

An aerial photograph of a wide, muddy river flowing through a dense, lush green Amazon rainforest. A blue and white motorboat is in the foreground, moving down the river. In the distance, another smaller boat is visible. The riverbanks are lined with thick vegetation, including palm trees and other tropical plants. The sky is not visible, as the forest canopy fills the upper portion of the frame.

IT'S A JUNGLE OUT THERE

Perhaps you've seen the headline: "Scientist Eaten Alive by an 80-Foot Dinosaur! 20-ton prehistoric creature captured in Brazilian jungle!" Or this: "America is about to be invaded by the most destructive creatures ever to march out of the steamy jungles of the Amazon – a vast army of mutant meat-eating locusts!" And remember the 1954 sci-fi horror flick "Creature from the Black Lagoon," about the prehistoric Gill-Man who "strikes from the Amazon's forbidden depths!"

The framed fake news stories and movie poster grace the belowdecks corridors of the M/V *Tucano*. I couldn't miss them last spring as I made my way around the custom 82-foot expedition vessel that American Mark Baker built of tropical hardwoods more than two decades ago to take guests on charters in the world's largest, most species-diverse, and fertile watershed.

Baker is a man of humor and vision. Before ecotourism was a thing, he steered his life away from the logging and export business to focus on conservation issues and on escorting fellow nature lovers around the Brazilian rainforest and rivers in sustainable style – leaving a zero-carbon footprint and turning his dream into reality.

Above: A tour boat traverses the Amazon. **Above right:** Tucano was home base for exploring the UNESCO World Heritage Site. **Right:** Animals like this spider monkey were all around but were often hard to spot in the lush jungle without help from the guide.

A boating adventure on the mighty Amazon is intense, offering extraordinary species to view and surprises at every turn



“The *Tucano* traveler is curious, scared, open,” he says. “This is a place of drama. We get used to it.”

Indeed, fear strikes the heart of otherwise adventurous souls the moment you suggest a charter in the Amazon. That’s what I encountered. Suddenly, FOMO – fear of missing out – on exploring the only UNESCO World Heritage Site accessible by boat, morphs into nightmares of being eaten alive, contracting a deadly disease, or being mugged in Manaus. This charter embarkation point, a fascinating port city of 2.3 million nearly 1,000 miles inland from the Atlantic Ocean, is the Amazon’s shipping hub and a nexus of Portugal’s South American colonial past, including the late 19th century rubber boom and bust.

We all pored over the extensive pre-trip planning pamphlet crafted by Baker. "Please do not spray insect repellent or apply liquid repellent while you are in your stateroom!" he writes. "It is bad for human respiration and melts the varnish!" No one tells you that when you're browsing the aisles at a camping goods store. Baker suggests instead wearing lightweight, washable, long-sleeved tops, long pants, and socks. Yet his advice about obtaining proper immunization and a prescription for malaria are justified for travel to an environment as rich in complex plant, animal, and microbial life as the Brazilian state of Amazonas.

My fellow *Tucano* travelers – curious, well-traveled, multilingual globe-girdlers – were far more prepared than scared. Our group included a pair of outdoors-loving Australian ladies who are long-time pals, and two married couples from the U.S. The husbands were first cousins, and among them was a native Brazilian fluent in Portuguese. This came in handy.

Voyage to the heart of the Amazon

Tucano, expertly handled by a crew of eight, including captain, engineer, deckhands, chef, stewardess, and guides, was anchored at Acará, the first overnight stop on a course 200 miles northwest up the scantily settled Rio Negro, the Amazon's second largest tributary.

The east-flowing Negro, comparable in size to the Mississippi, is the largest blackwater river in the world, colored by the high concentration of dissolved organic matter. Its slow-moving waters, high in acidity and lower in nutrients than the Amazon, repel microorganisms and larval formation of insects, including mosquitos, which feed on them – good news for travelers. Another characteristic, the *Encontro das Aguas* or "meeting of the waters" of the café au lait-colored Amazon and Negro just off the Manaus waterfront, merits designation as the eighth natural wonder of the world.

In the early morning, after a rich, strong Brazilian brew in *Tucano's* wood-paneled dining room, our group glided along in sturdy plastic kayaks and took in the sights and sounds of the submerged rainforest, which, by the month of April, in all its lush green and inky black, still



had another 10 to 15 feet to rise before subsiding in June – 75 to 100 inches of rainfall a year.

Trunks, logs, vines, and branches below and above the water made for interesting navigation. Intermittent bird squawking and percussive insect noises, along with the rippling sounds of the humus-rich water past our shallow hulls,

were interrupted by commentary and the occasional whack of a machete by our lead, senior guide Alex. Otherwise, all was still and silent, until I heard a faint snorting sound. Something was following me.

Crescent forms of curious pink river dolphins, freshwater relative to their marine cousins, danced around. The



Once seated in the launch, all we really needed to do was look, listen, and think. The Amazon rainforest is known as part of the ‘lungs of the planet,’ generating 20% of the world’s oxygen, its trees critical in reducing pollution.

light of these early hours drew out the brilliant gold and greens of macaws in flight. I took care each time I dipped my paddle in my morning kayak explorations and stayed present for these precious moments.

Ashore was another matter: There are no trails as one enters the dense rainforest, only an endless curtain of tree, epiphytes, vines, and branches as far around and skyward as you can tilt your head back to see. Every time I grabbed a tree branch to steady myself on the soft and uneven jungle floor, I could feel how chockablock it was with biomass. Needle-length thorns protruded from limbs and fallen leaves. My every step was taken with heightened attention, and it was easy to imagine a sense of claustrophobia in such opaque, humid surroundings.

Field observation comes with no guarantee of spectacular displays of natural delights. The incomprehensible abundance of plant and animal life – half the plant and animal species in the world exist in the Amazon! – is paradoxically elusive. So, while jaguars, eagles, sloths, and spider monkeys roamed around us,

they were hard to find.

“Even birds with glamorous plumages can be remarkably silent, still, and difficult to spot in the dense, shaded foliage,” writes naturalist John Kricher in *The New Neotropical Companion*. “Patience, persistence, keen eyes, and a measure of luck are required.”

We learned so much while quietly looking closely. Encounters with trains of industrious leaf-cutter ants were frequent. The bits of leaves they carry to their underground colonies aren’t food – they’re used to build a bed that’s cultivated to produce a fungus that becomes the food. Such a complicated ritual is but one microscopic example of how wildlife adapts and survives in the Amazon’s mysterious, vast ecosystems.

As for bird-watching, we were lucky to have the trained eyes of our guides. By the end of the charter, the count of bird species spotted and listed on a wall chart outside our *Tucano* dining room was nearly 50.

When we weren’t learning

about how critters survive, Alex showed us ways humans survive in the jungle. He deftly extracted water and a milk-like substance from tree branches, found clusters of Brazil nuts for us to sample, and showed us how to fashion a blowgun from a limb. The weapon would come in handy if the jaguars and peccaries (a strain of boar) approached and you needed to hide out high up in a tree, he mentioned with a smile.

These magical early morning kayak outings and hearty mid-morning jungle walks were two of four daily excursions off the boat. The other two – late-afternoon and nighttime wildlife observation sessions from the boat’s launches – occur at staggered times throughout the day, interrupted by passages to the next anchorage and meals.

Scenery, silence, then sounds made these relaxing late-day adventures memorable. Once seated in the launch, all we really needed to do was look, listen, and

Guests enjoyed exploring the depths of the Amazon by kayak and on foot, as well as through binoculars from the deck of the boat.





think. The Amazon rainforest is known as part of the “lungs of the planet,” generating 20% of the world’s oxygen, its trees critical in reducing pollution. Baker’s practice was to have the crew use the noisy, conventional Yamaha diesel outboards to speed us to our observation site, then deploy the quiet Torqeedo electric outboards so we could drift in the shallows and appreciate this rainforest that has existed for tens of millions of years.

If I were an artist, I’d paint the mossy scenery in acrylics, so lush and dark it was against the glassy black water and the powder-blue sky. A symphony of critter noises was what sold the group on the nighttime outings, as did the backdrop.

“Mesmerized by the reflections,” said crew mate Julie Kluz, “I couldn’t tell what was water, what was horizon. It was an out-of-body experience.”

Eat, drink, sleep, shower sustainably

Tucano’s daily schedule of activities allowed generous free time; no excursions were mandatory. Dining was one feast after another, served buffet-style.

The socializing among the nine guests was as rich an adventure as those in the jungle. The scrumptious fare included hot dishes made from fresh, local chicken, fish, and free-range beef. Vegetarians were happy, too; every meal included vegetables, rice, sweet potatoes, pasta, beans, cheeses, and fresh-baked goods.

Breakfast was an affair unto itself, with fresh tropical fruits, including fried

Tucano’s rich, wood-paneled dining room was a hub of activity.

plantains, eggs prepared several ways, porridge, and yogurt. Extraordinary baked goods whipped up by chef Dione were made with manioc flour derived from the cassava root. Beverages, aside from bottomless coffee, tea, and water refills, included freshly squeezed, unsweetened juices of pineapple, guava, soursop, acai, and orange.

A solar-powered water system avail-

If you go

» **Season:** Year-round. Rainy season mid-December to mid-May, temperatures in the 80s. Dry season August to November, temperatures in the 90s.

» **Rates/accommodations:** Cabins accommodate one to three travelers. Four nights, \$2,000/person in a double cabin. Six nights, \$3,450/person. Airfare and other fees excluded.

» **Three great books** to whet your appetite:

The River of Doubt: Theodore Roosevelt’s Darkest Journey by Candice Millard

The New Neotropical Companion by John Kricher

Amazon: The Flooded Forest by Michael Goulding – **E.L.**

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able 24/7 complemented an on-demand system that is turned on for a good bacteria-cleansing scrub after our morning jungle walks. Both systems draw directly from the clean water of the remote and unpopulated anchorages of the Rio Negro. All the boat's diesel-consuming systems, including air conditioning, were shut off for several hours daily.

Baker's design purposely includes large, screened windows that let in natural light and breezes. Solar panel-covered outdoor areas, particularly the top observation deck, keep passengers out of direct sunlight. Solar power is

used for illumination and galley refrigeration. Instead of single-use plastic water bottles, each guest receives a reusable aluminum water bottle stamped with the *Tucano* brand to use during the charter and take home. Linens are changed every other day. All trash is separated, returned to Manaus, and recycled when possible.

Meeting of the waters

Every great adventure comes with a grand finale. As the sole vessel at each of our nightly anchorages, we'd cruised the couple hundred miles northwest

trusting the internal GPS of Darlan, our captain, as there are no navigational markers in the Amazon. Darlan then reversed our route, heading southeast, and on this last joyful full day, we'd remain aboard to bird watch while he drove *Tucano* toward Manaus.

High up on the vessel's observation deck, our perspective gave us a different view. As we sipped coffee and *Tucano* cruised slowly, parrots, toucans, and macaws revealed themselves, along with

The Encontro das Águas, or Meeting of the Waters, is the confluence of the sandy-colored Amazon River and the dark Rio Negro. The waters run side by side for nearly 4 miles without mixing – a phenomenon visible from space.

an array of species rarer than my basic birder curriculum covered. In the distance, Alex pointed out a brown-throated three-toed sloth in the canopy of a tree, and we spied on him as he did the slow dance to his next feeding spot.

Anchored for a lunch stop, we descended into the launches and motored to a sandy beach. Swimming in water I can't see through was never high on my bucket list, but I dove in for a few cooling laps, until the opening scenes of "Jaws" sprang to mind, and I headed to shore to towel off.

If swimming in the same waters as the Gill-Man isn't enough of a thrill, how about witnessing two differently colored rivers run alongside each other without mingling? Before *Tucano* motored to that confluence and I saw it myself, the coffee-milk colored Amazon next to the black of the Negro, it was hard to imagine, even though I'd seen photos. Their differences in composition, flow rate, temperature, and density contribute to this phenomenon, which is visible from space. From the Amazon, I'd expect no less of a cosmic show.