

South America Part 3: The Peruvian Amazon

South America

Part 3 – Amazon Country – Peru

March 4, 2009

Dateline: Puerto Maldonado, Peru

Latitude at Puerto Maldonado 12.35 South, Longitude 69.10 West

Today we traveled by air 198 miles from Cusco to Puerto Maldonado to begin our tour of the Tambopata National Reserve. By land, this journey would take up to 6 days from Cusco on 310 miles of bad road. In less than an hour, we went from a climate that was chilly to really cold to one that was hot to steaming hot, and from an altitude of 11,000 feet to 600 feet. We were booked into a lodge in a primary and pristine rainforest, meaning it has never been logged or cultivated. It is in southeastern Peru, very near the border with Bolivia. We were met by our tour operator and our guides, Leny and Oscar, who work for an operation called Rainforest Expeditions, and both of whom are from local families here in the Peruvian Amazon. Our destination, La Posada Amazona, we thought, was a sister lodge of the wonderful Inkaterra in Aguas Calientes, since both were designated as "eco" resorts. We were okay with the idea of an eco resort, thinking it meant they only change your towels when you ask, recycle your beer cans and so forth. However, here in the Amazon, "Eco" means roughing it with none



The Posada Amazonas Lodge

of the niceties you associate with civilization as we know it, except for the flush toilets. We were at best naïve, at worst, totally delusional, although I will say that the beds with mosquito netting were okay – it's what could be on the other side that netting that can give you the willies. But then after all, the tour was billed as Rainforest Expeditions, not Rainforest Resort and Spa, so I guess we should have anticipated some sort of privation, and we did, but just not to the extent that we were actually deprived over the coming days.

Feeling there must be some sort of “failure to communicate” to borrow a phrase from Cool Hand Luke, I called Donovan, our tour operator in Cusco, for a short consultation as we stopped at the headquarters of Rainforest Expeditions to repack only the essentials that we can carry ourselves over roughly 1.5 miles of rough terrain.. It seems Donovan was aware of the amenities (or should I say the lack thereof) at La Posada Amazona – he just failed to communicate them to us. His part of the conversation went something like this, although I must admit most of the snarky parts are more what I thought, rather than what he said:

No hot water – no problem, you won't want any hot showers anyway. No electricity – no problem, you don't want to see what's creeping around out there since your room is open to the elements, and oh did I mention that there are no doors to the rooms? All rooms are open to the outdoors, but no problem, we have never had a tourist carried off by wild animals. Yep,

with no electricity that means no ceiling fans, no air conditioning, but no problem, it's cool there at night. And yep that means a mini-bar, TV and Wi-Fi are out of the question.. And also no swimming pool, but hey, you're going to get plenty wet out there on the trails, what with the rain and sweat and so forth.

After a brief group discussion, the six of us decided to adjust our attitudes, "man up", put on our Big Girl Britches, or whatever, and embark upon this adventure with as much enthusiasm as we could muster. In Spanish *posada* means a place for stopping so the name of the Eco-lodge, *La Posada Amazona* means, the place for stopping in the Amazon. The question is *por que* (i.e. why – as in why would you want to stop here?) We resolved to find out the answer to this as we set out to the Tambopata Reserve and our accommodations.

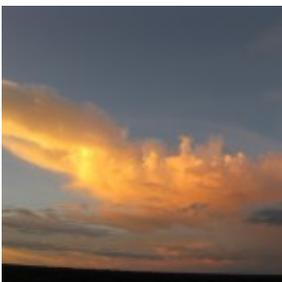
From the headquarters of Rainforest Expeditions, we took a bus to a place called Comunidad de Infierno (which, and I am not making this up, translates as Community from Hell). We came to learn over the next few days first-hand how the community earns its name. We took a motorized canoe – a very long, very narrow boat, powered by a car engine and steered with a long tiller. The boat was so narrow with practically no ballast, so the sequence of loading and unloading people and goods really mattered, as it tended to tip alarmingly with any type of movement on board.

The river we will be traveling on and the state we are in is called Madre de Dios (Mother of God), but we think it should be Madre de Dios Hace Calor Aqui (translation: Mother of God it is hot here). The Reserve takes its name from the Tambopata River, another Amazon a tributary that joins the Madre de Dios at Puerto Maldonado. They merge with several other rivers that form the Amazon River which flows for 3,000 miles to the Atlantic.



Lunch on an Eco-friendly Banana Leaf

We head east from Puerto Maldonado on the river, which is brown from all the silt, not so much the chocolate milk color of the Urubamba, but more of a mustard brown, maybe a Grey Poupon. Turtles were abundant along the shore with hordes of butterflies swarming around them. Leny said the butterflies are attracted to the salt in the turtle tears. I suppose somewhere someone got a government grant to determine this, but then you never know when you'll need a fact like that at a cocktail party. We were served an interesting and surprisingly delicious lunch on board – fried rice served hot, wrapped in a banana leaf. Our instructions were to just throw our leftovers and banana leaf plates overboard to clean up, but of course the plastic forks were disposed of otherwise. We suspect fingers are the ecologically correct way to eat our lunch, but were glad to see this minor concession to convenience and to conspicuous consumption.



Sunset in the Amazon

The Tambopata Reserve has over one million square hectares,

(one hectare is roughly 2.5 acres) and the Peruvian Amazon comprises over half of Peru's land mass; however, only 5% of their population lives here. The Reserve contains the most diverse ecosystem on the planet. There are around 200 mammal species, such as the giant otter, which is actually "giant" only when compared to the average otter. I was thinking when I heard the name that it would be some ground-thumping sort of creature out of a Michael Crichton novel, but we learned it was the same creature we know by the name "nutria", that pesky species that was introduced into North America and which continues to multiply like rabbits. They also have the collared peccary, a javelina relative, which is a pig-like animal with bristles and there is the tapir, which looks like a pig-like animal with a big fleshy snout, but it is most closely related to hippos and horses. They have a creature called the horned curassow, which is not a sow at all, but a showy bird. Then there is the largest rat in the world, the capybara, which is the oddest looking rodent you can imagine – sort of gopher-like with a squared off snout. Perhaps the most notorious inhabitant is the anaconda, which apparently lives up to its reputation in terms of size, but does not in terms of the number of humans consumed. As far as they know, that number is zero. They also have the beautiful, if exceptionally shy jaguar, similar in appearance to the African leopard, but much smaller and the even smaller ocelot, also spotted, but weighing only around 25 to 35 pounds. They also have a small bear, also a shy creature, called the spectacled bear, with golden fur around the eyes, and black elsewhere, giving the impression that the bear is wearing glasses. Unfortunately, the shy animals chose not to reveal themselves, but we were assured they are out there.



A Major Thoroughfare by Amazonian Standards

The real biodiversity here comes in the form of birds, plants and insects. They have over 900 species of butterflies, 190 of reptiles, 94 of fish, 2,000 of flowers, 187 of trees and 207 of plants. As we chugged along down the river, we saw deer and flocks of scarlet macaws and parrots flying along our route. You have to really work to see the much of wildlife here since their survival is predicated on their remaining unseen. The insects however are downright brazen, and we learned we must always coat ourselves with repellent with a minimum of 40% Deet, which of course makes it hard to sneak up on any wildlife possessing a sense of smell.



Laundry Day in Tambopata

People here are outnumbered by just about everything, which is somewhat refreshing after the crowded cities we Americans inhabit. Many local tribes still exist and live the way they have for centuries – dugout canoes, blowguns, and poison-tipped darts. In the 1870's there was the big rubber boom,

which later collapsed with advent of artificial rubber. Today there is primarily just subsistence agriculture practiced by the *riberenos* (river dwellers), although this area does export Brazil nuts, coffee and tropical fruit.



A Hammock for
our Leisure
Time in our
Open Air Room

Once we docked, we had the long trek with our backpacks to our lodge, up the banks of the river to a path with a gazillion steps, tree roots and swampy mud holes, with big wet leafy things slapping our faces every few yards as we made our way through the jungle's dense canopy. Our quarters were as promised – no doors or windows –and open air, kind of like putting a bed out on your screened in porch, except there were no screens. The walls were of rather thin bamboo on 3 sides and open to the fourth side with just a deck-like railing. There was a hammock suspended from the ceiling, in case you wanted to have a snooze



The Banana

Cage at Tambopata

there, but there was no netting, so it was open season for the insects. We marveled that no creatures invaded our quarters. Of course we would later find we had no cause to marvel at this, but more on that later. We had little time (or need since it was really small) to explore the lodge since we had a trek to the canopy tower scheduled for a 4:00 p.m. departure. We did take note of a special feature – the banana cage just off the lobby. Bananas are hung their daily there for us to nibble on, but are placed in a special cage that we are smart enough to open, but the monkeys are not. We were wondering if we needed to be furtive about operating the lock mechanism in case any savvy monkeys were perhaps spying on us.

Before our first hike, we had to pick out our footwear which proved to be tall rubber boots which would prove invaluable over the coming days. However Gary had to roll his boot tops down to make his into short rubber boots since his calves were to big for the legs of the boots. We were advised to tuck our pants into the boots to thwart any insects which might be interested in exploring our persons via that route.



The View Above
the Canopy

We were dripping wet with sweat from the trek to lodge, but found on this adventure we could and would get even wetter. En route to the canopy tower, we were chattered at by, and actually had sightings of, several dusky titi monkeys (Leny

says it gets its name from the noise it makes, versus any particular feminine endowments) We also had a spontaneous serenade by unseen birds up high in the canopy. After a mile or so of trekking we arrived at the tower, a structure of scaffolding, approximately 130 feet high, and roughly 12 feet by 12 feet with a platform at the top. We climbed and sweated, climbed and sweated, and repeated as needed to reach the top at last. At this height we were well above the trees and could see a number of nests of various birds. It was really a treat to see the wild parakeets, parrots, and macaws in flight. We could hear the peccaries (wild pigs) rooting around somewhere far below us. And for the first time we heard a sound very much like a fierce winter wind whistling and howling around the eaves. Leny told us that we were only hearing a single male howler monkey who was just letting everyone know whose territory this is, but it was enough noise for a whole troop of them. Leny cautioned us not to touch anything – apparently teeny tiny ants are everywhere. The leaf cutter ants were sort of fun to watch (we were a little hard up for fun, in case you can't tell) They are little ants about the size of a poppy seed trudging along in single file, toting a postage stamp sized leaf back to the anthill.



The Shadow of
the Tower on
the Canopy

On the tower we saw a great sunset in one of the few places where you could actually see the sun drop over the horizon since the jungle was so dense at ground level. Unfortunately, since the sun was setting while we were up in the tower, it

was dusk by the time we got down and thus our return trek was in the pitch black dark – and not a good experience. The ground was squishy with a snarl of roots, the air was thick and humid, and the foliage was wet and clingy. Thankfully the mosquitoes that had been buzzing about seemed to diminish after the sun went down. We learned that when they swarm, the trick is to keep moving so they don't settle in and stay for lunch. We also learned that it is not a good idea to shower before dinner because (A) you will wash off your Deet which will still be sorely needed in the open air dining room and (B) you will again be drenched in sweat by the time dessert is served anyway.

We agreed that Donovan was right about one thing – none of us wanted anything but a cold shower, and so our nightly routine became to quickly wash off sweat and insect repellent, attempt to towel dry, and make a bee-line (no pun intended) for the bed and dive under the mosquito netting. After dinner, things were pretty quiet and very dark. We had kerosene



Sleeping Al
Fresco

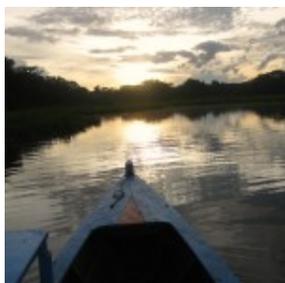
lanterns set in window openings with access from the outside walkway. We had a night watchman of sorts (kind of like the Warden at the Big House) who came by and turned the lanterns off around 9:00 p.m. If you wanted to read in bed, (or write notes for your journal) you had to get out your flashlight or headlamp and switch it on. However, the light will create a frenzy of attacking insects attracted by the light and beating themselves silly against the mosquito netting, so this is not

as soothing an activity as one would expect. We were tired enough for sleep, but our survival instincts kept us thinking about those al fresco bedrooms and wondering if anacondas would be seeking out warm bodies in the middle of the night. These sleeping arrangements definitely called for a dose of Ambien. We were pleased that it was, as promised by Donovan, cooler at night here and thus we had a surprisingly good night's sleep.

March 5, 2009

Dateline: Tambopata Reserve, Peruvian Amazon

The warden came by and lit our kerosene lanterns early – before sunrise since we got up about that time for our day's adventure. In case we missed our wake-up knock, the howler monkey started up about that same time and there was no sleeping through that, no matter how many Ambien you swallowed during the night. We hopped out of bed and into our clothes and coated ourselves with Deet, hoping to be quick enough about it that the mosquitoes didn't even know we were awake. We brushed our teeth with bottled water, although it is reportedly distilled from the waters of the yellow brown river just down the hill, so who knows what organisms may still be there. The microbe-rich stuff out of the tap is definitely not recommended.



Sunrise on the
Amazon

We again trekked the 1.5 miles to the river (at least it was downhill this time) when the sun was not quite up and we took

our motorized canoe to a dock where we boarded a pontoon boat of sorts for our river otter spotting expedition at a nearby oxbow lake, which was formed when the river changed courses and eventually doubled back on itself. The problem with river otter spotting is that you are supposed to be very quiet – which proved to be quite a challenge for the six of us who were anxious to trade war stories about our night in the wild, e.g who has the most insect bites, who had the most critters on their mosquito netting, whose tap water was the brownest, and oh by the way did you notice the floor of your room has one inch spaces between the boards and we were speculating on just how skinny some those 190 species of reptiles may be.

Staying here at La Posada Amazon, we decided, is sort of like Girl Scout Camp without the mothering, or boot camp without the push-ups, and, although we do perform some pretty grueling marches in unflattering boots, at least we don't have to double time it. And of course, although we do have the warden, we are not confined to our rooms – not that anyone is prone to wander off premises anyway. And did I mention it's hot here? I think I like the idea of the Amazon better than the reality of it.



River Otter Expedition

Once on the river, the sun rose and we saw flocks of the usual birds – for here anyway – parrots, macaws, toucans, tanagers, parakeets and we also saw pheasant (Amazonian version) and heron-like wading birds. We did see the elusive otters – a family of 5. They never left the water so what we saw was the

V shaped ripples and their heads as they swam by us. In our idle time (and there was a lot of it on this particular morning) we learned a little about the love life of various creatures. The river otters are monogamous with only one mate at a time. Many of the bird species are monogamous and they mate for life. Jaguars and deer are polygamous, *i.e.* one male may mate with multiple females, but the double standard is alive and well because female monkeys are referred to as promiscuous – *i.e.* the females mate with every male they can get their paws on. We had a good yuk about this, deciding that these would be called these “slut monkeys”.



At an Oxbow

Several notorious Amazonian creatures were present here at the oxbow lake. We saw tracks of a caiman, a type of crocodile (not as large or vicious as their African cousins) in the muck. And we were all riveted by the flattened grass that Leny told us is evidence that an anaconda has recently slithered by. There were no sightings of either creature, despite our cameras being at the ready. After the otters left, we had some time for fishing – piranha fishing to be precise. This is another Amazon species whose man-eating capabilities are greatly exaggerated in that there are no documented cases of this actually happening. Piranha means



Little Fish – Big Teeth

“cut the skin” in a local dialect, which is pretty much what they do. However they are really teeny little fish with teeny little bellies and it would take thousands of them just to make a dent in your leg. This is not to say they can’t give a nasty bite, as Leny demonstrated with a stick. There were many catches, but no keepers, and they proved to be extremely tricky to take off hook.

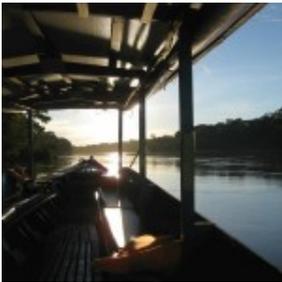
We managed our return boat trip, our trek back to lodge and our lunch before a big, big rain arrived to provide a really fine backdrop for a delicious afternoon nap. We did have one



The Killer Piranha is Subdued

somewhat alarming interruption of said nap when a maintenance worker right outside where our door would be if we had one yelled “*Culebra, culebra*” We hurried outside to see him brandishing a machete and pointing under our room (whose raised floor is made of the decking with the one inch spaces). I seemed to recall that *culebra* means snake in Spanish and

shared that tidbit with the rest of the nappers in our group. We searched for any signs of the *culebra*, but gave it up. With that incident so fresh in our minds, nap time was pretty much over.



En Route to
the Shaman's
House

We had a trek planned for 4:00 p.m. which was almost cancelled, but the rain stopped just in time and so we slugged in the mud back to the river to take the canoe to visit the shaman and tour his magical mystery farm. The shaman is roughly the equivalent of a native-American medicine man. He has multiple roles in both spiritual and medicinal realms. This particular shaman looked remarkably like a Peruvian Spanish speaking Robin Williams. Leny translated everything he said into English, which made for a very long time to be standing still for us mosquito targets, but we learned a lot. For example, the shaman said that the jungle has



Part of
Shaman's Crop

good spirits and bad spirits and his job is to discern the difference and figure out how to enhance the good and mitigate the bad, most of the time with plant based medicines. He is a healer and an herbalist (or a more interesting, if somewhat contrived term, a “vegetalist”). Much of the local religion is based on visions the shamans have had through the years after sampling the local medicines. The shaman makes the distinction that drugs he prescribes are psychotropic versus hallucinogenic. (These are drugs that affect the central nervous system and emotions, but unlike hallucinogens – do not make you see stuff that is not there. I.E. they are mood altering vs. reality altering.) The hallucinogens, we suspect, he keeps for personal use.

We had a tour of the shaman’s gardens and learned about the following plants:

Chacruna which is from the coffee family and has a hallucinogenic alkaloid. It is used for eye drops and migraines. It is also used to brew ayahuasca, a local fun beverage.

Ayahuasca (Pronounced eye-yah-whas-ka with the accent on “whas”) is the name of a vine, plus the name of the brew made from the ayahuasca and other plants. It is a purgative, but it is also described as a magical drink producing profound insights that will, per our translator, “get your head right”. It has ceremonial uses as well as medicinal.

Mapacho is black jungle tobacco. The shaman smokes it and blows smoke over individual with unspecified ailments with unspecified results. Leny was a little vague on the details here so this may bear further investigation. We had a chuckle over the idea of where exactly the shaman was “blowing smoke”, but the colloquial expression did not translate well and Leny had no idea what we were laughing about.

Una de Gato or Cat’s Claw appears to be a wonder drug of

sorts. It is a thorny vine that is an anti-oxidant so you can treat your wrinkles while curing arthritis, bursitis, allergies, and bowel and intestinal disorders. It is also an immune booster, and a cure for cancer, herpes, AIDS, and fungal infections. And if you chose to take chemo therapy instead of this particular medicine, it can also treat the side effects of chemo.

Chuchuhuasi seems to be the closest thing to snake oil in the jungle. It is said to be a cure for rheumatism, tuberculosis, bronchitis, stomach ache, digestive problems, cramped muscles and female troubles. Or to quote Leny, who is translating for the shaman: "it cures a woman's bad spirits" which we interpreted to mean cramps, PMS, or some other hormonal difficulty. It is quite bitter so if you have any bad spirits to cure, you should take it with honey.

Para Para– This plant is the Amazonian Viagra and is aptly named, since it translates as "stand up, stand up".

Fortunately the shaman did not personally demo the effectiveness of this potion, but he did bend a leaf of the plant and it sprang right back up, so if that's any sign, it works really fast. No word on whether this is the key ingredient in Viagra, but the Amazon is the source of the vast majority of prescription drug ingredients, so it may well be the case.



The Shaman
Discussing
Tangarana

Tangarana is actually a tree and is home to some nasty ants by the same name. The ants will ferociously attack anyone or anything that messes with their tree. They live in the hollow core of the tree and eat its sap, which is the price the tree pays for defense. They do a good job of it. They don't let any other plants crowd in and no animals will climb the tree. There are stories about local tribesmen tying naked enemies to these trees to torture and eventually kill them. We are unclear over what the shaman uses the tree for, but we were warned that the ants are lightning fast, so we should not touch, and not even get close enough to touch.



Sampling the Shaman's Remedies

We were offered some samples of a few of the concoctions, (no ayahuasca), but we did not experience any miracle cures, although to be honest, with the exception of mosquito bites, we didn't really have many ailments for the shaman to work his magic on. We again found ourselves negotiating the 1.5 miles from the river to the lodge in the dark. We had our supper and went to bed fully exhausted well before the warden doused the lights. Amazon night life was pretty sedate as evidenced by this typical post-bedtime conversation:

I say, "Gary, roll over you're snoring".

He says, "It's not me, it must be Stu on the other side of the wall."

I say, "No, I just heard him in the shower, and he let out a

yelp and said 'Damn that water's cold'."

He says, "Do you think it's Sharon?"

I say, "No it's not Mara either. It's not dainty enough for a woman's snore."

He says, "I don't think it's Bill" (who was two rooms away), "I just heard him cough and then their toilet flushed"

I say "I wonder if it's the howler monkey. And if so, I wonder how we could get him to roll over."

He says "Are you enjoying the Amazon?"

I say, "Oh yeah. Is there any more of that Ambien?"

March 6, 2009

Dateline: Tambopata Preserve, Peruvian Amazon



The View from
the Man-Hide
Hut

Today we were again up before dawn, and we left right after breakfast for a trek of about a mile to a salt lick on the banks of the river. Our plan was to see the macaws, along with other birds, who flock by the hundreds to the banks of the river where clay formations provide needed minerals. We were told that the monkeys like it too and if they come, they will drive the birds away so we hoped they would stay away. We had to tip-toe to a hut (they call them "man-hide" huts in East

Africa) with slits in the window like WWII bunkers at Normandy, but they are made of wood vs. concrete and again we have to be quiet since macaws spook easily. We both heard and saw many of them roosting in trees above us, but there was no salt licking going on. A lot of river traffic, chattering dusky titi monkeys and those rowdy tourists didn't help either. We had met a Dutch couple, Jill and Rati (it was pronounced Rotty, but it was a nickname for something



Caricature
Time in the
Man-Hide Hut

unpronounceable to our non-Dutch tongues) who were in the hut with us. They were both caricaturists (typically booked for conventions and meetings) and to pass the time, Jill did caricatures of us. Gary asked how she picks features to focus on. She replied that it is what strikes her as the most prominent features. His next question was whether his ears, nose and neck really that big? He did agree that my neck was that skinny and my cheeks do look like a squirrel hoarding walnuts. She gave us the sketch and it is one of our best mementos of our trip.

We reversed our steps for the uphill trek back to the lodge for



Under the
Giant Kapok
Tree

lunch. In the afternoon we had another trek to see a huge kapok tree and a canoe trip downriver to a local farm. The kapok tree is estimated to be 400 to 500 years old. Trees in the Amazon do not have rings because they do not have seasons, so age is harder to judge. En route we saw a sloth, up in a tree being slothful, true to his name, totally oblivious to passers-by.

The farm was about as basic as you can get. There were a few lean-to's, campfire cooking with a motley assortment pots and pans and utensils. The farmers were nowhere in sight so we sort



Amazonian
Farmhouse

of poked around the fields with Leny to see the banana, manioc, papaya, avocado, and mandarin orange crops. Leny grew up on a farm like this in large family and still she managed with help of siblings to get an education. Since we were

practically melting in our rubber boots and under siege from a ravenous horde of mosquitoes, we petitioned Leny for a boat ride in lieu of more time at the farm, just to get the air moving if nothing else. It proved to be a good move. We finally saw the funny little capybara – the world’s largest rodent, about the size of a small pig, rooting around on the river banks, where it eats brazil nuts and spreads seeds as it passes them. Jaguars love to snack on capybara, so we were on the lookout there, but no such luck. We also saw several wild turkeys and were treated to another beautiful sunset on the river, the only place other than the tower to see one.

We had an uneventful dinner followed by a truly eventful night. I was reading with my headlamp waiting for the Ambien to take hold. Gary was snoring softly under his own mosquito netting when I heard little rustling noises up high in the A frame ceiling. I got out of bed and turned my headlamp to the rafters where I perceived motion and little squeaking sounds. It was all I could do to keep from making my own little squeaking sounds, as I woke Gary up to confirm that yes indeed those were bats, if not in our belfry, then in the straw of the ceiling. What to do? Take another Ambien, ignore whatever guano and bits of straw were dropping on the mosquito netting and burrow under the covers, making sure no neck was exposed, just in case they were vampire bats.

March 7, 2009

Dateline: Lima, Peru



Bamboo Walls

at the Posada

We woke early to the twittering birds and the howler monkey, and over breakfast we compared notes on the Night of the Living Bats. Actually we didn't have to wait until breakfast. Our bamboo walls were so thin you could actually chat, even in a whisper. In fact Gary had a full conversation with Monica (whom we first met on the train from Aguas Calientes to Cusco) while perched on our toilet examining the interesting droppings on his toothbrush and shaving kit, which he had left out and open overnight. I had to give the sink a thorough rinse before any teeth brushing or any other daily ablutions could commence. Monica reported that a bat had become entangled in her mosquito netting and she was bordering on hysteria and ready to call for help when it finally escaped. Our other traveling companions reported similar bat experiences and all agreed we were not sad today to bid farewell to the Amazon and to our rubber boots which we have come to appreciate and, perhaps the bat visit was our sign that it is indeed time to go. Conclusion: Eco tourism is not for wimps.



Leaving
Tambopata in
our Tippy
Canoe

We loaded up our backpacks and made the final trek to the river to catch our motorized canoe for the dock at Comunidad del Infierno where we learned still another reason this is called the Community from Hell. Leny (about 100 pounds)

attempted to help a much larger tourist about twice her size up an embankment and was sucked into the oozing mud up past her knees, and practically had to be winched out. We interpreted that as still another sign that it's time for us to go back to civilization. From the river bank we took a small bus to Puerto Maldonado down a long dusty road. Much of the road had been washed out by the big rain we had two days ago, so there are mud holes every few feet. We again stopped at the Rainforest Expedition headquarters to reunite with the luggage we did not take with us. We will go to Lima via Cusco, where we will have to control the impulse to charge off the plane to gulp in some of the chilly air we were way too hasty to escape just 3 short days ago.

We arrived in Lima in the late afternoon and had a city tour with our guide, Erica and our driver Ronald. The sky is a grey that Erica tells us is called "the donkey's belly" and that it is frequently this color in the winter months. There is Atlanta-league traffic, but with a lot more interesting things happening. For example, at the airport we saw porters with cruise ship luggage piled high on big dollies who parked them, stopping traffic both ways, to help push a broken down car out of the way that was blocking an access ramp to the sidewalk. Later we saw a man jump out of car to give the bus driver in front of him what for, but apparently he did not realize his own car was still in gear. His car smashed into the back of the bus. There was much cursing, or so we fancied since Erica did not translate, and much arm waving. Then in the late afternoon we saw a bridal couple in a stretch limo. They had popped up through the sun roof like the King and Queen of the Prom, waving to throngs of perfect strangers. Although these incidents were not part of tour, they certainly were part of the entertainment.



The Bishop's
Palace – Lima

Lima was founded by Spaniards upon their arrival since the existing capital, Cusco, did not provide a seaport. Like much of the rest of Peru, it is very earthquake prone, with particularly devastating ones occurring in 1687 and 1746, which created the need for a great deal of reconstruction. The one in 1746 was the worst in history. It lasted 4 minutes and caused 15 thousand deaths, many in the resulting tsunami at the port of Callao. The tsunami sank or swept inland as much as a mile, taking every boat in harbor with it. There were 40,000 survivors, but only 20 houses of 3,000 in the city were left intact. Priests went out among the people to advise them that the earthquake was a sign that it was time to get right with God, although not exactly in those words. Vigilantes roamed the streets and looters were hanged on the spot. The last big earthquake was in May of 1940 when the city lost 23% of its buildings, but by then the Judge Roy Bean justice system had been toned down quite a bit.



The Pisco Sour
Fountain

Our first stop was the Plaza Mayor where we saw a bronze

fountain built in 1651 and where once a year on Independence Day, pisco sours are substituted for water and people can get as many refills as they want (this is a huge improvement over fireworks, but I won't hold my breath for this happening here at home). This plaza has been the site of a lot of excitement over the years – bullfights, executions during the Inquisition, the declaration of independence from Spain, and now the free pisco sours. We also saw, but did not tour the Archbishop's Palace at Plaza Mayor, which looks very much like palaces in Granada. The Moorish influence is clearly evident with the shuttered balconies made of dark wood, intended to make the women of the house see, but not be seen from the street. Situated as it is on the Plaza Mayor, it affords archbishop the opportunity to watch, and even partake in the Independence Day pisco sours.



Lima Cathedral
at the Plaza
Mayor

We saw the Cathedral, also on the Plaza Mayor, which was started in 1535 by Pizarro at the same time the city was founded. It was completed in 1540, but has been added on to numerous times. Pizarro's tomb is inside. – well at least they think it is his tomb now. It seems there was a mix-up over exactly which remains were his.. Until 1990 they had a headless body in the crypt they were touting as Pizarro, but tests proved it was not his. So they apparently went to another tomb and got the real Francisco – at least that's their story and they're sticking to it. We also saw Town Hall and the Government Palace, which was built in 1938, after a

fire destroyed the original. It has been made to look old and very Colonial on the outside, but it is quite ornate on the inside, with the most elaborate room intended mimic the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles (called the Salon Dorado or Golden Room). We resolved to visit more interiors next time we are in Lima.



Skull
Sculptures at
the Monastery

We did go inside the convent and Church of St Francisco, built in 1557 and rebuilt after a 1656 earthquake. The Church of San Francisco has survived many other earthquakes due to a special building material called *quincha*, which is a mix of rushes, mud and plaster which proved more earthquake resistant than conventional European materials. One of the chief “attractions” for tourists is the catacombs which contain the bones of over 25 thousand people, a veritable city of the poor, with skulls and other bones arranged in various patterns. The wealthy, of course, had crypts for their remains so there were not legions of monks making artful arrangements with their bones. The church also has its own Last Supper painting, featuring the ubiquitous guinea pig. There was a spacious courtyard and cloisters with gardens – again quite Moorish in design -with beautiful blue glazed tiles (called *azulejos*) from Seville on the cloister courtyard walls dating from the 1600’s.



The Plaza Mayor in Lima

We walked from the Plaza Mayor to the Plaza San Martin along the Jiron de la Union, a pedestrian only street with shops and outdoor restaurants including a Norky's that almost overpowered us with a longing for roasted chicken with the scent of it wafting out on to the street. In Peru "jiron" is a colloquial expression meaning a long street or row of houses, although in most of the rest of Spanish speaking world, it is a long strip of cloth or a banner. The Plaza San. Martin, was built in 1921 on the 100 year anniversary of Independence in a decidedly French style in contrast to the Spanish Colonial look of the Plaza Mayor. Peru's version of George Washington was Jose de San Martin and there is a statue of him on horseback in the center of the plaza. At the foot of San Martin's statue is a statue of Madre Patria (a symbolic figure of Mother Country). The design intent was reportedly to have a crown of flames (called llama in Spanish) on her head. As you might anticipate, something was lost in translation between Spain and Peru, and consequently the sculptor put a small likeness of an actual llama on her head. In the ensuing years, it seems to be sort of like the guinea pigs at the Last Supper, in that Peruvians and tourists alike find it quaint, charming and mildly amusing. I guess it is kind of like the eccentric aunt in the family – she may be a goofy old lady, but she's our goofy old lady. Besides a little touch of the absurd is always appreciated in an itinerary laced with so much history.



The Tunnel Fountain at the Parque de Reservas

Our last stop on our city tour was at the Parque de Reservas, a showcase of elaborate water fountains featuring colored lights, music, and laser displays. There is also a tunnel fountain which can be walked through without getting wet and a play fountain where the whole intent is to get as wet as possible. This park is very popular with locals, particularly the children. There is also an 80 meter fountain which holds the Guinness record for height.

We had our driver drop us at the Alfresco Restaurant, located in Miraflores and just a few short blocks from our hotel. Miraflores has a wealth of interesting shops and restaurants, almost all with inviting outdoor dining, featuring delicious seafood and fresh produce. We had an excellent dinner and then walked back to our hotel, the Casa Andina, for our final night in Peru. Tomorrow morning we leave for Ecuador and the Galapagos. We agree that we should have planned more time here in Lima since we are leaving so much left unexplored. As for the Amazon, we are inclined to say “been there done that, got the mosquito bites”. And did I mention that being eco-friendly in the Amazon was really hot? On the other hand, it is fascinating, so if we go back, maybe we will go more “eco-hostile” next time.