

## CRUISING THE RIVER WILD



### IF YOU GO

LAN Airlines has daily flights from Lima to Iquitos, Peru. Flights from Tampa to Lima are about \$1,200, and the LAN flight to Iquitos is another \$300. Iquitos is Aqua Expeditions' home port. Three-night cruise itineraries start at \$2,550. For more information, go to aquaexpeditions.com and lan.com.

# AMBASSADORS OF THE AMAZON

Forget Brazil. A cruise through the Peruvian rain forest lets local guides show off the wonders that are theirs.



Macaws, sloths and pink dolphins are among the wildlife that can be seen on a riverboat tour of the Amazon in Peru.

**STORY AND PHOTOS BY ALISSON CLARK**  
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As our skiff leaves the comfort of the riverboat *Aria* and heads toward the thick vegetation of the Amazon jungle, our guide asks, "What do you want to see?"

Passengers shout out their wildlife dream list: "Toucans!" "Macaws." "Monkeys." "Sloths." "Fireflies!" "Pink dolphin!" "Caimans!"

I scoff at the seeming impossibility of so many dream sightings in one excursion, but our guide, Juan, doesn't seem daunted. Instead, in what would become a catchphrase of our three-night cruise, he cheers, "Let's go and get 'em!"

The skiff leaves the wide, latte-colored Amazon and slips into a narrow creek. A few minutes later, Juan is literally hopping with excitement, pointing into the trees, where he has spotted — don't ask me how — a pair of three-toed sloths. Like all of the naturalists on Aqua Expeditions' *M/V Aria* and its sister ship, *Aqua*, his enthusiasm is unfeigned and infectious. (On another excursion, guide Ricardo spots a rarely seen southern tamandua, a golden anteater about the size of a house cat, and practically glows all the way back to the boat.) As notable as the guides' enthusiasm is their skill in spotting the wildlife we're here to see: After a few hours, Juan has found all of the animals on our wish list, adding fish-eating bats, a pod of tiny gray river dolphins, a ringed kingfisher and at least a dozen more species of birds.

*Aria's* guides grew up on the Amazon, near the river's origins in Peru. While Brazil remains the more common destination for Amazon cruises, Peru's stretch of the 4,000-mile river offers plentiful wildlife, indigenous culture and undeveloped stretches of jungle, and unlike Brazil does not require a visa or a yellow fever shot (though many travelers do opt to get the shot, and take antimalarial medication as well).

A typical day aboard *Aria* starts with an optional early morning tour — popular with binocular-toting birders. The early risers return to the ship in time to join the others for breakfast, then passengers head out on a morning tour, coming back to *Aria* for lunch and downtime during the heat of the day before an afternoon excursion. In addition to wildlife spotting, excursions visit native villages and schools, venture into tannin-dyed blackwater creeks to catch piranha or offer an opportunity each night to watch the sunset while sipping champagne. Four- and seven-night itineraries include longer excursions. Diners feature five-course Peruvian-fusion tasting menus, from dorado catfish with chorizo sauce and pureed aguaje — a native palm fruit — to creme brulee with macambo, an Amazonian relative of cacao. Breakfast and lunch are served buffet style, but you won't find the cold

cuts and salads typical of many larger ships. Much of the menu is hyperlocal, down to the sofrito for the Amazonian dishes, which uses tiny peppers and beer fermented from local yuca for an extra kick. Other buffet spreads include a sumptuous Italian meal that reflects owner Francesco Galli Zugaro's heritage and dishes inspired by chifa, the Peruvian-Chinese hybrid cuisine influenced by centuries of Asian settlers in the region.

Along with its upgraded cuisine and focus on wildlife, travelers on an Aqua Expeditions cruise will find other notable differences from the typical cruise experience. Ships on the Peruvian Amazon must be small, about 30 passengers and nearly as many crew, to avoid creating waves that erode the riverbanks. In place of splashy revues or magic shows, evenings are dominated by animated conversation in the lounge, which opens onto a deck that's outfitted with a small pool and is popular for stargazing.

The final night, however, includes a celebration of South American rhythms in which guides and waitstaff reveal themselves as gifted musicians and dancers.

"When I was hiring," recalls Zugaro, "I wasn't sure whether to advertise for a waiter who could dance or a dancer who was also a waiter. They were both important."

During shore excursions, you'll find handmade jewelry and crafts rather than discounted watches and handbags. Emphasis is on cultural exchange. On a village visit, schoolchildren sing for us, and our guides urge us to respond in kind. We opt for *If You're Happy and You Know It*. Our group also pays a visit to a shaman, who demonstrates on a lucky passenger a blessing that combines singing, whistling and copious clouds of cigar smoke.

Aqua Expeditions cruises begin and end in the city of Iquitos, where several of our guides live when they're not aboard ship. All but the smallest Amazon villages offer schooling through age 11, Juan explains, but to continue their education, most village children must relocate, as our guides did when they finished middle school. They are largely self-educated in the flora and fauna of the area, however. It's difficult to imagine any program that could teach them what they've learned through a lifetime on the river: that anaconda tastes like chicken, which types of trees sloths prefer, why piranhas are a crucial part of the ecosystem.

Ricardo knows how to whistle to attract dolphins, a skill he learned from his grandfather. He relates indigenous mythology as well as real-life jungle tales, describing the relationship between the ani bird and the monkeys it follows. As monkeys move from tree to tree, they stir up insects for the ani to eat, while the birds, for their part, warn the monkeys when a predator is near. Each guide can spot a stock-still sloth from a skiff traveling at 20 miles an hour, and knows, from 50 feet away, the exact tree where nocturnal owl monkeys can be spotted resting during the day. It's all knowledge they're thrilled to share with newcomers.

"Look look look look!" Ricardo says as three gray dolphins leap out of the river, their bodies clearing the surface as they jump in unison. For this crew, sightings like this never get old. After experiencing the splendor of their backyard, it's easy to understand why.

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Source: Google maps STEVE MADDEN | Times



After shore excursions, cruisers can relax in the air-conditioning. Ships that traverse the Peruvian Amazon are on the smaller side, accommodating about 30 passengers.



LEFT: Aqua Expeditions cruises are on small boats to minimize damaging wakes.

BELOW: The cruises begin and end in Iquitos, Peru. Iquitos is the largest city in the world not reachable by road; visitors must travel by plane or boat.



ABOVE: During shore excursions, travelers will find handmade jewelry and crafts rather than discounted watches and handbags.

LEFT: After a day of wildlife spotting and cultural exchanges, cruisers can catch the sunset from the window of their Riverboat Suite.