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Cruising the wild side of Peru

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HUGH HUNTER, JR. / INTERNATIONAL EXPEDITIONS

The cruise ship La Amatista steams up the river.

What's hairy, slightly scary, and has beguiling toes?

My husband, David, myself and our 12 fellow passengers found out when a pink-toed tarantula hopped on board our skiff, trying to hitch a ride up the Ucayali River in the northeastern Peruvian Amazon.

George, our local naturalist guide whose smile is as big as his love and knowledge of the region, calmly coaxed the tarantula into his cupped hands.

“See? I told you that Peru is the land of the unexpected,” he grins. “Don't worry. It won't unleash its venom as long as it doesn't feel threatened. Anyone want to hold it?”

I'm curious, but not adventurous enough to let Pink Toes crawl on me. The spider does take a stroll along the caps, backs and arms of several braver folks while the rest of us snap photos like star-crazed paparazzi. With everyone's curiosity satisfied, George returns Pink Toes gently to a leafy reed at the riverbank. We speed off to rejoin our cruise ship, La Amatista, anchored farther up river.

On this seven-night cruise into the heart of the Peruvian Amazon, La Amatista is headed from our starting point, Iquitos, the world's largest inland port, to the flooded forests of the Pacaya Samiria National Reserve, 400 miles up river. (The cruise now departs from nearby Nauta.) Although the region is easy to reach by air -- a 60-minute flight from Lima -- once there, you're isolated by millions of acres of rainforest. We're among only 3,000 tourists each year who will visit this remote region at the headwaters of the Amazon River. It's not for everyone, but if you're looking for a bit of

adventure, a hint of danger and a chance to see one of the world's last unspoiled frontiers, the Peruvian Amazon has it all.

To our delight, the all-wood, 28-passenger La Amatista looks like it's steamed right out of the late 19th century, when rubber barons plied the Amazon's waters in their riverboats. Although the ship might evoke another era, we're not roughing it. La Amatista is equipped for comfort with electricity, air-conditioned cabins and *en suite* bathrooms with hot and cold water in the shower. The 14 wood-paneled cabins are small: our double had 108 square feet, but comfortable with plenty of storage.

An expansive open-air third deck offers ample space to relax, read a book, work on a tan or grab a tart Pisco Sour or a bubble-gum flavored Inka Kola. From the deck, I take in the passing show on the river: the endless green tangle of the jungle, two paddlers in a tiny dugout canoe buffeted by the *café-au-lait*-colored waters and huge ferries strung with colorful hammocks for overnight passengers.

At meals, the show continues through the dining room's wrap-around panoramic windows as we tuck into delicious, fresh Peruvian cuisine, served buffet-style. Daily, we feast on local produce (papayas, hearts of palm, yucca), fresh fish, grilled meats and Peruvian specialties, such as *lomo saltado* (marinated steak with a kick of chiles, topped with French fries) and *quinoa* (a cereal grain) salads studded with super-sized kernels of *maize* (corn).

Twice a day, at the clang of the ship's bell, we grab our gear and hop on board two small, motorized skiffs. For several hours at a time, we explore the tannin-stained offshoots of the main river, take a nature walk or visit riverside communities. The break-into-an-instant-sweat heat (95 degrees and above) and humidity make a full frontal assault daily so excursions get underway in early morning or late afternoon.

As we motor along narrow tributaries, black-collared hawks keep a hooded eye out for prey. Horned screamers shriek in alarm and clumsily fly off, their black bodies looking too big for flight. Cuvier's toucans, whose big curved beaks threaten to topple them from their branches, silently eye us from above. Elegant coicoi herons glide silently toward their rookeries as kingfishers play tag along the water's edge. Our list of bird species grows quickly -- at least 20 or 30 new ones each day -- culminating in a grand total of 167 by the end of the trip.

“Watch your fingers,” warns George, holding up his scarred thumb as testimony. “You want to catch the piranha, not be caught by them!”

We've pulled into the shaded shallows of a narrow tributary to try our hand at fishing

for glistening purple, orange and white piranhas. Who knew that the fiercest fish in the Amazon, known for its flesh-stripping abilities, could be such suckers? All it takes is a simple fishing pole made from a tree branch, a line and a small piece of meat on a hook. Later, the ship's chef fries up the catch. Piranhas make a meaty but bony snack that tastes a bit like halibut.

A short hike through the rainforest at Yucuruchi leads us to a serene pond of giant water lilies (*Victoria Amazonica*). Each night, the lilies gently enfold into their buds the beetles essential to their pollination and release them the next morning after the beetles' work is done.

When we return to the riverbank, two enterprising local women have opened an instant craft market. They spread out their wares -- brightly colored palm-frond baskets, red and black seed necklaces with tiny piranha jaws, and gourds incised with sloths and toucans -- on colorful blankets on the ground. After a little friendly bargaining, for \$2 I purchase a woven palm fan embroidered with a scarlet macaw to help beat back the heat of the day.

At night, the rainforest hums with the buzz of mosquitoes, goes "bonk" with the music of frogs and occasionally falls silent. In spite of the headlamps and flashlights we carry for a half-hour tromp through the jungle, it's as dark as squid's ink and a bit unnerving.

"Don't stray off the path, watch what's under your feet and keep up with the person in front of you," cautions George, who is armed with a machete for the unexpected.

"Yikes!" someone yells from the back of our single-file line, and we all jump. "No problem. A scorpion just dropped out of a tree onto someone's hat" is the message relayed from the rear. Although there's a possibility of meeting up with jaguars, giant anacondas and poisonous toads, only the shooed-off scorpion and a giant roach favor us with an appearance.

On board the skiffs, we probe deep into the quiet and serene Pacaya Samiria National Reserve, which is twice the size of Yellowstone National Park. Large vessels, such as *La Amatista*, are not allowed to enter this protected area. Called *L'Esperga de la Selva* (the mirror of the jungle), the Reserve's black lakes and lagoons duplicate the giant clouds and the sky in their waters.

Far into the Reserve, troops of tiny squirrel monkeys anxiously skitter up and down tree trunks. Bushy-tailed monk saki monkeys perform high-wire antics as they leap from branch to branch. Red howler monkeys break the silence with their big-cat

roars. A solitary three-toed sloth looks lonely clinging motionlessly to the umbrella-leaved cecropia tree.

The pink river dolphins that ply the Reserve's black waters seem like a myth until I catch a glimpse of their pale, rosy snouts and backs surfacing above the waterline. The fins of their sister gray river dolphins poking through the surface give them away. Giant river otters, tapirs and capybaras (the world's largest rodent, resembling a giant guinea pig) inhabit the reserve, but they remain elusive this trip.

During visits to villages strung along the Ucayali River and in the reserve, we meet the Ribereños, the fishermen and farmers who live in small communities along the river. Thatched roof homes, perched on stilts that protect them from river flooding, an occasional botánica or medical clinic, and a church or two neatly line the hard dirt main streets. Every village we visit has a school. There is no running water and meals are cooked on open fires. Sometimes, a village generator supplies a few hours of electricity. The river and the rainforest offer an adequate, but very basic, living.

At Captain Clavero village, the elders greet us warmly but with polite reserve. Quick-to-smile children gather around, shyly eager to peer into a digital camera to see photos of themselves.

At the village school, a circular open-air structure with a thatched-cone roof and wood benches, George quickly lines the children up by height and age (5-14). The children introduce themselves and recite numbers and the alphabet in English. George then leads them in a rousing rendition of the Peruvian national anthem. We respond with the less lofty, but well received "If You're Happy and You Know It, Clap Your Hands." As a small thank you, we leave school supplies that we've brought with the elders who will later reward the children for good academic performance.

On the return journey, George has one final surprise for us. At the village of San José de Paranapura, a shaman and his apprentice teach us about the medicinal powers of cat's claw, commonplace plants like oregano and the ayahuasca vine, a hallucinogenic drug key to shamanistic rituals.

We sit in contemplative silence as the shaman blows *mapacho* (a strong nicotine) smoke over our heads as a blessing of protection and good fortune, one final gift from the rainforest.

During the voyage, George's mantra has been "Peru is a land of the unexpected." He's right. One thing I do expect, however, is to have the good fortune to return. And maybe next time, I'll let a friendly pink-toed tarantula crawl up my arm.

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