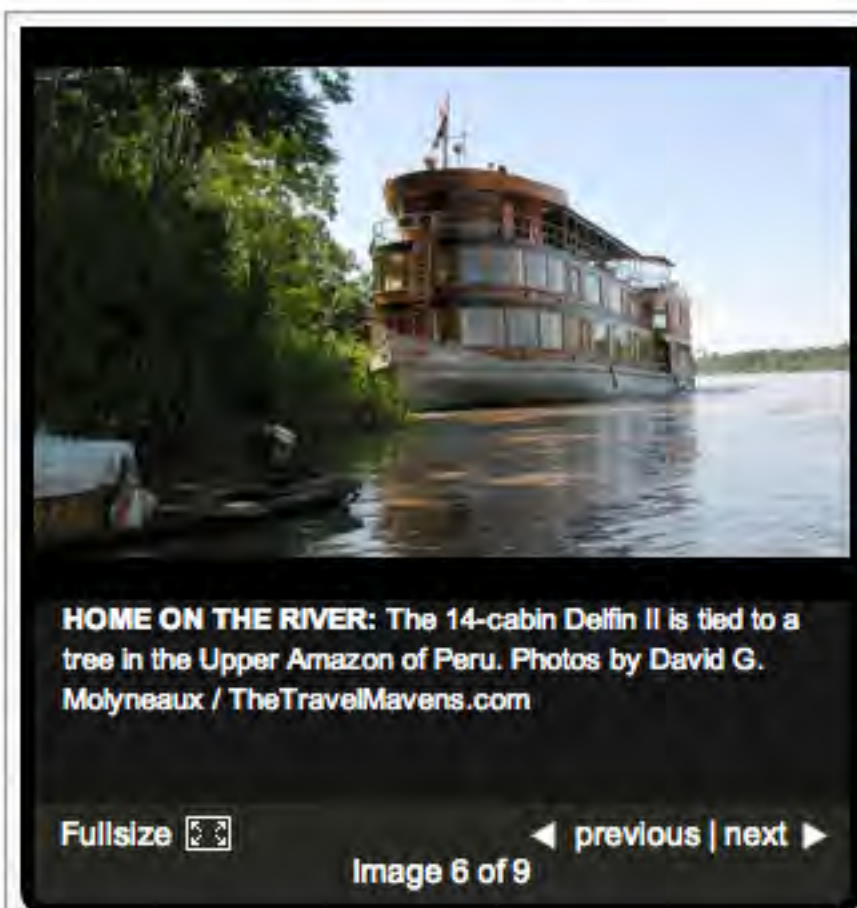


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Cruising the Upper Amazon Basin: anaconda, piranha and king toads, oh my!



HOME ON THE RIVER: The 14-cabin Delfin II is tied to a tree in the Upper Amazon of Peru. Photos by David G. Molyneaux / TheTravelMavens.com

Fullsize

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AMAZON CRUISE

Lindblad Exhibitions is a partner with National Geographic on nature tours and cruises around the world. Contact the company at Expeditions.com or 800-397-3348.

Other Amazon choices: Aqua Expeditions cruises the Upper Amazon year-round from Iquitos. Downriver, big cruise ships are on the Amazon from the Atlantic Ocean to Manaus, Brazil, with shore excursions and overnight tours deeper into the jungle, from January to March.

BY DAVID G. MOLYNEAUX
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One day, on a cushy fall river cruise in the Upper Amazon Basin, our 10-passenger, motorized skiff was exploring tributaries, and tributaries of tributaries. Each sliver of water was smaller than the former, until we plunged into a jungle path clogged with vines, rotting logs, trees with twisting roots, weeds and tall grasses.

Our guide, Rudy Flores, was pointing out species of birds, buzzing insects, and the occasional three-toed sloth. Then, deep into the doubtful waterway, our motor conked out.

"What's under us?" I asked.

"Anaconda," he said, "lots of anaconda."

No worries. Within 20 minutes, Rudy and the motorman dismantled and cleaned the prop and restarted the engine. These men were jungle masters, magicians of motor and machete. Rudy sliced and diced us through what lay above the water. The driver would thrust the engine to speed forward, raise the prop to slide over impediments, lower the prop back into the water for another thrust, gunning the engine before raising the prop again.

A river cruise in the Upper Amazon of eastern Peru, with experts from Lindblad

Expeditions/National Geographic, is a sure thing, at least for safety and as much comfort as you might anticipate on an excursion into the jungle.

Before the trip, I read a terrific book, *The River of Doubt*, by Candice Millard, about Theodore Roosevelt's famous and frighteningly deadly exploration of the uncharted Amazon jungle in Brazil 100 years ago. It's a good read.

But life on a South America tour boat today hardly compares to Roosevelt's challenges. About the closest we came to anxiety was the dead motor, miles from our expedition boat, Delfin II, tied to a tree several rivers away.

While our comfy accommodations and expert leaders took most of the doubt away, I noticed an excitement among our group about being beyond the range of worldly communications, traveling for a week in a region where the animals and insects rule.

Freedom was a feeling, too. As a passenger from Chicago said, when he returned to the Delfin II from a kayaking jaunt: "We had the current, and we could have just let go. Another 3,000 miles of river and we'd be in the Atlantic."

Our tour group of 25, mostly Americans, had flown into Iquitos, Peru, from Lima. Iquitos can be reached only by air or by water; the Andes are to the west, and the Amazon River eventually empties into the Atlantic Ocean to the east. Highways do not reach Iquitos, which is connected by road only to its neighbor, muddy Nauta, where we began and ended our river journey of seven nights into Pacaya-Samiria. It is a government reserve that protects some of the Amazon Basin's thousands of species of flora and fauna.

No matter how reputable the tour company, a trip into the jungle is no casual vacation to rest and relax.

True, our fancy riverboat, Delfin II, was modern and cool. The 14 cabins are bigger than those on most vessels, with huge picture windows and plenty of hot water in the shower. The able staff worked overtime to provide guidance and creature comforts.

As Lindblad's expedition leader Sue Perin pointed out, anyone who makes a journey into the Amazon has to want to be there.

Before you book this pricey trip with Lindblad/National Geographic, your doctor will recommend pills to ward off malaria and typhoid, a shot for preventing yellow fever, as well as an updating of other medical protections.

Once in the Amazon, you will engage frequently with the primary residents: insects. You may hike into the woods wearing rain gear, layers of insect repellent (with Deet), and because of the mud, rubber boots (Wellingtons, known as Wellies), provided and cleaned by the staff.

You will rise early to meet the birds and find little reason to linger awake into the evenings. Few modern conveniences will interrupt the Amazon day: no cell phone connection, no television, no internet, no radio. You will eat fruits and vegetables you've never heard of. Occasional entertainment will be energetic amateur musicians from the vessel and kitchen crew. You may be too exhausted at the end of the day even to pick up a book.

Exploring the Amazon is more like an African animal safari than a European river cruise, with a similar routine — a pre-breakfast walk or skiff ride to spot animals and birds, followed by a full breakfast and a morning excursion or hike; lunch and rest period, followed by a late afternoon excursion, hike or opportunity to kayak; dinner, sometimes followed by another excursion or hike for a view of the night world, which is far busier than what you see in the day.

Said one passenger on the Delfin II, "We begin the day before breakfast, fortified by a sumptuous feast of coffee, saltine crackers and bites of fruit on toothpicks. Perfume of the day: Eau de Bug Spray." She laughed, as visiting the Upper Amazon was one of those special bucket list trips, without a regret. Our tour group contained not a single naysayer.

The Amazon is a visual feast. Here's my abbreviated list of wildlife sightings: pigmy marmoset, tamarin, squirrel and howler monkeys, gray and pink river dolphins, three bat species, caiman, king toad, piranha, armored catfish and anaconda.

Also there were birds, so many birds, of which 74 varieties were checked off on my classification chart. My favorite: a vibrantly colored plum-throated catanga, hanging out on a leafless branch of a riverbank tree.

"The Amazon is a jungle of 16,000 species of trees, and 80 species of Heliconia," said Perin, the expedition leader, who takes delight in her weekly lecture called Flower Sex 101.

The guides, who have grown up in and around the reserve, could talk not only about a trail or lake, but also of specific trees where they last had seen macaws or monkeys.

Amazon life provides fascinating stories. One of my favorites came from guide Juan Luis Ihoaraqui, who explained the process for making jungle beer.

Beer in the Upper Amazon comes from cocona, a local fruit, he said. Elsewhere in South America, it begins with corn or yucca.

Key to the beer-making process is human saliva. Cocona, yucca or corn first is chewed. Saliva begins a fermentation process that is followed by boiling the cocona, which becomes jungle beer.

"Here," said Juan Luis, "if you don't drink it, you are an outcast."

Alas, jungle beer was not on our riverboat menu.

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