



INTO THE HEART OF PERU

A WORLD-CLASS AMAZON

BY JOSEPHINE MATYAS

A CLUSTER OF BLEARY-EYED PEOPLE WEARING RUBBER BOOTS POUR THEMSELVES MUGS OF COFFEE IN THE DINING ROOM OF THE LODGE. IT'S 5 A.M. AND STILL DARK.





ADVENTURE

This close to the equator the sun comes up fairly early year-round. The trick is to get to the wildlife observation platforms before the sky is filled with light, the temperature soars and the humidity descends.

Manu Wildlife Center—at the heart of the Manu National Park and Biosphere Reserve in Peru—is off the beaten track. You’ve got to really want to go; however for birders and eco-enthusiasts craving a world-class rainforest experience, there is no better place in South America.

“We’ll be in an area where, if you hike 10 or 20 kilometres north into the rainforest, you’re likely to meet unencountered people,” deadpans conservation biologist Dr. Charlie Munn, “and you have a good chance of becoming a pincushion.”

EXTREME WILDERNESS

Munn is the driving energy behind the Manu Wildlife Center, an eco-tourism lodge deep inside Peru’s Amazon jungle. Thirty-five minutes by small plane (or a twisty 12-hour drive) from the mountain city of Cuzco, followed by a 90-minute boat ride, Manu provides a completely different experience from the archaeology of Machu Picchu, Peru’s main tourist draw.

“If you drew a pie chart of the numbers of visitors, Manu’s slice would not even show up,” says Munn. He’s not exaggerating: the Manu Wildlife Center draws about 1,200 visitors a year; the same number of people climb to the famous Incan ruins at Machu Picchu by noon *each* day.

“I’m trying to develop conservation models that can protect the Amazon,” explains Munn, who has a long list of accomplishments totaling millions of protected hectares in Peru, Bolivia and Brazil. The forest at Manu is virgin, old-growth rainforest—much of the region has not been explored and remains in its natural state . . . including several tribes of indigenous peoples who shun modern contact.

The secluded lodge and guest huts at Manu attract birders (the lodge boasts an astounding 1,000 species—about 10 per cent of the total on Earth) and extreme nature lovers. By providing viable ecotourism jobs for the local people, Manu is an economic alternative to the destructive practices of logging and hunting (more than 90 per cent of the lodge staff are locals).

“We are jungle interpreters for our visitors,” explains Jose Antonio Padilla, a Manu guide and bird specialist who never seems to be without his binoculars. He’s been working as a guide at Manu for five years and has an encyclopedic knowledge of the flora and fauna in this patch of Amazon rainforest.

background: Claiming one of the highest levels of biodiversity of any park in the world with more than 600 varieties of trees found in one hectare, the Manu Biosphere Reserve is a 1.8 million-hectare home for 600 bird and 11 monkey species as well as other animals such as caimans and mammals. Enrique Castro-Mendivil

opposite, bottom: The Manu Wildlife Center is 12 hours by rough road or a scenic flight over the Andes (oxygen required in a small plane) to a grass landing strip cut out of the Amazon jungle. From there, it’s still another 90 minutes by motorized canoe to the remote ecolodge. Josephine Matyas

centre, left: Dr. Charles Munn pores over the map of the Amazon Basin, planning out the day’s visit to Hans Tammemagi, a guest at the Manu Wildlife Center, which is one of the premier ecolodges in the Amazon rainforest and a favourite for birding and wildlife observation. Josephine Matyas





“FIRST THE PARROTS ARRIVE, THEN A BREAK, THEN THE BIG BIRDS LIKE THE MACAWS.”

A BIRDER'S HAVEN

Clutching our coffee mugs, we board the motorized canoe and push out onto the Madre de Dios River, heading toward our destination—the clay lick where flocks of endangered macaws and parrots congregate and feed in the early morning hours. I lean back in my seat and marvel at the purity of the passing landscape. There are no commercial developments and no other signs of civilization.

“This river flows 570 kilometres in Peru, then through Bolivia and Brazil and finally into the Amazon,” says Padilla. “So, even though the Amazon is in the north of Peru, the river basin flows this far south.” The twists and turns of this silty, brown river are the only break in miles of verdant rainforest. The river banks are lined with bamboo, palms, kapok and fig trees—in this part of the Amazon more than 600 types of trees per square kilometre make up what Munn calls “the world’s largest tropical forest.”

A half-hour downstream and a short hike into the forest, we climb the steps to a large viewing platform at the clay lick. “It’s basically a morning show,” says Munn. “First the parrots arrive, then a break, then the big birds like the macaws.”

Within minutes there is a cacophony of chirps, screeches and whistles, as birds begin arriving at the exposed wall of light brown clay. Munn and Padilla launch into a whispered, good-natured competition to name the

different species—parrots, parakeets, toucans and macaws.

“These birds are seed predators,” explains Padilla. “The seeds are full of toxins so they eat the hard clay to neutralize the toxic effect.”

The clay lick is a crucial key in observing and predicting the birds’ behaviour. They fly in from kilometres away, first landing in the forest canopy to assess any danger, then flying down to hang on the vertical wall, nibbling away at the rough clay. By watching the bird traffic—species as well as ages—Munn can track health, reproduction rates and behaviours, all part of his conservation efforts.

The clay lick is soon covered with several dozen red and green macaws, the large colourful birds found only in South America. The macaws are squawking and the humans are silent—quiet is the golden rule, to not disrupt the birds’ natural pattern of behaviour. Then there’s a sudden, raspy alarm call—perhaps an eagle’s been sighted—and it’s a mass of red and green feathers as the flock disperses for the safety of the canopy.

Confession time: I am not really a birder. Did I really expect the rainforest experience to convert me? Maybe. Maybe not. But the real miracle is not whether I made the conversion. It’s that birder or not, Manu delivered.

When I ask Munn if he has a favourite type of macaw, he is candid: “Whatever one I happen to be looking at at that moment.” With this, I couldn’t agree more. ■

Visitors to Manu can observe the endangered giant red and green macaws of South America in their natural habitat, feeding at the clay licks in the Manu Biosphere Reserve. Enrique Castro-Mendivil

TRAVEL PLANNER

Without the conservation efforts of lodges like Manu Wildlife Center, there would be no wildlife to see. Here are some tips for your stay:

Bring bug spray with DEET.

Wear quick-drying clothing; long-sleeves and long pants are crucial.

The dry season, July through October, is the best time at the clay lick.

Manu Wildlife Center is “roughing it” in very comfortable raised huts with bathrooms and hot showers. Access to a generator is limited to only a few hours each day (to recharge batteries, etc.); there is no air conditioning.

For more information, visit peruverde.org and peru.info. Peru is serviced by LAN Airlines: lan.com.