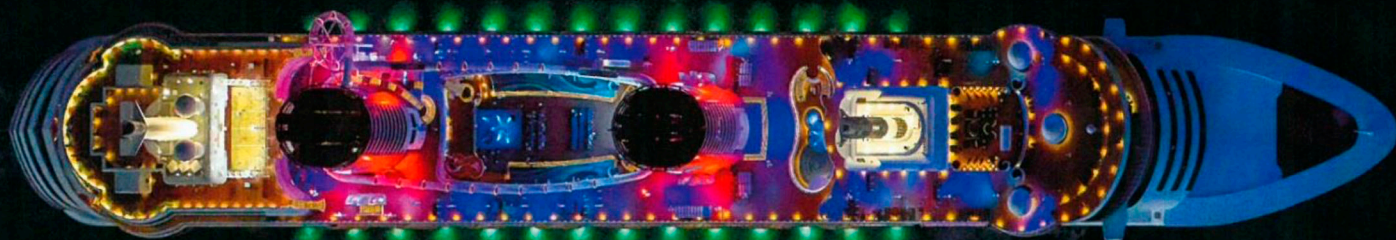
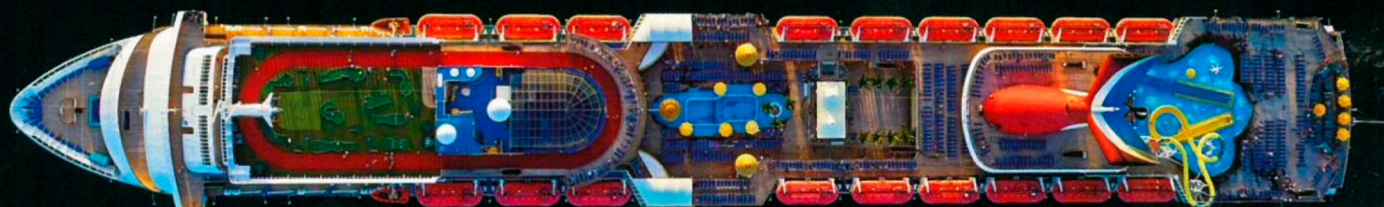


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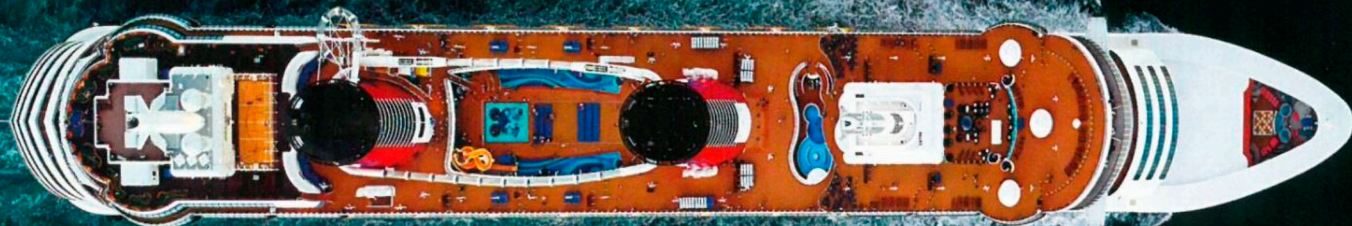
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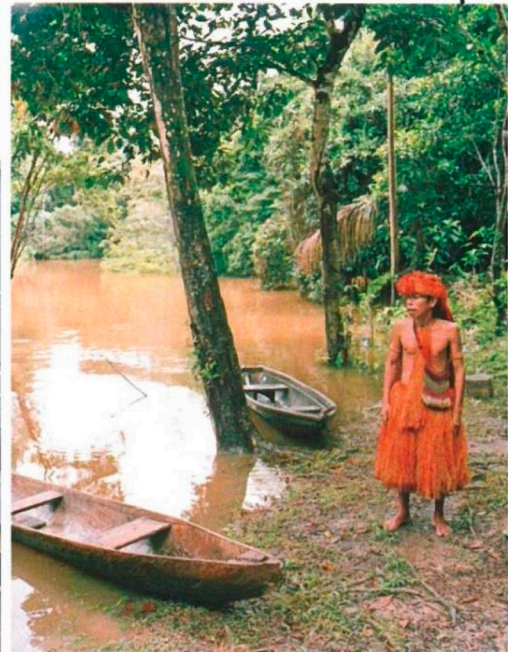
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THE ULTIMATE
CRUISE GUIDE

BEST FOR A RUMBLE IN THE JUNGLE





PERU

STEVE KING COMES FACE-TO-FACE WITH LIFE ON THE AMAZON BY JOINING AN INTREPID CREW THAT HAS ALSO JUST BRANCHED OUT INTO ASIA

So picture this. You're smack-bang in the middle of the Amazon. The Amazon jungle and the Amazon River. The middle of the middle of nowhere. It's enormous. Forget about the Google-able numbers, the mad, made-up-sounding metrics of magnitude. The Amazon basin is the greatest remaining wilderness on the face of the earth. There isn't really more of anything, anywhere. So shouldn't it be, you know, *enough*?

It's an interesting question, and you won't know the answer unless you go and see for yourself. See if it matches or exceeds or confounds your expectations of what the Amazon ought to be. You might be surprised. I was.

There's more than one way to do it. But there's currently only one way to do it in five-star style, with air-conditioned suites, floor-to-ceiling windows, ace guides, a menu created by the celebrity chef who runs Malabar in Lima and the very barman who invented the Anaconda Sour (crème de menthe, white rum, lime juice – genius).

Aqua Expeditions operates two state-of-the-art riverboats, *Aria Amazon* and *Aqua Amazon*, which ply a stretch of the great river and its tributaries within the Pacaya Samiria National Reserve, a park in north-eastern Peru almost the size of Belgium. You fly from Lima to Iquitos and push off from there. Itineraries vary according to duration and time of year.

The basic idea is that the boat travels by night, then stops in the morning and lets you off to make one or two forays a day into the jungle on foot. The guides, most of them locals, are outstanding. The wildlife-spotting opportunities are, of course, unparalleled. The crew of the *Aria* provide a partial checklist of likely suspects. It contains about 350

species, from giant gladiator tree frogs to nine-banded armadillos, spectacled caimans, pink dolphins and ladder-tailed nightjars.

There was a quiet chap on my *Aria* trip called Joe, from Odessa, Texas. Like most of the others on the boat, Joe was of retirement age. Unlike most of the others, he was retiring by nature too. Shy, laconic, polite. Not the life and soul. The only one aboard whose wife couldn't be bothered to join him. But for Joe the cruise wasn't about killing time or ticking boxes or keeping the missus happy. It was about realising a childhood dream. He was reduced to tears of joy just looking at the trees. 'Ah'm in oil,' he said. 'Yessir. An y'all know them pumpin' jacks? Well. Thass what we got for trees in Odessa.'

For Joe, the Amazon was all about the trees, and the trees were enough. For me, I'm still not sure what it was all about, or whether it was enough. That was my surprise. I was so primed for sublimity that I fretted there was something wrong with me when the shades of Longinus, Burke and Schopenhauer failed to materialise. In my head I understood the splendour and significance of where I was. But in my heart I didn't feel it. At river level, where everything is water, treeline and sky, I had the sensation not of being absorbed into the beating heart of an infinity of wilderness but of being stuck on a long, twisty lane in Devon, with thick hedgerows on either side, hemmed in, unable to see beyond the next bend, where all that I would see would be more of the same.

In the end the keenest pleasures of the Amazon were the smallest and simplest. I remember being struck by the serene dignity of a solitary heron on a bare branch beside the riverbank. A still, silent point of focus in the incomprehensible vastness.

SAIL AWAY

Cazenove+Lloyd (+44 20 7384 2332; www.cazloyd.com) offers a six-night trip to Peru from £4,200 per person, based on two sharing. This includes two nights at Hotel B in Lima with breakfast and private airport transfers, four nights aboard *Aria* with all meals, house drinks, transfers and daily excursions, return flights from Heathrow via Madrid with Iberia and domestic flights from Lima to Iquitos. Last month, Aqua Expeditions (www.aquaexpeditions.com) launched the *Aqua Mekong*, which cruises the Mekong River in Cambodia and Vietnam