

The routine on the Amazon River charter worked well. Crewmen tied "The Discoverer" to the banks of the big river at night; every morning at 6 a.m., the guide and the pilot took us in a dinghy to a lake, or on a special walk in the jungle. After four hours, we returned for a big breakfast of special omelet and thick slices of half-cured bacon so full of cholesterol that grease blocked the circulation of the air around the platter.

In the heat of the day, the captain sailed further upstream. December through May is the rainy season. Short downpours sent us undercover, but having only six clients aboard, the deck on the stern offered plenty of space to read, or glass out the shore by binoculars.

On the walks, small children appeared from the thickets. Barefooted little fellows, they trailed along gawking at our ineptitude in the mush and brambles of the forest. The shoreline fluctuates so much, where we hiked one day might have been 10 or 15 feet under water the week before. So the trails were plenty slippery.

Mossy logs, felled by the natives, served as bridges for the people and tests for the gringos' sense of balance. At one stream, the family living close by offered the use of their dugout canoe. The first American to sit in the boat mashed it down in the mud so deep, our guide had to find another way to ford the stream. Lots of dugouts passed by our boat carrying three or four people, however, the jungle denizens don't have Dunkin Donut shops for morning breaks like we do. Later, we took a swim under a waterfall in clear backwater. It was obvious Amazon dugouts weren't designed to transport swimmers of those proportions.

Like all forests, birds and game hid in the deep overgrowth. Tiny squirrel monkeys rustled the leaves and a bird called the oro pendela warbled a song like a lovely note by a harpist. The shafts of light and the enormous trees cast a spell. Sometimes forcing the boat to shore through thick stands of reeds, we'd float across a pond of huge lily pads, blooming in white blossoms and decorated by jacana birds, who skim across the leaves and moss as nimble as birds walk on the ground.

Primary forest along the Amazon grows 900 metric tons of plant life per hectare. Of this, only 3.9 tons are beneficial to man and the animals. Secondary growth allows more sunlight to pass through, so cuts and burns become thicker than the virgin forest, yet produce fewer fruits and berries.

The guides carried machetes to clear the paths. We had to watch for thorns and trees harboring ferocious ants underneath the bark. Fisherman have to be careful not to drift under these trees as the ant will fall over in the boat and exact horrible stings. All life seemed to be well nourished, including the people, who not only harvest the fruits and roots of the jungle for food, but also depend on it for medicines and thatch and bamboo for their houses.

One morning, the guide grabbed my walking stick and tried to pin down a big red copper-colored snake he called a "suzzia." He kept apologizing in Spanish and English for allowing the snake to escape. Water oozed up around my wading shoes, sweat poured down my back and vapor fogged up my bifocals. I took a wide swing at a vine brushing my ear. Seconds later a shadow caused me to feint to the left and crouch into a bellicose stance ready to strangle any snake in the jungle. Medical help is so far away on the Amazon, folks can recover from the seven-year itch before they ever see a doctor, much less help for a snakebite.

I had been schooled on jungle reptiles before I boarded the Discoverer. My Uncle Mark spent 20 years helping build the Pan American Highway down through the wilds of Bolivia and into Peru. He saw a boa constrictor die from swallowing a longhorn cow head first. She had a horn spread of 28 inches. He claimed when the snake constricted, the horns poked out through the boa's ribs and deflated his air sack, meaning immediate suffocation. The first time I reported the story for the Livestock Weekly, Uncle Mark thought Time magazine had verified the kills; later on a retraction changed the news source to a Boston newspaper and sawed eight inches off the cow's horns, showing a total overall reduction in the size of the snake's mouth of 16 inches.

The same day we saw the snake, we stayed up on a tributary after dark, headlighting caiman, the huge crocodile of the Amazon. A tree frog jumped over in my lap; had there been a minnow bucket in the boat, I'd of kicked it 40 feet high.

My traveling partner, Harry, scolded me for pounding the bottom of the boat. Up in the bow, a boy snatched a two-foot caiman from the water in a quick throat lock and brought him twisting and snapping on board. "Touch him, Monte!" a lady squealed. I knew then it was going to take a mighty sly snake to catch me off guard ...

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