

Tip-toeing through the rainforest

Luxury resort in Peru's Amazon wonderland was sheer magic

BY LINDA BATES, SPECIAL TO THE PROVINCE JULY 15, 2012

"There's been a man in my room - and he took a shower!" I announced to the other members of my tour group at dinner. I explained that there was a huge pair of black men's sandals - size 12 at least - beside my bed, the bath mat was on the floor, obviously used, and there was a towel hanging beside the shower.

This of course caused somewhat of a stir, but I was more bemused than upset. We were at Inkaterra Amazonia, a luxury eco-resort in Peru's Amazon rainforest, all of our cabins looked alike, and there was no way to lock them from the outside. I could see how someone who had one too many pisco sours (Peru's delicious national drink) might stumble into the wrong cabin. I was relieved to learn you could lock them from the inside, so I figured I'd just put the big shoes on the front porch and lock myself in for the night. As far as intruders go, I was more concerned about the little buzzing ones that might get through the mosquito netting.

Inkaterra Reserva Amazonia is in the Tambopata National Reserve on the Madre de Dios River, a 45-minute boat ride from Puerto Maldonado, and we had been well cared for from the moment we arrived, greeted with drinks and then given information about the many excursions available, all included in the daily price.

We decided to start with a two hour Rainforest by Night walk. As we crept through the jungle with our flashlights, our guide Jackson (who grew up on his family's Brazil nut farm close by) pointed out night creatures like stick insects, birds, snakes, and several kinds of tarantulas. Suddenly Jackson asked us all to be quiet and simply take in the sounds of the rainforest at night. What had seemed silent when we were all talking and crashing through the bush revealed itself as a cacophony of sound. It was magical.

There seemed to be no question Jackson could not answer. The seventh of eight children, he didn't wish to join the family farm but rather went to university, on borrowed money, to study reptiles. His obvious affection and respect for the jungle and its creatures informed our visit. Jackson really proved his worth on the half-day Lake Sandoval excursion. After a short boat ride and a three-kilometre walk through the rainforest (dodging huge mud pits along the way) we arrived at the tranquil lake where we boarded a canoe. There we saw a monkey and many beautifully coloured birds (macaws, parakeets and more) but unfortunately no giant otters, for which the lake is renowned. Tiny bats clung to a tree near the water while butterflies delicately alighted on our arms, drawn, said Jackson, by the "salt in our bodies".

As much as we enjoyed the excursions, we were always ready to go back to eat. The food, prepared by 30-year-old culinary school graduate Raul Camayo Luya, was surprisingly and consistently good, given that we were in the middle of nowhere. This isolation turned out to be

the kitchen's strength, as almost all the food we ate was sourced locally, much of it from the nearby Gamitana farm, a model for sustainable agriculture in the Amazon, which not only provides produce for the restaurant, but takes back the leftovers to feed to the livestock.

For lunch the poached fish with ginger, leeks and basil drew raves, and, although I'm not usually a big meat eater, the grilled beef tenderloin with spinach risotto and persimmon chutney was so good I had another beef dish the second night. Another favourite was fish steamed in bamboo sections, charcoal braised, with rice and spicy Brazil nut sauce. Desserts, like coconut creme caramel, were equally good.

Meals and drinks were served in a large airy central lodge with a cozy upstairs area for socializing. Dinners began with a "happy hour" free pisco sour, which usually led to more. Our rooms, our private cabanas, were set out along the river in rows. We felt like something in Out of Africa, with our huge beds and soft linens, ceiling fans and private screened-in porches with hammocks. After dinner, we'd return to cabins lit by kerosene lamps. (There was electricity too, but only at night.) Along the pathways we saw monkeys, birds and many agoutis, large rodents native to the area.

I said private cabana, but was mine really private? Well, it turned out, yes. There was no man with big sandals in my room. When two staffers accompanied me back I learned that the maid had put the black rubber sandals beside the bed, and she had taken out the bath mat and put it outside the shower, too. The towel was one I had used, but it completed the picture so well I saw it as part of the fiction. "Do you want different sandals?" the young woman who walked me back to my cabin asked, thinking perhaps that was my concern.

Well, I thought, I certainly don't want men's size 12. Unless, of course, there's a nice tall man to go with them. Alas, it was not to be.

Specials start at \$452 US per person for three days and two nights, which includes all meals and excursions and transportation from Puerto Maldonado.

Our tour was arranged by Only Latin America Tours of Richmond, B.C., onlylatinamericatours.com or 1-866-978-2997.

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