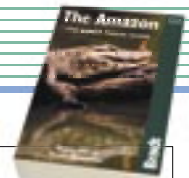


# Amazon adventures

A trip to the Amazon has to be one of the biggest adventures that anybody with a little more than £1,000 and a yearning for the unknown can go on. **Hilary Bradt** recounts a boat trip she took down the River Ucayali in Peru in 1969, while Amazon aficionados **Joe Tobias**, **Rupert Barrington** and **Adrian Barnett** recall their own experiences in the rainforest to end all rainforests.

The River Ucayali – one of the Amazon tributaries running through Peru – reveals the region's dense rainforest, but if you want to get close to wildlife, you have to get out of the main stream.



### BBC Wildlife Shop

**The Amazon: The Bradt Travel Guide** by Roger Harris and Peter Hutchison (Bradt, ISBN 184162070X, £14.95). Buy this book on page 65, quoting code 061/xxx.



There are many great places to visit within the 7,000,000km<sup>2</sup> of the Amazon Basin – we've picked out four of the ultimate locations for a real wildlife adventure.

## 1 Pucallpa to Manaus

**Hilary Bradt**

Travel writer and guide-book publisher

In June 1969, I was standing on the bank of the River Ucayali in Pucallpa, Peru, watching a cargo boat being loaded with cement. Slim young men trotted up the narrow gangplank with 100kg sacks slung over their shoulders. We found the captain and asked when the boat was leaving and whether there was a cabin available. "Hoy dia," he said, "mas o menos." It was leaving today – more or less – and yes, there was a cabin. We negotiated a price to Leticia in Colombia, checked out the cabin, decided to go anyway, then waited two days until the captain felt ready to leave.

That was the start of a 3,200km journey. In the month it took to reach Manaus, we travelled on an assortment of vessels, from a small barge where there was only just room to sling a hammock, to the classic Amazon three-storey 'bird-cage' boat. I was often bored, frequently fascinated, occasionally exhilarated, sometimes disgusted and never ill. I ate some exotic, 'locally' caught meat, such as turtle and

Tony Morrison/South America Pictures

peccary, but they are probably best avoided these days. I counted 116 mosquito bites in one night and watched my two cabin mates turn yellow with hepatitis. Knowing that it was my turn next convinced me to fly the last stretch from Manaus to Belem. And, frankly, by that time we'd all had enough.

### Howlers overhead

The stretches I remember most vividly were at the beginning. The upper reaches of the Ucayali were, in those days, everything one imagined the Amazon to be. Rainforest grew close to the water's edge, and we heard howler monkeys calling in the mornings. When we stopped at villages to reprovision or pick up passengers, villagers swarmed onto the boat to sell us pottery, fruit or live animals. I resisted the temptation to buy a beautiful albino squirrel monkey and a baby peccary. But this was the closest we got to the wildlife, which was a disappointment. I'd imagined parrots flying overhead and monkeys swinging from the trees, but the locals had shot and eaten any creature foolish enough to hang around the populated riverbank. To see animals, you must take a small boat and venture up the tributaries, cutting through the water hyacinths to reach places where the canopy closes overhead and the wildlife feels safe.

We reached Manaus on 16 July. On 20 July, the church bells rang throughout the town. "It's because three Americans have landed on the moon," we told an old Brazilian. "Oh no," he said. "You can only go to the moon after you die. It's not for the living."

### Now you do it

● **Jungle Expeditions** offers seven-day luxury wildlife cruises down the Ucayali and into Pacaya-Samiria National Reserve, Peru, for around \$1,500 per person. [www.junglex.com](http://www.junglex.com); ☎ 00 51 65 261 582/261 583; fax: 00 51 65 260 721.

● There is no direct journey from Pucallpa to Manaus. You will have to travel on a mixture of luxury cruise ships and cargo boats (the latter being the cheapest option – your best bet is to hang around the port until one comes along, then negotiate a price).

● **Amazon Tours** runs cruises down the Amazon from Iquitos and Manaus in luxury boats with private, air-conditioned cabins with private bathrooms. [www.amazontours.net/manaus.htm](http://www.amazontours.net/manaus.htm) ☎ 00 51 65 231 611.

### 2 Madidi National Park, Bolivia

Joe Tobias, zoologist

When a team of biologists surveyed the Madidi watershed of northern Bolivia in the early 1990s, the results were so impressive that they gave rise to a national park. Spanning 19,000km<sup>2</sup> of wild terrain and ranking as one of the world's richest protected areas in terms of biological diversity, Madidi National Park is an 'El Dorado' for naturalists and adventurers alike.

Inspired by these tales of riches, I flew from La Paz to Rurrenabaque and then trekked to Alto Madidi. In those days, the journey involved a motorbike ride from Ixiamas to the Candelaria guardpost, followed by a long slog on foot. At Candelaria, where the slash-and-burn clearings thinned out and the forest closed in, I spent my first night in Amazonian Bolivia.

Torch in hand, I walked an abandoned logging road into the depths of the woods. It was one of those quintessential moonless rainforest nights, warm and still, interrupted by rumbles of thunder and the hooting of night monkeys. Spot-lighting in Amazonia is often unrewarding, but before long I was creeping stealthily towards an orange glow in the torch beam. It was the eye of a bull tapir. Standing close to the track, thinking himself hidden behind a screen of foliage, he fluttered his lashes at mosquitoes.

#### Magic of jungle cats

I walked onwards, flushed with success, as pulses of lightning illuminated the tree boughs. Fearing a downpour, I was about to give up when I glimpsed something else some distance away. Two small, fiery orbs approached quickly, then disappeared. Probably a possum, I thought. I waited, knowing how forest mammals love paths, and sure enough the eyes emerged again, much closer. Holding the torch steady, I peered through binoculars until I saw spots and a banded tail.

When night falls in the Amazon, dig out your torch and go for a walk in the forest. If you're lucky, you could spot a margay.

Kathy Jarvis/South America Pictures



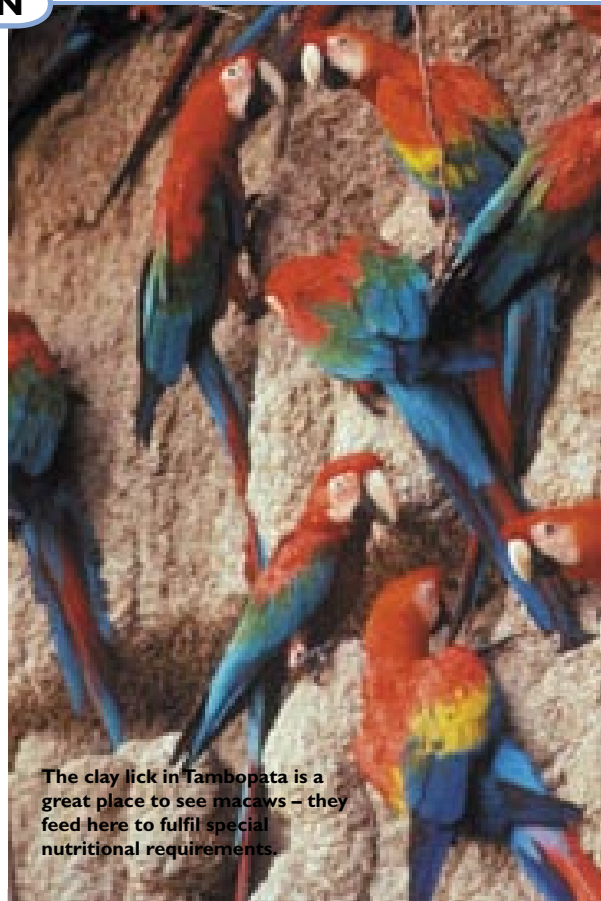
A monkey frog in Madidi, Bolivia, whose name derives from its habit of walking and climbing rather than jumping.

Spots? Banded tail? That's no possum – it's a cat! Directly towards me it came – too slender for an ocelot and too bulky for an oncilla – with an elegant gait and a lengthy tail. When it was no more than five metres away, I was sure it was a margay, perhaps the rarest and prettiest of all Amazonian cats, and still it kept coming. Incredibly, it brushed against my calf and stopped. I peered down as it sniffed my trouser-leg. Quickly guessing that something was amiss, it turned away and sprang gracefully over the trackside grasses and into the shadows.

It's not just the rowdy macaws and boisterous monkeys that make Amazonia so wonderful, but precious moments, such as this, when secretive creatures show themselves. Madidi has macaws and monkeys in spades, but keep your eyes open because anything can (and occasionally does) happen.

#### Now you do it

- Madidi National Park is still one of South America's great wildernesses, but a thriving eco-tourist trade has made it a highly practical travel destination as well. The best season is from May to December.
- Rurrenabaque, the gateway to the park, is reached by air from La Paz. Many shops in 'Rurre' offer jungle tours, from a day with dolphins to 18-day hikes through the jungle, and these can be arranged on arrival. But be warned – many of them cater for travellers more interested in catching piranhas and tussling with anacondas than watching wildlife. If you want a more sensitive, less exploitative experience, shop around.
- The bungalows of **Chalalan Eco-lodge** (chalalan.com) and **Mapajo Lodge** (h7887.serverkom.petenz.net/mapajo) are only three hours away by boat. The latter lies just outside the park in the nearby Pilon-Lajas Reserve, but both are owned and managed by local indigenous communities, and visitors are accompanied by expert guides. Visits or tours can be booked in advance through agencies on the internet.



The clay lick in Tambopata is a great place to see macaws – they feed here to fulfil special nutritional requirements.

### 3 Tambopata, Peru

Rupert Barrington wildlife film-maker

My journey to Tambopata began when I arrived in Lima and boarded a small plane to the frontier town of Puerto Maldonado, which sits on the Tambopata River facing thousands of miles of almost unbroken rainforest.

Tambopata Research Station was still a bum-numbing seven-hour river journey away, but this at least allowed me to watch the last riverside farms disappear as I entered a vast, uninhabited reserve. Herons and cormorants perched on the branches of submerged trees, and capybaras scampered away into the jungle.

To break up the journey, I stopped at the beautiful, lakeside Sandoval Lodge. Guides canoed me through the swamps to see giant otters, strange hoatzin birds with their archaeopteryx-like young and huge black caiman resembling floating logs. In the clear water I also spied paichi fish, which can grow up to 3m long.

Tambopata Research Station was basic but comfortable, with good food and a bar. Every morning, we were woken by the roars of howler monkeys sounding like dinosaurs in pain – goodness knows what early explorers thought.

The pièce de résistance was a massive clay lick,



Partridge Films Ltd/OSF/photolibary.com



David Tipling/Alamy

which attracts up to 1,000 parrots. We approached it by land, and the noise levels cranked up with every step as more and more brilliant macaws screamed overhead.

Guides led us on trails past massive strangler figs, while blue morpho butterflies flashed like electric sparks. Most life, however, was in the trees – dusky titi monkeys, saddleback and brown capuchins and spider monkeys were all numerous – and we returned to base with our heads locked skywards. The closest we got to a jaguar, though, was a paw print in the mud.

When night fell, we walked through a white noise of frogs and cicadas to watch spiders' eyes glow in the torch beams. The guides recounted tales of being stung by bullet ants – reputed to have the most painful sting of any insect – and of catching the skin-wasting leishmaniasis from sandfly bites. But then this was real rainforest – we didn't want it any other way.

#### Now you do it

- Travel arrangements to Puerto Maldonado were made through **InkaNatura** in Lima. ☎ 00 51 1 440 2022; [www.inkanatura.com](http://www.inkanatura.com)
- For Sandoval and Tambopata Research Station, we booked through **Rainforest Expeditions**. ☎ 00 51 1 421 8347; [www.perunature.com/contact.asp](http://www.perunature.com/contact.asp)
- The main tourist hotel in Puerto Maldonado is **Cabana Quinta Hotel**. This could be booked through InkaNatura or other travel agencies. BBC WILDLIFE APRIL 2005

Daniel Gomez/Naturepl.com

## 4 Jau National Park, Brazil

**Adrian Barnett** ecologist

We were based in Jau National Park, an Israel-sized chunk of Amazonia, a day and a half by boat up the Rio Negro from Manaus. We were doing a survey of golden-backed ucaris, a species of monkey that lives in the seasonally flooded forest that occurs in narrow strips along the Amazon's backwaters. Our work involved slogging through knee-deep mud and water following the treetop bounding monkeys.

One morning, after getting some wonderful views of giant otters and pink river dolphins, we pulled up to a mudbank in our canoe. We passed a couple of turtle carcasses on the beach, and walked through to an area of flooded forest where we could hear the ucaris calling. As we marched, leaving perfect boot impressions behind us, we crossed a fine set of tapir tracks.

After about 20 minutes, when we'd lost the monkeys (something I swear had nothing to do with my fall into a flooded armadillo hole, the reflexive grasping of a viciously spined murumuru palm and some associated yelping), we returned to take a closer look at the tracks.

Walking alongside them, we also found three sets of jaguar prints belonging to an adult and two near fully-grown cubs. It was easy to tell where the jaguars had leapt into action and where the tapir had broken into a run. Overlaying dimples indicated two rainshowers, suggesting the events took place three days ago. We followed the paths until they disappeared into shallow water, denying us the denouement.

Returning to our beached canoe, we found our



Staffan Widstrand

**Golden-backed ucaris are one of the real treasures of Jau National Park.**

own tracks from earlier that morning now overlain with those of a large jaguar, which had followed us until we'd started wading after the ucaris. Nervously, we looked around and realised that the mudbank was a turtle-nesting site, and that the thick vegetation on either side contained several sleeping jaguars – sated, for the moment, on turtle flesh and eggs. The beast that had followed us had probably just been curious – we were unlikely to have had to join the tapir in running for our lives.

#### Now you do it

- Trips to Jau National Park leave from Manaus. You need to allow a minimum of six days.
- **Iguana Turismo** is run by Gerry Hardy and Wilson Castro, who both speak very good English. ☎ 00 55 92 91 32 9367/92 633 6507; e-mail: [iguanatour@hotmail.com](mailto:iguanatour@hotmail.com); [www.amazonbrasil.com.br](http://www.amazonbrasil.com.br)



**Jau National Park – remote and beautiful but only a day and a half from Manaus.**