

AUTUMN/WINTER 2019

SUNDOWNER

Out of Africa

WHERE TO TAKE A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

**OLYMPIC
GAINS**

JAPAN'S WINNING
FORMULA

**HIP
'HOODS**

FRESH SPINS ON
STATESIDE CITIES

Abercrombie & Kent

RIVER RUN

LOUISE RODDON BOARDS THE *ARIA AMAZON* TO TAKE A STYLISH CRUISE THAT GOES ON A DEEP DIVE INTO THE PERUVIAN JUNGLE

“**Y**ou need to watch where you tread,” warns our guide Julio as we begin our trek through Peru’s Amazon rainforest. The rains have momentarily ceased and as I push past tangled branches and peer through the gauze of my mosquito hat, all I can see on the path below are dozens of harmless-looking ants.

“See that?” he asks, pointing to a lone insect as big as my thumbnail. “That’s a bullet ant. If it bites, you’ll feel like you’ve been shot by a pistol. It’ll make you pretty ill!”

Our first experience of hitting land after days of cruising around on Aqua Expeditions’ sleek *Aria Amazon* is turning into a mild horror movie. I’d been keen to explore the interior, but stepping away from the ant and moving my gaze upwards, there’s something even more challenging to



PERUVIAN AMAZON

Then on morning expeditions, we enter a steamy riverine environment of obscure tributaries and creeks that few visitors get to see – a neck-craning world of thick breathing vegetation where sloth hang from branches and tiny tamarin chatter overhead – and when the motor is switched off, the silence gives way to the throttled bark of howler monkey.

Our goal, however, is the Pacaya-Samiria Nature Reserve – one of the best protected parts of the Peruvian Amazon: a reserve so huge, it matches Belgium in size. Here, we are rewarded by the sight of small pink river dolphin, leaping in unison like so many synchronised swimmers around the prow of our skiff.

There are other treats too in this vast reserve: a night safari where, armed with small fishing rods, we catch and release fearsome-looking piranha, and when the engine is cut, we sit quietly, listening to the unseen life of the jungle: insects sawing, the whoops of primates, while overhead, the sky splits with bright stars.

Later, our guide Alex flashes his torch into the velvety darkness and focuses on the glower of tiny red eyes. He bends down and plucks a baby caiman from the water, holding it carefully around the jaw. "This one is three months old, I reckon," he tells us. "Eventually it will grow to about four metres long."

It is a beautiful creature, cool to the touch, small fangs overlapping its jagged lip line and with a tail that swishes in protest as Alex passes it among the guests, warning us to mind our fingers.

And we have a final treat to round off our voyage – a visit to Esperanza, an Amazonian riverside village of neat tin and thatch-roofed houses that have been pieced together by the residents over generations.

The children rush to greet us, leading us to the school room where we are invited to join in the school song. Cue peals of laughter at our funny accents, and smiles too when we offer up the gifts that our expedition crew had suggested, pre-travelling, we bring: useful stuff like bandages, clothes, pencils, and paper.

No child leaves empty-handed. And outside, older brothers shriek with laughter over a game of football with *Aria*'s guests, watched all the while by women lounging in hammocks on their porches. And while exploring the village, one guest is pulled into a local shop and treated to a tribal make up session by giggling girls. Valiantly, she offers her heavily daubed face up to our cameras.

The enduring memory for me, however, is of a little boy and girl trotting away from the schoolroom – the girl with two of my crayons stuck in her hair; her brother almost tripping over his feet, so busily is he admiring the new, somewhat overlarge flip-flops that I had brought along. ©

behind; a huge, almost comically hairy tarantula poised on a leaf – and I swear it is eyeballing me with evil intent.

Yet this creepy-crawly moment is as bad as it gets on our walk – and it's not really bad at all – for Julio, one of *Aria*'s four excellent Amazonian guides, is super-vigilant. Occasionally there's the slash of vegetation falling away as he hacks a makeshift path with his machete. Yet mostly Julio is constantly checking we are following him.

Snippets of local knowledge culled from a childhood spent in this steamy jungle-bound world pepper his stories. And for our group of just seven guests these prove fascinating: for here is cat's claw that will lower blood pressure and help a sickly stomach; then a type of euphorbia that can be effective for hepatitis; and even a plant whose sticky leaves drip a liquid that can aid conjunctivitis.

Most fascinating however, is the Punishment Tree. Innocuous-looking to the outsider, this, Julio tells us, is where villagers tie their drunken neighbours, leaving them to the mercy of vicious fire ants. "It soon cures them," he chuckles.

This trek happens halfway through our four-night cruise, and, goodness, it's proving a wonderful voyage. Departing from Iquitos – the largest city in the world that can only be reached by air or riverboat – we have left packed day-tripper boats and larger cruisers far behind, heading instead for some of the remotest parts of the Amazon's upper tributaries: places where we find ourselves entirely alone apart from birds and monkeys, insects and caiman.

And *Aria* is certainly a lovely vessel; the perfect luxury add-on if you've already hiked Machu Picchu or are planning a few days post-voyage in Peru's fascinating capital, Lima. Dark wood panelling hallmarks the Chinese junk-style exterior, but once

inside, space is key – especially in the 16 exquisite suites created by the renowned Peruvian designer, Jordi Puig.

Think floor-to-ceiling picture windows that allow a private screening of the moving river from your bed. Add on polished wood flooring and a muted colour scheme and you've a suite that wouldn't look out of place in a five-star hotel.

That same sense of spaciousness applies to all three decks. On the top deck is a lovely outdoor area with recliners and Jacuzzi set under a calico awning, while inside, the lounge bar features elegant sofas and a good selection of maps, books, and games.

Yet it is the food in the second-deck dining room that really wows. This is a voyage not just for expedition lovers, but foodies too – for the menu has been devised by superstar 'Jungle Chef', Pedro Miguel Schiaffino.

A few years back, I ate in one of his two renowned Lima restaurants – the Amaz – feasting on dishes fashioned from Amazonian produce; river snails and huge spicy scallops proving the most memorable – and there's a similar taste vibe here on the *Aria*. Buffet lunches might feature unusual salads, perhaps alligator nuggets served with fried yuccas or leaf-wrapped tamales; formal dinners see treats like smoked armoured catfish broth preceding the meaty local paiche fish cooked in bijao leaves.

There are just 23 of us onboard, and with expeditions divided into groups no larger than six or seven, guided outings feel highly personal. Dawns see us boarding motorised skiffs that whizz off to islets stuffed with dazzling birds: blue and yellow macaw screeching through the knotted greenery; the flash of red-capped cardinal, and the uncanny-sounding call of a horned screamer – a cry so similar to a donkey, you'd barely know the difference.

PREVIOUS PAGE: *Aria* Amazon cruising down the Amazon
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Macaw; the balcony of *Aria* Amazon;
a sloth hangs out; one of the suites aboard *Aria* Amazon

CONTACT ABERCROMBIE & KENT

For more information, or to arrange your Amazon adventure, call our Latin America travel specialists on 01242 547 701.