

THE EMERALD FOREST

Transformed By Adventures Deep Into the Heart of the Peruvian Amazon

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I'M SITTING IN A TINY HOME IN THE flooded village of San Jose, deep in the heart of Peru's remote rainforest, listening to 72-year-old shaman Don Juan (whom our naturalist guide, Johnny, calls "Maestro") as he explains the medicinal uses of various plants found only in the Amazon. Although we pass around a plastic water bottle filled with the hallucinogenic tincture known as Ayahuasca, there will be no vision quests today. But, knowing what's to come, my heart is beating in my chest nonetheless.

Finally, the ancient blessing ceremony begins, and Don Juan makes his way around to the individual members of our tour group. In front of each one, he sings a brief melodic mantra while shaking a handful of bundled herbs over their head as they raise their hands to the sky as if in prayer.

He stops chanting, takes a puff off a tobacco cigarette, and blows smoke into their hands to be spread across their bodies for healing and purification. It's an ancient ritual found

commonly in shamanic cultures, but in this intimate setting it feels sacred and profoundly personal.

Suddenly it's my turn. The Maestro stands before me and begins to sing, but my blissful reverie is quickly broken when he starts coughing uncontrollably. He excuses himself, walks outside to clear his throat, and then comes back over to me, only to start coughing again. Later I asked Johnny what had just happened. "You noticed that, huh?" he responded with a broad, knowing grin. "You have a very powerful spirit, and the Maestro was overwhelmed by your energy."

With that, I, too, am feeling overwhelmed...

This was one of many emotionally impactful moments during our Amazon river cruise with International Expeditions, one of the area's leading ecotourism operators. After flying from Atlanta to Lima, and then over the Andes Mountains to the city of Iquitos, we boarded classic riverboat The Aquamarina for a 600-mile adventure down the Amazon and its various tributaries, exploring a side of Peru that even the vast majority of locals never get to see.

It almost seemed as if nobody knows the Peruvian Amazon exists, making it a great alternative to a Brazilian Amazon increasingly plagued by deforestation and poaching. Over the course of our 7-day excursion, we did not see another commercial vessel of any sort, and only occasionally would we spot any human beings at all. When we did, it was usually a small dugout canoe of the Ribeñeros (or river people), who get their food and water, bathe and wash their clothes in the mighty river.

As a result, the wildlife sightings along the way were both plentiful and spectacular. In what became a daily routine, every morning we'd wake before sunrise and load into two small skiffs attached to the side of The Aquamarina, each with

around seven travelers. We'd make our way off the main river and back into smaller tributaries, where our naturalist guides used binoculars, ears and instincts to seek out sights and sounds the rest of us failed to see or hear. On our first day, we saw Great Egrets, the brilliant yellow hues of the Capped Heron, and grey dolphins leaping out of the water before we'd had our first cup of coffee.

Over the course of the week, we saw literally hundreds of colorful bird species, from dusky headed parakeets and "punk rock birds" (a.k.a. hoatzin, a pheasant nicknamed after its vivid orange Mohawk-like crest feathers) to toucans and horned screamers. There was plenty of other wildlife as well— iguanas, caiman lizards, tarantulas, pink dolphins, sloths, piranhas, and more monkey species than I'd ever seen before. It wasn't just the variety that proved impressive, but the sheer abundance: At

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one point we saw over a dozen scarlet macaws in one tree, and at another we spotted two monkey species (cute squirrel monkeys and the bizarre equatorial saki monkeys) coexisting peacefully, side by side.

But there was one particular wildlife encounter that proved far more memorable than the rest.

Around lunchtime on our fourth day in the Amazon, we made our way to Ranger Station #2, deep in the heart of the Pacaya-Samiria Reserve. This is literally as deep into the remote Peruvian Amazon as travelers are allowed to go, and our excitement level was high: The wildlife sightings were increasingly impressive, and we knew we were about to get the rare experience of swimming in the Amazon.

I was out on the ranger station porch alone, taking photos of a pink-toed tarantula, when one of the rangers (Ribeñeros who volunteer in exchange for rights to fish in areas off limits to others) quietly mentioned that he had a surprise for us. It was then that I noticed two other rangers carefully pulling a large dugout canoe that had been submerged in the water over to us, fishing around in the water for something. There was a splash and a brief flash of a creature that clearly did not want to be caught, and we melted as we realized what it was: A baby Amazon Manatee, the smallest of the world's endangered Manatees.

Apparently, the rangers had rescued the little guy (estimated to be under a year old) from poachers the day before. In the Amazon, where meat is often scarce, a Manatee is a prized source of protein that can feed an entire family for months, and the poachers had been caught on their way to sell him to the highest bidder. Knowing that our group was coming— with a World Wildlife Fund rep and two journalists in tow— the rangers decided to keep him there overnight so that we could share the story of their fight to preserve this rare wildlife species.

As the rangers weighed and measured him, we got a little emotional at the thought of someone eating this beautiful baby, and suddenly it became all too clear why it was crucial to emphasize the importance of wildlife conservation and the economic benefits of ecotourism to indigenous communities around the world. Watching him being released back into the wild was one of the sweetest moments of our lives.

On one of our final days in the Peruvian Amazon, we had another emotional encounter with an entirely different (but equally adorable) species: The children of the village of Nueva York. International Expeditions works with several Ribeñeros villages in the area, visiting a different one on each trip, helping to fund water treatment plants, donating school supplies and bringing in tourist dollars from the sale of handmade crafts.

From the second the Aquamarina dropped her plank onto the shore, a gaggle of the village's kids were using the ship as their very own jungle gym, jumping from ship to shore and rolling on the ground while giggling their heads off. Wherever we went within the village, they would inevitably find us, strike some sort of hilarious pose, patiently wait for us to take a picture, and then urge us to show them the results. It always seemed to result in a huge grin, so we indulged them time and time again. Their energy was infectious, and we found that we couldn't stop smiling.

Our naturalist guides (several of whom had grown up in similar villages) taught us quite a bit about the Ribeñeros' way of life, showing us the simple but well-maintained inside of a typical home, teaching us about the foods they ate (from huge apple snails and fish to a variety of root vegetables, and giving us a chance to try our hands at daily chores such as roasting manioc (also known as yuca or cassava) over a roaring fire for six hours, turning constantly to avoid burning.

Eventually we made our way to Nueva York's tiny, colorful schoolhouse, where IE presented the village's mayor with donated school supplies. Our guide, Johnny, led through us a brief cultural exchange, with the kids teaching us words in Spanish and us teaching them words in English. Then, the Ribeñeros children and travelers performed two interactive songs together: In the first, they'd sing, "Como estan mis amigos, como estan?" and we'd enthusiastically respond, "MUY BIEN!" In the latter, we taught them how to do the "Hokey Pokey." Everyone wound up smiling so much, our faces hurt the next day.

In the end, we learned that the people of the Peruvian Amazon are just as amazing as its diverse flora and fauna, serving as great examples of how communities can live in harmony with nature. We emerged from our week-long adventure with a much greater appreciation for the life we have, and a desire to share the ancient wisdom and ceaseless wonder of our experience with a world far removed from the remote, rural lives of the Ribeñeros.

