

VANITY FAIR

The background of the cover is a composite image. The top half shows a dramatic coastline with steep, grey rock cliffs meeting a deep blue sea. The bottom half shows a balcony with a white tiled floor, a person in a red dress lying on a lounge chair reading a book, and several potted plants, including a large bush of pink hydrangeas.

MARCH 2014

ON TRAVEL

AFRICA

THE CASE FOR ZIMBABWE

Plus: TOP GUIDES and
SAFARIS FOR KIDS

By GRAHAM BOUNTON and LUCIA VAN DER POST

PERU

IF I CAN, YOU TOUCAN

By STEVE KING

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

MAKING FRIENDS AND
HAVING THEM FOR DINNER

By STANLEY JOHNSON

*"One of the gladder moments in
life is the departure upon a distant
journey into unknown lands."*

—RICHARD BURTON

GENTLY *Down* *the* STREAM

It's still a jungle out there, but you no longer have to tough it out like a conquistador to see the Peruvian Amazon. The world's mightiest river, in the middle of the world's most stupendous rainforest, now comes complete with a bar, a fancy restaurant, air-conditioning, picture windows and a Jacuzzi—aboard the Aqua Aria, that is, says STEVE KING



RHAPSODY IN BLUE

Sunset on the Ucayali River, a tributary of the Amazon, in the Pacaya-Samiria National Reserve, Peru.

How do you like your frontier towns, amigo? Stinking hot, dirt poor, shrouded in diesel fumes and so far up the Amazon as to be de facto independent? Then Iquitos is the frontier town for you.

You come and go by air or water. It's unreachable by road. This swathe of northeastern Peru, abutting Ecuador, Colombia and Brazil, used to be an inland sea. The bedrock lies beneath a thousand feet of clay and silt and sediment, which makes highway-building a thankless task. And with river levels varying by up to 45 feet a year, bridges are pretty much doomed too. In Belén, the poorest quarter of Iquitos, on the floodplain

at the river's edge, thatched wooden houses balance on stilts, like oil rigs made of popsicle sticks. Some float on a base of logs, rising and falling amid the sewage and water hyacinth with which this section of the river is clogged.

In and around the main square, the Plaza de Armas, there are reminders of a more prosperous past. Between 1860 and 1910, when the market for natural rubber was insatiable, fortunes were made in Iquitos. Narrow your eyes and you can just about picture the city in its pomp. Many of the colonial mansions are still standing—showy Moorish *azulejos* and rusty railings on the outside, mahogany panelling and parquet on the inside. There is a sculpture by Rodin in the square—though this is no more surprising than one of the buildings on the perimeter, the Casa de Fierro, the Iron House, designed by Gustave Eiffel for the 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle. Unlike the more famous tower he dreamt up for the same occasion, this extraordinary all-metal edifice didn't remain long in France. It caught the eye of a visiting rubber baron, who shipped it across the Atlantic and up the Amazon. The story goes that the house was intended not for Iquitos at all but for Quito, in Ecuador.

The rubber boom ended as abruptly as it had begun and Iquitos slid into a deep decline that was only halted by the discovery of oil near the Peru-Ecuador border in the 1960s. Today vast quantities of oil, as well as gold and timber—all touchy subjects—pass through Iquitos and sustain a population of more than half a million.

Lost in the maze of the Belén market, you could easily mistake it for a city 10 or 20 times that size. This is one of the great souks of the world. You can buy things here that you didn't know existed. Unidentifiable fruit and unimaginable

vegetables. Obscure birds, fish, mammals, reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates, dead or alive, whole or in parts, raw or cooked. Dolphin sperm. Prescription medicines. The shamanic hallucinogen *ayahuasca*. Perhaps even, if slogans painted on walls denouncing child sex tourism are to be believed, human beings. A solitary calico kitten, one of the few domestic cats I saw in Peru, sat unblinking alongside a cardboard box containing an assortment of pirated porn DVDs and Disney classics.

A kind of order applies. For the bachelor or budget shopper, tiny quantities of cooking oil are decanted into plastic bags that are neatly knotted and suspended from wires like socks on a washing line. Empty turtle shells, their tenants freshly evicted and sold for the pot, are stacked like dirty dishes in a restaurant kitchen. Female catfish are displayed upside down on trestle tables, their mottled-orange ovaries, an Amazonian delicacy, exposed through surgical incisions. They stare skywards and gasp. A splash of water on the gills will keep them alive for hours.

At the end of the day the streets are littered with piles of fish scales that sparkle like broken glass in pools of congealed animal blood. The entire neighbourhood resembles the scene of a tremendous car crash. The stench has its own weight. As the last vendors pack up, the dogs and vultures move in, blasé, unhurried, lurching from one scrapheap to another until they can no longer be bothered to move at all.

Iquitos was, for me, a revelation. As vivid and exotic as anything I could have hoped to find in the rainforest. I'd happily have stayed for a month. But I was only there to kill a few hours before getting on a boat. This most inland of all seaports has been the hub for excursions into the Peruvian Amazon since

the mid-18th century, when the Jesuits arrived. From there I took the *Aria* upriver to the Pacaya-Samiria National Reserve, Peru's largest reserve, which is about the size of Belgium.

The *Aria* is 147 feet and three decks' worth of steel and glass and wood. Primarily glass. It looks like the top few storeys of a modern Danish apartment building and contains 16 large, unfussily elegant cabins that accommodate a maximum of 32 guests, as well as a bar, a restaurant and a Jacuzzi. It's one of two boats operated here by Aqua Expeditions. They have three-, four- and seven-day itineraries, covering up to 600 miles on the Amazon and its tributaries the Ucayali and Marañón. There are twice-daily excursions on motorised skiffs, morning



NEED A LIFT?

Houses on stilts near the river in Iquitos. Below: a street full of shoppers and vendors in the Belén market.



SMOKIN' HOT

Container and passenger ships line the river in Iquitos. Below: a cigarette vendor at the Belén market and a view from the market towards the river.

WOODEN HOUSES BALANCE ON STILTS, LIKE OIL RIGS MADE OF POPSICLE STICKS



MARCH 2014



www.cntraveler.com | VANITY FAIR ON TRAVEL 111



DAYS OF HERON

A small caiman, caught in a spotlight; young *riberños* show off their pet parakeets from the riverbank; a cocoi heron; giant water lilies and a dugout canoe in the village of Yucurachi.

Opposite: a view of the *Aria* and one of its motorised skiffs; a *riberño* with a freshly caught armoured catfish.





SUPERLATIVES VANISH
INTO THE AMAZON WITHOUT
A TRACE... IT WILL "OUTBILLION" YOU



and evening, safari-wise. Depending on the season, river jaunts are interspersed with easygoing forays on foot into the jungle or visits to small communities of *riberños*, the indigenous river-dwellers.

The wildlife spotting can be hit and miss, which is as it should be, since although this is the Amazon, it isn't a zoo or a documentary. Most of the animals and birds live in the canopy, many are nocturnal and all are wary of predators. Patience will, however, be rewarded. In your cabin you'll find a checklist of wildlife that you're more or less likely to see. It's 10 pages long and contains 200-odd species. There's almost as much satisfaction to be had in reciting the names of these creatures—rufescent tiger heron, white-chinned jacamar, saddle-backed tamarin, three-toed sloth—as there is in actually glimpsing them through a gap in the leaves.

One of our guides caught an anaconda and dragged it to the riverbank. Not a very big anaconda by anaconda standards but big enough to draw gasps of delighted horror from the group, most of whom wished to be photographed with the snake slung across their shoulders. Ladies shrieked and squirmed, gentlemen grinned and struck macho poses, camera shutters clattered. The snake maintained the sullen forbearance of a thoroughbred racehorse in the winner's enclosure—at once there and not there. Its head was the size and shape of a small dog's. It had river weeds stuck in the corner of its mouth. The guides, whose feelings about this crowd-pleasing set piece I found hard to gauge, talked it up like carnival barkers. "What a morning! Who! Unforgettable! Holy mackerel! How about a big round of applause for our anaconda hunter, Miguel? Yeah, give it up! Excellent! Perfecto! Now let's go find a jaguar fighting with a polar bear!" I felt like a polar bear in the jungle at that moment, hot and grumpy and out of place. And a hypocrite to boot. Earlier in the week, in a bar in Iquitos, before we set off on the *Aria*, I had petted a tame margay, a jungle cat similar to an ocelot. It belonged to Walter Saxer, the production manager on Werner Herzog's enchanted tribute to opera and the Amazon, *Fitzcarraldo*. Saxer has lived in Iquitos off and on since they shot the movie on location in Peru in the late 1970s. The margay's name was Ludmilla. They practically had to prise her from my arms. Who was I, then, to look down my nose at the snap-happy snake lovers?

Another day we went to a village in a "buffer zone" on the edge of the reserve. More shacks on stilts, this time arranged adjacent to a football field. The muddy footpaths were dotted with piles of sodden, partially incinerated rubbish, often including items of underwear. We were greeted by a group of

ecstatic schoolchildren, their less ecstatic parents and a tethered capuchin monkey with a freaked-out expression and a startling erection. Drunk men danced to music from a battery-powered boombox. Women sold beaded trinkets and squares of soiled fabric embroidered with animal shapes.

Superlatives vanish into the Amazon without a trace. It dwarfs our passions. It will "outbillion" you, to borrow a splendid coinage from Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* script. The river is 4,650 miles long. Its basin covers 2.7 million square miles in nine countries and drains an area almost as large as that of Australia. Its rainforest produces 20 percent of our planet's oxygen. There are 4,000 types of butterfly and perhaps as many as 5,000 species of fish—nobody knows for sure. More than 400 new plant and animal species, among them a purring monkey and a vegetarian piranha, all previously unknown to science, have been discovered there in the past four years alone.

Yet even in the midst of all this sublimity I sometimes felt a twinge of embarrassment, a faint sense of deficiency or ingratitude, that I wasn't more moved by my surroundings. One tiny lakeside village we visited was home to three families and a population of giant water lilies. The lake and lilies had recently been used as the backdrop for a fashion shoot in *Condé Nast Traveler*. Satiny and fringed with red tassels, the plants made me think of old pictures of circular beds in the Playboy mansion, big enough for a party of three. The photographer accompanying me on the trip admired the lilies too. "It's not really the scary jungle, is it?" he said cheerfully. "This could be Giverny."

If it did at times feel more Claude Monet than Francisco Pizarro, maybe that was just as well. I probably couldn't swallow the real Amazon if it were served up neat. It takes about three seconds from the moment your

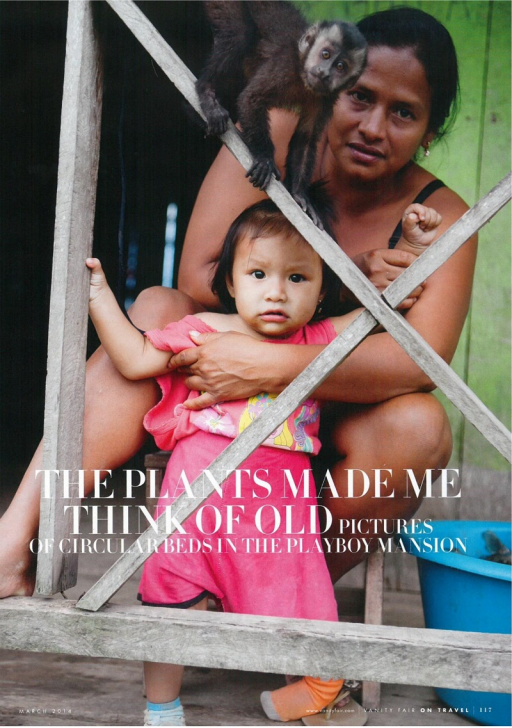
skiff hits the riverbank and that artificially created breeze vanishes for you to feel crippled by the heat. Heaven only knows what the conquistadors thought they were doing here, toiling for months, years, in the fogg and the muck, against the endless, unyielding indifference of jungle and river. I suppose nothing piques an appetite for hardship or fortifies a stomach for violent conquest quite like good old-fashioned greed.

It's easy enough to entertain such idle thoughts in the air-conditioned bar of the *Aria*, where your only acquisitive and murderous thoughts are likely to be directed at a pisco sour. Certainly there is no other way to see this part of the world in anything like this degree of comfort. There are few other ways to see this part of the world at all, unless you're considering a



CLASS DISMISSED

A classroom in Urarines, a village on the edge of the Pacaya-Samiria National Reserve. *Opposite:* a mother, child and capuchin monkey in the same village.



THE PLANTS MADE ME
THINK OF OLD PICTURES
OF CIRCULAR BEDS IN THE PLAYBOY MANSION

FADE OUT, CREDITS ROLL

Dusk on a tributary near the confluence
of the Ucayali and Marañón rivers,
in the Pacaya-Samiria National Reserve.
Opposite: the Ario by night.

“IT’S NOT REALLY
THE SCARY JUNGLE, IS IT?”
HE SAID. “THIS COULD BE GIVERNY.”



career in shamanism, mining or logging. Having to share the boat with a small group of strangers is part of the deal, with the pros and cons that such an arrangement entails. You might, therefore, expect to be engaged in some small talk concerning wine cellars and dog hotels back home in Brussels or Ottawa or Cleveland. Noise levels will tend to rise over the course of dinner. As things start to fray a little, the tinkle of broken glass may be met with a wink and waggish cry of "Taxi!"

In any event you will be well berthed, well fed and well looked after. The executive chef, Pedro Miguel Schiaffino, also runs Malabar, a top restaurant in Lima. And the expertise and enthusiasm among the guides is truly impressive. I asked one of them, Julio Mozombite, how he came to be there. Like most of his colleagues, he was a local, a *ribereno*, in his case of the Omagua tribe. He was born in a village 100 miles or so upriver from Iquitos, the third of six children. His parents sold fish wholesale to stallholders at the Belén market. They would take the fish by river taxi to Iquitos and return with salt, matches, kerosene and a small amount of money. When Julio was 13, the family moved to Iquitos permanently. The first time he heard English spoken, he knew he wanted to speak it too. He worked at the market from 4am until noon and then went to school. He took extra English classes at a Canadian NGO in town and in his spare time hung out at the airport and the Plaza de Armas to practice his English with tourists. After finishing high school he got a job as a waiter at an eco lodge near Iquitos. In 2011 he joined Aqua Expeditions as a guide.

One evening, on one of the smaller tributaries, Julio cut the outboard motor and let the skiff drift. It was getting late and the light was almost gone. We sat in silence for a while, until it became obvious that we weren't sitting in silence. "This is the sound of my childhood," Julio said. Ruddy pigeons and nun birds, calling to each other as if in competition. Nightjars. Parakeets. Frogs and crickets. Beneath it all, the ceaseless whisper of the river. I guessed that Julio had performed this little trick many times before. It didn't matter. It was a good trick. We kept drifting and listening. I remembered a line from Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* journal, describing a similarly quiet, contemplative moment on the water. "Such a sense of peace came over me that I felt I was discovering something that had been missing from my life." □

PERU

WAY TO GO

Luxury tour operator and South America specialist **cazenove +loyd** (cazloyd.com) can tailor-make a six-night trip to Peru from £3,650 per person, based on two sharing. This includes two nights at **Hotel B** (hotelb.pe) in Lima, with breakfast and private airport transfers; four nights aboard the **Aria** (aquaexpeditions.com), with all meals, house drinks, transfers and daily excursions; return flights from London Heathrow via Madrid with **Iberia** (iberia.com); and domestic flights from Lima to Iquitos.

NEED TO KNOW

DO give some thought to the time of year. There's no bad time to go—the Amazon really only has two seasons, high and low water. June to November is low-water season, when forays into the jungle on foot are possible. In high-water season, from December to May, most of the Pacaya-Samiria reserve, through which the Aqua Expeditions boats travel, is submerged. DON'T worry about yellow fever, which comes and goes in this part of the world, but don't forget to check about it either. You might need a precautionary jab before you go.

DO bring a big hat and lots of mosquito repellent.

DON'T stress about clothes. When it rains in the Amazon, no amount of next-gen safari clobber is going to keep you any drier than the hideous plastic ponchos the Aria guides will give you as the heavens open.

DO take presents, such as school materials, for young *riberenos*.

DON'T be tempted to forgo a Peruvian beer (perfectly OK, if not life-changing) in favour of a toot of hallucinogenic *ayahuasca* (possibly life-changing, though not necessarily in a good way).

READ ON

Peru has its very own Nobel prize-winner, Mario Vargas Llosa. He has written an enormous amount. *The Time of the Hero* is a good place to start. Anyone going to Iquitos and the Amazon should read German film director Werner Herzog's *Conquest of the Useless*, his typically idiosyncratic journal of shooting *Fitzcarraldo* in the jungle. It is quite mad but superbly evocative, and the title alone proves that he has a sense of humour.

PS

Foodies rate Lima among the most exciting cities on the face of the earth. Highlights include **Malabar** (malabar.com.pe), **El Mercado** (rafaelosterling.pe) and **Astrid & Gastón** (astridygaston.com). The café at Mario Testino's **MATE** gallery (mate.pe) is a cool place to hang out after taking in the art (all from the Lima-born photographer's personal collection) displayed in this elegantly converted old townhouse in the once grand, now up-and-coming Barranco neighbourhood.