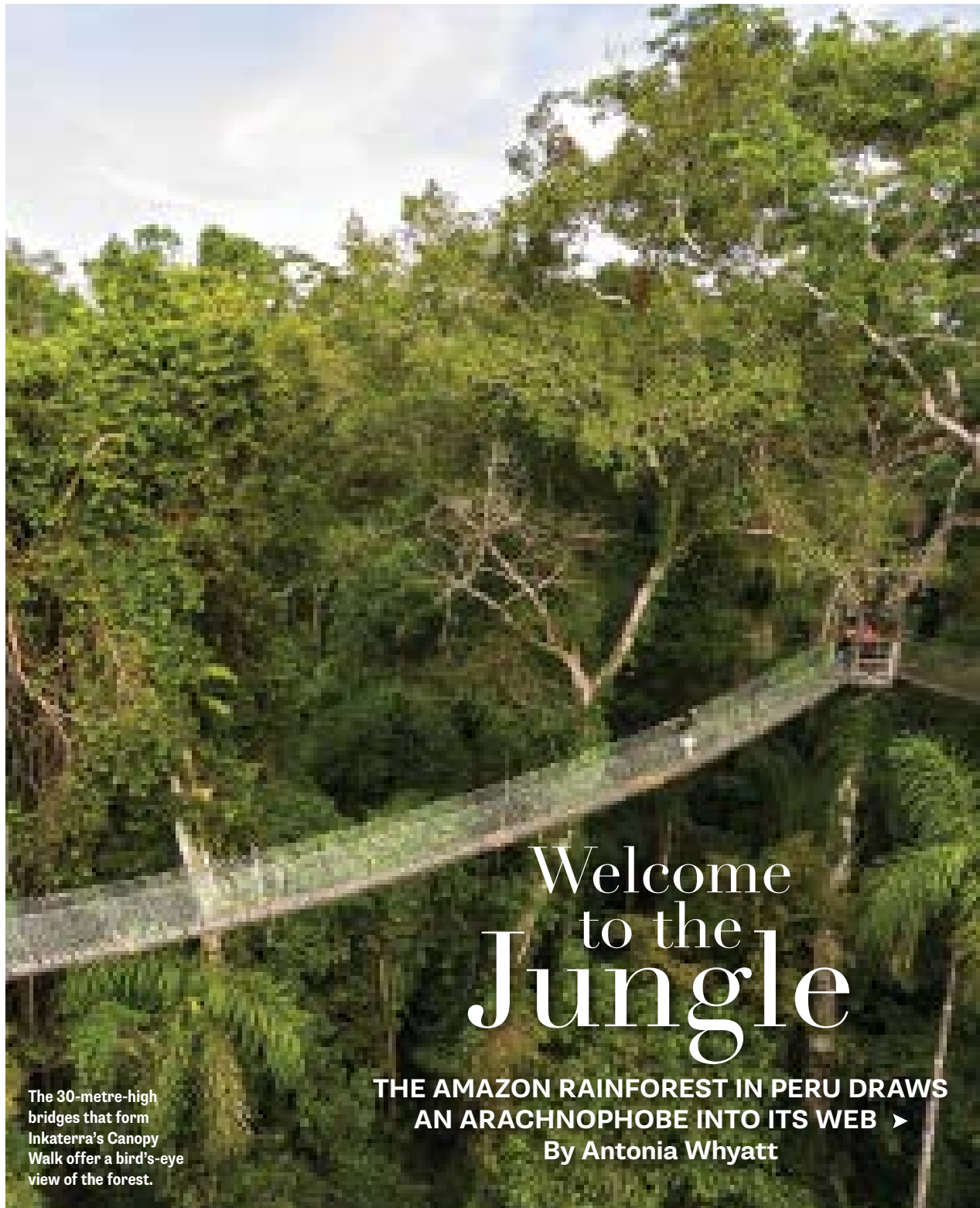


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Welcome to the Jungle

**THE AMAZON RAINFOREST IN PERU DRAWS
AN ARACHNOPHOBIC INTO ITS WEB ▶**

By Antonia Whyatt

The 30-metre-high bridges that form Inkaterra's Canopy Walk offer a bird's-eye view of the forest.

PHOTOGRAPHY, CARLOS VALLEJO/PROMPERU



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he muddy, roiling Madre de Dios river is my first glimpse of the Amazon, the rainforest-blanketed river basin that covers almost seven million square kilometres and stretches across eight borders. It is the beginning of the rainy season, and floods upstream have caused this Peruvian tributary of the Amazon River to rise by over two metres; the current's eddies and ripples carry huge branches and even the occasional tree. We are in Puerto Maldonado, a town of 85,000 at the confluence of the Tambopata and Madre de Dios rivers, to take a boat to our



Clockwise from top: An eco-cabaña at Inkaterra; the Liana vine's bark is used by locals to regulate blood sugar; one of the pink-toed tarantulas spotted on our night walk; the mighty Madre de Dios river; a katydid grasshopper; the author canoeing on Lake Sandoval with guide Paulo Canales and fellow journalist Claire Sibboney. The lake has black caiman, giant river otters and piranhas. Opposite: a mango and green papaya salad.



lodge. Civilization slips away as we head 45 minutes downriver.

The southern Peruvian jungle – *la selva*, in Spanish – near the Bolivian border is one of the most biodiverse places on Earth. There are more than 10,000 species of plants, 650 birds and 1,200 butterflies, as well as jaguars, anacondas, piranhas and alligator-like caiman. Layers of green line the riverbanks, where palm-like *caña brava* fronds and tangled vines give way to towering cecropia trees. Apparently they are a favourite with slow-moving sloths, although I never did spot one.

The air is sweet, cossetingly humid and thick with chattering, cooing, trilling and screeching from birds, frogs and insects as we pull up to Inkaterra. The Peruvian-owned luxury eco-lodge, built using native materials, is 100 per cent carbon neutral, and preserves over 17,000 hectares of original forest. We follow one of several paths (made from sawn-off logs) that fan out toward 35 *palapa*-roofed cabañas on stilts placed a discreet distance apart. They all have screened-in porches with colourful hammocks, bedrooms with waist-high screened windows that allow the breeze to come through and feather-light curtains that drop down to keep you modest – any sound from neighbours is drowned out by a resonant wall of jungle noise. Bright tropical flowers dot the grounds, adding to the idyllic, castaway feel.

Dinner in the main lodge is delicious, haute-jungle cuisine; salad with green mango and papaya, followed by pork belly glazed with passionfruit. I round it off at the charming, tiki-style bar with a pisco sour. Night falls fast and, as our Inkaterra guide Paulo Canales shepherds us to our huts, I almost forget I am walking through a teeming ecosystem.

Then Canales, who grew up in the jungle, casually points his flashlight up at a roof covering part of the walkway, and there, practically above my head, is a salad-plate-sized tarantula. I have been known to run screaming from dock spiders, so I take a few deep breaths and try to control an involuntary shiver as I walk underneath, praying it is velcroed to the roof. After seeing the tarantula, I am not enthused by the night walk on our itinerary the next evening. I can do big scary things, like bears, sharks and snakes, but if I encounter anything with too many legs, a carapace or antennae, my heart rate soars.

The next night I approach my outfit like a tactical soldier, tucking my trousers deep into my trusty lodge-loaned rubber boots, securing my T-shirt in my waistband so nothing can wiggle down and covering my arms in a long-sleeved shirt to avoid any unpleasant brushes with nature. Six metres from the main lodge, at the edge of the forest, Canales shines his powerful torch on a branch. Dangling elegantly from a tree is a long, pencil-slim cat snake, named for its vertically elliptical pupils. As we walk forward, still

on lodge grounds, Canales swings his light up to a palm tree near my cabaña. There, on the trunk, about two metres up, is a pink-toed tarantula. The spider's thick legs seem ready to spring, its large abdomen and hairy body make my skin prickle, and its eight pink "toes" are clearly visible. Canales describes how they live up in the palm fronds and come out at night to eat insects, tree frogs and lizards.

But the spider stays reassuringly still. As Canales explains, tarantulas are ambush predators, and use their webs to sense movement and trap prey. They'd rather stick to their little patch of palm or forest floor than go on the attack. They do have a few nifty defence systems, harpoon-shaped hairs with urticating (stinging) barbs that, if you touched them, would cause a painful rash. Pink-toes shed the hairs upon contact, while other tarantulas, like the Goliath bird-eater – the world's largest spider, which Canales finds deeper in the jungle underneath leaf litter – launch their barbed hairs by rubbing their legs together, sending them out into a would-be assailant's eyes and skin, like miniature missiles. Annoying, but not deadly.

Strangely, despite the oversized arachnids surrounding me, I felt calm when I returned to my cabin. Now that I had seen the tarantulas and had a sense of their place in the ecosystem, I was able to replace fear with understanding. As much as I was wowed during the day by the vibrant macaws, golden-crested hoatzin, blue morpho butterflies, capuchin and spider monkeys leaping through the canopy, the intimacy of the night walk and watching the tarantulas shifted my perception of the creepier parts of nature.

That night, with fans whirring over the bed, the soft evening air enveloping me and my mosquito net tucked firmly under the mattress, I felt incredibly peaceful as I listened to the calls of the night creatures. This is why we go to the wilder places on the map: to confront the unknown, to centre ourselves in nature's web and reconnect with our prehistoric, limbic selves. I will come back here often in my mind, and one day I hope to return to commune with my new friends – and maybe overcome another fear, scorpions. ☒

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