

THE PERUVIAN RAINFOREST

By Susan Drew, Travel Columnist

I've led a dozen trips to Peru and soon I'll lead my 13th. I've seen Machu Picchu, Lima, Cusco, the Sacred Valley, Lake Titicaca, Nazca and the Amazon River many times. Yet I dreamt of a place I kept missing – Puerto Maldonado, Peru's gateway to the rainforest. That is until 2005 - when my dream came true.

With my group headed home, I boarded a plane from Cusco to Puerto Maldonado by myself. It was a short, scenic flight over the Andes, into the gentle Madre de Dios and Tambopata river valleys. Here the rivers snake through the lush rainforest of the Amazon basin, as far as the eye can see.

Cusco's cool temperatures hadn't prepared me for the heat and humidity of the rainforest though. Peeling off layers upon arrival, I was met by the Reserva Amazonica Lodge bus and was driven through town to the river. There I boarded a long, thatched boat and settled in for a 45-minute ride downstream.

The river was wide, beautiful and mesmerizing. I knew I was going to be happy here. Once we arrived at our lodge, I knew I was going to be even happier!

It was gorgeous, in an eco-friendly sort of way. Lunch was waiting in the stunning dining room - rough-hewn tables and chairs, all arranged around a huge, floor to ceiling tree trunk. Sunlight streamed in from all directions, lighting up Peruvian tapestries and creating a magical air. Lunch was delicious and afterwards I headed to my cabana for a rest. Complete with porch, hammocks, comfy beds, mosquito netting, bathroom and shower - it was simple, but charming.

Later I met my personal guide, Eric. We started out by exploring the flora and fauna nearby. After an hour we found ourselves at the lodge's canopy walk. Climbing up the observation tower, I was soon high above the trees. When I stepped onto the canopy walk, bouncing with each step I took, I saw the rainforest below as few get to see it. And to think we could lose all this!

At dusk we returned to the lodge, now lit with hundreds of glowing kerosene lamps. After cleaning up, I headed to the dining room, made even more magical by music and candlelight. Dinner was superb - fine wines, interesting local dishes and good conversation. Eventually I walked back to my cabana, read a bit in the hammock and fell asleep surrounded by the sweet sounds of the rainforest.

The birds woke me at dawn, so I grabbed my camera and took photos of the sun rising over the river. Then it was time for breakfast, followed by a boat ride to Tambopata National Reserve. Once there, Eric and I walked through the rainforest, now brimming with butterflies, to Lake Sandoval. Here we took a canoe ride around the lake, checking out the bird and plant life along the shore. It was a treat to just sit and take photos, while Eric did all the paddling. Eventually it was time to head back - another magical moment in the rainforest!

After lunch we sailed to Monkey Island. Walking to the dock we passed a row of ugly, rubber boots. I remember thinking how glad I was we didn't have to wear them, since we'd had no rain. In retrospect, I should have picked up a pair.

As our boat approached the island, there was too much mud for docking in the usual place. The problem was we had to walk over the same muddy area instead. In no time, I was slipping and sliding until I finally fell. I was completely covered in mud and my camera was too. My filthy clothes went right in the garbage, but at least my camera survived. Regardless it was quite an experience and worth seeing all the monkeys.

Next we visited a farmer to learn about his life along the river. If I'd had more time, I would have enjoyed visiting a local village too. Once back in our boat, Eric thought I'd like seeing all the cayman along the riverbanks. At dusk, he easily spotted them by their glowing eyes and hoisted them onboard. Hearing my shrieks, he knew he was wrong however. No cayman, alligators or crocodiles for me – thanks.

As we approached the lodge, I realized I had only one more evening in paradise. I was definitely leaving far too soon! I'd just gotten into the rhythm of the rainforest and unfortunately it was time to leave. My wish was for more time. Now as I prepare to return to Peru this fall and the rainforest once again, my wish will be granted.