

MY EXPERIENCE IN THE REMOTE

Amazon

AMAZON RIVERS & RAINFORESTS
JUNE 26-JULY 6, 2024

When we think of river cruising, we automatically look at Europe or Asia. We forget about one of the longest rivers in the world – The Amazon.

The Amazon is also one of the largest river systems in the world. The system originates in the Andes Mountains of Peru and travels through Ecuador, Columbia, Venezuela, Bolivia and Brazil before emptying into the Atlantic Ocean. As it gets closer to the Atlantic Ocean, it measures a width of 10 kms in areas. When travelers have mentioned they have sailed the Amazon on the larger cruise ships, I have always been baffled. What they mean is they visited only the very end of the Amazon, where it empties into the Atlantic. This journey is about a very different experience. Most people associate the Amazon with Brazil, but they miss out this hidden gem of an expedition right at the origin of the Amazon River. There are a lot of tributaries which we ventured into along with many National Parks. However now I am jumping too quickly into the trip. Let's start at the beginning.

Upon arriving by air into Lima, we were met by the UNIWORLD rep who took us to the Country Club Lima Hotel. The hotel is part of the Leading Hotels of the World. This is where you will call home for the next 2 nights.

In the morning, we met our tour guide and the rest of the group for a briefing on our week ahead. After that, we headed out and had a beautiful city tour of Lima known as the City of The Kings, which included a visit to the Basilica and Covent of San Francisco, where we ventured down into the catacombs. Once we finished this part of the tour, we continued on a walking tour until we found ourselves at the door of The Casa de Aliaga. The Aliagas have lived there for 17 generations. The home was built in 1535 and is said to be the oldest home in South America.



Next, came the day we were all waiting for! We headed back to the Lima airport where we departed on our flight to Iquito, which is located in Northern Peru. Once in Iquitos, we enjoyed local cuisine at a restaurant before heading to the ship. The ship, Aria Amazon, has an incredible story. Francesco Galli Zugaro worked in the travel industry all his life and in early 2000's had a job as Vice President, marketing and sales, of a boutique cruise company in the Galapagos. While there, he realized there was an opportunity to bring small ship expeditions to the Amazon in Peru. He found a partner, Fred Brown who was instrumental in the creation of Aqua Expeditions. They started off on a 6 day research adventure in the Pacaya-Samiria National Reserve in order to map out an itinerary. They spoke with park rangers and found out which black lagoons where the best to experience the Peruvian wilderness. After many journeys, in March 2007, they signed the contract with the Navy Shipyard to build the M/V Aqua and their second vessel M/V Aria, years later. They planned for the food on the ship to be local and had the menu designed by Peruvian chef Pedro Miguel Schiaffino, who has worked to highlight the foods of the Amazon jungle and Peruvian cuisine.

On our first full day, we had an early excursion out on the ship's water skiffs, commonly called flat-bottom boats, which can get into very shallow water. We started out at 6am to catch the early risers in nature, before it got too warm. The list of all the incredible creatures we saw is long. There were sloths, kingfishers, wide wing parakeets, iguana's, condors and the pigme marmoset – the smallest monkey in the world, just to name a few. We arrived back on the ship for breakfast before heading out on the next excursion at 8:30am which lasted approximately 3 hours. More wildlife had all of us were in complete awe, from squirrel monkeys, blue & yellow macaws, anteaters and grey river dolphins. Amazingly, there are over 3000 species of fish in the Amazon. Each skiff has a driver along with a Naturalist, who are incredibly knowledgable! We got back to the ship for lunch and then time to enjoy the afternoon (where we will complete CME for a few hours) including a massage, a board game in the lounge or just curl up with a book.

Due to the remote areas of the Amazon, there is no WIFI on the ship and only at certain times you may get limited data on your phone as we pass small towns. The ship does have a satellite phone which you can leave the number with loved ones in case of an emergency. The trip, in spite of all there is to discover and see, is a perfect way to detox and truly rest and relax. Should you have withdrawals from TV and computer screens, the ship has iPads which have TV shows and movies loaded. However, for me this trip was a real opportunity to get away from everyday life.

As far as dining on the Aria Amazon goes, breakfast is served buffet style and the chef prepares eggs / pancakes / waffles to order. Lunch and Dinner are served family style at each table. There is a set menu however they were fantastic at making adjustments based on food preference and allergies. I couldn't say enough about the staff on the ship and how incredibly special they made everyone feel.



On our next day we headed into one of the National Parks where we got to explore and see many more animals including a male sloth, (distinguishable by an orange patch of fur on their back), walking catfish, tanagers, a scarlet macaw and red cap cardinal. As we made our way through the waterway, we were met by the chef and his team where they had prepared an outstanding breakfast for us to enjoy on the river in our skiffs. Can you imagine ... breakfast on the Amazon! We enjoyed more adventures before heading back to the ship where we had some free time until mid afternoon. The ship provides rubber boots which we needed for our next adventure as we were out for a jungle walk, looking for poison dart frogs, which we found along with an anaconda and tarantulas. Scary, but not.

By mid June the water levels are down 20 feet and will drop another 20 feet before August. As the water drops more land wildlife come closer to the rivers edge, making it an ideal time to see more species.

Next, further down the Amazon River, we headed to a village to learn the way of local life. The community we visited was only founded in 1973 and has 200 people living there. Kids go to local school until Grade 6, when they then head into the larger towns and board at schools during the week until they graduate high school. There is a small medical centre however for any large medical emergencies the closest town is 2 hours by boat on the river. Most of the men fish throughout the day and the women are there preparing meals and tending to gardens. They have a limited time during the year to grow crops from the enriched soil once the water levels begin to drop. We were back on the ship for lunch and down time in the afternoon. It gets quite humid, so most of our afternoon tours were later in the day. Despite the humidity and heat, you always felt comfortable in the moving skiffs and the air-conditioned Aqua. This evening we ventured out to look for more wildlife and enjoyed watching the sun set with our floating bar, where we were served sundowners, a Peruvian cocktail along with casava and plantation chips.

On Day 6, I had to overcome my fears. Okay, more of my fears. I don't believe that I have shared the fact that I am scared of snakes, large spiders and crocodiles of any sort. And yet, in the morning we ventured out in search of them. We saw water vultures, Monk saki monkeys, wood stork and roadside spoonbills before heading back to the ship. We had a relaxing afternoon and early dinner and for those who were comfortable and adventurous, or just peer pressured into it, went out for a night adventure on the skiffs. Here our guide had spot beams and we found camus crocodile along with a baby anaconda and a tree boa.

On Day 7 we had a later start. From 9:00am – 2:30pm, we went to the nature reserve. Here we found more sloths, great herons, jumping catfish, common squirrel monkeys, bushmaster pythons, the most dangerous snake in the Amazon, a freshwater apple snail, a very large anaconda, yellow spotted turtles, the red howler monkey along with many birds. For the daring, the guides will hold the wild anaconda with you, if you're lucky enough to find one basking in the sun. Throughout the trip, on the skiffs you would get the aroma of the jasmine and honeysuckle from the shore. Around lunch hour we were met by the chef who prepared fresh ceviche and a lunch for us to enjoy.



Day 8 was a great way to close off our time on the ship. We ventured out to fish with gear made out of bamboo, fishing line and a hook. Along the shoreline we fished and most were successful in catching piranha. After some time, we met up with locals where we joined them for a ride in their traditional canoes. I will be the first to admit, the paddles were a lot heavier than the ones we have back home. If you thought the adventure was over, it wasn't. Before heading back to the ship, we got back on the skiffs and headed to the middle of the lake where water noodles were thrown in and one by one (for those who wanted to), jumped into the water for a swim in the Amazon. I did go in, but only after our tour guide Carlos, jumped in first and assured us we all would be fine. The afternoon we had free to enjoy time sharing pictures, laughing and talking with new friends we had made on the ship. Remember, this ship has only 16 staterooms, that is a total of 32 guests. How amazing to have made such memories within a week that will last a lifetime. This evening we enjoyed our last dinner on the ship and some fun music entertainment from the crew.

Our last morning, we had such mixed emotions heading down for breakfast. It was sad to say goodbye, but we also knew there were guests flying in from Lima to join the ship who were just as excited and full of anticipation as we were a week prior. After we said our goodbyes we headed to the Manatee rescue centre in Iquitos where we saw them feeding baby manatees who were rescued from the surrounding areas. After the centre, we headed back to the Iquito airport where some guests departed to Lima and stayed overnight at the airport hotel before heading home. Others continued to Cusco, where they enjoyed the optional post tour to Machu Picchu, a must if you have the extra time.

When you think of a river cruise, you picture getting off at small towns and walking along the cobblestone streets with old buildings. This is not like that. It is an amazing expedition of discovery to a remote area of the world. On this river cruise, be ready to step into skiffs or onto wooden stairs buried into the mud on the side of the Amazon River. It is a truly unique experience.

To sum it up, if you are looking for something different on a small ship expedition, without sacrificing creature comforts, the Amazonian wildlife experience on UNIWORLD is more like being on a wildlife safari in Africa.

Sincerely,

SuZanne Gosrani

Executive Vice-President



Amazon Rivers & Rainforests June 25 - July 6, 2024

