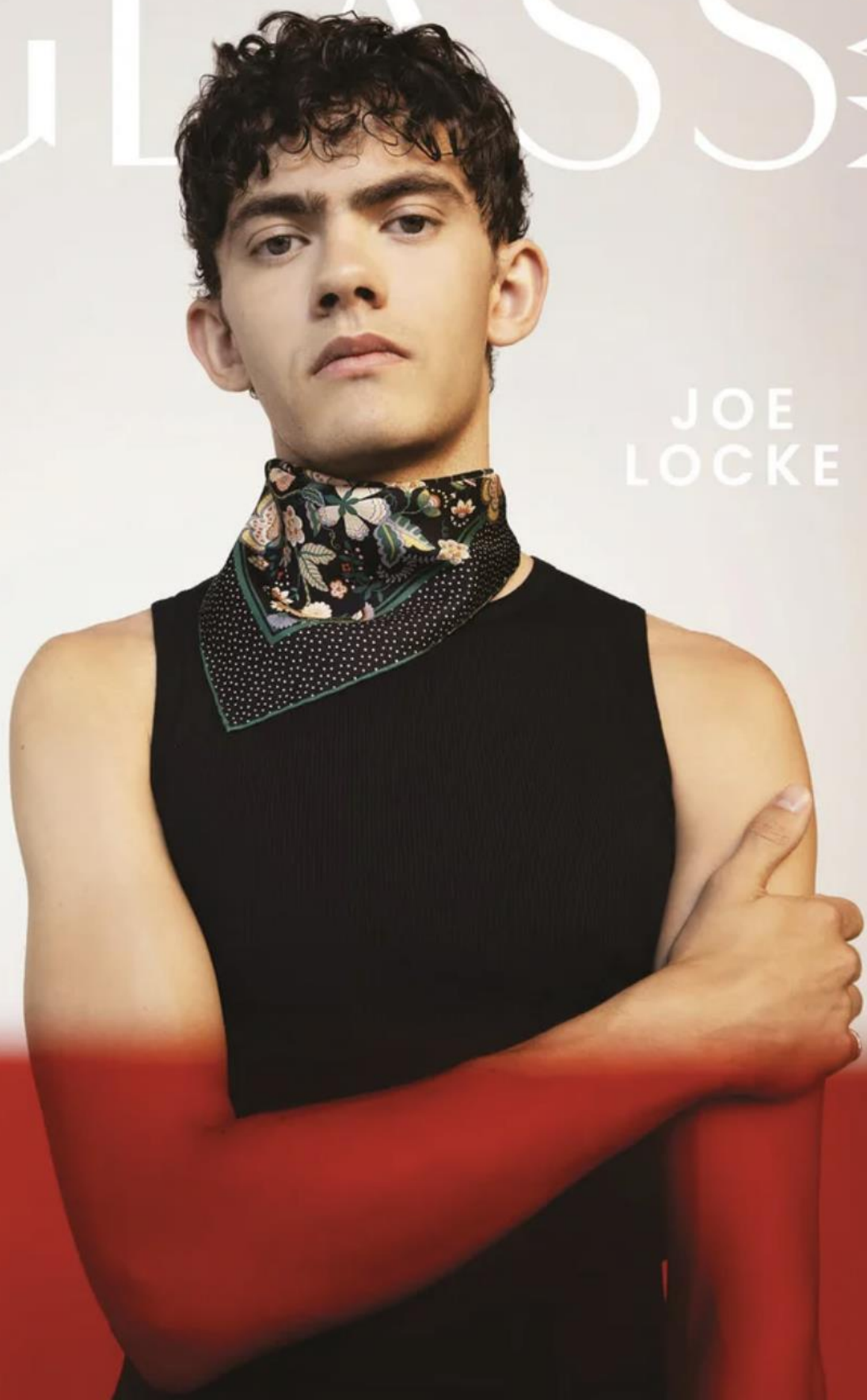


SUMMER 2026

GLASSMAN

JOE
LOCKE



IN THE AMAZON: NO ORDINARY CRUISE

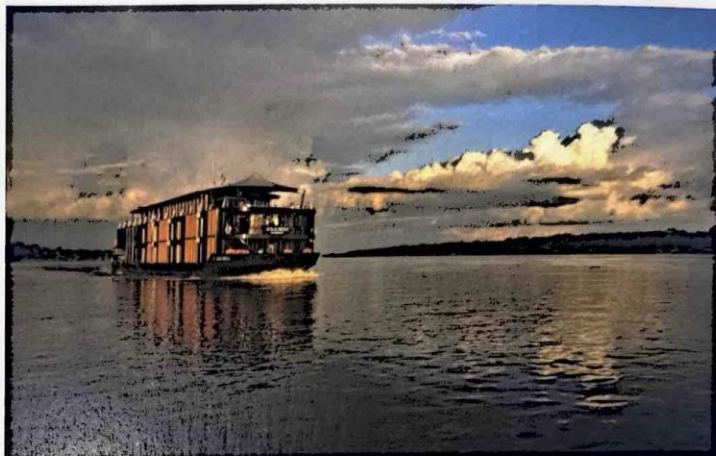
Acqua Expeditions

Writer SEAN SHEEHAN

Luxury cruises are not rare and, though there might be an inverse relationship between the quality of a cruise and the vessel's size, it is not the Aqua Nera's capacity of merely 20 suites that makes a voyage on it such an extraordinary event. It is, instead, the coming together of the Marañon and Ucayali rivers in north-east Peru, a confluence that marks the official beginning of the River Amazon and around which the Aqua Nera takes you on a hugely memorable, four-night, river cruise.

The Amazon, the rivers feeding into it, their banksides and interior rainforests constitute a mighty cornucopia of wildlife – nothing comparable will be found anywhere else in the world – and a river cruise, while affording only a glimpse into this complex ecosystem, provides endearing and enduring memories of a most precious environment. To experience this without sacrificing the contentments of first-rate accommodation, quality service and a host of creature comforts and diversions is the icing on the cake.

Meals on Aqua Nera, whether breakfast on deck or white-tablecloth affairs in the dining room, will not disappoint when a mesclun salad with Dijon mustard dressing appears one day on the lunch menu or when you are introduced to grilled paiche, the humongous Amazon fish so prized that it appears on the flag and the seal of Peru's Department of Ucayali. The chef and his team's ability to produce such meals become astonishing when you see the size of the kitchen on a below-deck tour.



Floor-to-ceiling windows on the Aqua Nera



Dining onboard the Aqua Nera



Sunset on the Amazon



A suite on the Aqua Nera

Food apart, the daily highlight comes after disembarking – binocular- and camera-ready – and seating yourself in a flat-bottomed and motorised skiff before speeding off to explore the labyrinth of greenery on the river's banks. It is impossible for the guides to predict what will be encountered but expect to see troupes of acrobatic monkeys in trees, pink river dolphins popping up in the water and spectacular birdlife always above and around you. Seeing a blue-beaked and yellow-chested capped heron, nosing amongst leaves for edible aquatic nourishment, was a beautiful sight but it was only one of many treasured sightings.

A walking trail in the rainforest led me to non-confrontational encounters with an anaconda, a boa constrictor, a thumb-sized poison dart frog and a blue morpho butterfly, one of the largest of its species in the world; a supremely laid-back sloth lounging on a tree branch proved strangely therapeutic. A night trip in pitch darkness, a full moon peeking through the dense canopy and fish-eating bats whirling and diving around the skiff, was amazing for the cacophonies of squawking and complaining as roosts were disturbed by the guide's probing searchlight.

Back on the Aqua Nera, it becomes easy to relax in the lounge or at the pool table, and learn how to make flawless ceviche or the perfect pisco sour. Contemplating the river views, dreamily passing by through the floor-to-ceiling windows that are everywhere on board, becomes hypnotic; at times, consciousness is jolted by the awareness that what is being seen is not a video post or a Henri Rousseau painting. The Amazon becomes a non-virtual and very visceral experience on a river cruise.



Amazon - Toucan

Direct flights to Lima are available from various European, North and South American airports, and from Lima it is a 2-hr flight to Iquitos in the northeast of Peru. A night or two in Lima, staying in the Miraflores district before and/or after flying north to Iquitos, is worth building into an itinerary.

For information on the Aqua Nera and river cruises with Aqua Expeditions, see aquaexpeditions.com/destinations/amazon-river-cruise. Four-day trips, excluding airfares, start from around £4000 per person.

Rainforest gear and lotions are essential and bird lovers will enjoy having a copy of *Birds of Peru* (Helm Field Guides).

The new edition of *Lonely Planet's Peru* guide may extend your travel plans further afield and for useful ideas and traveller information on Peru see peru.travel