

Take me to the river

Under siege from oil companies and loggers, the Huaorani of Ecuador are fighting back - through ecotourism. Piers Moore Ede is the first to visit their Amazon lodge

By Piers Moore Ede, Saturday October 27 2007



Green day ... the Huaorani live in a remote rainforest

Flying low over the dense green canopy, I wondered if I might be dreaming. Below, like a giant patchwork quilt, stretched the Amazon rainforest, covering 1.2 billion acres of land and 40% of the South American continent.

Down there was the stuff of boyhood fantasies: giant spiders, venomous snakes, tribes who hunt with blowpipes. If it was hard to believe where I was, it was harder still to believe what I was there to do. I was about to spend a week with the Huaorani, one of the most recently contacted tribes in the Amazon.

The four-seater plane buzzed angrily as we banked and for the first time we saw the landing strip ahead.

"Doesn't look like much of a runway," I muttered, as I stared down at the patch of Ecuadorean jungle that was our destination.

"They cut it with machetes this morning," grinned Jascivan, my guide. "Might be a little bumpy."

The Huaorani first made the headlines in 1950 when they killed five American missionaries with spears. Since then a large number of the tribe have converted to

Christianity and maintained regular contact with the outside world. But others have retreated deeper into the forest, where their whereabouts remain unknown.

It was the "settled" Huaorani, of course, that I was here to visit. For aside from missionaries, another western intruder has lately been making undue demands on their way of life. Oil companies, hungry for the estimated one billion barrels of black gold that lie beneath the Yasuni national park, are offering large sums of money for the right to drill their lands. In need of money but anxious to hold on to their ancestral territory, the Huaorani have attempted something remarkable. In a joint venture with Tropic Journeys in Nature, which is based in the Ecuadorean capital, Quito, they have built an ecolodge. I was among the first visitors.

Representatives of the Huaorani community of Quehueri'ono were waiting to greet us after the 40-minute flight from Shell, an unremarkable town in the central highlands. Their leader, Moi Enomenga, cut a striking figure in his white headdress and clutching a 12ft blowpipe. Others wore less traditional clothes, such as Ecuadorean football shirts, and Nike trainers. One woman had a monkey perched on her shoulder.

"Moi is the most well travelled Huaorani ever," explained Jascivan, "and he's become a hero for his village." Moi has been to New York several times, and is the principal character in Joe Kane's book about the Huaorani, *Savages*.

After half an hour of introductions to what seemed like an entire village, we made our way to the lodge in a quilla (canoe). Considering the remoteness of the location, I was expecting little more than tents, but was pleasantly surprised to find five log cabins with wooden decks. Each one has hot water and a flush toilet, Jascivan told us proudly, and there is a large central dining room.

"It's taken a long time, though," he added. "From our first meetings with Moi until now has taken almost 10 years. So you can see why the Huaorani are so excited to have you here."

That evening, after a traditional meal of mashed plantain, rice, and beans (this trip isn't for those looking for gourmet food), I lay in my bed, listening to the sounds of the jungle - which on one side of the cabin is only kept at bay by a mosquito net. The chirps, squeaks and flutterings were so loud it sounded like the local wildlife had made my room its home for the night.

We were up at 5am the next morning for our first hike, led by a Huaorani guide and a naturalist from Tropic. Grateful for the wellington boots provided by the Huaorani (the Amazon is a magical place, but it's muddy), we tramped through the jungle, pausing every few minutes while our guides explained the uses and properties of various plants. Everything, it seemed, had a purpose.

Dragon's blood, we were told, was a plant that could be used as a coagulant. Another was an effective local anaesthetic. A large cotton-like plant provided wadding for blowpipes, another (curare) a poison for the dart tips. To outsiders the jungle is a vast, alien environment, but for the Huaorani it is comforting and abundant.

"The jungle has always given us everything," said our guide. "Our food, our medicine, our shelter, even our clothes. We have no wish to leave it."

Pointing to his blowpipe, I asked what they hunted. He told me that their prey includes peccary (wild boar) and howler monkey. "When we catch some meat we take only what we need, then leave the rest in a communal area for anyone else to eat. That way nothing is wasted, and there is food for those too old to hunt."

Raising the blowpipe to his lips he shot a dart into a target the size of a 10p coin. "If you aim the dart in the right place," he told us, "the poison enters the animal's blood stream and the animal falls to the ground. Then we finish it with the tapa [spear]. Will you try?"

He handed me the blowpipe, and showed me how to insert the dart. I took aim at a tall tree, and mustered the best puff of air I could. The dart flew out, sailed high up into the trees in a corkscrew motion, and was lost. The Huaorani guide roared with laughter, patted me on the back and said: "It's a good thing you're with us or tonight you would go hungry."

Walking back to the lodge for another (non monkey-based) meal, a beer, and a few hours in my hammock, I couldn't have agreed more. Ahead of me lay four days of safely guided but wild adventure with the Huaorani. It was a quintessentially modern kind of travel experience.