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# wanted

BusinessDay



# NOW THIS IS THE LIFE, AQUATIC



Gillian McLaren hits the bucket-list big-time on a thoroughly exotic, luxury adventure along the Amazon River



*Indoor lounge and bar*

**"I FEEL LIKE AN INTREPID EXPLORER AS THE TARANTULA MAKES ITS WAY UP MY ARM"**

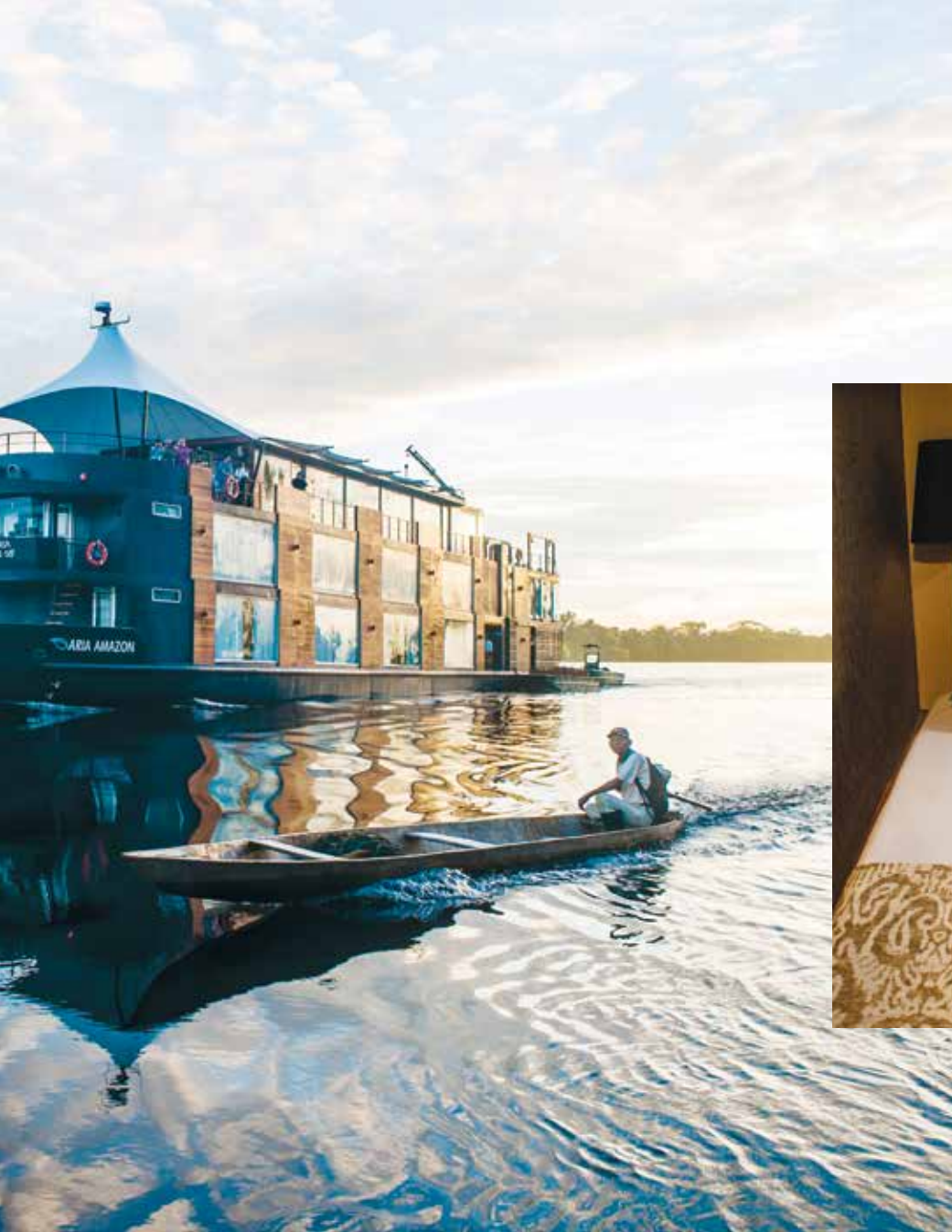
**S**TANDING ON THE FRONT of the tender boat, our naturalist, George Dávila, shines his searchlight on the water of the Amazon River and its river banks. On an excursion from the Aria Amazon cruise ship, we are searching for nocturnal creatures. Spotting illuminated eyes is enough for Dávila to identify a spectacled caiman. With gloves on, he grabs the reptile's neck in one bold movement, revealing its wide Alligatoridae head, plus narrow teeth and an overbite. The caiman is returned to the water and speeds off into the darkness.

It's not the first set of sharp teeth we have seen today. On our morning excursion we had an up-close-and-personal experience with piranhas. We each tried our hand at some Tom Sawyer-style fishing, using a simple wooden stick, with a short line and baited hook. We encouraged one another with whoops and cheers and our competitive natures emerged as we compared the size of our trophies. Only the larger piranhas were kept for the chef to prepare as a side dish for lunch. The piranha's teeth sure are razor sharp and can shred flesh at an alarming rate, apparently, but they are, we learnt, definitely not the vicious creatures portrayed in Hollywood films. Dávila suggests that humans are too large to be selected as prey and are unlikely to be attacked, unless there is swirling water where many kinds of fish get into a feeding frenzy.

This information helps to remove any qualms about diving off the skiff for a swim in a blackwater river, so named because of the dark tannins from decaying vegetation that suffuse it. Fellow passengers call out, pointing to three breaching, bubble-gum pink Amazon river dolphins. As they swim closer, I hear their short, high-pitched calls.

Our host on the ship is Jean-Michel Cousteau, the conservationist





to fiercely and noisily guard their territory and chicks. As I have no mosquito repellent on my hands, I'm permitted to hold a pink-toe tarantula. It's all too reminiscent of the chilling moment in the James Bond movie Dr No, where Sean Connery has one advance across his hairy chest. I feel like an intrepid explorer as the tarantula makes its way up my arm. Dávila assures me that they are not aggressive and, although they can bite, are not venomous — take that 007!

The brown-throated, three-toed sloth lives up to its reputation as the slowest animal on earth. We watch it descending with excruciating exactness from a leafy arboreal perch on its way to the ground to defecate, which it does once a week.

With the engine of our tender turned off, we listen to the rising chorus of birds — including scarlet macaws — as they fly over the jungle canopy toward their roosts. Singing cicadas, the deep guttural growls of howler monkeys, and the sonic emissions from leaf-nosed bats add to the symphony.

It's a moment of utter bliss in this remote region of our planet, as the river reflects the melted vermillion of the sunset. Heading back to the Aria Amazon, we pass through thick clouds of swarming mayflies— a phenomenon that draws swooping fishing bats. We stop to watch a family of capybaras — square-headed and awkward looking, the largest rodents in the world — as they forage for grass and water plants.



son of the late Jacques Cousteau, the great underwater explorer and pioneer of scuba-diving equipment. Cousteau has joined us on the skiff and explains that this uniquely rosy and appealing dolphin species is endangered. Threats include hunting, habitat loss, pollution, decrease in food supply, and entanglement in fishing nets and lines. Legends about these large fish abound among the local people. When a man returns to his village after a time away hunting to find his woman is pregnant, it is said she was impregnated by one of these dolphins.

The Aria Amazon offers three excursions daily. As well as early-morning bird watching from the skiffs, we take slow saunters through the jungle to discover armies of leaf-cutter ants, the tiny 1cm poison dart frog, the leaf-shaped lizard, and spider monkey. We discover giant water lilies, the Victoria amazonica, a member of the Nymphaeaceae family, with wattled jacanas picking their way across the huge lily pads



Top: on-board spa; left: Naturalist George Dávila; below: Amazonian Dead-Leaf lizard





## travel

*Into the jungle: the expedition deep in the Amazon on foot and in a skiff*

1920s mansion. Colourful Peruvian paintings decorate the walls, and a huge, antique light fixture dominates the entrance hall. The stately hotel is located in a charming, quiet street.

After the 10-hour flight with Latam Airlines from Johannesburg via São Paulo, followed by a five-hour hop to Jorge Chávez International Airport in Lima, it is heavenly to take a shower in my suite before being ensconced in crisp, white sheets on a king-sized bed. With blackout curtains to defy the daylight, I wake refreshed.

Breakfast is served in the courtyard, on a comfortable sofa, beneath a stone-coloured umbrella. The lavish buffet includes a selection of freshly baked pastries, yoghurts and cold-pressed juices, cheeses, cold meats and fish, as well as the best olives I've ever tasted. Eggs are made to order. Try the salchicha de huacho, a Peruvian treat of scrambled eggs with artisanal sausage. A selection of uniquely blended leaf teas is available. It's a spread that will give you the energy you need to explore the neighbourhood's art galleries.

During my morning stroll along the cliff tops of the Bay of Lima — looking out to the Pacific Ocean — I watch residents walking their dogs and fitness enthusiasts running and exercising in pretty parks. Over three days, I explore the surrounding areas, enjoy superb meals in charming restaurants, and try some street food, alongside friendly locals. It's a much-needed stop-off, and a destination worthy of a visit itself.

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[latam.com/en\\_uk/latam-airlines-south-africa](http://latam.com/en_uk/latam-airlines-south-africa)

### GETTING THERE

Fly Latam Airlines from OR Tambo International to São Paulo in Brazil, then on to Lima.

Peruvian Airlines offers two flights a day to Iquitos. After a three-hour private bus trip, you reach the Aria Amazon. Return to Lima from Iquitos and overnight in Wyndham Costa del Sol.

### AND WHILE YOU'RE AT IT...

On chef-hosted departures with David Thompson and Pedro Miguel Schiaffino — who have won numerous industry awards and worldwide recognition — you can join them to explore food markets and for master classes and Q&A sessions.

Francesco Galli Zugaro, the owner of Aqua Expeditions, hosts selected trips. The Aqua Mekong, a luxury ship similar to the Aria Amazon, cruises between Vietnam and Cambodia.



### SPOILS, OVERBOARD

Boarding the Aria Amazon, we are met by Robinson Bollet, the barman — always a popular crew member — who has freshly squeezed juice ready for us. I change from my drenched jungle outfit into a dress after a strong, hot shower in my cabin, and breeze up to the indoor lounge on the top deck, to join fellow passengers for a pre-dinner drink. Each evening I taste a different South American wine, which is an adventure, as Argentine malbec is the only varietal I know. The bar has a glass wall, so the view — of passing villages, small fishing boats, and vast cloudscapes — is our ever-changing backdrop. The lounge is a hub of activity, where cooking demonstrations are given by our chef, Cousteau delivers his conservation talks with video snippets, and passengers browse coffee table books on the Amazon.

Pink dolphins and tarantulas aside, meals on board, in the aft dining room, are a highlight of my seven-night cruise. They've been created by Pedro Miguel Schiaffino, who specialises in Amazonian cuisine using fresh Peruvian ingredients. His two restaurants in Lima, ámaZ and Malabar, are ranked among Latin America's 50 best restaurants. I particularly enjoy the delectable paiche, an Amazonian fish roasted in a chilli sauce. Different, quirky serviette rings with Amazonian animals — made by local women — add a touch of humour to the table settings. Seating is not allocated, so we mingle easily; travelling alone is comfortable.

With their kindness and warm hospitality, the crew on the Aria Amazon significantly add to the pleasure of the cruise. There are only 16 cabins, all of them stylish, so passenger numbers are limited, ensuring individual pampering. From my air-conditioned suite, I gaze at the jungle and lambent moonlight on the Amazon River as the ship glides towards her next mooring, and eagerly anticipate birdwatching with Dávila in the early morning. [aqualexpeditions.com](http://aqualexpeditions.com)

### LIVING IT UP IN LIMA

If you are visiting any of the popular destinations of Peru, it's well worth spending a few nights in Lima before you head on to Machu Picchu, the Amazon, or wherever your traveller's heart is taking you. Consider staying at Casa República, an intimate boutique hotel in a renovated



*Above: Casa República's rooftop bar in the balmy night; below: the Garden suite*

