

# KENSINGTON & CHELSEA

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## Helen McCrary

On *Fearless*, feminism  
and life in London

OUR PICK  
OF THE  
HOTTEST  
PRE-FALL  
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ESSENTIALS

## THE TRAVEL ISSUE

Exploring hidden Japan, sailing down the Peruvian  
Amazon & discovering Italy's top wellness retreat





long haul

# RIVER WILD

*Journeying inland by boat from Lima  
to the Peruvian Amazon, South America's  
urban and natural jungles present a rich  
landscape and make for an enticing destination*

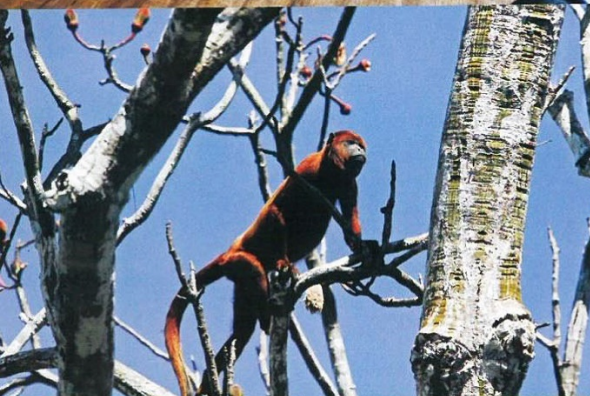
*words by Olivia Sharpe*











*Clockwise from top left: Suite, Aria Amazon; Toucan; Observation deck, Aria Amazon; Plaza Mayor, Lima; Macaw; Skiff ride down the Amazon; Aqua Expeditions; Howler monkey; All courtesy of Aqua Expeditions*





Our guides are brimming with such a wealth of knowledge that they would put even David Attenborough to shame

For many, visiting Peru sits high on their bucket list. With its ancient sites, diverse topography and thriving capital, it has much to recommend it. With direct BA flights having launched last May from London Gatwick, journeying here is more accessible than ever, as I realise on a seven-day tour of this remarkable South American country.

After a few days in Lima, I board a plane to Iquitos, where I will embark on a cruise of the Amazon, one of the new Seven Wonders of the World. Travel company Aqua Expeditions was the first to launch a luxe river cruise on the Peruvian Amazon in 2007 and it now offers three-, four- and seven-night tours. Next year, it will partner with Jean-Michel Cousteau – son of oceanic explorer Jacques Cousteau – on a new series. The renowned conservationist will take guests on tours of the Amazon and Mekong (starting this year), imparting his knowledge of natural environments.

Iquitos is the largest city in the world that is only accessible by river or air. Yet this has done nothing to prevent it being flooded with Europeans, who were drawn to here for its booming rubber industry in the late 19th century. Their continuing influence can be seen in the city's architecture, which includes the Iron House, rumoured to have been designed by Gustave Eiffel.

As we board the skiffs to take us aboard our ship, *Aria*, it begins to rain. Visitors should expect to be drenched daily in a place that sees at least 80 inches of downfall annually, but nothing could quite prepare me for the weather, which is almost biblical in its relentlessness.

Each of *Aria*'s 16 suites are nearly identical in size and appearance, featuring king-size beds, sitting areas and panoramic floor-to-ceiling windows. I love the sense of floating on water every morning when I open my curtains on the lower deck of the three-tier vessel.

Upstairs on the top deck is the lounge, bar and small library, along with a gym and massage room. Outside on the observation deck, a large white awning covers a cluster of sun beds and an outdoor jacuzzi. The decor is simple but stylish, with comfy sofas, coffee tables and polished wooden floors. *Aria*'s restaurant is its pride and joy, producing five-star Amazon-influenced cuisine courtesy of chef Pedro Miguel Schiaffino.

The daily itinerary includes morning and afternoon excursions for three hours down the river on motorised skiffs in small groups. The guides really set the trip apart from other tours of the region. Having all grown up here, they are brimming with such a wealth of knowledge that they would put even David Attenborough to shame, and have an inexhaustible passion for their homeland.

Much like us, they cannot contain their excitement when they spot local wildlife, as though they too are seeing it for the first time. On two occasions, our guide Julio pulls a baby anaconda out of the river, while

another wrestles a caiman into our boat. They appear to know the name of every bird in the sky which, given there are more than 205 species here (along with 2.5 million insect and 40,000 plant species), is quite something.

The guides don't get to have all the fun, though – we spend a morning fishing for piranhas in Moringa Lake, followed by canoeing at Lake Clavero. We journey into the heart of the rainforest to discover the creatures that live within. Mosquitos seem immune to insect repellent, and our guide warns us not to touch any of the many trees, which are riddled with stinging ants and giant tarantulas. However, we are welcomed by three-toed sloths, rare birds and squirrel monkeys.

Each day presents something new and unforgettable, such as one evening when we sip sundowners in our skiffs, reflecting on all the wonders we have seen as the sun sets – an awe-inspiring sight in itself.

I start and end my trip in Lima, where I stay at the five-star Swissôtel, in the financial district of San Isidro. Peru's vibrant capital recalls its past as well as its promising future. Just ten minutes by car from our hotel is Huaca Pucllana. The ancient ruins, which once served as an administrative and ceremonial site, date back 1,800 years to pre-Columbian South America.

Lima was founded in 1535 by the Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro and traces of the city's 300-year Spanish rule can be found in Plaza Mayor, where the Government Palace and cathedral are situated.

Lima has become famous in the past decade for its diverse culinary scene. Widely regarded as one of the best restaurants in the world and one of the first in Peru to receive a Michelin star in 2013, Central is a must-visit. Its inventive menu, devised by renowned head chef Virgilio Martínez Véliz, celebrates the native gastronomy and geographical diversity. Another restaurant I must mention is Maido, which serves a Nikkei menu that fuses Japanese and Peruvian culinary techniques.

Peru's capital has a burgeoning fashion and art scene. The Miraflores district is home to Love Park which, with its mosaic walls and contemporary artwork – including the El Beso sculpture depicting sculptor Víctor Delfín and his wife kissing – has been compared to Gaudí's Parc Güell more than 6,000 miles away in Barcelona. Finally, Mate, the not-for-profit centre founded by Mario Testino, showcases the Peruvian photographer's works as well as that of lesser-known contemporary local artists.

Staring at his collection of photographs dedicated to the festive dress of the Cusco people and the region's topography, you can see how creatives such as Testino, who have emerged from Peru, will forever draw inspiration from this spectacular country. ♦

*A three-night cruise on the Aria Amazon with Aqua Expeditions starts from £2,920, aquaexpeditions.com. Premier rooms at Swissôtel Lima start from £186 per night, swissotel.com. British Airways flies direct from London Gatwick to Lima, from £657, ba.com*