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Cristina Lewis with her daughters, Liliana, Isabella, and Alessandra



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Rolling on the River

Aboard the luxe Aqua Nera, explore Peru's Amazon River, teeming with wildlife and intrigue

Written by **CHRISTIANA LILLY**

We're gliding along the Amazon River in a Zodiac boat when our guide, Vladimir, suddenly signals for us to stop—now. Then he calls out for his fellow guides over the radio, alerting them to what he's spotted.

It's an anaconda, wrapped within the twisted mangroves next to us. Its triangular head peeks through the brush to see what the commotion is about, its tongue darting in and out to taste the air. As we get closer (not too close, we're warned), we see a gash in his flesh. He'll be fine, thankfully, and little

do we know that this is not the first anaconda we'll come across in our time aboard the Aqua Nera river cruise.

There will be another anaconda, plus countless sloths, piranhas, poison dart frogs, tarantulas, pink dolphins, and birds that fill the horizon—far more animals than any humans we will come across on our voyage.

Before we board the Aqua Nera—a part of the Aqua Expeditions family of luxury cruises—our journey begins in Iquitos, Peru, the largest city in the world not acces-



sible by car. While we traverse the streets in a taxi, three-wheeled motocarros and motorcycles swerve around us, from moms picking up their kids from school to girls hanging on tight to their beaus. We pass the throng of traffic and drive on a straight shot south to the river village of Nauta, where the mighty rivers of the Marañón and Ucayali join to form the Amazon, the longest river in the world—and one of the most storied.

Before us is the Aqua Nera, a black, 20-suite boat fit with a sun deck and pool, dining room, game room, and other luxe accommodations. They were far more comfortable than the quarters of Percy Fawcett, the famed English explorer determined to find the Lost City of Z and prove to his fellow explorers that South America boasted ancient civilizations teeming with wealth and science. He disappeared into the Peruvian jungle in 1925. Meanwhile, we're greeted with drums, guitar tunes, and a cocktail in our hands.

The digs are more than comfy, but we're here for adventure. As the boat winds through the Amazon River, our three guides take turns leading excursions out onto the water, where their eagle eyes manage to spot the unique animal life high up in the treetops or skimming the surface of the river. What to us resembles a bundle of leaves turns out to be a sleepy sloth, its comical smile revealed through the lens of the binoculars we pass around. In the water, what looks like a pod of sunburned dolphins rise to the surface. They're pink river dolphins, larger than their grey counterparts and with a less dramatic dorsal fin.

It was on my wish list of animals for the trip, and just a day in I'm already checking them off one by one. I hoped to find a capybara (the water hadn't



receded enough, and the river rodents moved inland) and a jaguar (after the fur trade exploded in the 1970s, there are only about 22,000 in the area); I settled for videos from our intrepid guides.

"Remember, we are not at a zoo," Vladimir says.

On another excursion, we attempt to use makeshift fishing rods to catch piranha with raw chicken. I bob the bait in the water, swirling it from side to side to mimic bugs skating on the surface, but the meat-eating fish are not new to this trick. Thankfully we aren't relying on our own skills for food, as the chef onboard the Aqua Nera creates dishes using ingredients from the area, including snake fruit, chayote, peppers, chorizo sausage, and paiche. There's also the "comfort meal" menu with pizza and burgers, but we're too enamored with the Peruvian fare to even think about it. For lunch one day, the chef surprises us aboard another inflatable boat, armed with trays of plantains and juane de gallina, or banana leaves wrapped around rice, chicken, and other treats.

It's during these meals we chat with our fellow travelers—a father-daughter duo from Northern Ireland, a couple from Mexico, sisters-in-law from Colorado and Texas, a couple from Vietnam. Languages and accents scatter throughout the boat, and for the handful of times that we disembark along the Amazon, we hear nearly extinct languages, too.

There are 48 languages spoken on the river, among 40,000 residents. Before we dock at a village, children run along the banks of the river, then lean onto our boat to sing: "¿Como están mis amigos como están? ¡Muy bien!" At the school we visit, a child is selected by her



teacher to perform a song in Kokáma, her elders' native language that the community is working to revive. For these families, living on the Amazon is a story of preservation; parents make the daylong trek to buy new school uniforms in Iquitos, and they travel by hand-carved canoe. However, the odd teenager here and there manages to sneak away with a cellphone. Because yes, even in the depths of the Amazon River, there are cell towers.

While we are aboard the Aqua Nera, other Amazonians are traversing the river, too. Ferries filled with passengers travel from town to town, armed with their own hammocks and food to last them the trip. Around here, travel isn't measured by distance but by time; how many days on the ferry from one destination to the next.

During another excursion, a guide shares that the Amazon is home to 1,000 bird species—and it's this piece of trivia that lends to one of the most breathtaking moments on the cruise.

As our inflatable boat winds through lily pads in one of the river's veins, our view is framed by jutting trees and the sounds of the rainforest. Then, as our boat speeds through the water, hundreds of thousands of white egrets take flight from their nests and hunting grounds. The corridor before us is filled with the flapping wings of these graceful birds, and soon we're surrounded by them, a scene AI could only attempt to recreate. Everywhere we look, these birds fly alongside us, a reminder that the Amazon is one of the last truly wild places on this planet. **b**



This page, clockwise from top left: sloth, dining aboard the skiff, boat lounge, local child with a sloth, river village children with their teacher, and dishes prepared by the chef

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WEB EXTRA: For more of our editor's adventures on the Amazon, visit BOCAMAG.COM/MAY-JUNE-2026.



This page, clockwise from above: excursions on the river, macaw, pygmy marmoset, hoatzin, and a dip in the pool aboard the Aqua Nera