THE PERUVIAN RAINFOREST

Exploring from an Amazon lodge.

(Privatair, 2007)

For anyone who suffers from vertigo, swaying on a wooden suspension bridge 75 feet above the Peruvian rainforest floor is not a preferred occupation. The bridges may be expertly anchored with steel cables, and their sides enclosed in chest-high mesh, but the overactive imagination cannot help picturing a plunge through the dense foliage to be lunched on by a vulture. So it says much for the canopy walk at Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica – the majesty of its snakewood and manchinga trees, the vividness of its bird life – that I allowed myself to be coaxed along its eight walkways – and that, having completed it, I found myself agreeing to do it all over again the next day.

The Reserva Amazonica, covering 30,000 acres, lies in the south-east of Peru, close to the Brazilian and Bolivian borders. It is inaccessible by road, so getting there means flying to Puerto Maldonado and taking a 45-minute boat trip up the Madre de Dios river, a tributary of the Amazon thinly populated with fishermen, gold prospectors and caimans. The focus of the private reserve is a beautiful and efficiently run lodge, consisting of 36 romantic wooden cabanas; but this is not just an excellent hotel in an unexpected location – it is an ecological education of the most enjoyable kind. The reception area, for example, doubles as a butterfly farm, where you can watch a gorgeous blue Morpho menelaus wind its gleaming way through the bushes, and a Caligo illioneus fold its owl-eye wings to feed on sweet bananas.

Packing for the lodge is not easy, since luggage on the boat journey is restricted to 10 kg per person, and the weather can change suddenly from tropically sticky to downright chilly: on the first night a cold snap left us clutching hot water bottles and calling for extra blankets. (The cabanas are designed for maximum coolness, so there is no glass in the windows, just

returned, tempting garish macaws from their perches, and brightening the jungle which encloses the lodge on three sides. Lying in bed listening to the call of the russet-backed oropendola – a sound like a fish leaping out of a pond – it was hard to think of a more exciting place to be.

Though most expeditions involve a boat, there are also trails leading from the lodge which provided an undemanding introduction to the rainforest. Our guide used a short stroll to instil some fundamental wisdom – for example, never shine a torch directly in an animal's face (it will leave it dazzled and vulnerable to predators). As he pointed out the enormous buttress roots of an iron tree, and a diminutive battalion of leaf-cutter ants toiling under their burden of foliage, the extremes of scale in this environment – as well as the interdependence of the smallest and the largest living creatures – became dramatically clear.

Of the other excursions available, the one most highly recommended by other guests was a morning on Lake Sandoval. Situated on the far side of the river, in the 680,000-acre Tambopata National Reserve, this unspoilt stretch of water fringed with tall, thin aguaje palms accommodates three-toed sloths, red howler monkeys, side-neck turtles, and any number of exotic birds. A less popular inhabitant is the anaconda: we met a boatman who had ill-advisedly taken on a 20-foot specimen, and only been saved by the timely arrival of a party of tourists.

Leaving the lodge in the pale dawn, we travelled upriver to a landing stage which marked the beginning of a two-mile track through the forest. The cry of a kite and a flypast of chestnut-fronted macaws greeted us; white-bellied parrots perched on the trunk of a date-laden palm, and a moth the size of my hand flopped across our path.

At the edge of a shallow creek overhung with vanilla vines, we clambered into a smaller boat and were paddled out into the lake itself. No sooner had we arrived than a commotion broke out in the shade of the bushes at the water's edge; a moment later, a family of otters the size of young seals came

whip of a tail, and one of them surfaced triumphantly with a fish clenched in its jaws. We watched enthralled for several minutes until they disappeared as suddenly as they had come.

Apart from a colony of fish-eating bats clamped flat against a tree-trunk, our other sightings were all of birds. The strangest was the turkey-sized hoatzin, which is born with claws on its wings (possibly left over from the dinosaurs); but there were also black-capped herons galore, skimming kingfishers, a diving snakebird, and a comically jerky sungrebe. The most beautiful were the smallest: neat, flamboyant red-capped cardinals, and flycatchers with glorious yellow chests. On our way back to the river we also glimpsed a pair of tamarind monkeys and a tapir's heavy footprints.

The longer excursions on offer include one to a community of Esa'Ejas, Indians whose ancestors pre-date the Incas and who still fish and hunt in a traditional way. But since our time was limited, we chose to spend an afternoon at Concepcion, an environmental centre whose grounds include one of the most unexpected sights in the Amazon basin: the rusted hulk of the boat which inspired Werner Herzog's film *Fitzcarraldo*. A century after its megalomanic owner had it hauled over a mountain in his quest to found an opera house in the jungle, the *Molly Aida* lies stranded in a muddy clearing with grass sprouting from its bows, its only passengers ghosts and mosquitoes.

We returned to rest in the seductive hammocks which swing in the porch of each cabana, before dinner in the two-storey circular wooden pavilion which serves as restaurant, bar and lounge. The menu included grilled catfish fresh from the river, palm-heart salad, and truly delicious lemon cake; the bar serves an excellent Pisco sour.

The logic of clocking up thousands of air miles in order to appreciate the rainforest is, of course, environmentally suspect. But the Reserva Amazonica aims to be carbon neutral, and guests are invited to offset the emissions from their journey via its website. Electricity is used as little as possible: there are

main building material is wood salvaged from the forest; the roofs are thatched with krisnaka leaves, and the screen doors separating each bedroom from its sitting area are woven from the liana vine.

The only shadow over our final day was my rash promise to return to the canopy walk. It was no less alarming the second time around, but the rewards were even greater. The light on the treetops was ethereal in the late afternoon, softening the green of the giant palm fronds and the reds and oranges of the flowering vines. As I watched a tiny hummingbird hovering above a vast yenchuma tree, and a black-fronted nunbird darting from its branch to seize a grasshopper in its beak, reincarnation as a three-toed sloth seemed the most enviable of career paths.