



12 PERSONAL JOURNEYS Monkeys and more along the Amazon.



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DISCOVERY | ADVENTURE | ESCAPE

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# Travel

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Top, cafe on the roof of the Museum of Contemporary Art. Above, from left, "The Long Way Home" at the Sydney Theatre Company; "Fragments" exhibition by Isaac Julien, at Roslyn Olsky gallery in Paddington; "Carnes" at the Sydney Opera House.



## Out of the Sun, Sydney Still Shines

There's a lot going on inside that opera house, and culture thrives away (but not too far away) from the beaches.

By TONY PERROTTI

The late, great Australian art critic Robert Hughes once complained that "Crocodile Dundee" is still regarded by many Americans as a work of social realism. A rhetorical exaggeration, of course, but he had a point. As an Australian living in New York, I've long been puzzled at the dominance of charming clichés about the country as a sun-dappled frontier. Advertising campaigns still promote the "ocker" image —

Australian redneck — depicting beer-swilling, huggy-go-lucky folk barbecuing steak at the beach.

I protest to friends in vain that Australia has a lot more to offer than rumpust beef-hound and cuddly boozis. Its cities are wildly cosmopolitan, I argue, and even, dare I say, sophisticated. Its museums are packed, its cultural life raucous, and endless arts festivals clutter the social calendar.

The gulf between image and reality is

most extreme in Sydney, my hometown, which is renowned for its Rorschach natural beauty. It's also known for the Sydney Opera House, an instantly recognizable piece of architecture — though few Americans seem to consider that opera is actually performed there.

Sydney exports plunkloads of stars to Hollywood — even though, because of their talent for accents, many aren't recognized as Aussies. For me, the final straw came before the last Academy Awards,

when I had to spend half an hour constructing a New York-based magazine editor that Cate Blanchett, until recently the co-artistic director of the Sydney Theatre Company, is not, in fact, British. I began to feel the need to update my own view of the city, if only to gather ammunition for dinner parties.

And so, as the polar vortex was enveloping the United States and Australia was basking in the glory of the antipodean

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### EXPLORER COSTA RICA

## When Is 'Wild' Wild Enough?

On the Osa Peninsula, leaving tourist areas behind in search of a rain forest adventure.

By AMY HARMON

By the end of our fourth day on the Osa Peninsula of Costa Rica, we had seen, according to the tally kept by my 9-year-old, Sasha, dozens of species of animals. We had peered at keelcutter ants, army ants and zombie ants. We had been dazzled by howler monkeys, beguiled by squirrel monkeys and strangely stirred by capuchin monkeys, whose feet bear an eerie resemblance to human hands. That afternoon, in the national park that covers a third of the peninsula, we had even spotted two tapirs, endangered mammals that look like hornless rhinoceroses with long snouts.

To sample this extravaganza of biodiversity,

we had risen early each morning of our vacation. So when our guide informed us that he would be taking us out at 4:38 a.m. to witness the rain forest waking up, I — the restraining force behind, and thus bearer of responsibility for, this trip — glanced apprehensively at my family and swallowed hard.

"We'll be up!" I said brightly. I had shepherded Sasha and my husband, Scott, to Osa in hopes of a tropical wildlife experience that was, in fact, wild. But as we crawled into our tent that night, the beaten path from which I had so resolutely steered clear was starting to look more inviting.

Costa Rica, home to large tracts of untouched yet accessible rain forest, had scored the obvious place to immerse ourselves in nature for a week in February. On Facebook, people responded with the Costa Rican phrase "pura vida" ("pure life") at the mere mention of the country. We had

admired photographs of bright-colored birds, frogs and butterflies from the preserves near the capital, San José, which could be reached by direct flight from New York. The ubiquitous "canopy tours" through the treetops seemed a great way to indulge Sasha's love of zip lining.

But as I researched where to go in the West Virginia-size country, I began to suspect that its popular ecotourist destinations might not quench my yearning for the untamed. On TripAdvisor, phrases like "well-developed" and the less-charismatic "Disneyified" arose in regard to the storied Monteverde Cloud Forest in the central highlands. Manuel Antonio National Park on the central Pacific Coast, widely loved for its beaches and restaurants, was reportedly better for night life than wildlife.

The more people who can enjoy the rain forest without destroying it the better, of course: The 70,000 or so who visit a silver



The author and her daughter in a tide pool near the rain forest.

# Sunsets and Pink Dolphins Along the Amazon



Skiff excursions and jungle walks, hot showers and cold drinks, on a luxury river cruise.

By MARY HILLARD

Sitting on the deck of a small cruise ship called the *Aqua*, I listened to the reverend sounds of the Peruvian Amazon rain forest. Beside me was a relaxed executive, a fellow passenger whom I had just met the day before. As the sinking sun bled into the darkening sky and the riverbanks along the tributary of the Peruvian Amazon turned from green to black, he told me of his days in Lagos in the '70s and Dubai in the '80s, then lapsed into silence. The moment was all the sweeter because we were playing loosely from an outing to view normal birds, opting for perfectly chilled white wine over mosquitoes.

Our schedule was interrupted when a young man dressed in Army fatigues, a bolted gun at his hip, stroked by my warily shipboard friend raised a quizzical eyebrow.

The armed escort, fortunately, was not a response to a specific threat. In 2009, the luxury *Aqua Expeditions* cruise ship had been boarded by armed pirates, who robbed the passengers of cameras, cash and jewelry. Ever since then, the *Aqua* and its sister ship, the *Arta*, have been accompanied by three armed guards, part of a Peruvian river protection strategy that includes a green speedboat named *Policia de Turismo* that follows the ship. So far, there have been no other incidents.

Luxury cruising through the Peruvian Amazon region is a rare and expensive experience, not surprisingly, since operating a push vessel in an area so remote is a logistical challenge. In addition to *Aqua Expeditions*, which operates the 120-seat *Aqua* and the 80-seat *Arta*, there is *Bellevue Amazon Cruise*, which also has two small ships (one with only four seats). Our boat had just 24 passengers and a dozen waiters and stewards; it was once a backdrop in a *Code Nast* Traveler fashion spread, with models covered in bangles, scarves and flowing dresses draped on the deck chairs. In contrast, my cruise mates wore lightweight khaki clothing and sensible shoes. They were intent on seeing as much of the rich Amazonian flora and fauna as they could on our four-day trip.

Our mid-May voyage had started the day before in Iquitos, a port city on the Amazon that can be reached only by plane (a two-hour flight from Lima) or, for the more adventurous, a river journey. My husband and I had joined for the formal meeting meet of our fellow travelers at the Iquitos airport before embarking by bus to the ship. The roads to Iquitos were jammed with three-wheeled cotermines called *motoceros*, and were muddy, still swamped from the record high tide during the rainy season.

Before boarding, the group went on a stroll at dusk down the riverfront walk. Music spilled from restaurants and bars. A row of buildings we passed had shikaree griffed terraces, remnants of a colonial boomtown surrounded by rubber plantations. The 1962 Werner Herzig museum, "Fitacarnaval," was housed in a local historical figure and filmed in the area, and there is a popular bar named after the would-be opera impresario and rubber baron.

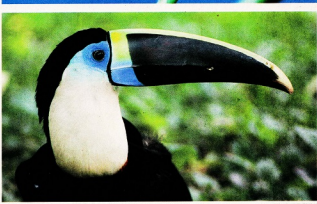
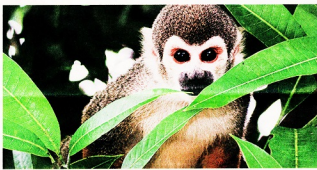
THEN WE BOARDED THE *Aqua*, which would be our home for the next three nights as we cruised down the Amazon and its many tributaries, making our way to the Pacaya-Samiria National Reserve, one of the largest protected areas in Peru.

For the most part, my fellow travelers were experienced, passionate, knowledgeable animal lovers and birders, among them a group from Naturalist Adventures, a travel partner of the World Wildlife Fund. Most were armed with state-of-the-art binoculars and telephoto lenses the size of basketballs. A nature-traveler neophyte, I was equipped with an iPhone camera. I soon learned, however, that even the most advanced wildlife viewer is great to cruise antics, such as a cobra live fueled by pisco, a potent grape brandy.

In the early mornings and late afternoons when it was just hazy and animal sightings were more likely, there were excursions in aluminum skiffs. The boats carried a maximum of 10 passengers, along with one of the ship's three naturalists who kept an eye out for animals hidden in the mahogany, kapok and Brazil nut trees.

On the first outing, the operator of the skiff pulled it close to the shoreline, and we sat quietly as the guide pointed out a sloth and explained some voice how it conserved energy by moving slowly as it lumbered between the towering trees. The only other sound was the cick of cameras.

Later, we would spot sparrow monkeys accessible and charming, proved to be a gateway drug to the birds, which, for me, was a revelation. The naturalist pointed



Above, from top, scenes on a river cruise: A skiff built for shore from the *Aqua*, a small ship that plies the Amazon; a rufous-tipped lagoon; a rufous-tipped lagoon; Ilya live frog; white-throated toucan. Above right, from top: a guide points out some birdlife on a shallow lagoon from a skiff; the *Aqua*, with picture windows, which the author took on her four-day cruise as one of 24 passengers.

## INTO A REMOTE RAIN FOREST

*Aqua Expeditions* has two ships that explore the Peruvian Amazon. The *Aqua Amazon* three-night cruise starts at \$2,850; the seven-night cruise at \$6,850. The *Arta Amazon* three-night cruise starts at \$3,000; the seven-night at \$7,000. Rates are per person based on double occupancy, and do not include flights. Cruises run year-round. Information: [aquapexpeditions.com](http://aquapexpeditions.com).

showed me how to use my rental field glasses, moving my gaze from branch to branch until I found my visual prey. Eventually, I spotted some macaws flashing their Technicolor plumage as they circled around and returned to the towering tree-tops. I exclaimed, to the amusement of my skiff mates: "These macaw's really work beautiful!"

The excursions offered a strong sense of place. We explored estuaries and were enveloped in the humid rain forest. The sun went down; we slathered on bug repellent or, alternatively, peddled on porches during sudden rainstorms. We visited a local village where we sat in a one-story school in post-size chairs, listening to the children sing.

Then we returned to the creature corners of hot showers, air conditioning, an attentive crew, immaculate housekeeping and onstop dining on everything from Thai food to local fare: Amazon bass, tiger catfish, Andean trout, ribbons of hearts of palm and a dizzying amount of cassava and other local fresh fruits.

Between excursions, I relaxed happily in my cabin, listening to the soundtrack of "The Mission" — the 1986 movie filmed in the rivers and jungles of South America — on my iPod. I lay on my bed watching the landscape at a proper remove. It slipped past the panoramic picture window: the river, by turns gray and brown; the dense jungle canopy; and above all, overlapping white clouds and a smattering of blue sky.

ON THE SKIFFS, entranced by my surroundings, I only vaguely noted in when the guides pointed out attention to the various species of birds, which included toucans, parakeets and macaws. But in my cabin, I obsessed over the acorn-holding "waddle" Checklet" given to each guest. What did we see? Was it a black vulture, cormorant straits, known locally as a gallinazo negro? Or the river king vulture, sarcophagus pupa, also called *condor Amazonico*? I pondered whether I had actually spotted a cobalt-winged parakeet.

On our second morning, I woke before sunrise and drank my coffee next to the bridge.

The sun was a thin band of blinding light on the horizon that cast a pink reflection on the water. A curtain of gray clouds battled for control of the sky. Gazing at the water, I saw the familiar elegant arch of a dolphin and the ring it created as it dipped back into the water. Until this trip, I did not even know that such creatures as river dolphins existed. I saw more and more of the floating arches. And, appropriately, given the morning's pink-on-gray color scheme, I was gratified to find two river dolphins on the checklist: pink (*Inia geoffrensis*) and gray (*Sotalia fluviatilis*).

Andrea Reynolds, an adventure specialist and expedition leader for Natural Habitats, later told me that she was shocked to see so many pink river dolphins. Ms. Reynolds was the perfect companion, willing to indulge in a frothy beer on the skiffs, and a knowledgeable animal enthusiast on the jungle walk and skiff excursions. "Cruising on a boat, you know there are things in the scenery you can only imagine," she said. "It was excellent to get out and see the little critters, like insects, tarantulas, the poison frogs, that you don't see floating." She did not mention the macaw, which another lucky group of travelers ran into on an excursion.

It has been almost a year since my journey. I still find myself turning to books like Peter Matthiessen's "At Play in the Fields of the Lord" about missionaries, mercenaries and hallucinations in the South American jungle, and Redmond O'Hanlon's "In Trouble Again: A Journey Between the Orinoco and the Amazon," about his macapaca in a month-long journey in a dugout canoe. "The Mission" soundtrack is in frequent rotation in my playlists. I even notice there are bits in *Mashaura*. One of my iPhone photos — a river view bathed in blue sky touched with pink — is now my screen saver. I cannot remember if it was sunrise or sunset. And I kept starting at close-ups of birds that I now board when I met on the cruise posted on Facebook. Bright orange chests and bright blue wings. I think they are macaws.