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The Sydney Morning Herald

SATURDAY, JULY 11, 2026

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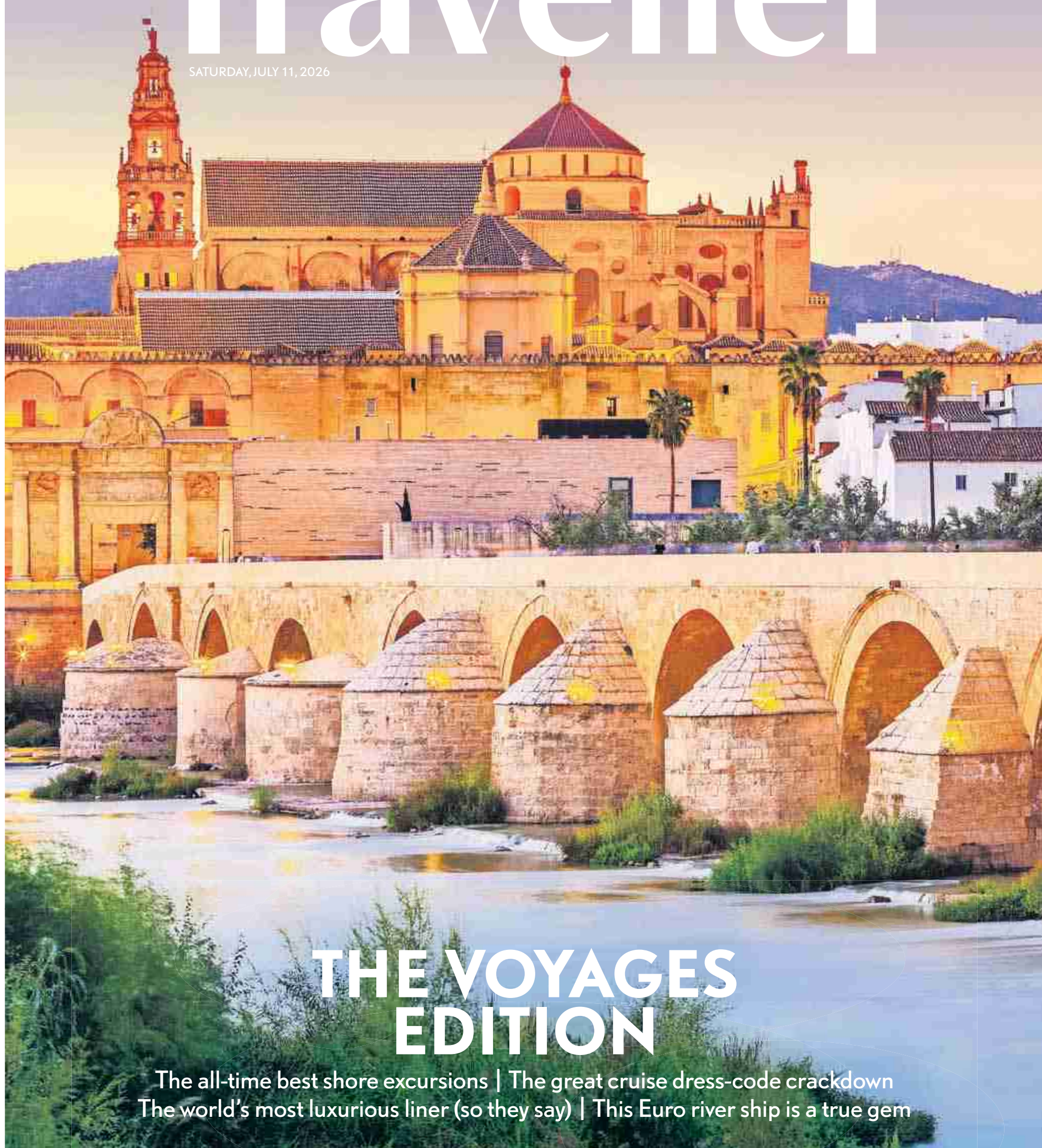
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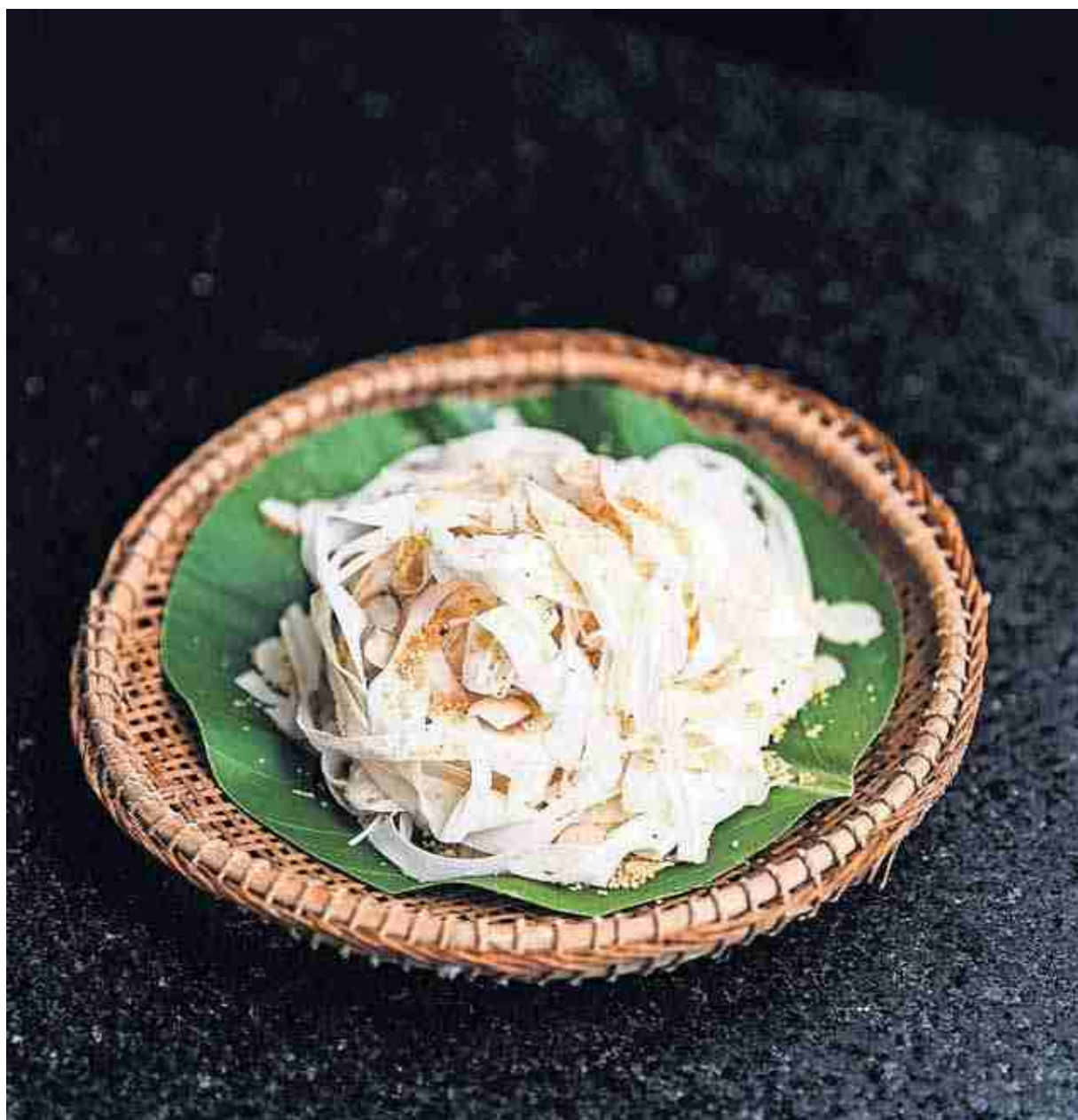
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FOOD | PERU

Amazonian appetite

It sounds like an impossibly tall order. You're cruising along the Amazon through the Peruvian rainforest, seeing its lush finery, hearing its wildlife, smelling its sodden earth and touching its time-worn surfaces, but you'd actually like to *taste* that jungle too.

And why not? After all, that final sensory experience is the one true test of full immersion.

Neither forget that with Peruvian cuisine now considered one of the world's finest, thanks to the country's biodiversity, tradition of multicultural fusion and incredibly creative chefs, it would be almost a crime to miss out.

You might be served *patarashca de Doncella* – extraordinarily tender and flaky Amazonian catfish, freshly pulled from the river, seasoned with local herbs, wrapped in plantain leaves and cooked over an open grill. Or *juane de pollo* – chicken in rice laced with indigenous spices, olives and eggs, tightly swathed in banana leaves and steamed; a classic.

Or even my favourite, *causa con langostinos en salsa golf* – sweet prawns on a layered mash of yellow potatoes with lime juice, oil and yellow pepper paste, served in a tomato-cream sauce.

Happily, the owners of this small, luxurious Aqua Expeditions cruise ship, the 20-suite Aqua Nera, plying the Amazon upriver from Iquitos, agree that the food is as vital an experience of this region as the sights and sounds.

So, they've designed it to be a highlight of a four- or seven-night cruise, serving four courses each mealtime of rainforest-to-table cuisine. The dishes have all been curated by acclaimed Peruvian chef Pedro Miguel Schiaffino, whose former restaurant Malabar, in the capital, Lima, hit the global World's 50 Best List.



When it comes to delectable discoveries, it pays to remember it's a jungle out there, writes Sue Williams.

That means showcasing all the local flavours, with 70 per cent of ingredients sourced from the Amazon's ancient food bank, cooked in time-honoured, traditional ways and seasoned in the spices that indigenous people have used for centuries.

Yet, still, it's light, bright and always interesting, with the menus also in the hands of Australian food and beverage director Adrian Broadhead, who has more than 25 years' in hospitality around the globe, including work with Australian greats David Thompson and Christine Manfield.

"The food is an incredible mix of Peruvian with some Japanese and a little bit of Chinese, and Pedro is a culinary god," Broadhead says. "He's a pioneering chef, as important to Peru as Neil Perry or Tetsuya might be to Australia."

"For him, it's all about celebrating the uniqueness of the product of this region and the culture and the narrative. Visitors want to experience everything about the Amazon, and what you have on your plate is as much a part of it. We see our food style as 'relaxed fine-dining', and it's always absolutely delicious."

Schiaffino, who's on board three to four times a year, also takes regular expeditions deep into the rainforest. There, he meets and talks to the indigenous inhabitants, looks for more ideas, and makes deals for supplies for both the ship and his current Lima restaurant, La Rosa Nautica.

Activities on the cruise include chilli and chocolate tastings. "Some people rate themselves as chilli experts ... and soon find out differently," Broadhead says. "They also say they like bitter chocolate until they taste the local 100 per cent chocolate and discover how bitter that actually is."

"But Pedro is so passionate about the local cuisine – he wants all guests to experience it first-hand. He's a great ambassador for Amazonian food worldwide and loves making the cruises as immersive as they can get."

Among his favourite ingredients to use are Aji Charapita chilli, the incredibly flavoursome sawtooth coriander sachaculantro, heart of palm, the Amazonian tomato fruit cocona, and, naturally, the indigenous cacao.

The desserts are just as innovative as the rest of the menu, too, with final courses including pepino fruit and copoazu sorbet with dark chocolate and peanut butter cups; aguaje popsicles with chocolate and macambo cocada; and crepes with tangerine sauce and cardamom ice cream and charapita chilli pepper marshmallows.

"But we make sure the meals are quite light," Broadhead says. "We still want guests to have enough energy afterwards to go out on expeditions and walks to explore the Amazon and see all of the amazing trees, plants, birds, animals and local villages for themselves." ①



THE DETAILS

CRUISE

Aqua Expeditions' Aqua Nera has itineraries from three to seven nights with all meals, house wines and beer, excursions, park entry fees and transfers included. From \$US5130 (\$7425) a person; flights extra. See aquaexpeditions.com

FLY

Qantas (qantas.com), code-sharing with LATAM (latamairlines.com), flies from Sydney and Melbourne to Santiago. Connecting flights to Iquitos are operated by LATAM.

The writer was a guest of Aqua Expeditions.

Clockwise from main: heart of palm salad with Brazilian nut oil; grilled tiger catfish wrapped in bijao leaf; chef Pedro Miguel Schiaffino; and Aqua Nera on the river.