

# ADVENTURE

TRAVEL

WINTER

# ESCAPES

FRANCE

ADVENTURE IN THE ALPS

SOUTH AMERICA

INTO THE HEART OF THE AMAZON

DISCOVER BRITAIN

EPIC WEEKEND BREAKS

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WELCOME TO THE

# JUNGLE

*Maxwell Roche* heads to the Amazon in search of an authentic jungle experience and he finds exactly what he was looking for...



“L

ike this,” said our guide Eliceo as he allowed one large ant to escape from a tightly clenched fist before quickly grabbing it between forefinger and thumb. Showing us the precise point at which to bite, he nibbled off the abdomen and proceeded to chew, raising his eyebrows now and then in satisfied surprise. “Tastes like lemons,” he said, offering a fresh one up to me, the poor creature still wriggling in the interest of his/her freedom.

I screwed my face up and reluctantly did as I was told, masticating tentatively until the potent flavour flooded my taste buds. He wasn’t kidding, the mini beast, not beyond 1cm long, was packing more ginger and lemongrass punch than a tablespoon of Thai green curry. “Eighty percent of the world’s food originates from here in the Amazon,” said Eliceo, chomping back a few more arthropods in quick succession “Do you guys not get these back home?”

Two months prior to our zesty six-legged lunch, my cousin and life-long adventure buddy Murray and I had been systematically scouring Her Majesty’s internet from our respective kitchen tables. We were ready to indulge our shared intrigue in a destination that is close to the top of almost every self-respecting travellers list; we planned, in order to gain the most authentic perspective, to explore for 10 days in classic fashion, both on foot and by traditional long boat, an area named Tres Fronteras, which marks the border between the Colombian, Peruvian and Brazilian Amazon.

Since even the most adventurous souls among us might find the prospect of 10 days on foot in such a steamy wilderness daunting, we had decided to enlist the help of a local guide, not only to ensure safe passage but also to guarantee a fully authentic and immersive experience. Luck, it would seem, was on our side because before long we found exactly the man for the job; Eliceo of Large Minority Adventures, a 30-year-old Amazonian gent born into a life of semi-nomadic hunter gathering, raised in the depths of the Colombian jungle. Lucky for us, Eliceo, speaker by some miracle of immaculate English, had forgone his traditional life aged 20 to become a wilderness guide. Over email he had enticed us with the promise of tribal interaction, wildlife encounters and indigenous pursuits. “Bring long trousers,” he’d said, “and a sense of humour... if you’ve got one.”

Eight weeks later we were boarding a plane in Bogota, Colombia’s mountain-fringed capital, on the final leg of our journey, the 600-mile flight south-east to the town of Leticia, at the dark heart of the indomitable Amazon. My luck was in and a stunning South American stewardess ushered me to a window seat. Murray the tyrant, knowing the window seat to be of high prize on a daytime flight in fine weather, tried to skip past and steal it from me. Fortunately, I’m a step ahead and manage to bat him away. It’s just as well I do too, since the next few hours of window-wangling are the finest of my life. The jungle below stretched like thick green shag-pile dappled with the shadows of towering cumulous clouds and framed by rainbows so numerous ►



HACKING AWAY AT THE UNDERGROWTH

## WHO'S WRITING?



**MAXWELL ROCHE** (like the chocolate but without the accent) is a literature graduate who spends time in antiquarian bookshops taking great long sniffs. He also hurls himself off, down or into anything for a story or a photograph, and travels in search of a view, because it's all about the view. He's a desperate climber, addicted surfer and frivolous cyclist, horrified by the prospect of missing out and tormented by indecision regarding his future.

they interweaved like the fibres on a knitted jumper. Occasionally, the forest was split by a slim waterway that snaked beyond my window's edge, but never for long. "Are people living down there?" I thought to myself, "Unknown to civilisation... microscopic amid the epic claustrophobia?" I'm certain that they are, and found myself comforted thinking, "If there are secrets left on Earth, this is where they'll be."

"Meet Soro, he's a Huitoto (we-toe-toe) tribesman," said Eliceo. "We'll be staying with him and his family this evening at his home, a traditional maloca long house three hours hike from here." We shook hands with Soro, a lithe, wild, and intensely friendly looking man despite black eyes, a Mohican hairdo, extensive neck tattoos and a wicked wooden spike the width of my index finger protruding from one pierced and stretched earlobe. Murray and I dove into our backpacks and changed for the hike. I set about removing my trousers and hop into a fresh pair of shorts, before crouching down to tie my shoelaces. Even this, the tiniest level of aerobicity, sent sweat cascading down my forehead and off the end of my nose.

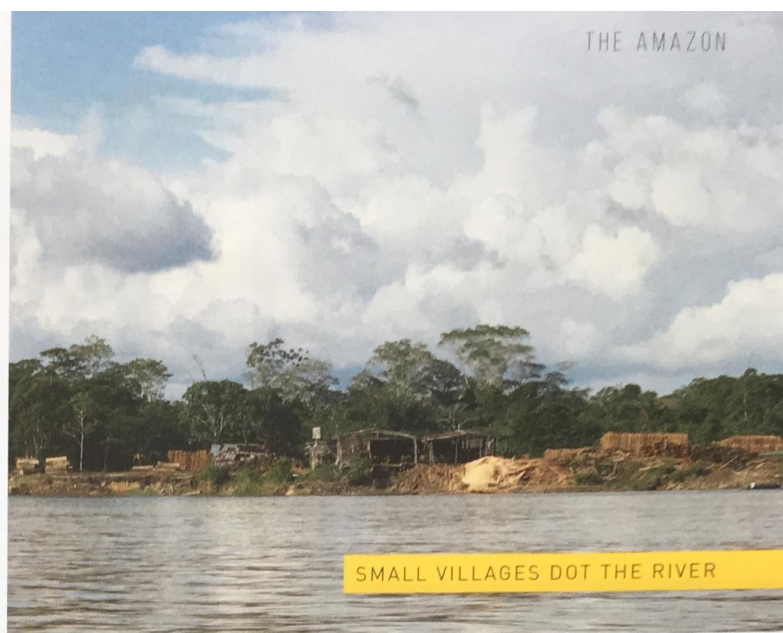
The humidity, according to Eliceo, was at 91% following heavy rains in preceding weeks. Sweating in the jungle, it turned out, is totally pointless. Excess body heat cannot be carried away by evaporation, since evaporation can hardly happen. Feeling similarly stifled, Murray exhaled in apathetic exaggeration as we wiped our foreheads in unison. Soro meanwhile, who was dressed in thick dark jeans and long sleeves, stood amused and unaffected, skin as matte as the river below a clouded sky. To

pass the time he begun absently whittling and weaving, from thin vines found close by, some jungle-style jewellery, bracelets and necklaces with which we were later adorned.

"That is a pigmy marmoset," explained Eliceo, pointing to a featureless spot on the trunk of a tree no more than six feet away. "It's the smallest monkey on the planet." Murray and I squinted together in the indicated direction seeing nothing but bark and leaves. Eventually, a tiny brown face appeared from behind the trunk. As I looked into the eyes of the pocket-sized primate, gleaming like polished marbles, a calm came over me. A light rain began to plonk onto the branches, leaves and moss-covered rocks around us, which in turn fired earthen aromas skyward, lowering the frequency of insect noise to a muffled hum. We'd been hiking for over two hours and I had unconsciously been in a state of extreme focus. Like a man freshly landed on a Martian planet I'd been treading lightly, teeth clenched, hot and bothered, anxious and skittish, tensing at the slightest tickle from leaf or stick. I gazed for a while longer into the eyes of the miniature monkey and enjoyed the babbling of brown waters from a nearby stream. Little did I know, as my anxiety slowly ebbed away, and I began to enjoy our brief hiatus from the hike, Murray was creeping up behind me with malign intent; he was clutching a baby Caiman caught by Soro down by the stream. I felt a sudden weight on my shoulder, looked to my right and straight into the prehistoric gaze of the hissing, needle-toothed reptile. Everyone was bent double with laughter as I dove, in fright, face first into a muddy puddle. "I'll have my revenge," I thought, shaking a fist



THE STUNNING PIGMY MARMOSET



SMALL VILLAGES DOT THE RIVER



LIFE ON THE RIVER



SETTING UP CAMP

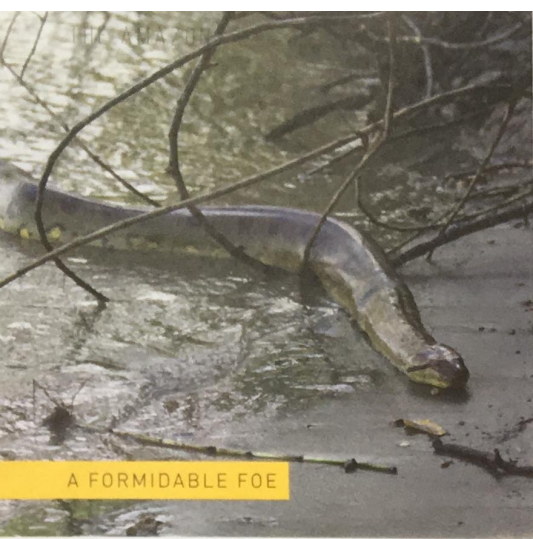
and peeling myself asunder.

"We're only two kilometres from the maloca," said Eliceo, leading us into a large clearing. Feeling all at once as though I'd stepped into a childhood dream, I observed the scene. The mighty tree that commanded the centre of the clearing couldn't be more emblematic of the jungle; with a wide trunk rocketing hundreds of feet toward the canopy and sinuous fanning roots strangled by thick woody vines that plunged into the dark littered floor before beginning their mysterious journey below. "We can use this Kapok," said Eliceo, patting the tree affectionately, "to ask Soro's mum to put the dinner on". Murray and I exchanged a confused glance. By way of explanation, Eliceo picked up a large log, which he found resting conveniently against the tree's gargantuan trunk, and began to whack one of the buttressed drum-like roots in a slow rhythmical fashion. After a succession of beats he stopped, and all fell silent. Almost immediately a faint response could be heard from the distant maloca, deep and muffled, finding its way to us despite the density of the forest.

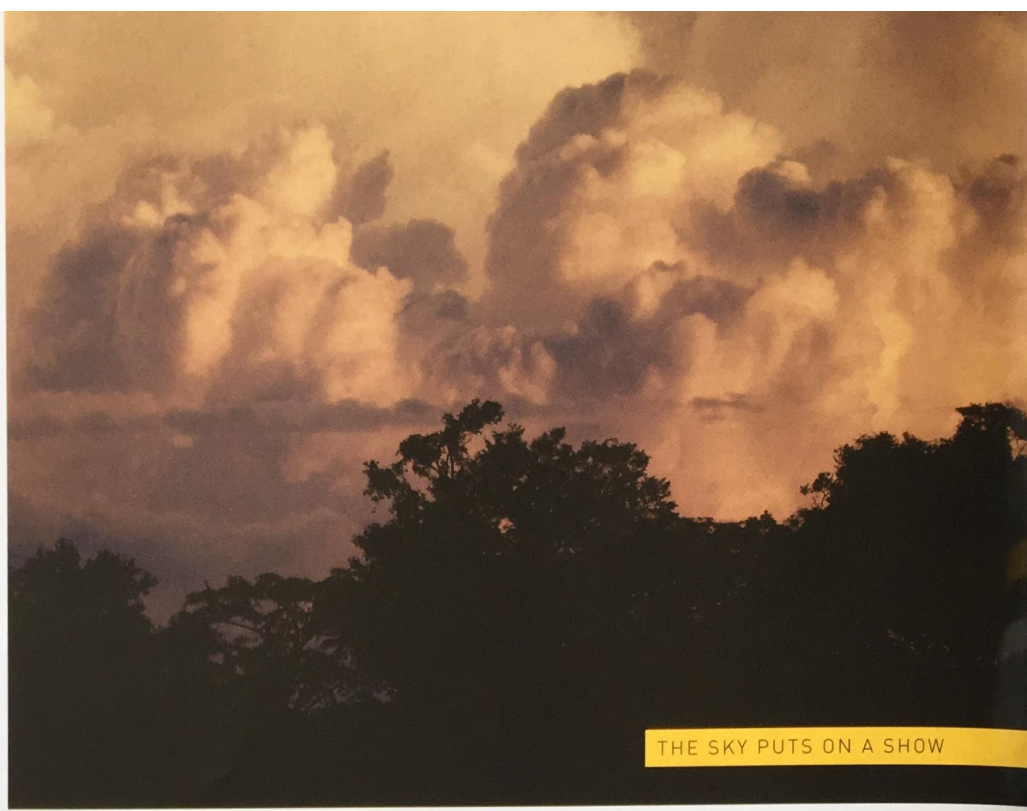
Night had nearly fallen by the time we reached the maloca and the ambient insect noise was at a full and fantastic volume. A curiously fragranced smoke, rather like hot tea, puffed from its high thatched roof adding flavour to the thick forest air as we approached. I rested a moment to take in yet another idyllic fairy-tale scene; the low hanging roof of the rectangular maloca stretching down toward the hard-packed earthen floor, stars blinking above in the partially clouded sky and palms, pushed

by the encroaching forest, leaning toward it on either side in the twilight. Eliceo and Soro lead us inside through a single solitary shoulder height door, and we sat in almost complete darkness on a ring of circular tree stumps. The mountain of drying coca leaves, suspended in a steel drum over the fire, confirmed the source of previously mentioned tea-like aromas. Soro's bare-chested brothers walked over to where we sat and shook hands before attending to the coca once more. We were soon joined by two Elders of the tribe; one of whom wore a small feather headdress and a python around his neck (as you do). Eliceo translated late into the night as the Elders told us far-fetched tales of adventure, tales of the leaping jaguar and the mighty anaconda. Such stories helped us understand a little of their intense magico-spiritual (rather than religious) connection with the forest and the creatures with which they share it.

Murray and I spent much of the evening in a trance like state, exhausted from the journey and over stimulated by the sensory unfamiliarity with which we were being bombarded. Encouraged, we chew dried coca tobacco, free of any chemical processing required to extract alkaloids and give the effects of cocaine, but still mildly mouth-numbing and mind-activating. "How long is that batch going to last?" I asked Eliceo, pointing to Soro's brother who was pounding a huge barrel of dried leaves to a fine dust in the darkness, "a month maybe?" "Not likely" said Eliceo with a smirk, "more like a few days, these boys love their coca." After we'd slung our hammocks and mosquito nets between the rafters, and readied ourselves for bed, the Elders called us back ►



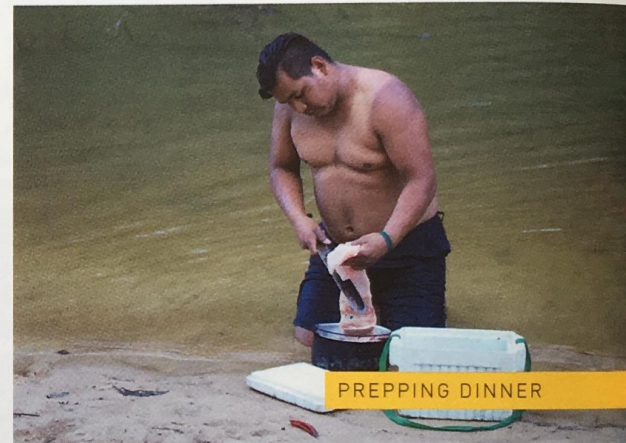
A FORMIDABLE FOE



THE SKY PUTS ON A SHOW



JUNGLE FUN



PREPPING DINNER

to the circle. Each in turn, our faces were painted with russet red ink made from the seeds of the urucum plant. They said some ceremonial words, wishing us luck on our journey through the forest and asked that we be protected from evil spirits. Finally, we were each handed a single huayruro seed, symbol of the Huitoto tribe, and a powerful giver of good luck.

“Say hi to Hido, guys,” said Eliceo with a flourish. “He will be our boat driver for the next five days.” Hido stood before us, completely at his ease. A big lump of a man with a pony tail and goatee, resembling ever so slightly a dark-skinned thickset Johnny Depp, his wellington boots were turned down below baggy shorts and his t-shirt turned up, exposing a rotund stomach which he tapped and slapped with a circulating hand. “He’s hot,” explained Eliceo, “so he’s letting the breeze rush across his fat belly.” Hido, understanding sufficient English to catch Eliceo’s drift, whacked him about the side of the head with a surprising turn of speed. We waited on the riverbank adjacent to the quintessentially Amazonian community of San Martin as Hido trudged a stone’s throw upstream to fetch his half sunken boat.

Meanwhile, Murray played thumb wars with the village kids, who were out for a morning swim, while I took a moment to myself, enjoying the feel of brown clay between my toes, listening over the laughter of kids to shrieking birds, distant monkey calls and the hum of legions of frogs and insects. Before long, Hido pulled the starter on his outboard motor, it spat and fired into action and I instantly wished it hadn’t. The narrow stretch of river, and tall trees that lined its banks, amplified the Gatling

gun type noise, putting an immediate end to my ponderous and peaceful state. Dynamised, we piled into the narrow wooden boat, single file front to back, before heading upriver toward Amacayacu National Park.

As my camera came back into focus I saw a prehistoric twinkle in the anaconda’s black eyes. Feeling safe behind my lens I risked a few more snaps as she uncoiled, slid off the beach and began swimming toward our boat in a menacing, meandering fashion. Murray inevitably, not being a fan of even the tiniest snake, upon sighting a four-meter-long green anaconda, the largest, strongest most iconic snake in the world, started to panic and clamber toward the back of our narrow and unstable boat. Eliceo, having only ever seen one other anaconda in his life, also clambered quickly backwards, pointing and yelling in delight whilst Hido, vying to free us from the snake’s path, squeezed the throttle. The boat, now heavily weighted towards the stern, nearly capsized and we only narrowly avoided taking a spill into the muddy drink. “That was lucky,” said Eliceo. “A snake like that would grab you by the head, put the first coil around your neck, wrap you up and swallow you whole.”

We’d been journeying north on the Amacayacu River, a tributary of the great Amazon River, for four days. What once was a fairly wide sweeping body of water skirted by low trees was fast becoming a narrow claustrophobic labyrinth of channels encased by soaring jungle. Accommodation had been arranged for us each night at a succession of charming huts and lodges from whence we’d venture out in the evenings for night hikes



THE RIVER OPENS UP AHEAD



LEARNING FROM THE EXPERTS



LOCALS GATHER BESIDE THE RIVER



THE AUTHOR

by torchlight in search of nocturnal wildlife. Sitting at the bow of the boat as we motored against the current, toward what was to be our final stop, I felt like Charles Marlow in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*; travelling farther and farther from civilization, away from our fragile structured happy existence, to a Darwinian testing ground where only nature's rules apply. The greater the distance we put between ourselves and home, the more conscious I became of our reliance on Hido and Eliceo, our trusted guides. The deeper into the jungle we ventured, the more obvious the path became, which brought a new and welcomed simplicity to our adventure. Eventually, just shelter, food and conversation remained the priority; stress dissipated among the trees and I enjoyed a relaxing clarity of thought.

Hido slowed the boat to an almost imperceptible speed and skirted the bank looking for a fishing spot. Kingfishers, like neon bullets, fizzed across the river's murky surface ahead, leaving trails across my vision. "This is where we will fish," said Eliceo, picking up a wooden handle wrapped in line that he'd whittled from a jungle tree that very morning. "We're camping tonight, and nothing beats crispy piranha on the barbie before bed." We each cast a line and sinker into the slow-moving water and waited. Before my sinker had hit the bottom, Hido yelled excitedly, reeling in a thrashing fish. "That's a white piranha," said Eliceo, as Hido freed his hook from the creature's mouth and held it triumphantly aloft, prying back the lower jaw to reveal a row of devilish teeth. "One this size jumped out of the bucket and took the end of a guests finger off last month guys, so be careful!"

Before long we had a bucket full of the toothy critters, befitting of a bountiful beach barbeque. Proud of our catch, we readied for the off. As we did, a local fisherman drifted past in a virtually sunken boat. Laid across his bow were the three biggest fish I have ever seen, huge black and red monsters with scales the size of two pence pieces. "Those are pirarucu," said Eliceo. "They're 23 million years old, three metres long and weigh 200kg. They feed on birds and mammals, and can breathe both above and below the water courtesy of lung tissue in their swim bladder. That dude will sell them for \$650 [£15] each at the market in Leticia". As Eliceo said this, the fisherman brandished a pale palm in our direction and waved it smugly. "The white meat is boneless, so from fish that size you can cut steaks the size of dinner plates". Later that evening, to our delight, Eliceo admitted to pre-purchasing two such steaks for us from St Martin, which we cooked over the open fire, together with the fresh piranhas; both were beyond delicious.

To celebrate our northernmost stop on the Amacayacu River, Eliceo informed us that we will be foregoing the comforts of a lodge, and instead, wild camping way out in the tangled grip of the jungle. Having familiarised myself with the itinerary pre-trip, I knew this night was coming, and the knowledge of its imminence had induced similar levels of dread and excitement. Hido pulled up to the bank, tied up the boat and Eliceo lead the way for two hours with his silver-edged machete, hacking a trail through the gold, sun-flecked forest.



## LET'S GO

### HOW TO GET THERE

The vast size of the Amazon means there are multiple countries and airports that you could fly into. Maxwell chose to travel via Bogota in Colombia. Return flights from London Heathrow with Avianca will set you back around £500, with an airtime of roughly 11 hours. From here, you can catch an internal flight to the town of Leticia (£130, two hours flight time).

### HOW TO DO IT

Maxwell and Murray organised their Amazonian escapade via a company called Large Minority ([www.largeminority.com](http://www.largeminority.com)). Explore, Exodus and Intrepid Travel also offer tours to the area.

### WHEN TO GO

Choosing when to visit the Amazon is fairly simple in that conditions don't change too much from season to season. You should expect rain, humidity and heat no matter when you go. Generally speaking, July through to December will offer lower rivers, better trail access, fewer mosquitoes and decent prospects of spotting caiman crocodiles.



The female tarantula, forelegs raised, leaned back on a furry red abdomen and flashed fangs toward Eliceo, who coaxed it gently round in circles on the forest floor. "I need to make sure she's fired off all her ulcerating hairs before I can handle her," he explained. "That's her first line of defence." After a few more circles, he placed his hand palm-up on the floor and allowed the arachnid to march slowly up his arm. "They aren't aggressive," he said, as the spider continued slowly forward, soon reaching the crease in his elbow. Murray and I took a closer look and, for all the morbid associations made about large hairy spiders, I couldn't help but find beauty in the perfect, delicate anatomy of the creature. Murray's interest eventually waned and he walked away toward the river. Naturally, I took the opportunity to conspire with Eliceo, who agreed to drop the spider softly into Murray's washbag. Revenge for the Cayman prank was mine at last.

Having cleared the spiders and a good deal of the forest floor, we planted and set light to insecticide coils around the camp perimeter before hanging our hammocks. Once the hammocks were in position, we wrapped them with mosquito nets and finally topped each with a heavy vaulted tarpaulin roof. Just as we did so, we heard heavy rain begin to strike the canopy hundreds of meters above. "We've got ten minutes," Eliceo said, "that's how long it takes for water to reach the floor in forest this thick." With Eliceo's help, we applied the finishing touches to the camp and mustered under a tarpaulin to build a fire.

For want of cold beer, we prepared some black coffee which, given that we were in Colombia, turned out to be a pretty damn fine substitute. Hido chopped a section from a nearby water-filled vine and stood it on end in the pot. After 10 minutes the pot was full. Following bitter, spicy, sweet coffee and a few hours of conversation, the rain finally abated. Head torches on high beam, we each retreated to our respective resting places, planted our boots upside-down on upturned sticks to keep the bugs out, and climbed into our hammocks.

What then ensued was by far the most affecting and memorable half an hour of the trip. Swinging alone amid the dark vastness of the Amazon, safely encased within my cosy hammock, I lay awake listening to the innumerable and diverse sounds of the forest. Hailing from the UK, a relatively silent world, I was blown away by how alive the night could be with pops, clicks, howls and squeals both in the distance and close at hand. Otherworldly audio files, that seemed almost computer-generated in their complexity, besieged my ears. Regardless of how visually and tactually stimulating the rainforest had been up until this point, it was this 'single-sensory' moment that left the greatest mark upon me.

If your curiosity regarding the secrets of the South American wildwoods cannot be contained, we strongly recommend you enlist the services of a legendary local guide like Eliceo. Not only will it put your mind at ease when it comes to the more unnerving aspects of your visit (i.e. the wildlife), it will also ensure you are fully immersed in an environment which I now understand to be nigh on unexplorable without the wit and knowledge of a native. A charitable and culturally conscientious company such as Large Minority, which has been organising both budget and luxury tours to the Amazon region for over a decade, is perfectly positioned to put you in touch with a reliable guide who will guarantee you see what is arguably the world's greatest wonder in the best way possible, through indigenous eyes.

The forests of South America, which are home to 10% of earth's wildlife (137 species of which go extinct every day) and produce 20% of its oxygen, are currently disappearing at a rate of 1.5 acres per second; according to recent studies, if deforestation continues at the current rate, 100 years from now, it will all be gone. With that in mind we advise you grab some comfy wellingtons and get there before it's too late. **AT**