

TRAVEL

ESCAPE ROUTES

ENCOUNTER THE
WILD, WITH COCKTAIL
IN HAND

THE ARIA IS A LUXURY
HOTEL THAT JUST
HAPPENS TO CRUISE
DOWN THE AMAZON



SAIL INTO A WORLD OF AMAZONIAN DISCOVERY



Stylist writer Jo Usmar experiences jaw-dropping wildlife and tastes the world's finest

ceviche in deepest Peru

Whenever I hear the words 'river' and 'jungle', straight away I think of Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart Of Darkness* (even though it's

set in the Congo, not the Amazon), which in turn leads to images of Marlon Brando wailing, "The horror... the horror" in *Apocalypse Now*. At no point have those words ever conjured up visions of an air-conditioned luxury cruise ship with a hot tub, tasting menu, massage room and small gym. Until now.

It turns out that you can travel to one of the world's

most exotic places in style and comfort, without the need for a tranquiliser gun or, indeed, an Attenborough-esque love of big insects. For there are two little ships that cruise up and down the Pacaya Samiria National Reserve in the Peruvian Amazon and take travellers deep into the jungle on motorised skiffs. The idea of venturing into the wild

without sacrificing any little luxuries is a brilliant one – and very much appeals to me. Glastonbury 2009 put me off roughing it forever, so the prospect of a once-in-a-lifetime adventure that also includes cocktails and well-appointed bathrooms filled me with glee.

From Heathrow I flew to Madrid, before catching a 12-hour flight to Lima, where

I took another flight to the largest city in the Peruvian rainforest, Iquitos, before finally boarding the boat. (It took nearly 24 hours to return to the UK, so I'd recommend incorporating the cruise into a larger trip.) If you get the chance to stop in Lima, it's definitely worthwhile. It's one of the most exciting culinary hotspots of the moment thanks to chefs such as



👉 Pedro Miguel Schiaffino, who runs the award-winning restaurant Malabar. Schiaffino is a specialist in Amazonian cuisine and is also the executive chef behind the menu I'd be sampling on the cruise.

Before catching my next flight I had lunch at the legendary restaurant, Chez Wong, where chef Javier Wong creates world-famous ceviche (raw fish marinated in citrus juices) that has been voted one of the 50 best dishes on the planet by *The*

staff as there were guests, so the service was impeccable.

We had three excursions a day, with the first starting at 5.30am. There was no pressure to go on every trip, but most people did because you didn't want to miss seeing a caiman or pink dolphin. (Yes, *pink* dolphins.) There were four guides, and for me they were the most amazing thing about the trip. They could spot birds and animals 50 metres away that I couldn't see under my nose with a pair of binoculars. They

bird-eating spider, sang songs with schoolchildren, swam in the river, and even went piranha fishing with just a stick and hook. I spotted every animal and bird on my wishlist – it was a non-stop show. I saw squirrel monkeys, saddleback tamarins, red howler monkeys, kingfishers, herons, raptors, plum-throated cotingas, long-nosed bats, turquoise tanagers, macaws, white-throated toucans, yellow-hooded blackbirds and an anaconda.

We even had bucks fizz sundowners in the skiffs one day, near the confluence of the Ucayali and Marañón rivers, known to Peruvians as the 'birthplace of the Amazon'. It was all quite overwhelming. The sheer expanse of the river and the jungle is just breathtaking.

Every night I came back to a power shower, a tasting menu and a large glass of wine. The food was amazing. For lunch one day we had a buffet which included causa (a potato dish) with freshwater shrimp escabeche and seco (braised beef in cilantro sauce) – it was nothing less than a five-star floating hotel.

The trip was exhilarating and exhausting – utterly surreal at times – and easily worth the long journey. And the spiders. **S**

The nine-day New Peruvian Amazon Discovery package with Bales Worldwide starts at £4,295, including flights and accommodation, with three nights in Lima and four nights aboard the Aria. Prices are per person based on two adults sharing on a mixed board basis; balesworldwide.com

“I RAN AWAY FROM SPIDERS, SWAM IN THE AMAZON AND WENT PIRANHA FISHING WITH JUST A STICK AND HOOK”

Observer. It's the sort of cult place that you would never stumble on by accident as it's hidden behind a nondescript door on a nondescript street. I've never had ceviche before, let alone the best in the world, so I was blown away by the fusion of citrus, raw fish and chilli. It was worth the flight time just for that.

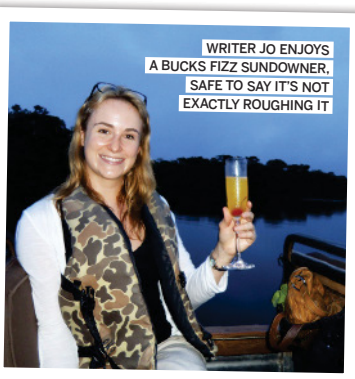
As soon as I landed in Iquitos, I was met by Aqua Expeditions' guides and joined up with the rest of the 60-strong group. We piled into coaches and reached the dock in darkness, stumbled onto skiffs and sailed up to what looked like a beautiful new block of flats floating on the water. This was our cruise ship, Aria. (I never managed to get my head around the incongruity of this townhouse pootling along the wildest river on earth.)

Aria is the slightly larger of the two ships and can sleep 32 people in 16 double cabins. One wall of each cabin is taken up with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the river, so it's almost impossible to wrench yourself from the room. But within the boat, there is a bar, Jacuzzi, restaurant, small gym and massage room, all spread across three floors. And there were almost as many

were all born and raised in the Amazon and recounted stories about their families and experiences in the jungle.

Our guide Julio told us that his grandfather made a medicine from leaves to treat depression. "The Amazon is the biggest pharmacy in the world," he said, "and your machete is known as your 'second wife', as you can't be without it." Their knowledge was inexhaustible and they didn't get annoyed no matter how often I asked, "Where's the sloth?" or, "Is that a spider on my shoulder?"

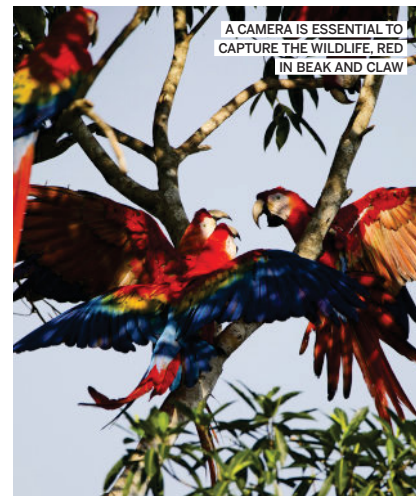
I went caiman spotting at night, ran away from a Goliath



WRITER JO ENJOYS A BUCKS FIZZ SUNDOWNER. SAFE TO SAY IT'S NOT EXACTLY ROUGHING IT



THE VIEW FROM THE CABIN IS LIKE WATCHING YOUR VERY OWN DAVID ATTENBOROUGH DOCUMENTARY



A CAMERA IS ESSENTIAL TO CAPTURE THE WILDLIFE, RED IN BEAK AND CLAW

AMAZON ESSENTIALS

It's wild out there. Don't leave home without the basics

A GOOD CAMERA: Unless you're a professional, there's no way you can get shots of the animals which are far away, but I did quite well with my iPhone and Sony digital camera.

MOSQUITO REPELLENT: You'll need a heavy duty mosquito repellent with DEET. The mosquitos aren't too numerous, but they will bite you if they get the chance.

MOSQUITO CREAM: For when you've been bitten. Iquitos is not a hotbed of malaria but taking preventative pills beforehand is also recommended.

HIGH FACTOR SUN CREAM: When we were zooming along in the skiffs it was easy to forget it was actually 35 degrees. We were all sunburnt on our noses and shoulders.

LONG-SLEEVED TOPS: You'll need lightweight long-sleeved tops when walking through the jungle. On the boat and skiffs it's fine, but once you're under the trees, all kinds of bugs and insects are present. And it's humid, so linen is recommended.

LONG TROUSERS: Full-length linen trousers are essential for jungle walks. Ideally, you should cover every area of the skin. Even the local guides made sure they were covered up at all times.

BIKINI: For the Jacuzzi.

CHARGERS: For your phone and camera. The boat has electricity points so you can power up all your gadgets.

BINOCULARS: If you have your own pair, bring them, as it's quite expensive to rent them on the boat.