business, financial and sophisticated retail hubs. The Renaissance features 910 beautifully appointed rooms and suites, complete with broadband high speed internet and modern amenities.

When it comes to dining, there are seven food and beverage outlets including the Sagano Restaurant for Japanese cuisine, TEMPTationS coffee house and Vogue Café for all-day dining and the Dynasty Restaurant, serving exquisite Chinese cuisine by award-winning executive sous chef Kok Chee Kin.

Guests are also able to enjoy the hotel's two-storey fitness centre, tennis courts, Olympic-sized swimming pool and for the ultimate spa journey - rejuvenating treatments at the luxurious Mandara Spa.

Business travelers are well-served at the Renaissance business centre which is fully-equipped to provide complete secretarial services. For conferences, weddings, seminars and dinner functions, the hotel boasts a magnificent Grand Ballroom and 26 multi-purpose function rooms equipped with state-of-the-art facilities and audiovisual equipment.

Renaissance Kuala Lumpur Hotel

Corner of Jalan Sultan Ismail and Jalan Ampang
50450 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Tel: (603) 2162 2233
E-mail: rhi.kulrn.sales@renaissancehotels.com
Website: www.klrenaissance.com

