



Bumble in The Jungle

Determined to catapult himself out of his comfort zone, an urbanite awkwardly ventures deep into the Peruvian Amazon

BY DAVID FARLEY

THE GUY whose task it was to guide me into the Amazon was named Reuben Leon. “Like ‘lion,’” he told me after gripping my hand and shaking it as if it needed to be wrung out. Which was a fitting name, considering I’d just met the manager of the hotel I was staying at whose last name was Puma. I wondered if later on I’d meet a woman named Anna Conda or someone with the last name of Jaguar? “Let’s go,” said Reuben, whose confident stride, forest-green fatigues and 2-foot machete swinging from his belt made him king of the jungle in my eyes.

I didn’t particularly want to be traipsing through the rain forest. After reading “The Lost City of Z” by David Grann and enduring films like “Anaconda,” I viewed going to the jungle at best as a health risk and at worst a death sentence. I travel frequently, but I’m much more of an urban explorer than a wildlife wanderer. I woke up one day last year, however, and decided I should start getting out of my

comfort zone when I’m traveling. The first thing that came to mind was the rain forest. And then the spiders, snakes and other calamitous creatures that lurk in it.

And so here I was, having booked a couple of nights at the Peruvian lodge Inkaterra Hacienda Concepcion, which can only be reached via a short boat ride up the wide Madre de Dios River from the town of Puerto Maldonado. The hotel offers several free excursions and diversions for guests, including bird watching, a walk across chain bridges atop the canopy of towering trees, or just relaxing in the midst of the forest’s fauna and flora inside one’s net-walled cabana. If I was going to plant myself in the rain forest for a few days, though, I wanted to really experience it. So I signed up for a half-day trek through the jungle to Lake Sandoval with an on-property expert guide.

The day before when I met Reuben and he fitted me and two others—hotel guests from Los Angeles who had signed up for the excursion—with some Wellington boots, he warned that if it rained that night, the excursion

could get a little messy. “There will be mud,” he said, “Maybe a lot of mud,” he added, putting his hand at his waist, as if to indicate how deeply we might sink into it like quicksand. I wondered if I would seriously regret this. After all, I had just texted a friend: “I hate it here. It’s too humid. Too many mosquitoes. And too many things here that can kill you.”

The next morning, the four of us began our journey to Lake Sandoval. The sojourn required us to head up river in a motorized boat for 10 minutes and then undertake a 3-mile stroll to the lake where a rowboat would be awaiting our arrival. It had, in fact, rained all night. Reuben promised we’d spy otters, caiman and maybe even a frighteningly plus-size anaconda or boa constrictor at or near the lake. Instead of sharing his excitement, I cringed.

As we traipsed through a narrow path flanked by verdant shrubbery, diminutive beasts made high-pitched sounds to announce their existence and Reuben cleared up a myth, perhaps sensing my trepidation: “The rain forest isn’t dangerous,” he said, waving his open palm at the wall of green around us. “The big city is more so. People are dangerous. Not the forest.” Before I could disagree with him—after all, I feel perfectly safe living smack in the center of New York City—he tacked a few addendums onto his attempt to reassure me I’d make it out of the jungle alive.

“You have to look out for falling Brazil nuts. If they hit you on the head, you could die.” My eyes shot up to the forest canopy looking for nature’s cannon balls. “And don’t touch anything while we are walking,” he added, stopping to point out a tree whose trunk was made up entirely of one-inch thorns, like some kind of medieval torture device. “Touch that and your hand will puff up like a beach ball.” A few moments later, he stopped to show me some citrus fruit on the forest floor. “This fruit,” he said, “is probably okay to eat. But never pick fruit from the tree. It’s probably not ripe and it will kill you just like that.” He snapped his fingers. I felt like I was playing a game of Amazonian roulette.

We stopped at a massive 80-year-old ficus tree; its aboveground buttress roots looked otherworldly in their size, like huge muscular thighs spreading out on the ground around its trunk. He pointed at a root-like parasite that had twisted itself around the tree and said that the parasite was slowly killing the tree, like a boa constrictor around a guinea pig. Everything dangerous, I said to him, is a plant or tree. “This is not Africa and the savannas,” he said. “The animals

here are stealthy and small. You hear that”—he cupped his ear and we listened to a loud clicking noise echoing through the forest—“that creature is this big,” he said, his thumb and index finger an inch apart. “Yet hear how loud it is.”

We turned onto a wider path, which was when things got messy. My pace dramatically slowed, as I was suddenly ankle deep in mud, my feet sloshing through the terrain. As I stopped chatting with my fellow travelers to concentrate on getting through the muck, I heard the aggressive cock-a-doodle-doo doos of Amazonian chickens

and the heehaw sounds of donkey birds. The earthy, musty smell of the wet ground protruded my nostrils. I’m in decent shape but I could feel my legs getting tired from yanking myself out of the mud with each step. Suddenly nearly knee deep, I lost my balance and tipped over. When I ripped myself away from the miasma of dark gunk, I looked down to see that I was caked in sludge from the waist down, just as Reuben had predicted.

After another 45 minutes of trudging—Reuben assured us it’s not always like this—we made it to Lake Sandoval, its placid waters reflecting the

thick green ramparts of jungle on its circumference. Reuben paddled our boat around the lake.

We rowed up to a tree spotted with sleeping bats. We saw giant river otters (among the most endangered species in the Amazon) playing by the shore. And we watched a 7-foot black caiman float by. Piranhas and electric eels swarmed just below the surface of the water. Squirrel monkeys danced in the trees overhead. I felt myself starting to relax.

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On the way back, I asked Reuben how our small group compared with other tourists he’d taken into the jungle. “You weren’t too slow,” he said. “In fact, you were average in your pace.” I’d never been so happy to be average.

Later that night, while enjoying a much-deserved pisco sour back at the lodge’s bar, I listened to the sounds of the jungle through the protective screen walls as the ceiling fans overhead made a valiant attempt to whisk away the humidity. I realized that maybe the rain forest wasn’t at all as bad as I feared. I regretted texting to friends that I hated it. Suddenly, Reuben appeared in front of me, his machete hanging from his belt, his arms akimbo.

“There’s a night walk through the forest starting in five minutes. We are certain to see a big snake and maybe some large spiders. Are you coming?” I looked down at my clean jeans and then my pisco sour, I’d gone this far—to Lake Sandoval and back. I wasn’t going to press my luck any further.



THE LOWDOWN / THE PERUVIAN AMAZON ON FOOT

GETTING THERE Reaching Puerto Maldonado isn’t a straight shot. Avianca offers the most frequent flights from varied U.S. airports—New York, Miami, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, for example—with at least two layovers along the way. [avianca.com](#)

STAYING THERE Inkaterra Hacienda Concepcion, a 25-minute boat-ride up the Gran Madre Dio River, picks up guests at the airport and shepherds them via shuttle

and boat to the hotel. The 25 comfortable net-walled cabanas give guests a real feel of staying in the middle of the rain forest. Free guided excursions for guests include a hike to Lake Sandoval, a twilight boat cruise, a night walk in the Amazon and a trip to a local farm, among others. Excursions are not offered daily so ask the hotel about them before booking. *From \$363 per person with a two-night minimum, inkaterra.com*