

Amazon Basin Trip May 12-16, 2017

Since my last email we joined three other couples on a five-day guided tour to Manu National Park. This park is helping to preserve one of the wildest subtropical jungle/rainforest areas in eastern Peru in the headwaters of the Amazon. There are three main regions in this large country--from west to east they are the coastal lowlands, the Andes mountains/highlands, and the Amazonian jungle. This was our big chance to visit the jungle here, world renowned for its incredible bio-diversity as well as home of several groups of indigenous people classified as "non-contacted"--as yet living wild and free of civilization.

We loaded into the tour van at 4:30am for an all-day drive east, mostly on dirt roads that wind down steep canyon sides dropping 10,000' to the hot and humid region referred to as Amazonia. With us were couples from Germany, Switzerland, and Canada, all of whom we enjoyed getting to know. That first day our guide stopped the van several times to point out beautiful tropical birds including Peru's national bird; "the cock of the rock", a vivid scarlet male with a tufted crown on its head, and a group of capuchin monkeys up in a bamboo grove eating leaves. That night we stopped at a lodge near the edge of the park and went to bed inside mosquito net enclosures serenaded by exotic sounding insects and animal calls.

The next day we drove a couple more hours to the end of the road on

Madre de Dios River. From there we loaded gear and supplies into a long, canoe-like river boat with a big outboard and a blue tarp canopy for shelter from the sun and rain. It was a thrill to set off downstream with the wind in our hair and thick jungle on either shore. The river was muddy, of good size and flowing fast. Frequently it divided into multiple channels with small rapids. Our boatman obviously knew the river well and skillfully kept us in deeper water. We went a long way downstream which took over four hours, leaving a broad valley bordered by the Andes foothills and entering an open plain. After a while we pulled over to the river bank and stopped for a delightfully relaxing soak in a natural hot spring fed pool, where we laid back and stared up into the intriguing jungle leaf canopy.

In the afternoon we arrived at our destination, a "lodge" that we walked to at the edge of a thick river cane forest that marked the edge of the floodplain of the river, which varies in height by several feet depending on the season. The lodge was a group of modest, open-air, screened buildings raised above the ground that housed a kitchen/dining hall and several small sleeping cabins.

We were issued rubber boots and rain ponchos and soon headed out single file behind our guide, Alex, for our first walk in the jungle. We moved slowly and quietly to increase our chances of seeing wildlife. The jungle felt a little creepy and mysterious at first (and especially later, after dark). With the heat and ample moisture

it felt like being in a hothouse--perfect growing conditions for subtropical plant life, and indeed the flora was impressive in its size, variety, exotic look and also the sheer amount of biomass present. Alex, who grew up in the jungle, was an enthusiastic naturalist and carried a spotting scope on a tripod. He stopped frequently to point something out in a hushed voice or to let us look through the scope at birds or monkeys in the trees overhead. We walked to a 70' high observation tower not long before sunset. Up in the tower, much closer to the upper tree canopy we saw outstanding displays of brilliantly colored tropical birds including many types of parrots, macaws, and toucans! After dark we climbed down to explore the jungle by flashlight. Lots of insects were active and the pulsing chirping of cicadas sounded exotic. Alex pointed out a couple of huge, black, furry tarantula spiders easily as big as my hand, and this reinforced the eerie feeling, like being in a haunted house. Then he led us to a pond where several pairs of orange eyes reflected our lights. He told us to wait and returned in a few minutes holding a baby caiman (like an alligator) a couple feet long. A little later I got to hold the little guy--one of my fav. moments of the trip!

The next morning we were up early to check out another jungle path on an island in the river. While we were out it rained hard and the river rose about three feet. The highlight of the morning for me was tasting termites that Alex showed us as they climbed up the side of a tree headed for their big dark nest suspended from a branch. He ate

some first, saying that the local people ate them. They popped like a berry as I chewed, with a mild woody taste and they were pleasantly oily. My first insect snack! Strangely, no one else was...hungry.

Later that afternoon we set out on an overnight outing. After a couple hour walk we came to a covered observation platform elevated about twenty feet above ground. It overlooked what they called a natural clay-lick"--where animals frequently come during the night to supplement their diet with the uncommon salts/minerals found there. We had mats to sleep on that were enclosed by mosquito netting. Each of us took an hour shift throughout the night during which we watched for animal activity below. The big reward came just before dawn when I was shaken awake by my neighbor to see two tapirs mucking about below. A curious-looking animal, they are like a small hippo or very large pig with a long, tapered snout.

From that point on the trip mostly involved returning by stages to Cuzco with stops to walk and view scenery and wildlife. I think that in all we saw four types of monkeys in the wild and Nancy happily added a couple dozen new birds to her "life list" including migrating roseate spoonbills that she proudly spotted before our guide did as we motored back up-river. It was a short trip, but active and well-run, and we are very pleased for the jungle immersion experiences.