



FROM THE AMAZON TO THE ANDES

Whether it's swimming in the waters of the Amazon river or trekking to the sacred Andean citadel of the ancient Incan empire, Peru offers travelers adventure and exotic experiences.

Thanks to the growth of luxury operators, there is also a very refined way of having it all, in this South American retreat.

STORY VICKI WILLIAMS

“Congratulations!” says Julio, our naturalist guide, as he helps me out of the water and back onto our small craft. “You have just been swimming with caiman, piranha, electric eel and anaconda.”

I am fairly certain he is joking, although the certainty is more hopeful than assured. Still, I would jump in this lake again in a heartbeat, with its tropical warm surface and cool waters at my feet, surrounded by the majestic Peruvian Amazon on all sides. It was, for me, a memorable moment not to be passed by, not knowing when I would get another chance to swim in the Amazon. Not everyone shared my enthusiasm and some of my companions opted to remain in the boat. During our four days cruising the rivers of the Pacaya Samiria Reserve, this was just one of many enthralling close encounters with the native inhabitants. There was also the evening we were in search of red eyes in the dark. Upon spying several pairs, we slowly made our approach by boat. As soon as we got near enough, Julio jumped to the front of the skiff, lunged over its edge, and as fast as lightning grappled with a writhing caiman, dragging it onboard. “Who wants to hold it?” he asked casually, as if he’s offering us fish.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CORBIS

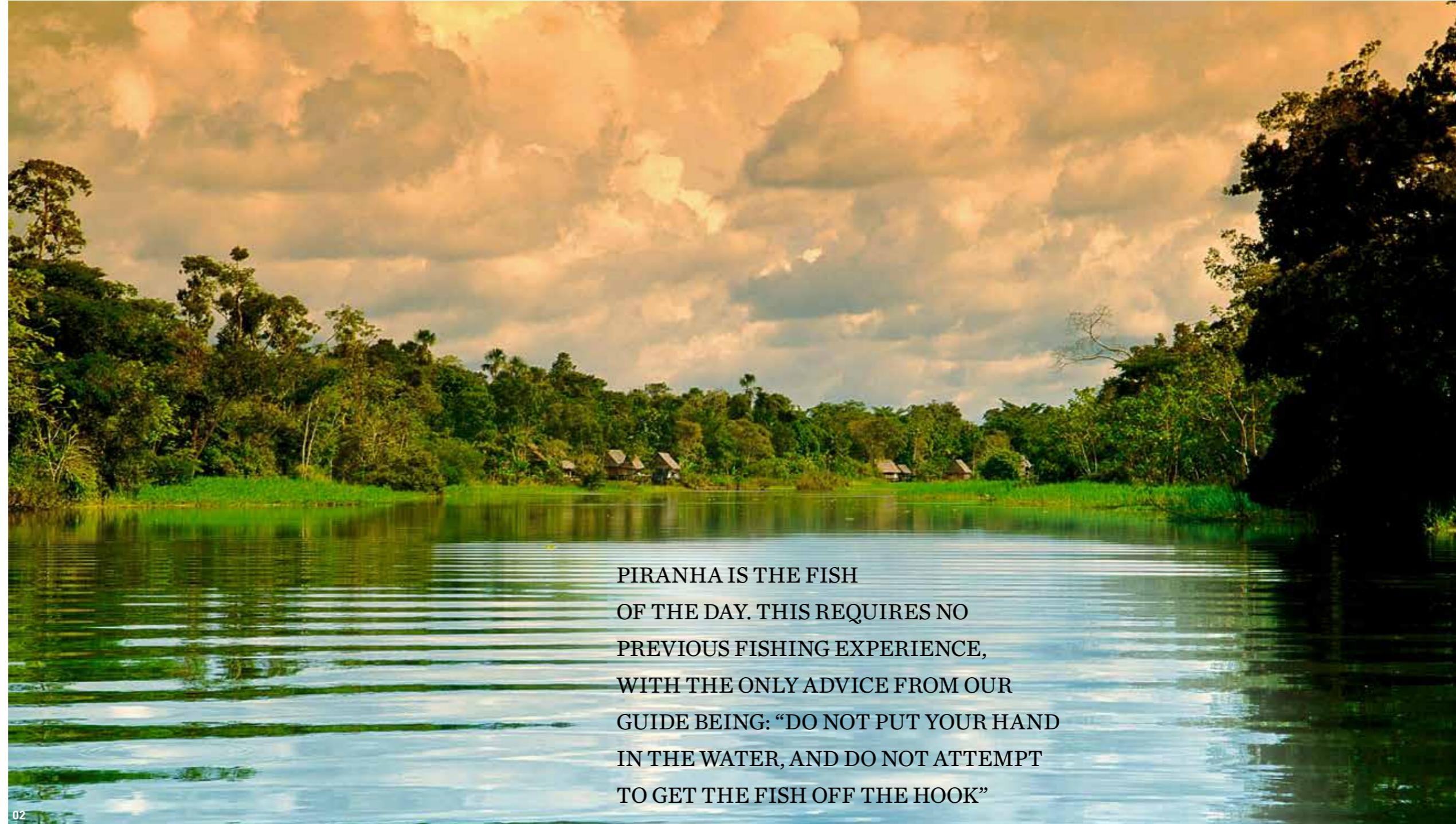
The caiman is a juvenile and this gives me some sense of security, it remained calm in my hands and felt pleasant to the touch. Calm also was the full-size adult that we nestled up to not long after. My heart quickened as I was within touching distance, mindful of who is the boss, but excited at the same time to be so close to such a majestic and dangerous reptile.

TRADITIONAL FISHING

Fishing is also on the itinerary, and the best bait for catching our target, with our flimsy bamboo poles (traditional style), is raw beef. Piranha is the fish of the day. This requires no previous fishing experience, with the only advice from Julio being: "Do not put your hand in the water, and do not attempt to get the fish off the hook." I manage to catch a couple, although too small to be kept. Small they may have been, but their numerous razor sharp teeth counter any disappointment from not catching anything bigger.

There are many gentler species that we come across, too – a guide to the area lists over 300 wildlife species that can be found in this reserve. We see the famed pink and grey river dolphins on several occasions. Playfully swimming near us, they seem to know when they are having their photo taken, darting below the surface at the very moment when the capture button is pressed, so video is a better option. The equally adored three-toed sloth is seen more than once, with binoculars or a powerful zoom needed to really appreciate these slow-moving, tree-dwelling creatures. Colourful birds of varying species dot the landscape like jewels, and so plentiful that you begin to recognise them. Turtles slip into the waters as we pass, monkeys howl and dart from branch to branch, and local fishermen show off their catch. We are repeatedly reminded that this is not a zoo, so what we see each day – and during each cruise – is different. We are shown a video of an anaconda digesting a caiman taken weeks before our visit, yet try as we might, searching the giant snake's hiding places, we fail to see one in the flesh – or scale, in this case.

The wildlife excursions do come with touches of welcome luxury, such as watching a stunning sunset from a picturesque sandbar with mimosa cocktail in hand, a perfect way to end our first day. Our home on the river was the upscale *Aria Amazon*, a 16-suite floating boutique hotel that has been operating since 2011. Its bedrooms feature floor-to-ceiling windows. There is also a bright and comfortable lounge and bar, an outdoor observation deck with a small Jacuzzi, a micro spa area, mini gym, gift shop, and a dining room where all meals are served. Most of the staff onboard have grown up along the waterways of the Amazon, and their knowledge and passion for the area and its wild inhabitants adds depth to the experience.



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01 Like a brown anaconda, the Amazon River snakes through the Peruvian rainforest.

02 Dawn on the Amazon head waters, in the Pacaya Samiria Reserve.

03 Introduction to a small, three-toed sloth.

04 A Bora villager in the head waters of Amazon.

05 A caiman, related to alligators but smaller.



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06 A launch from *Aria Amazon* allows guests to explore a submerged forest.



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07 A howler monkey, whose vocal exercises can be heard for miles.

08 Lima's coastal suburb of Miraflores is a good paragliding base for a bird's eye view of the capital city.

09 A suite on the *Aria Amazon* features floor-to-ceiling windows.

10 The *Aria Amazon* is a purpose-built floating boutique hotel.



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DINING AND GLIDING

The capital, Lima, the only South American capital on the shores of the Pacific Ocean, provides more urbane adventures. Top of the list for many, especially gourmets, would be a culinary adventure. Peruvians are proud of their cuisine and rightly so, with the city home to a plethora of great eats, a number of which are in *The World's 50 Best Restaurants Guide 2014*.

Two of these, Central and Astrid y Gastón, take the top two spots in *Latin America's 50 Best Restaurants 2014*. Dining at both is essential, although not on the same day as we did, for a total of 46 wine-paired courses. Diners will discover dramatic plates of modern Peruvian cuisine that highlight native ingredients at both restaurants, but the dishes themselves and the overall experience are different. Other noted restaurants are Maito, Malabar, and Rafel, and for a casual lunch, Gastón Acurio's T'anta and Amor Amar are both good choices.

Keen photographers, architecture fans and art lovers will want to stroll around Miraflores and Barranco, with its art galleries and streets lined with former grand homes and mansions.

To make exploring the city – and the country – a

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seamless experience, it's advisable to work with a high-end tour operator such as Abercrombie & Kent or Metropolitan Touring Company. They create bespoke itineraries accommodating the needs, wishes and interests of the sophisticated traveller, and the guides provide invaluable insider knowledge.

For a bird's eye view of the city and its dramatic coastal location, take to the skies in a tandem or individual paraglider. Taking off from a cliff's edge and riding the currents over the ocean and the city, one oftentimes comes incredibly close to buildings. There is also surfing, with many options for lessons along the beaches of the Costa Verde.

Lima boasts historic churches and cultural museums, colourful artisan markets and indigenous art. One can shop for antiques, handcrafted silver jewellery, designer fashion and alpaca scarves, or simply admire the views of the Pacific Ocean at sunset from Parque del Amour, with its famous *The Kiss* sculpture.

RUINS AND TRAINS

Of course, visiting Peru is not complete without trekking up to the country's most famous site, Machu



Picchu, a Unesco World Heritage Site. The 15th century Inca ruins situated 2,430 metres above sea level, atop a mountain, is impressive and wondrous. How it was built is still a mystery, which adds to its allure. Many visitors start from the bottom and walk to the top for that much-photographed view at the end, but for first timers, I would recommend going against the crowds and heading to the top first and then exploring the lower buildings. Visiting first thing in the morning or later in the afternoon is best as it is less crowded, or you can walk the Inca Trail to arrive for sunrise long before the tourist hordes.

A three-hour train journey is necessary to get to Aguas Calientes, the nearest settlement to Machu Picchu, and while PeruRail has rather plush trains, the indulgent option from Poroy near Cusco is the Belmond Hiram Bingham, sister train of Eastern & Oriental Express. Watch the shifting landscapes from the observation car as you sip champagne, or try the national cocktail, the pisco sour, in the bar car as you listen to live Peruvian music. Move to the elegant dining cars for a multi-course repast of Andean inspired dishes, such as Wayllabamba trout, fava beans, Andean mint and *airampo* (cactus) emulsion, accompanied by sommelier-recommended fine wines.

The nearest airport is at Cusco, and this former Inca empire capital and Unesco World Heritage Site is a striking city with its Andean mountain location, historic architecture, colourful traditional dress, noted cathedral, and nearby places of interest such as Saksaywaman and the Sacred Valley.

For gourmets, this region is the breadbasket of the country and there is a fantastic market in the centre of town showcasing the abundance of Peru. I showed great restraint by only purchasing award-winning Peruvian coffee beans and artisan-made chocolate, but other take-home purchases could include cheese, quinoa, chillies, spices, and even varieties of potatoes that are not found outside the country. There is a vibrant dining scene in the city, including such noteworthy restaurants as Cicciolina, and Chicha by Gastón Acurio. It is also one of the best cities to try guinea pig and alpaca.

In Peru, I found a destination that caters to the demands of the savvy, cultured traveller, but which also provides adventure, wonder and awe – an increasingly rare combination these days. A glistening, unique gem in a world of increasing sameness, Peru is abundant in rich experiences and diversity. One trip is just the beginning. ☺

11 A Quechua walks her llama in front of the ancient Incan walls near Cusco, former capital of the Incan empire.

12 The cathedral of Cusco in the heart of the old city, built by Spanish conquistadores.

13 The Hiram-Bingham train enroute from Cusco to Machu Picchu.

14 The ruins of Machu Picchu, last citadel of the Incas, was only discovered in 1911 by explorer Hiram Bingham.

