

Deep in the Peruvian Amazon, **Roberto Serrini** uncovers a smorgasbord of psychedelic frogs, research fanatics and a surprising array of creature comforts.

Photography by **Roberto Serrini**

RAVING IN THE JUNGLE

Caption



Caption

As a native New Yorker, I'm no stranger to long commutes. But after an eight-hour journey into the heart of the Peruvian rainforest in a diesel chugging, flat-bottom boat, even this experienced subway rider has met his match. Hours pass and the jungle thickens, and by the time we disembark it's clear that we've ventured into a world virtually untouched by humans. It might just be the engine ringing in my ears, but I'm pretty sure I'm about to have my mind blown.

It's fitting that the Tambopata Research Center is located in a region of south-eastern Peru known as Madre de Dios or Mother of God. Tens of thousands of plant and animal species, from macaws and monkeys to jaguars and giant turtles, thrive in this protected tangle of forest. The wildlife is so prolific that while I'm here my guides discover two new species of spiders – and that's just on the walk from the boat to the lodge. Visiting this jungle is like stepping into God's messy kitchen.

Getting to Madre de Dios isn't easy, but that's part of the appeal. Upon flying into Puerto Maldonado, I'm met by a personal guide from Rainforest Expeditions and brought by bus to Infierno, a town that seems to consist of a *bodega* (bottle shop), bathroom and small dock on the Tambopata River. With my personal Virgil (whose name is actually Ramón and who's far more placid than the character from Dante's Inferno) we jump into a little vessel along with a dozen other intrepid travellers. Our first destination, the Refugio Amazonas lodge, is a three-hour cruise away.

With its shellac-coated wood walls and thatched roofs, this remote outpost oozes with all the romance and adventure of a Hemingway tome, or an early Cary Grant film. Following a warm reception featuring tall, refreshing drinks, we're handed room keys. It's a curious touch considering each suite has just three walls and a gap opening out to the foliage. Hammocks invite us to kick back and doze in the syrupy air,

and meals are prepared fresh, despite the distance from civilisation and the fact that power zips through wires for just a few hours each day. I've found eco-friendly bliss.

The next day, we trek through backcountry to an observation tower. For those of us with the guts to climb up, it rewards with a sublime view of the 30-metre-high rainforest canopy. A small, man-powered boat

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carries us across a lake that's home to dozens of species of birds. Chicken-size, mohawk-sporting hoatzins perch on sticks and horned screamers show off long slender spikes sprouting from their skulls.

“Shall we fish for piranhas?” Ramón asks, to which the answer is, of course, “Hell yes!” He carefully fixes a morsel of meat to a hook and line that looks like a tool Huckleberry Finn just put down.

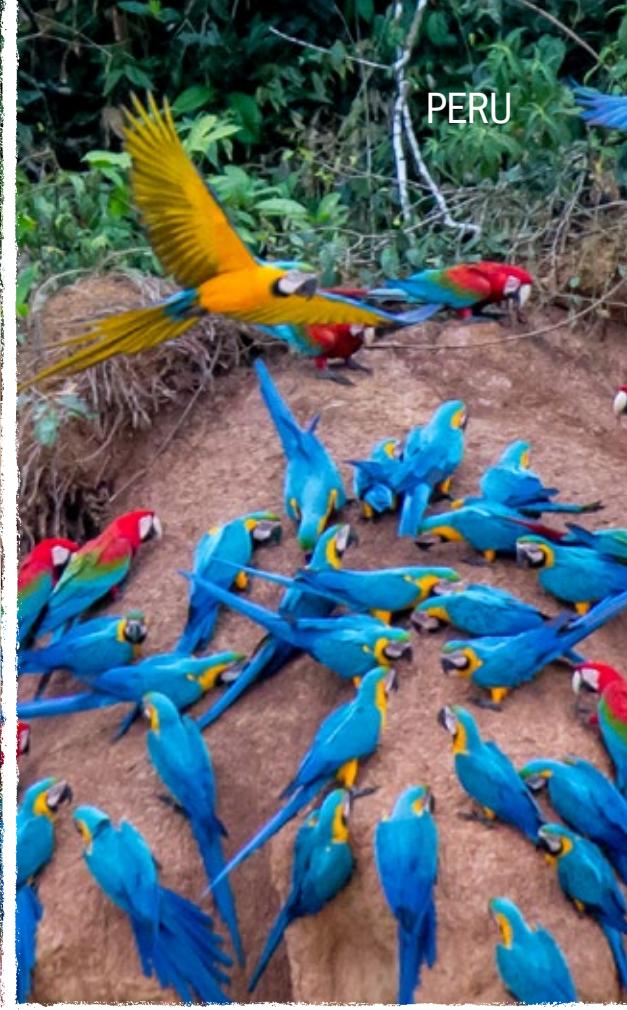
“Here, just drop it in. Gently,” he instructs, handing it over to me. I dip it in the water cautiously (I've watched *Shark Week* one too many times) and

before I know it, a small piranha dangles from the end of my rod. Ramón slides it off the hook, giving us a close look at the type of sashimi that's perfectly capable of taking a bite out of you, before returning it to the lake. I make a mental note to switch to California rolls.

I already feel eons away from the NYC grind, but we're yet to embark on the final leg of our expedition that will take us to the Tambopata Research Center. Nature takes complete control as our repurposed truck engine blasts us deeper up the river, in the direction of one of the most remote lodges in the world. Caimans brandish their snouts above the murky water and we even spot a jaguar lounging on the riverbank. Trees march down to the river, their roots holding the earth in place.

Small barges cruise past, each adorned with pumps that shoot water through a giant slanted sieve. “Those are illegal gold miners,” explains Ramón. “This river is rich with gold.” It's dangerous work, but apparently very lucrative – if you are lucky and you don't get caught.

Three-hours into the ride we come to fork in the river and dock at a weathered landing. We're at the Malinowski River control station, a mandatory stop implemented to reduce illegal river traffic. A hut stands as the office, accessible via boards with bottle caps nailed on to add a bit of extra traction. A makeshift basketball hoop clings to the side of a wonky tree. The whole place appears as though it's been



pulled from the set of *Apocalypse Now*. Weathered maps and young men with firearms line the walls inside, and the official obligingly stamps my passport so I can memorialise making it this far into the jungle.

We pull up to the research centre two hours later. Porters dash to the bank to grab our sacks and we trundle through the wild forest, which bristles with noise. Boar-like peccaries bark at each other and shuffle hooves through the low-lying bush, while howler monkeys scream across the treetops.

Graced with a grand entrance, the Tambopata Research Center is even more earthy and majestic than the Refugio Amazonas. What really sets it and this Rainforest Expeditions tour apart from other Amazon trips is the fact that the lodge is also a fully functioning research facility. With field scientists and researchers on site, visitors experience far more than eco-tourism. A stay here borders on college credit.

Ramón promises we'll spot a few macaws letting loose at a nearby clay lick. It turns out 'a few' actually means a few hundred. Plumes in scarlet, cobalt, chartreuse and egg-yolk yellow blur before me like a

psychedelic Gaspar Noé title sequence (*Enter the Void*, look it up). The bio-diversity found here is beyond any zoo or safari on Earth. No SD card in the world has enough capacity to capture it all.

Researchers join us at dinner, allowing us the chance to whack them with all the questions that have bubbled up during the day. They feed us stories about the rare animals they've observed and discoveries made. Sometimes they dish up tips on the best locations to capture perfect photographs. Over one meal, a young researcher invites a couple of us on a "rainforest rave".

"We go out at night with UV lights and search for bioluminescent insects. It's a riot!" For the photographers in our midst, the offer is akin to telling a frat boy there's a well-organised pub-crawl planned. Armed with blacklights, we head into the pitch of night and watch as the forest puts on a show that would astound even the most sauced-up Burning Man participant. Spiders that look like the 80s puked all over them crawl on logs. Frogs radiate pink and green like a brash neon sign. Did you know scorpions glow bright blue under UV light? They're just like a toy from one



Caption

of those grocery store vending machines.

During the next few days we tramp through riverbeds and hike inland to waterholes, spotting bats and turtles, armies of barking caterpillars and flocks of butterflies. Living in these trees are 600 bird species, 200 types of mammals, a thousand butterflies and innumerable insects. My neck almost unscrews from constantly turning to observe new creatures.

brain after drinking up a serve.

Manual labour isn't on the official ticket, but there are plenty of opportunities to get your hands dirty if you wish. I team up with three young post-grads to scale a 30-metre-high tree. Up in its limbs we hang a macaw nest fitted with a camera. It's part of a plan to research the curious habits of these birds that not only share food and grooming duties, but

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A shaman waits for us at a spiritual retreat that's being constructed downriver. Wandering through the jungle garden, he points out the hallucinogenic vine he'll use in the traditional Ayahuasca ceremonies. Unfortunately, it's not yet ready to be stewed into the tea that sends your mind to out of space. I can't begin to imagine what a rainforest rave would do to your

form life-long relationships.

After five days immersed in the rainforest, it's time to emerge from the wilderness. We venture back downstream and reunite with civilisation in Infierno. I've been to remote, wild places before, but this adventure has stirred me in a way that was entirely unexpected. Perhaps the contrast between the sublimely

comfortable accommodation and the jungle's untamed, unrivalled biodiversity is too much for my city-forged mind to handle. Or maybe being surrounded by clever people, who have dedicated their entire existence to cultivating more knowledge is what did me in.

I return to my small apartment, 24-hour electricity and high-speed internet a bit shaken, a little more sceptical of pre-packaged food and burning with a growing sense of enlightenment. It seems as though the journey not only took me to one of the most remote places on this planet, but it took me deep into my own soul and left me with truths I never knew before. Well that, and a yearning for another rainforest rave. ☺

GET PLANNING



GET THERE

Fly from Sydney to Lima, Peru from AU\$2130 with Qantas and LATAM. Once there, travel with LATAM to Puerto Maldonado, where your adventure into the Amazon will begin

qantas.com
latam.com



STAY THERE

Rainforest Expeditions has four luxury custom lodges along the Malinowski River so adventure seekers can experience the depths of the Amazon. Despite being completely engulfed by nature, each lodge is well equipped with running hot water, sundries shops, massage rooms and electricity (for part of the day). Rooms start from AU\$280 per night.

perunature.com



TOUR THERE

Each group is led by an expert guide who will help you unlock the mysteries of the jungle. Tour the macaw clay lick, fish for piranhas, take a photography course, or simply enjoy the view of the canopy from the towering observation deck.

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