

# JOURNEY TO THE SOUTH

How to cruise through the Amazon river—  
and soak in the sights and sounds along  
the way *By Kee Foong*



Sunrise on the Amazon

PHOTO: KEE FOONG



“Will we see jaguars?” It was the question on our minds, and the first one asked during a briefing session before setting sail along the world’s mightiest river. “Extremely unlikely,” came the reply from Billy Chujutalli, a locally born and raised naturalist guide, who had only seen the elusive big cats once in the wild, despite living in proximity to their natural habitat.

Over the next seven nights, with expectations managed, we go on to encounter myriad other fantastical flora and fauna, ranging from the beautiful and unusual to the scary and prehistoric, as we journey through some of the most biodiverse ecosystems on the planet.

The cruise aboard our luxury vessel the Aqua Nera starts and ends at Iquitos, a bustling city of half a million people in the middle of nowhere. Accessible only by air or water, it’s the gateway to the Peruvian Amazon. Our destination is the Pacaya-Samiria National Reserve, a Unesco-designated tropical wetland, where the Ucayali and Marañón rivers meet to form the headstream of the Amazon river. Casting off at dusk, it’s not until morning that I can appreciate the mystical realm we’ve entered: a wide, flat, mud-brown and deceptively calm expanse of waterway flanked by rainforest and farmland as far as the eye can see.

We set off early in a skiff to explore a tributary. Raucous parrots and caracaras—a species of long-legged raptor—greet us as vultures circle and kingfishers swoop past in a flash of colour. Birdlife is so plentiful, it’s hard to know where to look. Eagle-eyed Chujutalli signals for the launch to stop and points towards the jungle. It takes time to spot, but camouflaged among the foliage is a three-toed sloth. These cartoonish creatures spend most of their lives sleeping in the treetops, so we’re lucky to see one moving, albeit at a glacial pace.

That afternoon, we venture further upstream, with palm, fig, kapok and rubber trees closing in around us. As the sun sets, swirls of orange, pink and purple dissolve into ripples of inky water while hundreds of cormorants settle on branches to roost. Macaws and toucans squawk, monkeys screech and a chorus of frogs pipe up. With the aid of torches, we search for caiman, a cousin of the alligator, their glinting eyes a giveaway among the reeds. Speeding back to our boat, the absolute blackness of the jungle swallows up beams of light, and what feels like rain splattering on my face turns out to be a torrent of insects pursued by bats.

One time, I’m standing on the edge of a skiff, staring at the black water before me. Beneath the surface lurk piranha. I know, because moments ago, I was yanking them out with a makeshift rod. But the day is hot and humid, so, with a mix of trepidation and excitement, I dive in, nervous the fearsome fish might exact revenge on me, yet thrilled to be cooling off in the legendary river.

Also known as the Rio Amazonas, the river and



Clockwise, from above: A cruise down the Amazon offers the chance to observe native species of fauna, such as this white-eared jacamar; a village on the Ucayali River; the Aqua Nera at sunset; a local child and sloth



IMAGE: GUILAUME SOULASSE (BOY WITH SLOTH); PAV HEE FUNG (JACAMAR)

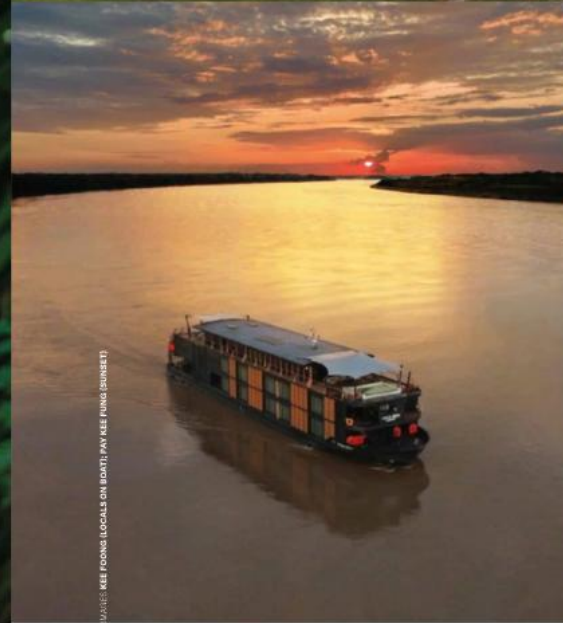


IMAGE: PAV HEE FONG (LOCALS ON BOARD); PAV HEE FUNG (SUNSET)

Amazon rainforest cover over one-third of South America. Measuring some 6,400 kilometres, it’s regarded as the second longest river in the world, behind the Nile in Africa, which is about 6,650 kilometres in length, though the figure is disputed by some. Measured on sheer volume, however, the Amazon is undoubtedly the biggest. Starting high in the Andes mountains in Peru, the river snakes east through Colombia and Brazil, taking in some of the least accessible terrain on Earth before emptying into the Atlantic Ocean. At its widest points, there is no land in sight.

Jack Wheeler, co-founder of Xapiri Ground, an organisation that works to preserve traditional crafts and culture in the Peruvian Amazon, says that “the lowlands towards the border of Brazil contain the last frontier of remote forests, where the largest concentration of ‘uncontacted’ indigenous groups live”. The fraction of river we traverse, however, is populated with mixed-race communities and villages that no longer hold to the old ways. Fishing and farming are important income sources, but so is tourism, with villagers selling souvenirs at the end of many excursions.

During a tour of the port town of Nauta, a storm forces us to take shelter. Waiting for it to pass, Juan Ihuaraqui, a naturalist guide who hails from near the Brazilian border, tells of two versions of how the Amazon river got its name. One is that Spanish conquerors in the 16th century were attacked by tribes resembling the fierce female warriors from Greek mythology while



**Clockwise, from below left:** Proboscis bats camouflaged on a tree trunk; the vast beauty of the Amazon; dining and local experiences offered by Aqua Nera



exploring the river. The other is that it comes from an ancient indigenous word *amassona*, meaning “canoe breaker”. As the wind whips up the water into choppy swells, I can imagine how that’s possible.

Ihuaraqui shares other tales about how healthy monkey populations are a sign that malaria is absent. That the all-powerful anaconda is protector and ruler of the river, forest and its people. Of giant fish with armoured scales that are delicious to eat (true). And a curious one about pink dolphins—endemic to the river—able to transform themselves into attractive humans to seduce girls and boys.

Because it’s low-water season, when water levels can drop by up to seven metres, I go on hikes in the rainforest. A local villager hacks his way through the underbrush with a machete, stopping to cut off a waterlogged vine so I can drink from it. He finds a pink-toed tarantula the size of my palm, and stumbles upon boas and anacondas—the latter are among the largest



TOP: (LEFT PHOTO: STEVE PHU WEE FUNG/AMAZON RIVER. FOOD: TREHOUSE; MIDDLE PHOTO: STEVE PHU WEE FUNG/AMAZON RIVER. BOTTOM PHOTO: STEVE PHU WEE FUNG/AMAZON RIVER)

snakes in the world, capable of growing a to staggering ten metres in length and devouring adult caiman whole.

Few men have sailed the length of the Amazon river. Richard Panduro, who has been navigating it for over 20 years, is one. The Aqua Nera’s captain has witnessed increasing deforestation and pollution, declining fish stocks, the retreat of indigenous peoples, and seen weather patterns change and the river alter its course over the years. Yet he remains enamoured by its mesmerising tranquility tinged with unpredictability.

Even with advances in technology, Panduro recounts how, one fine day, a powerful whirlpool appeared without warning, dragging the ship along. Helpless, the crew had to stay calm and wait for the danger to pass. He understands the science behind it and doesn’t easily fall for sailors’ superstitions. But he also knows that the Amazon is a mysterious, living being, a place of inexplicable magic that can enchant the most rational among us.

## LUXURY CRUISING

*The Tatler-approved guide to exploring the Amazon*



### WHEN TO GO

The Amazon is a year-round destination. High-water season (December to May) is more dramatic. The river rises and forests flood, allowing ships to sail further and skiffs to glide under canopies. There are also lots of mosquitoes. Low-water season is warmer, drier and allow for more land-based excursions. There are fewer mosquitoes.



### HOW TO GET THERE

Flights depart from major Asian capitals to Lima, Peru, via Europe or the US. Iquitos is a 90-minute flight from Lima. Travellers can stay in Iquitos and do day excursions but the best way to experience the Amazon River is on a three to seven-night small-ship cruise. Cruising the Peruvian side of the Amazon is more tranquil than the Brazilian side, where many large ships operate.

### WHERE TO STAY

**Aqua Expeditions** operates two of the most luxurious ships in the Peruvian Amazon. The new, state-of-the-art Aqua Nera (interiors and dining

pictured above) has 20 cabins of the same size and layout with floor-to-ceiling windows. Aria Amazon has 16 cabins. High-quality dining and excursions are included.

**Delfin** operates three Relais & Chateaux-affiliated luxury vessels. The smallest, Delfin I, has just four suites, which come with private terraces. Delfin II has 14 cabins and the newest, Delfin III, has 22 cabins. Rates include meals and excursions.

**Treehouse Lodge** comprises 12 rustic, open-air pavilions high among the forest canopy, two-and-a-half-hours from Iquitos. Treehouses are built ten to 20 metres above the ground and are connected by stairs and suspension bridges.