

Out of the Desert and Into the Rain Forest

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It was like beachcombing the ages: there is a stingray spine, and here a lobster shell. This is a bone from a seabird, and that a sea urchin and some petrified wood. And then, in a wind-scoured gully, Mr. Cabrera spotted an unmistakable glint: a five-inch tooth from a megalodon — the extinct whale-eating giant shark. He did a dance, kicking up soft dust that hung in the warming air and stopping only to show me his forearm speckled with goose bumps. “Perfect things like this are a message from Pachamama,” he said, referring to the ancient Andean earth goddess..

That night I slept on the desert floor next to the exposed 12-million-year-old remains of a whale, its pearly ribs by my head. I gazed up at the outrageous southern stars—the Milky Way so vivid it no longer seemed an unlikely home for such creatures.

A few days later, it was all obscured by riotous life. I was in the rain forest, at [Posada Amazonas](#), a lodge along the Tambopata River in the Peruvian Amazon. Water, the handmaiden to life, was everywhere: in the chai-colored river, in the humid air and dripping from leaves onto muddy trails. Intricate and fantastical diversity — immense trees to tiny, perfect insects — was all around us.

The Peruvian region of Madre de Dios is undergoing an [eco-tourism](#) boom. More than 70 jungle lodges cater to visitors eager for an easy visit to the pristine Amazon. The protected areas there include Manu, a vast park that falls down the eastern slope of the Andes into primordial rain forest, and Tambopata, which together with an adjacent area in [Bolivia](#), is larger than [Connecticut](#) and comprises the biggest chunk of protected forest in the [Amazon basin](#).

The second order of business upon arriving at Posada Amazonas, after being issued rubber boots, is a short walk down a forest trail to the lodge’s canopy platform. The 120-foot climb brought our small group of visitors to the light, fragrant air of rain forest

treetops. We looked over a sea of trees cataloging the entire range of green shapes: tufts, sprays, bursts, blazes, cascades and starbursts. It seemed an aerial coral reef as multitudinous [birds](#) (a toucan, a blue-headed macaw, a guan) sought roosts in huge crowns, some aflame with blossoms, others bearing heavy pods of Brazil nuts.

The river bent far below, and the foothills of the Andes floated on the horizon. The sunset cut a tracery of branches in the still, spiced air, exciting a billion cicadas.

The lodge itself is spacious and comfortable. High thatch roofs shelter big, airy dining and sitting areas. Rooms, connected by elevated wooden boardwalks, provide unexpected comfort — mosquito nets, showers and flush toilets — without separating guests unduly from the rain forest; one side of each room is open directly into the unrelenting greenery.

At Posada Amazonas, each party of visitors is assigned a guide. Rodolfo Pecha, our guide, is a member of the Ese'ejá indigenous group from the community of Infierno, which owns the pristine forest around the lodge. In a partnership, Rainforest Expeditions, the company that operates the lodge, is leasing the land for 20 years while training community members to take over its operation.

To Mr. Pecha, the forest din is an intelligible language. Often, he would stop us on the trail, picking out a few notes from the sibilant cacophony of chirps, barks, honks, buzzes and hoots. Then he'd answer. "That's an antbird," he'd say between rising whistles. "They're really beautiful." He'd creep off into the dense underbrush, binoculars at the ready, trailing considerably less graceful visitors through the vines.

On our second day, we awoke before dawn to the alarmingly throaty din of howler monkeys. After a quick breakfast of strong Peruvian coffee and fresh fruit, we made our way by river and squelching, muddy forest trail to an oxbow lake — a curving stretch

of perfectly flat water cut off when the Tambopata meandered elsewhere.

We floated out on a silent pontoon boat, emerging into dawn light. Cascades of pink trumpet flowers dripped into the syrupy brown stillness. All around us, life was under way: dozens of birds, from waterfowl like tropical cormorants and kingfishers, a fine-feathered tiger heron and a gangly osprey, to beasts like the hoatzin. Turkey-like things as imagined by [Dr. Seuss](#), hoatzins cruised the shrubbery along the water's edge, eating leaves and grunting contentedly.

A riotous flock of parakeets passed overhead, heralding a trio of giant river otters that furrowed the lake in their hunt for breakfast. Easily the size of tall, skinny people, the otters are skittish and severely endangered, yet they seemed comfortably at home, gliding playfully and coming close enough for us to see their sharp teeth and button noses.

Our boat that morning had a jolly crew of nature lovers: a pair of American birders, a Hungarian couple and a Brazilian couple. They were the sort of people who don't mind a little sun and a few mosquitoes if it means glimpsing a troupe of dusky titi monkeys. One morning on the trail, I came across the Brazilian couple gamely eating live termites at the suggestion of their guide. "Spicy," they said, offering me one.

At the edge of the river Gyorgy Valyi, one of the Hungarians, sank up to his thighs in quicksand and surely would have been reclaimed by the preposterous Amazonian hazard had not a handful of guides rushed to the rescue. Even as he was sinking, Mr. Valyi had a grin of delighted disbelief, as though finding himself in a Tintin adventure.

Later that night, as I lay in bed, I too felt as though I were sinking into the living forest. The wafting perfumes and strange growls melded into a baroque stereoscopic vision — dreams of the hidden landscape underlying life itself.