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AMAZON ADVENTURE

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Travels with Charlie
The "Fabulous" Amazon Adventure

Only with some (maybe much?) trepidation, only after seeing photos of the relatively luxurious boat cabin with wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling windows, and only after being assured that she would never have to leave the big boat and could spend the entire five days sitting on the bed watching the scenery go by did the Sultana consent to my proposal for a Spring Break cruise in the Peruvian Amazon.

Lynda and I arrived in Lima late in the evening and spent the first night at a Ramada, which was in the process of transitioning to a Wyndham Hotel, immediately across from the Lima Airport terminal. Mid-afternoon of the next day, we were back at the airport for our short flight

to Iquitos, where we would meet the tour guides. Iquitos is the largest city in the Peruvian Amazon, maybe in the entire Amazon. It is also the farthest inland Atlantic port with a population in excess of 500,000.

Although obviously a poor city, it does have some attractive areas, especially the plaza in front of the cathedral. It is also home to the "iron house," designed by Gustav Eiffel of Eiffel Tower fame. How did a building designed by Eiffel end up in Iquitos? The story I heard, true or not, is that it was shipped across the Atlantic destined for Quito, Ecuador, but only made it as far as Iquitos, either because of confusion over the name or because the high Andes intervened, or maybe both. We also passed a bar named Margaritaville with a second floor balcony that had a New Orleans French Quarter street sign. Perhaps the owner is geography-challenged.

Iquitos is a very busy city, a center for petroleum and lumber. The streets swarm with motor scooters, mopeds, and motor carts, the latter partially enclosed "cabins" powered by a motor scooter, which serve as taxis, delivery vehicles, and private transportation. There are also open-air public buses, which, given that Amazonia is equatorial, have no need for windows.

Below Iquitos (which sits on "high ground") is a second city, Belen, which quite literally floats in the river. It is truly a city, laid out in "streets" lined with street lights, a floating church, a floating schoolhouse, floating petrol stations, a floating market, its own water supply, and floating houses fully furnished and equipped with electricity, televisions (we saw one through an open doorway), and floating outhouses. Why, you might ask, would one choose to build a floating house in the river rather than on the relatively high ground of the city. The answer, not surprisingly to an economist, is property taxes; there are none in the river.

Lynda and I were met in Iquitos by several of the guides from the boat. There were only fourteen of us on this trip, although the tour capacity is 32. The guides checked our names and instantaneously committed names and faces to memory, but more about these guides later. We then made our way to a van, which would take us to Nauta, where the big boat awaited. There is one road leading out of Iquitos, it runs sixty miles to Nauta, and Nauta is truly the end of the road. There is nowhere else to go.

The boat definitely lived up to its description and to the photos—luxury in the jungle. The cabins were spacious, with all modern conveniences except television (who needs it) and Internet (who wants it), and they were serviced two or three times a day. The food was excellent, much of it local. Choices were limited, but even a very picky eater like me found something appealing at every meal.

Mornings began quite early, around 6:00-6:30, except one morning when it was even earlier to watch the sunrise. We had at least two excursions off the big boat each day using 8-passenger motorized skiffs. Each skiff came with a driver, and one of the four naturalist-guides accompanied us on each excursion.

The first day, we encountered rain for our morning excursion, but we were supplied with ponchos. Eventually, three of the four skiffs voted to abort the excursion and return to the big boat; only one stayed out the entire time, and surprisingly it was the one that included the Sultana, who decreed she had not come all this way to be deterred by some rain. After that first morning, the weather was quite satisfactory.

There are only two seasons in the Amazon, low water and high water. March is high water when the river rises with the snowmelt from the Andes. During high water season, the skiffs are able to reach farther into the jungle, so all but two excursions were entirely on the water. Of the other two, one was a visit to a village on the riverbank and the other was a jungle hike. During low water season, most excursions involve jungle hikes, so high water season was perfect for us, especially with Lynda's myriad foot problems. Being equatorial, there is very little temperature variation through the year, but average temperatures are a bit lower in the high water season.

My biggest concern was in fact the heat. My travel clothes are polyester, and although they are vented, they can become quite uncomfortable when it's hot. Furthermore, we were advised to wear only long pants and long-sleeved shirts, which my travel clothes are, to protect from bugs, especially mosquitos. I must say, however, that I was never really uncomfortable. The temperatures were relatively moderate (low- to mid-80's), being on the water most of the time helped, and mosquitos turned out to be a non-problem. We did use "bug wipes" each time we went out, and for those who might not have prepared for the possibility of mosquitos, the boat furnished bug spray.

We spent most of our time on one of the two major tributaries, the Pacaya, that forms the Amazon River proper. In Peru, the rivers are about one-half mile wide in low water season. In high water season, they can reach a mile across and they flood the adjoining lands to a depth of several feet stretching as much as thirty miles back into the jungle.

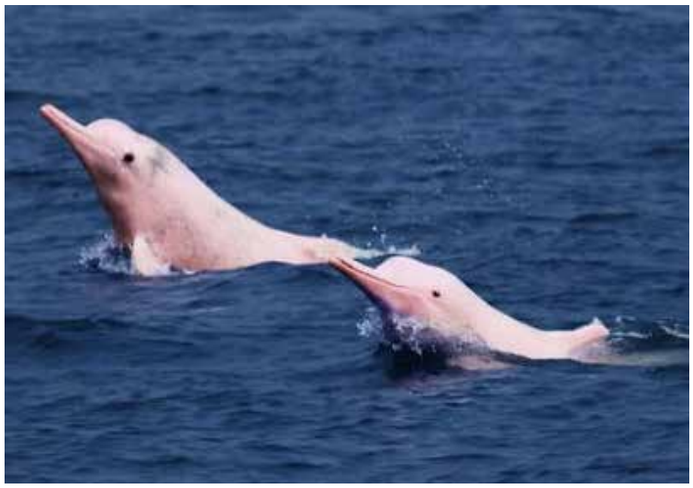
The local people, of course, build their villages on the edge of the river as that is their only means of transportation, commerce, and communication with the outside world. However, they build their houses on stilts or pilings several feet off the ground so that they are, hopefully, above the high water mark at its peak. The houses are quite simple—flooring planks set on a frame anchored to the pilings, planks for walls that typically only reach about halfway up leaving the houses open to the outside air, and thatch roofs. This creates natural "air conditioning."

I did notice a few houses with tin roofs, which brought to mind something I read about foreign aid provided to some other less-developed countries. As an experiment to try and reduce the waste and corruption that characterizes much foreign aid, cash grants were given directly to some aid recipients, who were allowed to use the grants as they saw fit. To the consternation of the aid officials, many of the recipients used their grants to buy tin to replace their thatch roofs. The aid officials felt this was quite irresponsible and judged the experiment a failure until someone inquired directly of the recipients. The reason given for replacing the thatch roofs with tin was that the thatch required constant maintenance and upkeep, so with low-maintenance tin, they had time for more remunerative activities such as farming, fishing, and city or village work. I relayed this story to one of the naturalist-guides (who, by the way, were all locals from the Peruvian Amazon), and his response was that in the Amazon, the only reason people used tin for roofs was because the government provided them, but it was really much less practical because in the Amazon, tin roofs turn houses into ovens.

Despite their remoteness and their primitiveness, the villages are not without modern conveniences. We saw satellite dishes, street lights (even though the "streets" were flooded), electric generators that operate a few hours each day to serve the village, and a water purification plant with water piped to a set of common spigots for the villagers' use. Each village appeared to have a building easily identifiable as a schoolhouse, one of which we visited.

I usually take pictures of buildings (architecture) and landscapes. On a trip such as this, I take pictures of plants, trees, flowers, and wildlife. But on this trip, I was fascinated by the people and took many "people pictures." While they may be poor by our standards or by any material standards, they appeared healthy and their faces showed much animation, often smiling. In the floating city of Belen, a group of children stood on a porch in front of a floating house. One little boy had a stern expression that never changed during the whole time we were paused there. But as we moved off, with no change in expression, his hand went up in a gesture of "good bye."

So what do these people live on? Obviously, fishing is a major occupation, and we saw many of the locals in hollowed-out canoes, especially early in the morning. We stopped beside one fellow's boat for a look at his catch and it was quite full just from that morning's fishing. In the village that we visited, we saw watermelon and sugar cane along with many fruit trees—mangos, bananas, and plantains. A typical pattern is for a family to build a raft, which they use to transport their produce down river to Iquitos. At the end of the voyage, they sell the produce, break up the raft, sell the lumber, and make enough money to pay for a water taxi ride back to their village and finance their basic needs until the next trip down river.



Needless to say, most of our excursions focused on the native habitat and wildlife. The upper Amazon is a birdwatcher's paradise—macaws, toucans, hawks, weaverbirds, many more. It was amusing to hear our tour companions "oohing" and "aahing" over the white ibises, which are pretty common here in Florida. We saw the unique pink river dolphins, both black and spotted cayman (the blacks being somewhat rare, we were fortunate to come upon one), and river otters, including one that served as a pet for a young man in a house along the river. Sloths, three-toed and five-toed, were numerous as were monkeys—spider and red howler, the latter appropriately named.

On the jungle walk, our guide tipped one of the local men to accompany us. He stepped off the trail into the jungle at several points, and each time emerged with some creature. When he returned with a small anaconda, about six feet long, wrapped around a stick, Lynda moved faster than she has in twenty years and put a good twenty feet between herself and the anaconda, but then the iPhone came out and the lady who fears and loathes snakes, began taking photo after photo, albeit from a safe distance. Our man's other finds included a red tail boa, a poison dart frog, about the size of a fingernail, and a pink tarantula.

So how did the reluctant traveler like the trip? First, I have multiple pictures of her in the skiff and on the jungle trail wearing a big smile. Second, when I decided to pass up one afternoon excursion, she went without me. And finally, when we returned home, I heard her describing the trip to her friends as "fabulous, one of the best trips we've ever taken."