

Voyage

on the Amazon



Patrick and Louise Krohn

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Distribution: Copies of this book may be purchased online at www.blurb.com/bookstore

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17 to 23 February 2012

It seemed we had been waiting forever for this trip! The arrangements had been made early the previous fall and by mid-February, we were more than ready for a break away from the cold snowy days, the slippery streets and the ever-present grey skies.

On Friday, February 17th, having left Sam with the dog sitter, we made our way to Spokane, WA, a three-and-a-half hour drive from home. We had given ourselves just enough time for a bit of last minute shopping at the Spokane Valley Mall. One never knows when another chance to shop might come along, so one must take advantage of every opportunity!

After a very unmemorable dinner at the Rustic Moose and a most comfortable night at the Hilton

next door, we boarded our overnight flight for the Cayman Islands, where we had planned to spend time with our son and his family.

It was a very pleasant and well-timed four-day visit. Our grand-daughter Valeria was on Spring break and our son had taken the week off. It was also Valeria's 9th birthday, for which we had carried an electronic keyboard as a special birthday present all the way from home. The time passed very quickly, but it was a good transition from our cold Canadian winter to the hot and humid Amazon climate!

We left Grand Cayman at 8:45 am on Thursday, February 23rd. Our flight from Miami to Lima was delayed by an hour and it was past midnight when we finally arrived in Lima.

Lima



24 February 2012: Friday

We had a rather disappointing day in Lima. The Swissotel, where we were staying, turned out to be in a mostly residential area. Although we went out for a couple of walks, we did not find anything particularly interesting to see.

We were a little taken aback by the large number of security guards that we saw and the many buildings that had barbed wire fences around their perimeters and steel bars on their doors. As we found out the next day, heightened security measures became necessary during the troubled 1980s and 90s, when nearly 70,000 people died as a result of the bloody conflict between the Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso) guerrillas, the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) and the government of Peru.

Although we saw no sign of anything amiss and certainly never felt unsafe, we later found out that the conflict was not yet truly over. It was only a few days before our arrival that the leader of the remnants of Peru's once-powerful Shining Path rebel group had been captured. By then, the group was operating primarily in the Alto Huallaga valley, a centre of cocaine production in the northern Peruvian jungle¹.

We found the Swissotel to be wonderfully comfortable, the perfect place for a good night's rest before embarking on our Amazon journey the next day.

¹ Source: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-17005739>



La Plaza Mayor



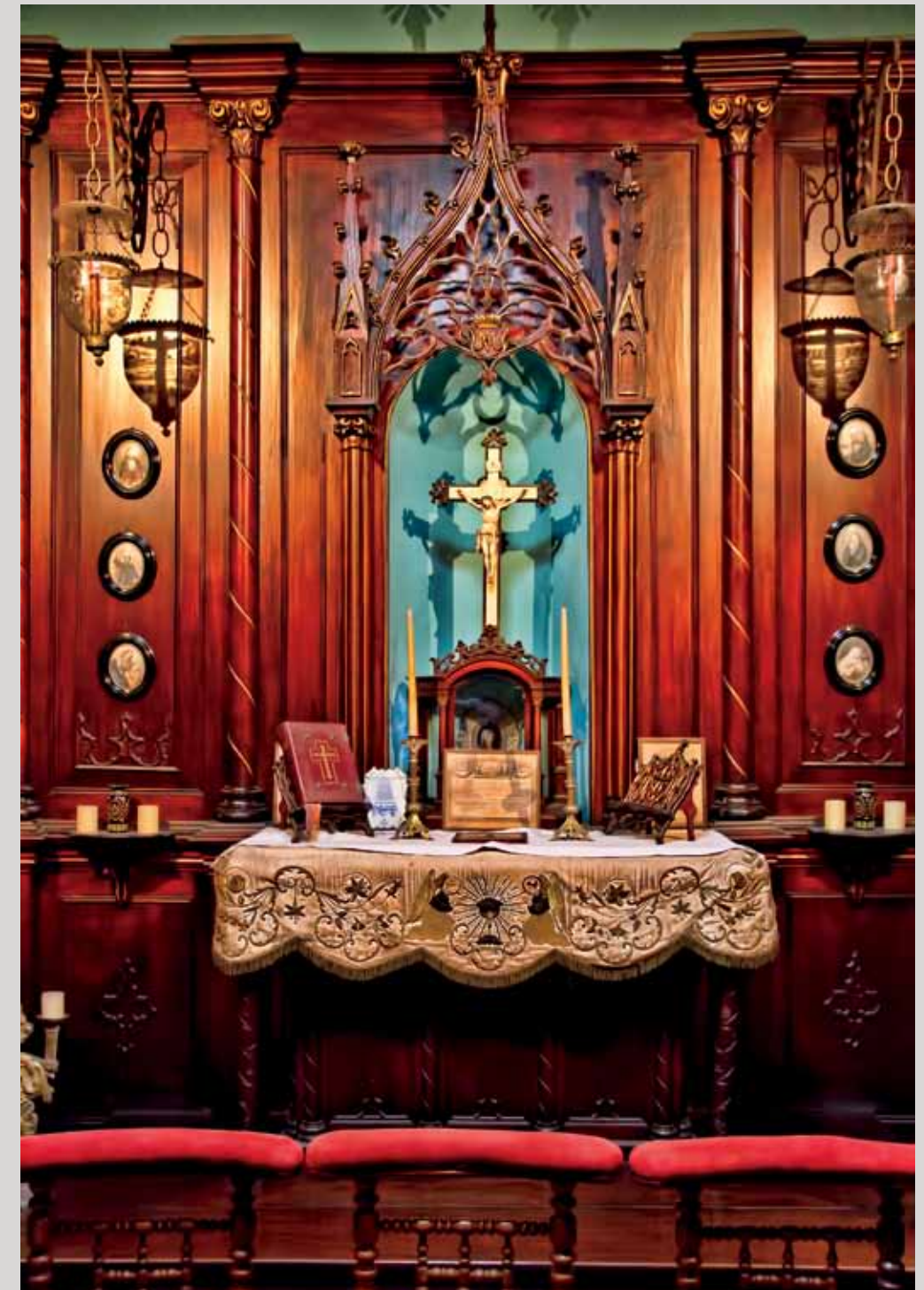
25 February 2012: Saturday

Dennis Osorio, our Tour Leader, and a local guide (whose name I forgot) met us at the hotel at 8:00 am for a brief tour of Lima. Of course, no three-hour tour can do justice to a city as rich in culture and history as is Lima. Our tour was really just a brief visit to the main Square in the centre of old Lima, the Plaza Mayor, where you can find the Municipalidad (the Town Hall), the Palacio Arzobispal (the Archbishop's Palace), the Cathedral and the Palacio de Gobierno (the Government Palace and the residence for the President of Peru). In the centre of the Square was a bronze fountain commissioned in 1650 by the Viceroy of Peru, the Count of Salvatiera. [Peru, Eyewitness Travel, p. 60] Each year, on Independence Day, July 28, local merchants fill the fountain with Pisco, a clear grape brandy considered Peru's national drink. We were told that the queues to get to the fountain that day were usually quite long!

Needless to say, the Square and the roads around it were heavily guarded and armed soldiers could be seen everywhere.



Bronze fountain
dated from 1650



La Casa de Aliega



Iquitos



We then went to see La Casa de Aliaga, just around the corner from the Plaza Mayor. The house is owned by the Aliaga family, descendants of Jerónimo de Aliaga, one of Francisco Pizarro's most trusted lieutenants during the Spanish conquest. El Señor Aliaga was rewarded in 1535 with a huaca, or Inca shrine, which he turned into a home. Seventeen generations later, the Aliaga mansion is the oldest home on the continent still owned – and occupied – by the same family. Only a few of the house's 66 rooms are open to the public. Even though it is still at the same location as the 16th century original, the house has been rebuilt many times because of earthquake damage, hence most of the outstanding architectural features, art and decor date from the 16th to the 18th centuries.² Our last visit was to the San Francisco complex, which included a church, a convent and two chapels, the whole built on a network of interconnected tunnels, or catacombs. These were used as a cemetery during the Colonial Period. [Peru, Eyewitness Travel, p. 64] We had a quick tour of the catacombs.

We then drove to the airport to check in for our flight to Iquitos. The airport was a zoo! Thank God, there was a special line for tour groups, with only a few people in front of us; otherwise we might still be there! We had a very nice lunch at the Airport Ramada Hotel before boarding our afternoon flight.

We spent a little bit of time in Iquitos: a brief visit to an Arts and Crafts market, a stop at a currency exchange center so we could get some local currency and, lastly, a quick stop at an ATM for those who needed cash.

Iquitos is one of the most popular places for starting a visit to the Peruvian Amazon. It is a major port and the fourth largest city in Peru; it is also the world's largest city inaccessible by road. The only way in is by air or ship; the latter must sail upstream from the mouth of the Amazon for 2300 miles to reach the city. The city remained a backwater trading post from its foundation in the 1750s until the 1880s rubber boom, where huge fortunes were made almost overnight. However, the boom only lasted about 30 years. The discovery of oil has led to the latest boom which, combined with eco-tourism, has seen the city's population rise rapidly to 600,000 compared to 250,000 in the 1970s. [Eyewitness Travel, Peru, p. 255]

Finally, at about 5:30 pm, it was time to board our ship, the Aquamarina.

² Source: http://travelinsider.qantas.com.au/casa_de_aliaga_lima.htm

The Amazon



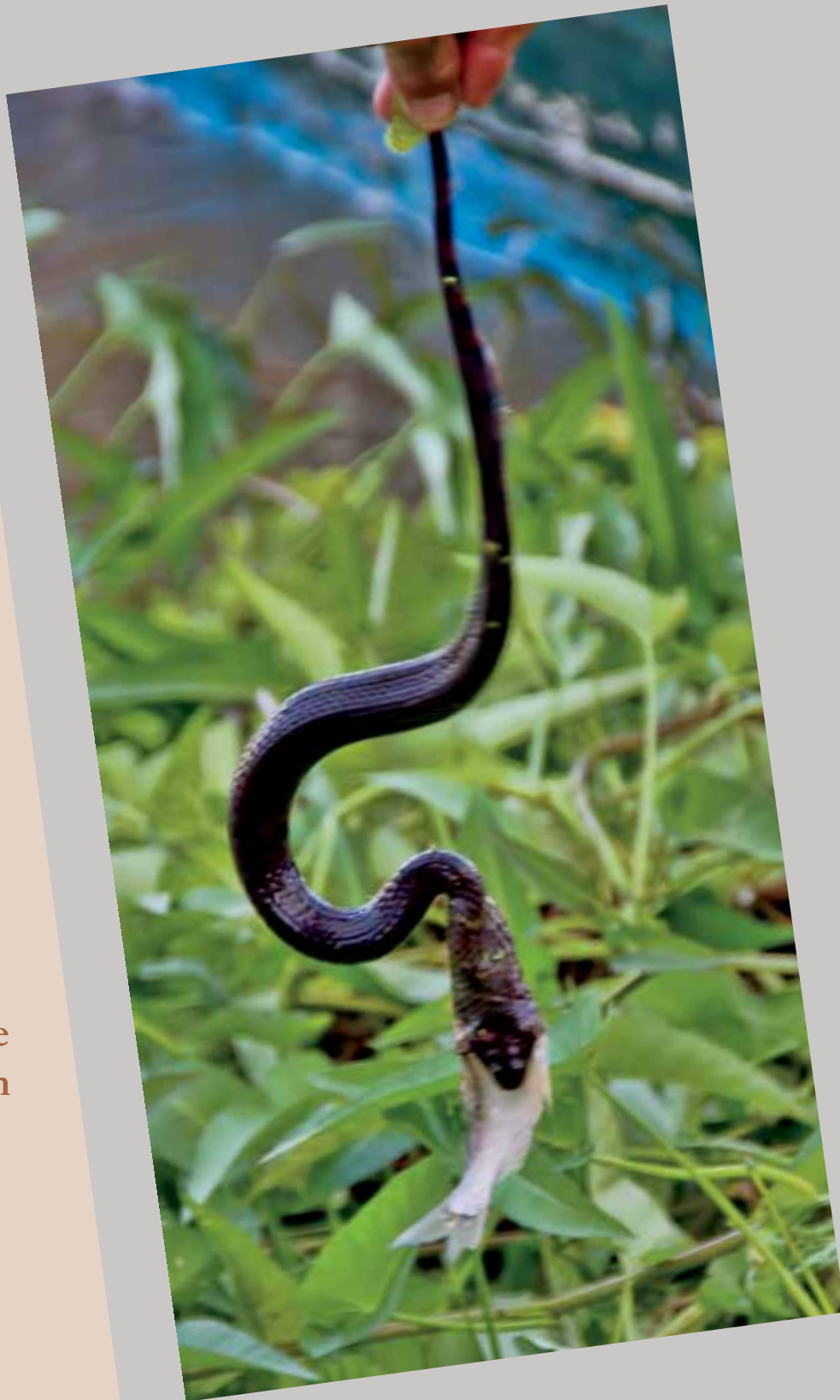
The Aquamarina

Built in the style of a river barge, the Aquamarina was 45m long and 8.5m wide. It carried 24 passengers in 12 double cabins. On this voyage, there were 18 passengers, plus two naturalists, a tour leader and a crew of nine (a captain and first mate, a chef and one assistant, an engineer, a dining room and bar managers and two cabin stewards). The air-conditioned cabins were quite spacious and

comfortable, and each was equipped with a private bathroom. The major drawback for me was that toilet paper could not be flushed into the toilet, but had to be discarded into a wastebasket. Although these were emptied 3 or 4 times a day, and odours were never a concern, there was still that “Yuk!” factor that I just could not get passed! Perhaps I am not made for jungle travel after all...



A river snake having lunch



26 February 2012: Sunday

This morning was our first view of the Amazon. It had rained quite a lot the night before and there was still a bit of a drizzle when we embarked for our first excursion after a hearty breakfast.

The ship had 2 skiffs, about 20 feet long I would guess, each with two 100 horsepower outboard motors. We split ourselves into two groups and, each accompanied by a naturalist, we went off in search of interesting things to see.

It was absolutely astonishing to see what the naturalists, Usiel and Johnnie, were able to spot as we rode, from what was often quite a distance: small brown bat-sized monkeys sitting in a tree, green iguanas hiding among the foliage, brown fuzzy sloths

camouflaged among tree branches, and so on. They could identify every bird that flew over the skiff and every animal that was spotted along the river banks. Usiel, in particular, had the most amazing talent for imitating bird and monkey calls. I would not have been surprised to see a monkey respond to the call by jumping on Usiel's shoulder, just to see whether he was "likely mating material"!

After the early afternoon "power nap" that would become part of our daily routine, we went off fishing for pirañas!





Earlier on, local fishermen had told our guides that they had discovered a new fishing place full of pirañas. So, on our way, we stopped by a local village and picked up two guides. A few more villagers followed in their own motorized canoes.

The entrance to this fishing paradise started through a very narrow passage, under a heavy canopy of tree branches. We made it, but not without disturbing a nest of wasps; our guide and one passenger were stung, but the rest of us escaped unscathed. We continued navigating this narrow channel; we could almost hear the moans coming from the bottom of the skiff as we kept hitting rocks and tree branches. We finally came through this channel, only to find another one just as narrow around the corner. All of a sudden, we had to come to a full stop: just ahead of us, blocking the channel, was a fallen tree that must have been at least 12 inches in diameter! But not to worry! In no time at all, one of our native guides got his chainsaw out, another one his machete, and before we knew it, the passage was clear! In all, it took over an hour to get to that heavenly fishing spot. At that point, each passenger was offered a fishing pole (in the form of a tree branch with some fishing line attached to it), a piece of meat to attach to the hook, and we were set. It took only a few minutes for the first fish to be caught, a catfish, as it turned out, and only a few more minutes for the first piranha to bite. In all, we probably got two or three dozens fish.



The Chunky Monkeys... or Usiel and the Pink Dolphins... or?

On the way back to the ship, we asked Johnnie whether he thought they would come back to the same area with the next group of passengers. His response was an emphatic “no”! I’m sure the skiff’s propellers will be relieved...

In the evening, we were treated to live music by the Chunky Monkeys, a remarkable band whose members bore a striking resemblance to members of the ship’s crew. They entertained us with lively South-American music from Peru, Cuba, Bolivia and other places. There was Edgar on the guitar, Diablito alternating between flute, panpipes and charango, Becket at the electronic keyboard, Dennis with the tambourine, Johnnie with the caracas and Usiel on the cajon drum. It was foot-tapping, hands-clapping great!

27 February 2012, Monday

The bird watching excursion planned for 6:30 that morning was cancelled because of rain. After an 8:00 am breakfast, we left to explore the Supay Creek. We continued to be amazed by Usiel's and Johnnie's keen eye.

The first interesting sighting of the day was a group of pink dolphins frolicking near our skiff. But you had to know what you were looking at! Every few minutes, something would jump out of the water, never, it seemed, where you happened to be looking at, and just as quickly disappear. Even though there were 18 cameras furiously clicking away at the sight, it is doubtful anyone actually captured an image that could categorically confirm that what we saw was a pod of dolphins!

The highlight of this afternoon excursion was a field of giant lily pads. What a beautiful sight they were!

Apparently, last night's band was no longer available, so a new band had been brought in: "Usiel and the Pink Dolphins". The players looked and sounded remarkably like the previous band members, but we were told it was a different band that had just flown in that afternoon. They were just as good as the previous ones.











28 February 2012, Tuesday

We had an early morning start: up at six, out by six thirty.

There was bit of a drizzle when we left, but it soon turned into steady rain. We explored a tributary of the Amazon. Until then, the rivers we had been on were all a murky brown, but here, the water was shiny black, due to the tanin leaching from the vegetation that grew along the riverbanks.

At about 8 o'clock, we stopped for a picnic breakfast of sandwiches, fruit, juice and coffee. The skiffs were tied under a canopy of trees to give us some refuge from the rain, which by then had increased to heavy showers.

After breakfast, we continued our journey along the river, looking for more wildlife, and then stopped for our first land excursion into the rain forest. By then, it was past 9:30; we had been away for a full three hours and nature was calling... quite persistently in

some cases. The staff had brought two portable toilets. One was quickly set up for the girls (the boys decided they had no need!), a line formed in the appropriate place and soon many "ahhhs" were heard. Finally, we split ourselves into two groups and were then ready for our walk in the jungle.

Alas, the mosquitos were also ready for us!

I thought I was well prepared: long sleeves, long pants with the bottom tucked into my socks and liberally covered with Deet. No matter: I still got bitten all over. I counted 24 bites on one ankle alone!





There were an incredible number of army ants, big, red and menacing, just waiting to catch a ride on our shoes. Big spiders were hanging from branches; a tarantula was spotted drying itself on a tree trunk. We were soon stopped as our path had become flooded. As Johnnie was clearing a new path with his machete, we heard Usiel say to his group: "Wait, I smell a snake...there is a snake nearby..." And, sure enough, he soon located a fer-de-lance snake, coiled on the ground under a tree, one of the deadliest types of snakes on the planet. It will attack without warning, and anyone bitten by it will die within a couple of hours unless they can be treated with the proper anti-venom. For local people, help is often too far away and, as a result, snakebites is a major cause of death in the Amazon.

After our customary afternoon rest, we met with Johnnie to go over the list of birds (about 100) and other animals (20 or so) that we had seen thus far.

We left at 5 pm for a night excursion. It was a lovely evening, with just a few wispy clouds in the sky. We stopped a few times to see birds, monkeys and other wildlife. At dusk, we stopped at a lake for refreshments and waited for the sun to set. The lake was black and shiny, offering wonderful water reflections of the river bank scenery bathed by the setting sun. The only thing one might have wished to make the experience more memorable was a butler to serve us a glass of champagne. We continued looking for nocturnal creatures while making our way back to the ship.

We returned at 7:30 pm and because of this late arrival, there was no band that evening!





29 February 2012: Wednesday

We left the ship at 8:00 am for an excursion along the Pacaya river. Our destination was a Rangers' station known as PV2.

Soon after we left, excited shouts were heard from the back of the skiff. Our driver had spotted something interesting. For about half a heartbeat, I thought he had found the anaconda everyone wanted to see. And indeed he had..... only it was a dead one. Our guide thought that the most likely reason for a dead anaconda to be found on the river bank was that the animal had become entangled in a fisherman's net and had either died there or been killed by the fisherman. It must have been dead for a couple of days, because the putrefaction process had already started, as evidenced by the smell!



After a brief stop at a temporary Rangers' station staffed by volunteers (and an opportunity to use rather primitive bathroom facilities), we arrived at Tamara Lake, where we had the opportunity to see some Howling Monkeys.

We resumed our trip and soon came to a point where the river had become completely covered with vegetation and was thus un-navigable for about a mile. Thankfully, a detour, consisting of a very narrow, winding channel, had been made by the Rangers, and so we were able to continue our journey. At one point, in a particularly narrow part of the channel, the skiff stopped and we were told to cover ourselves as completely as possible, as a large wasp net had been spotted on a tree branch, just about head-high for anyone sitting on that side of the skiff. In no time at all, we were all hiding under our ponchos, covering our faces with hats, towels, jackets or anything else we happened to have. What a sight we must have made under our improvised blue, yellow and green burkas!

It was already 11:30 by the time we got to the Ranger station. A few adventurers went for a swim, the avid fishermen in the group went fishing, and the rest of us hovered over the staff who were trying to set up our picnic lunch.

After lunch, we made our way back to the ship, stopping anytime someone spotted anything interesting. We arrived at 2:30, in time for the afternoon siesta.

At 4:00 pm, the ship's chef gave us a cooking lesson. We prepared "juannes", a mixture of rice and chicken flavoured with garlic and turmeric, olives and hard-boiled eggs, placed on plantain or banana leaves, tied into single-serving bundles with balsa wood strips, then boiled or steamed for 30 minutes. "Juannes" are traditionally served on June 24th, St John-the-Baptist day.





At the Ranger's Station



Iguana hanging tight....

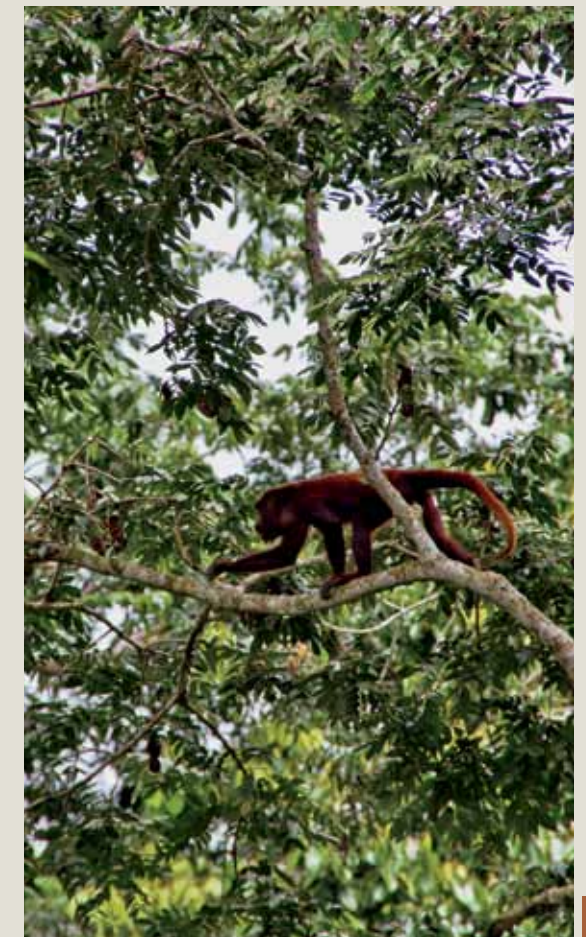
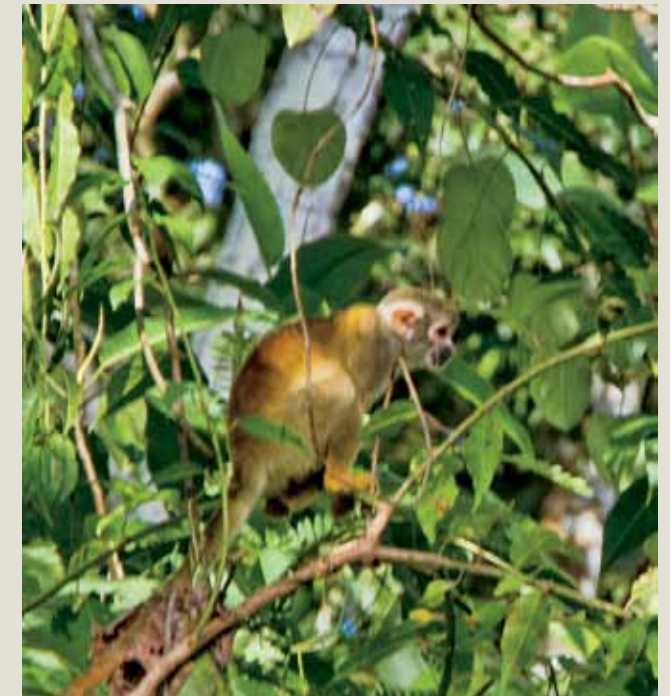


In preparation for the next day's excursions, we met again at 4:30 pm and Usiel gave a brief lecture about the people who inhabit the Amazon, known as the Ribereños, or River People. He explained that, contrary to what we might have heard, the small villages along the Amazon are not homogeneous tribes, but its people are of mixed origin. This is because the tradition is that when two young people decide to live together (usually, there is no formal marriage, only a local blessing by the parents), the couple will move to the man's village, thus creating a constant exchange of people among neighboring villages.

One of the most common ways for young people to meet is through inter-villages soccer matches. Indeed soccer is so popular that the main communal buildings (e.g. school and community hall) are often arranged around the soccer field.

The Ribereños are very poor, eking a living from agricultural crops (bananas, maize, rice), fishing and/or hunting, depending on the season. The larger villages have an elementary school (grades 1 to 5); children from the smaller villages must travel up to 3 hours by canoe to get to school and all children must either travel or move to the larger cities for high school.

That night's entertainment was provided by "Diablito and the Howling Monkeys". I am still puzzled that they should look and sound so much like the previous bands....



Monkeys



A few of the
124 species of birds
that we saw...



1 March 2012: Thursday

The focus of the activities that day was cultural.

We disembarked from the ship at 9:30 am to visit the Village of Casa Grande. After a brief walk along the main path, we went to visit the house of Carlos and his wife Malvina. Johnnie made the introductions and Carlos answered our questions about life in the village. A group of small children sat on the porch with us; a young boy who appeared to be about 10 years old came from the house to join us, a small parrot on his shoulder. He was introduced to us as Joel, Carlos' youngest child. Then Malvina invited us in to show us her kitchen, or what passes for a kitchen in that part of the world: a small burning fire, a few cooking and eating utensils and a table on which to put the food. No chairs: people normally eat sitting on the wood plank floor.

After our visit with Carlos and Malvina, we made our way to the Community Hall to visit with the children. As we entered the building, a group of about 30 children ranging in ages from 5 to maybe 12 were assembled in the centre, while many others, perhaps 20 or so, seated themselves with some of the

village's adults and younger children on the benches that lined the rectangular hall. We placed ourselves on benches facing the children, and Johnnie, our MC for the occasion, got the show going. This started with a kind of military drill, with Johnnie as the drill Sergeant shouting the commands and the children good-naturedly following the orders. This is apparently done in all Peruvian schools every day.

Then, Johnnie asked the children if they wanted to sing a song for us. "Si!" came the answer. The song was an interactive one; we were quickly taught our lines ("Muy bien!", "Que bien" and "Muy bien" again.) We turned out to be a particularly gifted group of students and so had our lines memorized in no time at all. The song was a traditional "Welcome to our house" song and the children, emboldened by Johnnie's cheers, delivered it with much gusto! Then it was our turn. Following our enthusiastic leader Keith, we gave a rousing rendition of the Hokey Pokey. The children joined in and soon, we were all in fits of laughter, as were all the villagers present. We introduced ourselves to the children,



the children introduced themselves to us and we concluded the visit with a group photo.

As I was walking back to the ship later on, I reflected on similar interactions I had had in the past with groups of children in similarly remote villages in other parts of the world. There, I had always felt a little bit uncomfortable, like an alien voyeur trying to create a human connection that could only be a very artificial one at best. But here, I had not felt that way at all, so thoroughly caught up had I been in the enthusiasm and fun that Johnnie had managed to create. He had a truly remarkable relationship with these kids and, because of that, made the interaction a very comfortable and enjoyable one for all of us.

We returned to the ship for lunch and our daily siesta and by 4:00 pm were ready for our next excursion to another small village near Pananapura. The focus of that visit was to meet with a Maestro Shaman. The Shaman was waiting for us seated on a bench inside a gazebo-like structure. The muddy dirt floors had been lined with





wooden planks along the edges, so that we could reach our seats without getting our feet muddy. After Johnnie made the introductions, he explained the role of a Shaman and the path one had to follow to become a full-fledged Maestro. It takes 8 years of study under the guidance of an experienced Shaman. Most often, but not always, the skills are passed from father to son.

Then the Maestro showed us some of the plants and medicines that he used. He explained that he often had to walk long distances into the jungle to gather plants. These are then either brewed into a tea, eaten as is, or infused with other ingredients to create medicines for various physical afflictions (e.g. stomach aches, liver ailments) and mental problems (e.g. depression). The Shaman explained that he performed no surgery: for this, patients must be taken

to the nearest clinic, often 2-3 days away by canoe. This information session was followed by a blessing ceremony that, we were told, would bring us peace and serenity. Using a cigarette made from tobacco that he grew himself, the Shaman, chanting a blessing, blew smoke first on our bowed head and then on our receiving hands. He repeated the ritual for each one of us, after which we shook his hand, thanked him and left.

The villagers had set a small craft market and many of us bought an item or two. I chose a small woven basket for 10 soles, about \$3.

Entertainment that evening was provided by the Village People. Hmmmm... I was getting more and more suspicious about these bands: how could they look and sound so similar?



The blessing ceremony





Children of
Casa Grande

2 March 2012: Friday

A group of keen birders left at 6:00 am for a short excursion. They were back at 7:30 am for a quick breakfast and the whole group departed at 8:00 am from Nauta.

The highlight of the day was a jungle walk on Terra Firma, near San Jose de Sarapanga, on the river Marañon. This was our first real excursion in the jungle, and it was just like I imagined the jungle would look like, except that local people had prepared the way for us by building walkways and steps with railings, at least part of the way. Still, there were many patches of extremely slippery mud that could be quite hazardous, if not to our bodies, to our clothing and our egos, lest we should fall on our bums in that sticky mess!

At the end of the walk, the villagers had set up a small craft market. We all did our best to help the local economy.

In the afternoon, we had a final debrief to get a tally of all the birds and animals we had seen during our seven days aboard the Aquamarina. The final count was: mammals and other animals: 56; birds: 123.

Among the mammals and other animals that were observed were bats, sloths, monkeys (10 different kinds), pink and grey dolphins, iguanas, caimans, snakes, frogs, butterflies, pirañas and catfish. As for birds, we saw many varieties of herons, hawks, egrets, macaws, parrots, swifts, tanagers, woodpeckers, martins, swallows and, among the more exotic (for me at least), jacamars, horned screamers and caracaras.

The debrief was followed by an origami towel folding demo from our cabin boys, Edgar the Guitar Man and Diablito the Flutist.

The sunset boat ride planned for the evening had to be cancelled because of the rain.

For this, our last evening on the Aquamarina, Dennis presented a slide show of some of the photos he had taken during the tour. They were great pictures and we were very pleased to hear that each of us would be receiving a copy of the 300 plus photos he had accumulated. For those of us who had forgotten their camera battery charger (!) or whose photography skills were not yet fully developed, it was a most appreciated gesture, the more so because it was unexpected.





The bustling town of Nauta, on Río Marañón









3 March 2012: Saturday

Time to start making our way home...

Our itinerary was supposed to include a half-day stopover in Iquitos on that last day but, unfortunately, this had to be canceled when the US Embassy in Lima issued a safety warning, indicating that it had “received information that members of criminal organizations may be planning to kidnap foreigners in the Iquitos region”.³

Still, we had to leave the ship at 9:30 am,

presumably to give staff the time to prepare it for the next group. Our flight to Lima was not until 1:00 pm and most of our international flights home were not until midnight. To make this long day a bit easier on us, the tour company had arranged access to a VIP lounge in both Iquitos and Lima, as well as a day room for each of us at the Swissotel in Lima. Nonetheless, it was a very long day, especially since we had two long flights ahead of us before arriving at our next destination!

³ Source: <https://www.osac.gov/Pages/ContentReport-Details.aspx?cid=12052>





4 March 2012: Sunday

From the time we left the ship until we arrived at our hotel in San Francisco, 31 hours had elapsed. Still, after a brief power nap, I managed to spend a couple of hours at the Macy's store just down the road from our hotel... and then, I collapsed for the rest of the day.

5 March 2012: Monday

What a wonderful ending to a perfect trip!

We woke up that Sunday morning to a bright sunny day. Away from the wind, it was relatively warm. We decided to buy a day pass on the Cable Car and made our way to Fisherman's Wharf. We had a lovely and leisurely walk, and a decent, if not memorable, seafood lunch. We were back at our hotel by about 2:30, leaving me a couple of hours to go and visit the Britex Fabric store, about which I had heard so much! What a fantastic store: four floors of beautiful, high quality fabrics. I thought I had died and gone to heaven... only it was so overwhelming, I did not buy anything! I can truly say I left my heart in San Francisco, at the Britex store...

6 March 2012: Tuesday

Our flight from San Francisco to Spokane was delayed by an hour and it was almost 5:00pm by the time we got into our car for the long drive home.

One of the good things about living in our area is the ease with which we can cross the border: there is rarely more than one car ahead of us. The Canadian border guard was most efficient, and waved us through with a smile and the comment: "OK, you can go and shovel your driveway now!" We thought the joke was on him because we had seen, from our remote webcam, that there was no snow in the driveway. Alas, the joke was on us after all, as we had to suffer days and days of snow after we got home, before spring finally showed signs of coming to our area.



San Francisco



Work cited

Peru, Eyewitness Travel series, main contributor Maryanne Blacker, Dorling Kindeersley Limited, London, 2008

Acknowledgements

The following photos are courtesy of Dennis Osorio: “Pink dolphin”, p. 20; “The picnic lunch”, p. 29, bottom right; “Spider”, p. 30, bottom right; “Wasp nest”, p. 35, top right; “Monkey”, p. 39, lower left; “Blessing ceremony”, p. 44, lower left; “Patrick”, p. 60, lower left.



Patrick and Louise Krohn, 2012