

The background of the entire page is a photograph of a luxurious outdoor swimming pool. The pool is rectangular and filled with clear blue water, which perfectly reflects the surrounding lush green rainforest. On the left side of the pool, there is a wooden deck with several lounge chairs and large white patio umbrellas. The pool is bordered by a dark blue tile edge. In the distance, through the trees, a body of water and distant mountains are visible under a bright, slightly overcast sky. A large, semi-transparent green shape is overlaid at the bottom of the image, containing the title and author information.

The Brazilian Amazon

How to experience the rainforest in style

By Lucy Bryson

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Foreword



Martin Frankenberg
Founder - Matueté

When I first set foot in the Amazon eighteen years ago, I knew I had discovered a special place: The lungs of the world, the heart of South America, the soul of Brazil.

And since then, despite having organized hundreds of trips to the region over many years, the effect this place has on visitors never ceases to amaze me.

There aren't many travel destinations in the world that come with so many preconceptions as the Amazon rainforest. Some of them are correct - yes it's hot, and yes it's often pretty rainy! But much of the received wisdom couldn't be any further from the truth - it's only when you set foot in the jungle that you realise how much you had wrong. The near total absence of mosquitoes in vast regions of the forest; the glorious white sand beaches and tranquil crystal waters; the joy of swimming in the rivers free of piranha and all the other creepies you might expect; I could go on and on...

But it's the subtle things that make the Amazon truly unique. The immensity of the rivers; the absolute silence of the nights; the singing of the birds and the overpowering beauty of a sunset over a deserted beach.

For my family, the Amazon has formed the backdrop of many of the most memorable holidays of our lives. And for this reason alone, it makes it so precious for me and for so many families I have had the pleasure of planning trips to the region.

Welcome to the jungle! Enjoy.

Welcome to the Brazilian Amazon

Often referred to as the lungs of the earth, the Amazon rainforest is the largest on earth and the Amazon itself is the world's mightiest river. Covering almost half of Brazil's landmass and extending into eight other South American countries, the Amazon region is a rewarding destination for anyone looking for that trip of a lifetime that will linger long in the memory.

The Amazon exists on a scale that is difficult to comprehend and its biodiversity is mind-boggling. There are more species of plant in just one

hectare of the Amazon than in all of Europe, and the jungle is home to around a quarter of all the planet's living species.

There are some 1,000 rivers and tributaries - enough to circle the Earth twice over if joined together - in which swim an estimated 3,000 species of fish. Some 300 species of mammal have been identified in the jungle, along with close to 2,000 types of butterfly.

The sheer scale of the Amazon rainforest can be both awe-inspiring and intimidating to the visitor. When planning a trip here it makes sense to concentrate on one region. The Brazilian portion alone is mind-blowing in scale, but many of the

jungle's most compelling attractions are within the reach of travellers who want to experience the world's largest tropical forest without abandoning their creature comforts.

And if you're imagining hacking your way through impenetrable forest, machete swinging wildly, it might be time to think again.

While the Brazilian Amazon offers great scope for rugged jungle adventures, a trip here needn't be an endurance test of your wilderness survival skills. Today's visitor can also find high-end jungle lodges offering impeccable cuisine, while luxury yachts provide a floating base to explore the jungle in style.

During the dry season, pristine white

sand beaches spring up alongside rivers that are so broad they're more like inland seas, making the Amazon a surprisingly perfect location for a beach holiday, and with a sense of splendid isolation that you won't find anywhere on Brazil's more famous coast.

Foodie travellers will be in their element, too, thanks to nature's bounty. The trees hang heavy with colourful tropical fruit - many of which don't even have names in English - while the rivers teem with edible fish. Superfoods such as energy-boosting guarana and acai are found in abundance.

Fish baked in a Brazil nut crust, potent *caipifrutas* made with sugar



cane rum and fresh fruit, and rich ice creams, mousses and sorbets made with tropical fruit such as creamy cupuacu are among the many culinary treats to be discovered.

What you see and experience depends entirely on where and when you visit, and how you prefer to travel. The Amazon River itself is the 'expressway' of the jungle. The communities that live on the banks of the legendary river are long accustomed to enormous ships passing by - with no roads linking it to the south of the country, all freight into the main city of Manaus is carried by river.

In contrast, travelling down the Amazon's countless tributaries is a much more laid back affair, more akin to taking a quiet country road. But the scale can still be vast! The waterways range from relatively narrow to so wide that you won't be able to see the shore on the other side.

Villages along these shores are usually very small, populated by communities who lead largely subsistence lifestyles, living off the river and the land. Schooling is a challenge here, and many children take a boat for miles to reach class.

The jungle is home to a staggering collection of flora, colourful birds and butterflies, and while the larger land mammals largely keep themselves hidden in the trees, it's common to spot pink dolphins at play in the rivers.

But it's not all about wild nature. Many of the rainforest's 17 million human inhabitants are concentrated in the large cities of Manaus - which

has a population close to two million - and Belém. Manaus is a buzzing, bustling city deep in the heart of the jungle, where visitors can admire the architecture of the city's famous Opera House and take in a lively drinking and dining scene before embarking on a trip down the Rio Negro as it flows out of the city. Meanwhile, the port city of Belém is a foodie hotspot, with some truly high-end restaurants serving highly imaginative dishes made from native ingredients.

The jungle's cities and large towns owe much of their grand architecture to the rubber boom of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Surrounded by rubber trees, these cities thrived, becoming the richest and most developed in Brazil until seeds were smuggled out of the country to establish plantations in Malaysia, thus ending Brazil's rubber monopoly.

Today, Brazil's Amazonia is a rich mix of untamed nature, barely-contacted indigenous villages and busy cities. It is perfectly possible to enjoy exuberant wild nature while traveling on luxurious yachts, or take in an opera after exploring some of the most remote regions of the jungle.

The region offers almost limitless opportunities for accessible, even luxurious, adventures, and trips can be tailor made to suit individual travel tastes. Always surprising, never dull, the Amazonia is a destination that goes well beyond the ordinary and into the realms of outright fantasy.



Amazon Highlights

Rio Negro (page 26)

The Amazon's most accessible and classic 'all-rounder' destination. Perfect for getting a taste of everything the jungle has to offer, including the opportunity to catch a glimpse of some colourful bird and animal life, admire tropical flora, explore channels and densely-forested archipelagos and witness the famous Meeting of the Waters where the Negro and Solimões form the Amazon itself.

Manaus (page 26)

A major transport hub for trips into the rainforest. Famous for its grand opera house, the city has a lively cultural calendar as well as some good dining.

Belém & Marajó (page 50)

The historic port city of Belém is the gateway to the vast Amazon estuary and its archipelago, including the wildlife rich Marajó island. Excellent for accessible wildlife spotting and beaches in the dry season. It's also a major gastronomic centre, with top Brazilian chefs flocking here to better acquaint themselves with the abundant native fruits, vegetables and species of fish. There are some truly world-class restaurants here, making it a favourite for foodie visitors to the Amazon.

Tefé (page 60)

One of the best places to see the jungle's natural residents up close. The Mamirauá nature reserve is home to 400 species of bird and at least 45 species of mammal. Guests stay at the famous Uakari floating lodge, home to the Uakari monkey, which is found nowhere else.

Xingu National Park (page 56)

This remote and strictly protected area only allows outsiders to enter at the invitation of the tribes that live there. It's a hard-to-reach destination and a bare-basics lifestyle, but the opportunity to see how the tribes live day to day is immensely rewarding.

Alta Foresta (page 64)

Home to Cristalino Lodge, one of the world's finest jungle lodges set within a private reserve that is rich in flora and teeming with birdlife. Excellent nature spotting in the lap of luxury and fine dining.

Rio Tapajós (page 42)

With paradise beaches hidden deep in the wild jungle in dry season, clear blue waters and the opportunity to escape the crowds and explore hidden tributaries and coves, it's a perfect spot for families and honeymooning couples.

Myths and misconceptions

The vast, steamy Amazon rainforest is a region shrouded in mystery, and few first time visitors to the jungle really know what to expect from a trip here - expectations are often very different from the reality.

Although the jungle is home to some incredible creatures including the jaguar, tapir and giant anteater, they tend to keep themselves to themselves and visitors expecting to encounter abundant large mammals will probably be disappointed. On the other hand bird watchers have a great deal to be excited about, thanks to the sheer number and variety of bird species that can be easily spotted in and around in the trees and waterways.

Another misconception is the thought of muddy waters teeming with piranha, caiman and other bloodthirsty beasts. In actual fact,

parts of the Brazilian Amazon boast unique blue-water rivers with gorgeous white sand beaches that are perfectly safe for swimming and are as paradisiacal as any Caribbean coast.

That said, the famed piranha can be readily found elsewhere, and piranha fishing makes for a fun and popular activity. Culinarily-curious visitors should be sure to try piranha soup - it's a staple on many menus here.

The famed pink dolphins of the Brazilian Amazon are also a reality, and a trip of five days or more usually provides ample opportunity to spot them at play on the water. Grey dolphins, meanwhile, can be found in abundance and visitors may even find themselves swimming close to these beautiful but shy animals.

Many people imagine the rainforest as a place filled with swarms of mosquitoes. In fact large swathes of the jungle are almost mosquito-free, particularly in the dry season (see climate, page 70). Even in the wet season, a good insect repellent is all



you need for a comfortable, bite-free trip (see recommended packing list, page 76). The beaches here actually have fewer mosquitoes than in Rio and elsewhere on the Brazilian coastline.

Don't expect to encounter a world of isolated indigenous communities, either - although some uncontacted tribes do still live in the Amazon, they are not only impossibly remote, but there are also strict controls in place restricting access to these tribes. Stay away from any operator claiming to offer access to uncontacted tribes, as in reality such access is strictly prohibited.

However, some reputable companies can organise ethically-sound stays with tribes that continue to live much as they have done for centuries. It is vital to thoroughly research any company offering such stays and find a trip that is culturally rewarding for visitors and doesn't exploit host communities.

Another widely-held misconception about the Brazilian Amazon is that it is pretty much off-limits for families

with young children. Fears about dangerous animals, stifling heat and biting insects can scare off cautious parents from even contemplating a trip to this vast rainforest, but in fact the Amazon can be an excellent choice for a family vacation with a difference.

The climate, while hot and humid throughout the year, is not as overbearingly stifling as many imagine. Temperatures tend to hover around 27°C and only rarely reach over 33°C - making it positively cool in comparison with cities such as Rio de Janeiro, where summer temperatures are truly searing - regularly reaching 40 degrees and above. In the Amazon, there is always fresh water at hand to plunge into and cool off.

The opportunity for jungle adventures make the Amazon a surefire hit with older children (see page 22), and the beaches that emerge in high season are truly pristine, with calm, clear waters - perfect for swimming even with very young children.





How to travel the Amazon

There is no single approach to seeing the vast Amazon rainforest. Although it is certainly possible to see some of the interior by backpacking independently with local boats heading upriver, such trips are more about intrepid survival skills than relaxation.

Most recreational visitors prefer to take an organised and guided yacht trip, with many operators running trips from Manaus as well as some other strategic locations. Meanwhile those travelling in larger groups who prefer to set their own agenda may find it worth the extra to charter a private yacht, allowing truly tailor-made trips.

Where you visit and how long you spend there depends on your travel style and what you want to see. For spectacular scenery, the Rio Negro (page 26) - in particular the Anavilhanas archipelago - is the most impressive, but the acidic water here attracts less wildlife than on the igarapés (creeks) that wind out of the river to the south of Manaus and in the more remote regions of the jungle. For those really keen to see jungle animals, it can be worth taking a flight from Manaus to the town of Tefé to visit Mamirauá - a vast ecological reserve where pink dolphins, bright red macaws and sloths can all be found in abundance, and some of the world's rarest creatures - such as the crimson-faced uakari monkey, which cannot be

found anywhere else on earth - can sometimes be spotted.

Most visitors to the Brazilian Amazon will spend from three to 10 days in the jungle, making a base at a jungle lodge or aboard a riverboat, which usually offer daily and nightly activities such as hiking in the jungle, recreational fishing, visits to local communities and adventure sports such as tree climbing, along with nocturnal nature walks.

Some trips are more focused on land-based adventures, and much depends on the time of year: those visiting during wet season will be able to glide through the forest on a canoe, but will miss out on the joys of relaxing on pristine white sand beaches. There are pros and cons to every visit, and it is worth taking some time to plan exactly what you hope to see, do and experience during your visit to the Brazilian Amazon.

Arguably the most efficient way to see large swathes of the Brazilian Amazon is by making your base aboard a riverboat, and if you really want to see virgin rainforest you'll need to spend at least a couple of days on the water to reach these more untouched regions. There's no shortage of operators, but be sure to do your research and avoid booking on-the-spot with touts. If your main interest lies in the flora and fauna of the jungle, don't be afraid to test operators' knowledge of the jungle by emailing them questions about the species you might see before booking your trip.

Amazon riverboats range from simple to deluxe. The main two

choices are booking onto a group trip with scheduled departures and fixed itineraries or chartering a private yacht (page 20) for those who prefer to set their own agenda.

Jungle lodges offer varying levels of home comforts - from simple family-run affairs to luxury lodgings in the middle of the wild jungle - and will typically include meals, excursions, guides and transport in the room price.

Lodges can be found within easy reach of Manaus (page 26) - the main point of entry for visitors to the northern Amazon - but there are also farther-flung options that offer a real sense of escape and exploration in the world's greatest jungle.

Although there are only a few truly world class lodges in the Brazilian Amazon, these top-end accommodations are worth the price tag for those looking for luxury in the middle of the tropical wilderness.

The city of Manaus is the gateway to the Brazilian Amazon and it is worth setting aside some time to explore this bustling city in the middle of the wild jungle. Although the state of Amazonas is the largest in Brazil in terms of landmass it is also one of the most sparsely populated, and almost half of the state's population can be found in this city of some 1.7 million inhabitants.

Less grand now than it was during Brazil's rubber boom, Manaus retains a handsome historic centre. With a busy cultural calendar, urban buzz and compelling sights such as the dramatic Renaissance architecture of the city's opera house, Manaus merits

a couple of days' stay (but probably no more than that due to a lack of good hotels and unpleasantly high levels of traffic) and the majority of Amazon trips start here.

The best tour operators are able to tailor-make Amazon trips for clients who are willing to pay a little more to set their own agenda. This can be an excellent option for travellers who know what they want to experience - and what they want to avoid - and want to see the jungle on their own terms.

Be aware that many operators do not adhere to sustainable tourism best practices (see: Responsible Travel, page 68). Don't be afraid to ask questions before booking and always check a company's credentials online - their word alone may not be a guarantee of responsible practices. Don't buy into cruelty by paying to pose with captive animals - close to big cities it is sadly all too common to see monkeys, sloths and other jungle creatures kept for the sole purpose of separating tourists from their money.

Where possible, try to give something back - the simple act of bringing pencils, stationery and other school equipment can be hugely beneficial to many Amazon communities. A reputable tour operator will be able to advise on key items that are in short supply.

See the destination overviews in this guide for more details on the activities and experiences you can combine into an itinerary.



The Amazon in style: Private yacht charters

Of the many misconceptions associated with the Amazon rainforest (page 14), perhaps the most misleading is the idea that visiting the jungle is inevitably a basic, raw experience; heavy on the adventure but light on the home comforts.

While that is certainly still true for intrepid explorers, what many visitors don't realise is that travel infrastructure and services are

increasingly catering for the higher-end market too, particularly with the growth of private yacht charters.

This is by far the most exclusive way of touring the rainforest, and it comes with a price tag to match. But the advantages are two-fold: not only can you cruise in the height of style and luxury, you're also buying the freedom and flexibility to set your own pace and tailor a unique journey to your exact preferences.

This makes it possible to visit regions that few others venture into, charting a course far beyond the areas most commonly visited by other group tours and excursions. Not only is this a

bonus for improved wildlife spotting but it also creates more authentic cultural interactions as you visit riverside communities that are not affected by regular tourism.

In the relatively busy region around Manaus and Rio Negro (page 26) a private yacht gets you further from the human bustle and deeper into pristine wilderness, vastly improving the quality of bird spotting and nature watching. In the Tapajos region (page 42) a charter affords access to your own remote private beaches, far from the crowds and land-based tours to the popular Alter do Chao.

Yachts vary in size, ranging

from three to 16 cabins and from expedition yachts perfect for navigating the myriad back channels and waterways, to 120ft superyachts. In addition to the sailing crew each cruise will include a multi-lingual tour manager, a professional naturalist guide and a full complement of chefs and cooks, ranging from big name Brazilian star chefs to great local cooks.

For those with some extra money to spend, this is the ultimate Amazon experience.



Family Friendly Amazon

The Brazilian Amazon teems with attractions and activities for younger visitors, and there's no need to let commonly-held preconceptions about the region deter you from planning a family trip to the jungle. Fears about uncomfortable accommodation, a sticky climate, swarms of mosquitoes and biting creatures rarely match the reality - it's just a matter of knowing where to go and where to avoid.

The Amazon offers plenty for kids to get excited about at any time of year. Canoeing through the flooded jungle is a highlight of the rainy season, while in dry season virgin beaches spring up alongside the clear, calm rivers, and swimming opportunities abound.

Children will get to see how Amazon communities live in the jungle, and while visitors are unlikely to spot dangerous wild animals, they'll have a good chance of sighting pink dolphins, as well as countless colourful tropical birds and butterflies.

Fishing and paddling in dugout canoes are popular activities for older children, while adventurous teenagers can trek through the jungle and get clued up about jungle survival: learning which plants are edible and which are poisonous, how to identify birds and spot caiman at night, all make for an enthralling and educational experience.

Visitors young and old alike will enjoy tucking into bowls of piranha soup, feasting on colourful tropical fruit - many of which are unheard of outside Brazil - and learning about the jungle's many animal inhabitants.

Arguably the best regions for children are the mosquito-free Negro and Tapajos rivers (see pages 26 and 42). The clear waters here are good for swimming, and the lack of biting insects is a major boon. Murkier waters can attract too many mozzies for comfort. While there is no wrong time for accessible family visits the Amazon, younger children are sure to appreciate the beaches that emerge in the dry season when sand castle-making, splashing in the clear, clean waters (a world away from the sadly polluted city beaches of famous beach destinations such as Rio de Janeiro) are real child-pleasers.

For older children and teenagers, paddle-boarding, kayaking and piranha fishing are all popular activities, and those traveling aboard a private yacht can get a real buzz from jumping off the vessel's decks, with their varying heights, into the river below.

Indeed, while there are a growing number of high-end jungle lodges, families may find that making their base aboard a private yacht is the most appealing and practical way to see the rainforest. Young children can take naps in their own bedrooms when needed, and there's always an opportunity to rustle up a snack for fussy eaters in the boat's kitchen.

Keeping healthy

Families visiting the Brazilian Amazon should be sure to have yellow fever injections before setting off, and to ask their family doctor about any specific precautions that their children should take. Be sure

to bring all medicines that may be necessary - including diarrhoea tablets, ibuprofen/paracetamol etc., from home, as there will rarely be a pharmacy at close hand on your trip.

Choose mosquito-free areas, where there is no malaria. Check medical advice on anti-malarials as they may come with significant side effects.

The most common health hazard in the Brazilian Amazon is sun-stroke - it is hugely important to protect kids from the intensely strong equatorial sun. Heat rashes and skin allergies due to the high temperatures and humidity are also common among children, so be sure to bring any creams and ointments your doctor recommends. Tropical strength insect repellent is advisable, although those with a very high DEET content may not be suitable for young children.

Food and drink

With its brightly-coloured, unusually-shaped fruits and vegetables and plentiful freshwater fish, the Amazonian diet is not only healthy but is also likely to appeal to adventurous eaters looking to rack up culinary experiences that will impress friends back home. For those with more conservative tastes, most upscale lodges - and all yachts - can put together a dish to suit even the fussiest child. If your child has dietary restrictions it is wise to advise the company you are traveling with beforehand, in order for the necessary arrangements to be made.

RIO NEGRO & MANAUS

Introduction to Rio Negro & Manaus

If there's one place that really lives up to most travellers' mental images of the Brazilian Amazon, it's the Rio Negro. It's on these dark, reflective waters - teeming with fish and caiman and stretching endlessly towards the horizon - that we find thousands of islands clustered into lush green archipelagos, around which meander countless channels and waterways perfect for bird-spotting from canoes and small boats.

But there's a side to the Rio Negro region that you might not have imagined: the metropolis of Manaus, the river beaches that rival anything to be found on Rio's coastline and make for a perfect family vacation, and even swimming - yes swimming! - in waters that are safe and perfectly free of piranhas and other underwater creatures you might be imagining.

It's this blend of the expected and the totally unexpected that makes Rio Negro such a compelling destination for visitors, offering a great all rounder location with a glimpse of the Amazon's many faces.

The Rio Negro, its tributaries and the Rio Solimões are perfect for wetland trips, exploring the narrow channels

that wind through the vegetation and micro islands by canoe and small boat. Water levels are higher during rainy season - when the river can span some 30 kilometres - but the channels are navigable by small boat year-round.

A major highlight of the river is the Anavilhanas National Park - one of the largest river archipelagos in the world, and an environmentally-protected haven for many of the Amazon's animals and birds. Some 400 islands are liberally scattered over 350,000 hectares of virgin rainforest, and there are some appealing jungle lodges to be found here, around 100 kilometres along the Rio Negro from Manaus.

The urban jungle meets the real jungle in Manaus itself. A buzzing metropolis of nearly two million people planted right in the middle of the world's largest rainforest, Manaus was a wealthy city during Brazil's rubber boom, and its famously grand opera house harks back to this golden age. Today the city is a little gritty in places, but the last decade has seen increased investment in tourism, and refurbishment has brought the city's historic centre back to something approaching its former glory. At the edges of the city, river beaches attract flocks of locals and tourists alike, all relishing the chance to strip down to their swimwear and get a little respite

from the humidity of the rainforest.

Although the jungle looms large over Manaus, it is one of Brazil's most important commercial cities, with container ships bound for the ocean docking at the busy port, and traders from Peru, Colombia and Bolivia gathering here to do business. The city's large market is a colourful place and offers good opportunities to pick up local handicrafts as well as jungle fruits and vegetables, and the Museum of the Indians outlines the history of the region's indigenous peoples.

Importantly for visitors, Manaus lies close to the famous Meeting of the Waters (page 29) where the black tea-coloured Rio Negro meets the latte-coloured Solimões, and the two run side by side, without mixing, to form the River Amazon itself.

Manaus' nightlife is more varied and lively than one might expect in the middle of the jungle, and there's plenty of opportunity to try local dishes such as pirarucu and tambaqui fish which can be cooked in a variety of imaginative ways. A particular regional highlight is grilled tambaqui fish with farofa (seasoned manioc flour), rice and jambu (a leaf similar to rocket but with a very dist Manaus has a busy cultural calendar with some sights and are attractions that are

worth seeing in their own right, but for many visitors it is merely a jumping off point for major adventures along the Rio Negro and into the jungle. There are some decent accommodation options here, but for the best Amazon jungle lodges you'll need to head out of the city and into the thick and steamy jungle.

Not to miss:

- Glide silently through the jungle by canoe during wet season
- Relax on pristine white sand beaches during dry season
- Experience big city life in the middle of the wild jungle in Manaus
- Explore the islands and waterways of the protected Anavilhanas archipelago
- See the Meeting of the Waters - where the dark waters of the Rio Negro and the clear waters of the Rio Solimões run for several miles without mixing.
- Spot caiman and other creatures of the night on nocturnal adventures in the rainforest
- Visit small riverside communities, and get up close to the Amazon's famous pink dolphins.



What to do in & around Rio Negro

The Rio Negro region, deep in the far northern rainforest, is a favourite for visitors looking to taste a little of everything that the Brazilian Amazon has to offer. Travellers with special interests or activities in mind may find another region more suitable for their particular needs but for the classic Amazon experience, look no further than Rio Negro.

Channels and wetland excursions

The Rio Negro, the adjoining Rio Solimões (the upper Amazon) and their many tributaries create a vast patchwork of wetland, and although in wet season the Negro can reach up 30km in width, the surrounding channels and natural canals are perfect for exploring by canoe or small boat. This is the ideal way to slink through the jungle without disturbing the birds from their daily routines and, if you're lucky, spot small mammals in the trees.

Guests at jungle lodges and aboard certain yachts may also have the chance to explore the waterways at dusk or night, when the already teeming jungle somehow seems to come yet more alive. Extinguishing the boat's spotlight and listening to the forest's raucous orchestra in the pitch black is an experience you'll never forget.

Water levels are higher in the wet season (page 70) but most channels are navigable by small boat all year round.

Be sure to visit the Anavilhanas National Park - with some 400 islands dotted around 350,000 hectares of untouched rainforest, this is one of the world's greatest river archipelagos, and an environmental protection order has ensured that its flora and fauna continue to thrive.

River beaches and swimming

Among the most unexpected sights in this part of the Amazon are the long river beaches that emerge between August and February and can, if just for a moment or two, make you feel like you've been transported to some paradisaical coastline. Unlike the more famous beaches in Rio, these strands are deserted, tranquil and pristine with little chance of a wayward beachball, insistent vendor or unwanted attention spoiling your moment of relaxation.

The waters are warm, slow moving, as clean as it's possible to get, free of piranhas or other biting nasties and so are perfectly safe for all the family to swim in and enjoy. At the height of the dry season - from October to December - so many of these beaches emerge that those on yachts will be able to find their own private beach.

The Meeting of the Waters (encontro das águas)

The Rio Negro and Rio Solimões meet at Manaus, together forming the mighty Amazon. The confluence of these two waterways has become an attraction in its own right, thanks to their stark differences in colour - the Negro being (true to its name) the colour of dark tea and the Solimões

a much lighter sandy colour. At their confluence the two rivers produce a remarkable phenomenon, forming a surprisingly literal boundary between themselves and the Amazon itself.

Lago Januári Eco Park

An easy hour-long boat ride from Manaus, this nature reserve offers an opportunity to explore the Amazon's wild side without spending days on the river. It's a popular day trip from the city and is appealing for wildlife lovers, families and visitors on a tight schedule.

Elevated boardwalks provide a path through the trees, allowing visitors to marvel at the sheer size and spectacular colours of the flora. Floating villages sit on crystal clear waters, sloths hang lazily in the branches, and monkeys leap between towering trees.



Sightseeing in and around Manaus

Teatro Amazonas, the grand, domed Renaissance opera house, is Manaus' most famous attraction and regularly hosts plays and live classical music events as well as opera spectaculars - many events are free. Opera Season runs from April through March,

when Manaus Opera Festival draws visitors from across the country. The dramatically ornate 1897 building is certainly worth a visit even if it's just to snap a photo or two rather than to take in a show. Details of upcoming events can be found at: <http://www.cultura.am.gov.br/teatro-amazonas>

Other attractions in the city itself are lower key, but there are a handful of worthwhile excursions within easy reach. Almost next door, the excellent Galeria Amazonica is the best spot in the city to shop for locally-produced arts and crafts.

A visit to the rubber museum, 30 minutes by speedboat from the city, is highly recommended for its insight into how the rubber extractors lived and worked during the industry's great boom. Those based in Manaus will find it easy to combine a visit to the museum with a dip in the Rio Negro, or it can easily be added to the itinerary of a private yacht trip.

Those looking for more active pursuits can take part in jungle survival courses, which are suitable for anyone aged 10 or above, and run from half-day to several days, depending on your level of interest and energy. Run by ex-army officers, they can be as adrenaline-packed or gentle as travellers wish. Expect to walk away with new skills such as how to make a fire without matches, find water in the forest, how to identify edible (and poisonous) plants, making traps, and general jungle safety.





Exploring the Rio Negro region

At the heart of Rio Negro's appeal to most visitors is its reputation as a classic all-rounder Amazon destination. You might not find the best birdwatching or the most pristine forest but you'll get a good sampling of everything the rainforest has to offer, and all within fairly close reach of the main entry/exit point of Manaus. The region's relatively undemanding environment helps too - the waters are acidic enough to deter mosquitoes, and the tourism infrastructure around Manaus makes the area highly accessible to all visitors - including families.

Both short and longer trips along the appropriately-nicknamed black

river usually depart from Manaus, and while operators compete in the city for visitors' custom it is strongly advisable to book in advance of your arrival and to thoroughly research tour operators. Even for a short trip, it is essential to travel with a reputable operator who know what they're doing.

Full-day or half-day trips along the Rio Negro from Manaus almost always take in the famous Meeting of the Waters (page 29), just outside the city and is the start/end point for many a yacht cruise along the Rio Negro.

For those in Manaus, it's possible to book a day trip via local boat (either private or as a group). Depending on the boat and river conditions it can take as little as 30 minutes or as much as two hours to reach the famed confluence from the dock outside the

Tropical Hotel.

Visitors happy to spend a little more might well find that the best way to experience the phenomenon is with a bird's eye view from a private water plane that will swoop down to a few hundred metres above the river. It's also possible to take an overnight trip in a water plane to the beautiful Anavilhanas archipelago.

A typical trip to the Rio Negro region might also include a visit to a riverside village and/or a trip to the Lago Janauari eco park. Around one hour's boat ride from the city, this is a 9,000-acre nature reserve notable for its floating villages, and abundant wildlife including sloths, caiman and various species of monkeys as well as its mammoth water lilies.

To see more pristine jungle, you'll need to travel at least a couple of

days by boat from Manaus. Trips will take in a visit to the Anavilhanas archipelago, around 60 miles from the city, before heading further upriver. The archipelago is a protected nature reserve, part of the vast UNESCO Central Amazon Conservation Complex, and teems with animal life and colourful bird species.

The farther upriver you travel, lodges become virtually non-existent, so to explore the pristine, remote regions, a private yacht charter is easily the best bet. Kayaks provide access to smaller creeks and through flooded forests, and it is possible to visit caboclos (river communities) to see daily life as it is played out on the banks of the river. Most river trips take three or four days, with options to add more stop-offs in the jungle or connections to major cities such as Rio de Janeiro.



Accommodation

Choosing the best accommodation for your travel style is the key to an enjoyable visit to the Rio Negro region. For most visitors, the choice is between a jungle lodge or a river cruise. High-end travellers or those visiting in larger groups might prefer the flexibility of chartering a private yacht (page 20).

Whatever travel style you choose, it's important to do some serious research before booking your trip to ensure the planned itinerary matches what you hope to experience in the jungle.

The main appeal of chartering a private yacht is the additional flexibility of tailoring a trip to your tastes, and escaping the more popular tourist routes to discover hidden regions of the Amazon. Again, prior research is key. Good operators will provide local guides, a skilled skipper

and crew, and even trained onboard chefs - so it's important to ensure your boat is staffed with the right people if you're splashing out.

A cheaper alternative to the private yachts are regular scheduled cruises. For instance the Amazon Clipper Premium, a 16 cabin yacht, operates a regular Monday to Wednesday cruise along the Amazon River and a Wednesday to Saturday cruise along the Rio Negro. The boat is comfortable, guides are professional and knowledgeable, and the food is excellent.

There are very few truly high-end places to stay in Manaus and along the river, so be wary of sales spiel and be sure to thoroughly research any possibilities before booking - and certainly before arrival.

The following are dependably good, and accustomed to catering to a high-end clientele.



Anavilhanas Lodge

This immaculately-maintained lodge is just outside the village of Novo Airao - a beach destination in the middle of the jungle, and one of the most visited spots on the Rio Negro. Many rate Anavilhanas as the best lodge in the Amazon, and the attention to detail is certainly impressive. It's worth splashing out on the superior bungalows, whose floor-to-ceiling windows seem to bring the jungle's wild beauty right into your hotel room, while keeping out noisy nocturnal sounds and flying and crawling beasties. The common areas are well furnished and there's even wifi available. The food, made using fresh Amazonian ingredients, win rave reviews from guests.

Novo Airao village

Novo Airao village is a must-see for visitors to the Rio Negro, and this smart hotel is a decent option if the popular Anavilhanas Lodge is fully booked. Located within Novo Airao itself, it lacks the wild appeal of a true jungle lodge but makes up for it with a range of good excursions and easy access to the village's own sights and attractions.

Tropical Manaus

In Manaus itself there is Tropical Manaus. Its days as one of the Amazon's finest hotels are long gone, but does offer resort facilities such as a large pool, bars and lounge, and even a small zoo, so families may find it a fun place to stay for one or two nights if intent on exploring Amazonia's biggest city. Provided you don't expect stellar service or luxurious lodgings, you might find it makes a surprisingly entertaining stay.



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Getting there and away

Most international visitors to the Amazon will arrive by plane, and the state capital Manaus handles by far the largest share of flights to the jungle. The city is a major commercial destination as well as the starting point for many adventures into the Amazon, and its airport is well served by international airlines including American Airlines and TAP Portugal as

well as the Brazilian airlines TAM and Gol.

The international airport is some 14 kilometres from the city centre, and taxis are easy to find although congestion can make the journey longer than visitors might hope.

Known as Eduardo Gomes International Airport in honour of a late Brazilian Air Marshall and political activist, Manaus' airport was the most modern in Brazil when it was inaugurated in 1976. It is no longer the most modern, but a major

overhaul for the 2014 FIFA World Cup has brought it up to international standards.

Unless you have a hankering to sit on hot, cramped buses as they crawl through traffic jams, it's best to avoid using public transport in Manaus. Taxis are readily available but be cautious of overcharging. Taxis from the airport generally operate on a fixed fare basis, but in other situations you should make sure the meter is switched on.

Travelling with a reputable tour

company with arranged private transfers to/from the airport and your other destinations will take a lot of the stress out of moving around in Manaus.

The same applies when taking to the water - the simple boats that transport locals and backpackers are far from comfortable, and at their worst can be dangerous. If comfort, reliable schedules and safety are non-negotiable it's best to stick with a pre-researched, reputable operator.



RIO TAPAJOS



Introduction to Tapajos

The beautiful Tapajos river is the fifth largest tributary in the Amazon, running for some 1,200 miles through Para state to the border with Amazonas.

The river, with its scenic towns and clear waters, is often referred to as 'the Jewel of the Amazon', and with good reason. Less exploited by mass tourism than the Rio Negro (page 26), it's one of the most beautiful areas of the jungle and is home to some of the best beaches.

Visitors can see the three different types of Amazon waterways and ecosystems in relatively close proximity to one another: the black waters of the Arapiuns river, the murky waters of the Amazon river and the rare clear-blue waters of the Tapajos river.

The white sand beaches that emerge here in dry season are unlike any others in Brazil, and are as quiet and pristine as Rio's beaches are packed and hectic.

The blue-green waters are too acidic to attract mosquitoes, making this region a popular choice for families visiting the Brazilian Amazon, while the abundant flora and fauna are a draw for nature lovers and birdwatchers.

Another high point is the meeting of the waters, visible from the pier at Santarem, where the blue Tapajos meets the brown Amazon, and the two run side by side for miles without mixing. Keep an eye out for the river dolphins here.

One of the most-visited places in Tapajos is the lakeside town of Alter do Chão, a popular backpacker hangout known as the 'Amazonian Caribbean' thanks to the clear, mosquito-free waters and the pristine white sand beaches that appear during the July-September dry season (page 70).

Tourist infrastructure in the town itself is largely geared up for backpackers and weekend visitors from Santarem. Although it's a relatively low-scale, budget scene, the beaches nearby are the finest in the entire Amazon. As there are no high end accommodations, luxury travelers tend to find that a good yacht cruise is by far the best way to escape the crowds and explore the region's true beauty.

Private yacht tours will also take in the 'meeting of the waters,' and other land and river-based activities such as piranha fishing, kayaking and nature walks can be easily arranged for those on yacht cruises. Jumping from the deck of the boat into the crystal clear waters is one not-to-be-missed experience, a guaranteed hit for kids.



Exploring the Tapajos region

Although it has a scattering of small towns and beach resorts, the Tapajos region's greatest attraction by far is its pristine natural setting and the scarcely-believable beauty of the sandbanks and beaches encircling tropical islands and archipelagos.

The area is popular with backpackers, but those traveling by private yacht will easily be able to escape the crowds, slipping away from the busy tributaries to find their own beaches for the day.

Some of the best strands in the jungle can be found along the region's Arapiuns river, also notable for its riverside communities, while opportunities for piranha fishing abound in the yellow waters of the Amazon tributaries.

When bathing in the crystal waters gets cold (hint: it won't) you can always spice things up with a hike into the forest or kayaking through the jungle creeks.

You can also see the Amazon's three distinct colours of water within a short distance of one another, and take in a meeting of the waters that attracts far fewer tourists than the meeting of the Negro and Solimões rivers outside Manaus (page 29).

You can comfortably spend up to a week exploring the Tapajos region without getting bored, but do give yourself sufficient time - the beauty and diversity of the place cannot be truly appreciated on a whistle-stop visit.

Although less accessible than the Rio Negro the Tapajos can still be comfortably explored, and the absence of mosquitoes, the incredible beaches and opportunities for jungle excursions make itineraries here a favourite for families, couples and those wanting to see the Amazon far away from the tourist trail.

Most trips start and end in Santarém - a slow-moving city at the confluence of the Amazon and Tapajos rivers. Its breezily laid-back feel of a fishing village is a stark contrast to the commercial rush and constant crush of traffic in Manaus and Belém.

While some travellers may choose to unwind at the simple restaurants here and take trips into the surrounding forest, there are more compelling sights to be found elsewhere, and one night's stay is usually sufficient.

Most travellers spend about six days on the waters around the city, with land excursions into the jungle and to visit indigenous communities. Zip-lining through jungle canopy, horseback riding, guided nature walks, and recreational fishing are all optional extras on most Tapajos tours.

From here it's an impossibly beautiful cruise along clear blue waters - a rarity in the Amazon - of the Rio Tapajos to the national forest.

A popular stop is the village of Alter do Chão, which famously has some of the best river beaches in the Amazon during the dry season, and is a favourite for backpackers and young travellers. Lodgings here are simple, so most luxury travellers make their base on a private yacht. Those on private yachts may well choose to bypass the

crowds here in favour of more remote, serene lodgings, and it's best avoided at weekends when it becomes a raucous playground for Santarém locals escaping the city.

The emerald green lake at the heart of Alter do Chão is a key part of its appeal, and many itineraries will also make time for trekking up to the Piroca hills for panoramic views over the jungle.

Smaller vessels will be able to follow the Arapiuns River from here - the virgin beaches are so isolated that most visitors will have them all to themselves - and cultural visits can be made to the riverside communities.

Most journeys will also take in trips along the yellow waters of Amazon tributaries - rich in flora and fauna, and with ample piranha-fishing opportunities - before heading back to Santarém.

Private yacht charters in Tapajos

For a truly unique experience, those with the budget might consider chartering a private yacht to visit the Tapajos region. By sleeping onboard and setting your own agenda it's possible to visit pristine areas that travellers based in Alter do Chão will not reach.

As you go further up the Arapiuns River during the dry season (page 70) you'll encounter stunningly beautiful beaches with not another soul in sight - perfect for docking your yacht, stringing up some hammocks on the beach and watching the sunset.

The Arapiuns region also has some interesting communities, including the Anã who are running notable initiatives for the sustainable development of the region including a fish farming project and a tourism project where visitors can spend a few nights in a special hotel - a communal room to hang hammocks, with good clean bathrooms and excellent food.



Getting there & away

More remote than the Rio Negro, much of the charm of the Tapajos region lies in the feeling of glorious isolation and of slipping away from the tourist crowds.

The main point of entry is the city of Santarém. Its airport is served by the main Brazilian airlines, flying from the larger Amazonian cities of Manaus and Belém. The flight time from either city is around one hour. The airport is around 15 kilometres from the city centre, and taxis are readily available. However, there are few compelling

sights and no high-end lodgings in the city.

There are also regular flights from the Brazilian capital Brasília, which provides quicker connections to Rio, Sao Paulo and other major destinations. There are regular boat departures to Santarém from Manaus and Belém, but with a travel time of around two days, you'll want to be sure you have secured comfortable berths. Again, a private yacht charter with a well-regarded operator is the best way to ensure not only your own comfort and security, but also to allow for excursions into the areas that commercial vessels can't reach.



BELEM AND MARAJÓ

Introduction to Belém and Marajó

The capital of the state of Pará in the northern reaches of the Brazilian Amazon, Belém is the 11th most populous city in Brazil and is around 100 km upriver from the Atlantic Ocean, on the banks of the Pará river. The Pará is a major waterway of the Amazon network, separated from the Amazon itself by the enormous Marajó Island.



An historic city with a busy port, Belém is famed for its abundant mango trees, and is the starting point for many Amazon river trips. It's renowned as one of the culinary capitals of Brazil, and many of the nation's top chefs come here to learn about Amazonian ingredients, such as the many endemic species of fish, fruit and vegetables. There are some truly excellent restaurants in Belém, and foodies will find yet more treats at the city's market and gentrified docks.

The city sits on an archipelago that is part of the vast estuary system created by the Amazon discharging into the Atlantic. The biggest and most famous of the islands is the truly vast Marajó, a river island the size of

Switzerland and home to gorgeous beaches in dry season.

Visitors usually make a beeline for the islands, and Marajó is a far more compelling destination than the city itself. Famous for its beaches, water buffalo (local lore holds that they came here when the ship they were being transported on was washed ashore) as well as the many indigenous bird species and other native animals such as black caiman.

Belém is not a long-stay destination in itself for luxury travellers, but there are some interesting things to see and do here for those starting or ending a cruise in the city. There are some fine squares, the largest of which is the Praça da República, and wide avenues flanked by handsome historic buildings.

Top of the list of tourist attractions is Mangal das Garças - a very well-maintained park with a bird sanctuary and a butterfly enclosure that allows visitors to admire some of the many beautiful, colourful and intricately-patterned species that live in the jungle. Take the lift up the park's tower, which offers sweeping views over the park, city and out to the rainforest, before crossing the wooden bridge that joins the park complex with Manjar das Garças - the park's acclaimed restaurant, which specialises in sophisticated dishes made with locally sourced ingredients, such as grilled lobster with shrimp risotto, or Red Angus steak with crisped potatoes and snail butter.

Foodies in Belém will also enjoy the Docas - Belém's restored port area, which makes for a pleasant

late-afternoon stroll thanks to its good selection of restaurants and food-focused bars. Even the drinks offer a wealth of new tastes, with all manner of tropical fruits blended into delicious - and potent - cocktails. For real gastronomic treats, gourmands should pay a visit to Remanso do Bosque - manned by talented young Chef Thiago Castanho, and cited among the 50 best restaurants in Latin America. Here, indigenous ingredients are presented in an ultra-contemporary fashion that has wowed many food critics. The seafood-focused Remanso de Peixe serves what is considered by many to be some of the most delicious fish in the world.

Belém's market is interesting enough to merit an hour or so trying local foods and shopping for keepsakes, while the cathedral, basilica and neoclassical theatre are other key attractions.

Despite Belém's charms, the islands surrounding the city remain the

main attraction for most visitors. The largest, Marajó, is the biggest river island in the world, and the second largest island in South America. Located between the Amazonas and Tocantins rivers, the island really is a world unto itself, with a buffalo-mounted police force, fewer cars than bicycles, and a slow pace of life in the small towns and villages that dot the island.

Descendants of the Marajoaras indigenous culture now run farms on the island, and many are open to family visits. There are some culinary treats to be enjoyed here too - most notably buffalo cheeses, and buffalo steak.

The most accessible part of the island is the eastern shore, where the small towns of Joanes, Salvaterra and Soure provide access to cafés, convenience stores and a couple of ATMs, but it's best to bring plenty of cash as the ATMs are not always in working order.



Exploring Belém and Marajó

The entire navigable network of Amazonian rivers and tributaries spans out from Belém, offering almost unlimited scope for exploration. It is possible to use the city as a departure point for adventures far upriver, but the nearby archipelago of river islands offers plenty of reasons to hang around and spend a few days exploring.

Belém is one of Brazil's most important gastronomic centres, and foodies can dine on delicious Amazonian ingredients prepared with great flair at some of the most acclaimed restaurants in the country. Food aside, there are some interesting sights to be found in and around the city, including a good park with bird and butterfly-watching opportunities at Mangal das Garcas, and some eye-catching neoclassical architecture - its grandeur a legacy of Brazil's rubber boom.



The city's neoclassical buildings - including a fine theatre and a handsome public square that regularly hosts free classical music concerts -



are eye-catching, and during the dry season there are dozens of pristine beaches nearby. Some of which can be reached by ferry from Belém's busy downtown boat terminal - others only by private yacht.

The waterfront market, known as Ver-o-Peso (literally, 'see the weight' as products are sold according to weight) is notable for its towers and for its abundance of fresh fish, seafood and other local produce such as medicinal herbs, talismans and even supposed aphrodisiacs. Be sure to try acai from a market specialising in the Amazonian power berry used to make energising juices and smoothies. The once-rundown port area known as Docas is now a fashionable area packed with bars and restaurants, and is a popular spot for an afternoon stroll and a bite to eat.

If you're on a tight schedule you might choose to bypass the city and head straight to the many islands in the surrounding archipelago. At Belém, the Amazon river splits into endless channels, creeks and two great estuaries which separate Marajó from the mainland. The Tocantins river joins the southern estuary, offering many opportunities for exploring.

The archipelago surrounding the city can be explored in days, weeks, or even longer. Where you go and what you see depends very much on the season, as the landscape differs enormously during the wet and dry seasons (page 70).

Whatever time of year, a trip from Belém to Marajó is essential. By ferry, it's a journey of just over three hours from Belém's main boat terminal, arriving at the town of Salvaterra on the eastern shore of the island. At over 40,000 square kilometres, Marajó has all the diversity of landscape and ecosystem anyone could want.

The dry season reveals two distinct

landscapes, the eastern highlands, covered in mangrove swamps, shrubs and farmlands and the jungle-covered lowlands.

Flooded during the wet season, these lowlands become grazing territory for the water buffalo that have become a symbol of the island. Marajó easily merits a couple of days' stay, and can be reached by boat or small plane from Belém.

Visits to buffalo farms are popular with families and kids, while the abundant bird and animal life makes for some good nature-spotting and photo opportunities.

Other key destinations within reasonably easy reach of the city include the beach island of Algodual, an unspoiled resort popular with backpackers. The traditional village of Icoaraci, around 25 km north of Belém on the Praia do Cruzeiro in Marajó Bay, is famous for its Marajoara pottery.



OTHER DESTINATIONS

Xingu National Park

Overview

Buried deep in the jungle of northern Mato Grosso, Xingu National Park is a hard-to-reach destination with enormous appeal to culturally-curious travellers willing to forsake a few creature comforts for an opportunity to get a taste of life in the Amazon rainforest.

Here, in an area that covers close to 2.3 million hectares, around 6,000 Xingu tribespeople live their lives, much as they have done for centuries. The residents, actually a loose cultural grouping of various individual tribes, inhabit approximately 30 villages in an area that has been designated as a protected indian-only area since 1961.

The protected area was established after tireless campaigning by the three Villas-Bôas brothers, Brazil's celebrated indigenous rights activists, who successfully advocated for the entire area of the upper Xingu river to be protected from development and from unwanted contact with the outside world - contact which had led to the death of countless indians due to exposure to diseases.

This was the first large-scale region of the Brazilian Amazon to be given protected status, paving the way for several more. A film about the Villas-Bôas brothers' fight to protect the Xingu tribes - Xingu - is an interesting watch for anybody with an interest in the region and its story.

A closed park, Xingu receives very few visitors each year, but its tribes are accustomed to contact with the

outside world. Outsiders are allowed to enter at the invitation of the tribes, and a handful of scrupulous travel operators have built positive relationships with some of the tribes, making it possible for visitors to spend time with them.

Reaching here takes a determined effort, the costs involved are high while comfort levels are low, but in place of luxury is the ability to participate in a positive, non-exploitative cultural experience that is truly unique.



Exploring Xingu National Park

Visitors to Xingu eschew modern material comforts in order to see at first hand the lifestyle of the

tribespeople. It's important to appreciate exactly what this entails: accommodation is in mud and straw huts with basic, outside toilets. Simple meals are prepared with the ingredients of the land and river. Travellers usually stay for just one or two nights and the ideal time to visit is from mid-May to mid-August. It is unwise to visit in September and October, when forest fires are a hazard, or between December and March, when torrential rains are common.

The welcome will be a memorable one - with a ceremony led by the chief, an exchange of gifts (your gifts are very welcome and your operator will advise on appropriate items) and a tour of the tribal village that will be home for a night or two.

Men may be invited to hear talks in a male-only central hut, before a simple dinner of fish, manioc, rice and the fruits of the last hunt, followed by nocturnal spear-fishing.

Other highlights of a visit may include joining the tribespeople on guided treks through the forest to observe birds and other animals; swimming in clear-water lakes, exploring the tributaries and creeks by canoe; watching indigenous dances, watching tribal body-painting (and possibly even being painted yourself) and nocturnal fishing with spears.

It is a genuinely back-to-basics experience that is certainly not for everybody, but which will thrill anybody wishing to learn about real life for the indigenous peoples of the Amazon.



Getting there

Charter flights are the only practical way to reach this region, making it an expensive - but extremely rewarding - trip for culturally-curious travellers. Visitors to Xingu normally fly to either Goiania or Cuiabá - the nearest large cities - before boarding their plane to Rancho Jatoba - a frontier ranch used as a base for travellers. Some operators will provide accommodation at a support base for a night or two, before heading into Xingu National Park itself.



Tefé & Uakari lodge

Overview

Nearly 600 kilometres west of Manaus on the south bank of the Solimões river, the small Amazonas town of Tefé is notable for two things - its proximity to the Mamirauá Sustainable Development Reserve, and the Uakari floating lodge which is in the reserve. If you are coming to the Amazon to see wildlife and are willing to sacrifice some creature comforts, this is your place.

Mamirauá itself is the biggest protected flooded forest in the world, located between the rivers Solimões, Japurá and Auti-Paraná.

The vast wetland is home to many rare species, and the water levels vary some 10 to 12 metres between wet and dry seasons - during the wet season, vast swathes of the wetland are flooded right up to the treetops (page 70).

Birdlife is abundant, as are pink river dolphins. Keep your eyes and ears open for the splashing somersaults of the pirarucu, the Amazon's largest fish. Don't be tempted to join the fish in the water, though - there are giant alligators down there too.

The region's most famous - and elusive - residents are the Uakari monkeys, an endemic species found nowhere else on earth.

Exploring Tefé

The famous Uakari floating lodge is a solid example of sustainable tourism done well. Run by the non-profit, research-focused Mamirauá

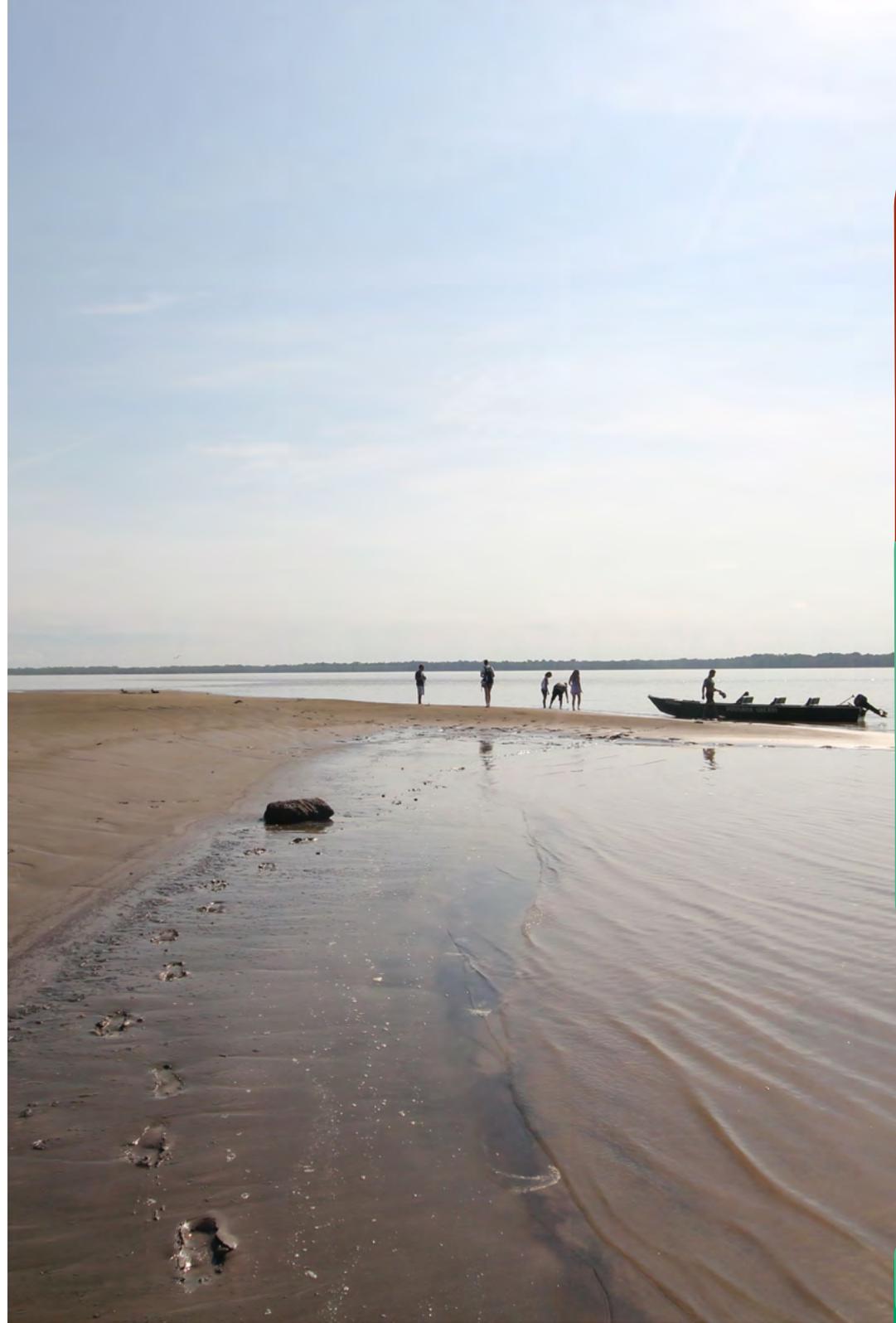
Institute and staffed by members of the reserve's indigenous communities, the unique lodge is made up of five floating bungalows, each of which have views of the river and forest.

Solar energy, rainwater collection and recycled construction materials ensure the reserve delivers on its sustainable principles. The lodge isn't for those who value personal comfort above all else - there's no air conditioning and the solar panels supply only weak minimal ventilation in the tropical heat - but the real luxury is to get up close and personal with the animal inhabitants of the jungle.

Kayaking through the wetlands with local guides, visitors should keep an eye out for pink dolphins, three-toed sloths, and manatee, among many other creatures native to the area, and some rare species of monkeys such as the black-faced squirrel monkey which can sometimes be glimpsed in the treetops.

Getting there

Despite the sense of isolation (there's no road access at all) it's not too hard to reach Tefé. There are regular flights from Manaus, a leisurely two-day slow boat trip or just 12 hours by fast boat. Most visitors will want to stay at least two or three days. The town of Tefé itself has little to grab travellers' attention - the real appeal is in the reserve.







Alta Floresta

Overview

The remote Alto Floresta in the southern state of Mato Grosso, is home to Brazilian Amazonia's biggest - and arguably its best - jungle lodge, the luxurious Cristalino Lodge.

It's a paradise for bird watchers - the ecosystem here is home to many endemic species, and the lodge's enthusiastic guides are highly knowledgeable about the wildlife here.

Serious birdwatchers and ornithologists have a great deal to be excited about here - it's one of the best places in the entire Amazon region for birdlife, with more than 570 known species, and new species still being discovered. Much of the birdlife is endemic to this region, and visitors can follow land trails or take river boat trips in the hope of spotting inhabitants such as the razor-billed curassow and the red-throated piping guan. Just relaxing in the lodge's tree-filled clearing provides plenty of bird-spotting opportunities - many species of toucan, macaw, parrot and

other tropical fruit eaters flock here to feast on cecropia - an Amazonian fruit that can be found in abundance on the lodge's trees.

The Cristalino Lodge sits in a private reserve that stretches for almost 45 square miles, and is dense with primary rainforest. The lodgings themselves are top-of-the-range with some higher-category rooms boasting private jacuzzis.

Conservation is taken seriously at the reserve, which is divided into areas for tourism, conservation, research and monitoring. The ecolodge is frequently cited as one of the world's best, and its observation towers, hugely knowledgeable staff and responsible approach to tourism and conservation make it a very much a destination for serious nature lovers.

As well as the celebrated birdlife, many large forest mammals live here - animals native to the region include tapir, giant anteaters, collared peccaries and southern tamandua.

Exploring Alta Floresta

The most southern region of the Brazilian Amazon, the ecosystem is

distinct to those farther north, and there are many species of flora and fauna that are unique to the area. The forest here is not prone to flooding, which makes for taller trees and a jungle canopy that attracts a vast array of birds and mammals including the rare white whiskered spider monkey.

Most trips will allow time for swimming in the river, bird watching and ascending into the 50 meter canopy, from where it's possible to spot several types of primates as well as myriad birds. According to the season, itineraries will also include treks or kayaking trips through the jungle - a popular trail includes the brazil nut trail, which takes in an area rich in these native nut trees.

The lodge's guided excursions will keep you busy from dawn to beyond dusk but try to set aside some time to simply sit and absorb the ambience of the jungle. Sipping a caipirinha on the deck after a river swim, while looking at the impossibly starry sky

and listening to the sounds of insect and animal life, is a wonderful way to unwind.

Getting there

Truly isolated, the Cristalino Lodge is not accessible by the cruise ships that travel along the Amazon River. Arrival here involves taking a flight to Alta Floresta (regular flights from the town of Cuiaba have connections to Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, and flights take around one hour), followed by a drive of an hour and a half, and then an hour's boat trip.

Transport is provided by the lodge, so it's less of an ordeal than it sounds, although adverse weather conditions can add considerably to the travel times during wet season.

As it takes such a determined effort to get here, most visitors will want to stay more than a couple of days and a stay of three to five nights is recommended.





Responsible travel

The importance of Amazonia to the well-being of the planet cannot be overstated, and this a region that needs to be treated with the ultimate respect. Sadly, many tour providers do not operate in a sustainable manner, and many visitors are unaware of the importance of minimizing their impact on the jungle, its waterways and its inhabitants.

Be conscientious in choosing your operator, and be thorough in your research. Check out the operator's sustainability credentials, and don't be afraid to ask questions about their practices.

Before setting off read up on the areas you plan to visit - the local customs, traditions and etiquette as well as the jungle itself. Good operators will provide you with useful reading material prior to your trip.

Be conscious that the communities of the jungle are simply living their lives, and are not putting on a show for visitors. Don't stare or take photographs without first asking permission, and remember that you are the visitor here.

Don't encourage a begging culture - it is better to donate supplies or money directly to a local organisation, school or other project that benefits the community rather than handing out cash to those who ask for it. Be polite but firm, and don't be tempted to hand out candies to children, as dental care in rural areas may be limited.

Don't encourage ill-treatment of animals by paying for photographs

with captured animals, or visiting animal attractions where the creatures are not well-treated.



Avoid putting additional pressure on already-overburdened resources. Turn off the tap when brushing your teeth, keep showers short.

Properly dispose of all trash, and don't pick anything from the jungle without on the express advice of a responsible and knowledgeable guide.

Stick to the international Leave No Trace principles to minimise your environmental impact.





Climate & when to travel

The Amazon isn't called a rainforest for nothing: it rains here at least 130 days per year, with average annual rainfall of 2,300 mm and humidity levels almost permanently above 80%.

But visitors are often surprised by the variation in precipitation and climate which can vary greatly by season and region.

The Amazonian winter or wet season, runs between January and June, and summer or dry season, between July and December.

In the northern Amazon - home to Santarem, Manaus, and other major destinations, it starts to rain in December and the rivers progressively rise until June, when the water is at its peak.

Rainfall averages vary between 300 cm per month in March and April, and less than 60 cm in August.

In the Southern Amazon, home to Alta Floresta, the rains can vary from as much as 442 cm in March, to less than 10 cm in July. Temperatures vary little throughout the year, hovering at around 30 degrees.

Travelling to the Amazon can be comfortable and hassle-free in both the wet and dry seasons, provided you come prepared for the climate (see Packing List, page 76).

Both seasons have their pros and cons, and choosing the best time to visit depends mostly on your preferred activities, interests and expectations.

The white sand beaches of Rio Tapajós (page 42) appear with the

lower water levels during dry season, and this is arguably the best time for family travel.

The main advantage of traveling during the wet season is that the higher waters allow much greater access for canoes and small boats for wetland excursions. Rains tend to come in short, heavy bursts, so there will be plenty of dry periods for exploring even during the wet season.

Events & festivals

Be sure to book accommodation and travel well in advance if you plan to visit the region during the high seasons of July-August, and December-January.

Carnival, whose dates move in accordance with Lent, is low key here in comparison with destinations such as Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, and the Amazon's biggest party is the Parintins Festival, in June. It's a colourful folk festival, and second only to Rio Carnival in scale and visitor numbers. The event takes place in a giant arena, slightly incongruous in the remote Amazon town of Parintins, and there are few luxury lodgings, but some cruises will include it in their itinerary.

Opera fans may want to be in Manaus during the city's April-June opera season, where there are some impressive shows at the iconic Teatro Amazonas.





Nature and wildlife

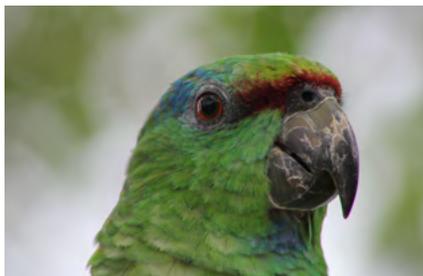
The wildlife of the Brazilian Amazon is more reclusive than you might expect and you'll be disappointed if you arrive expecting to see large mammals at every turn.

For nature lovers, the joy of the Amazon is in understanding the forest's nuances and learning where and how to spot its shy inhabitants. Patience is rewarded handsomely: allow your guide to teach you their behaviours and habitats and this universe of birds, monkeys, reptiles and countless species of marine animals will gradually reveal itself to you.

If wildlife spotting is your main draw, you'll need to sacrifice the beaches and crystalline waters of Tapajos: murkier brown waters attract more insects, which in turn attract every



animal further up the food chain. The major trade off is that these waters aren't suitable for swimming - think piranhas and caiman - and that mosquitoes necessitate plenty of insect repellent and covering up any bare skin.



Generally speaking, the more remote the location, the better for spotting wildlife. The remote lodges such as Cristalino Lodge in Alta Floresta (page 64), and Uakari Lodge (), in the southern region of the jungle, offer the chance for wildlife enthusiasts to venture far off the beaten track.

The Cristalino Lodge is a luxurious base from which to spot animals such as the Brazilian tapir - South America's largest land mammal, and capybara - the world's largest rodent - which can commonly be seen grazing along the river banks from July to October.

Giant river otters can be spied (or at least heard) splashing in the water as they hunt for fish.

There are many species of monkey in this southern region of the Amazon too, with howler monkeys and capuchins the most easily sighted, although visitors may be lucky enough to catch a glimpse of one.

Collared anteaters, three-toed and two-toed sloths also inhabit the area, although they only occasionally reveal themselves, while encounters with big cats such as jaguar, puma and black panthers are rare but not unheard of. Although you're highly unlikely to find yourself face to face with a big cat, at the very least your guide might help you identify paw prints and other clues to their presence.

The famous Uakari Lodge, over an hour's boat ride from the Amazon town of Tefé, offers fewer creature comforts, but entices nature lovers with its prime location in the heart of an ecosystem that is bustling even by Amazonian standards. Located in the vast Mamirauá nature reserve, the waters here are home to one of the world's largest freshwater fish in the form of the piraruca (Arapaima),



which can reach four metres in length. Once on the brink of extinction due to overfishing and habitat loss, numbers are now recovering thanks to a ban on commercial fishing.

There are hundreds of species of birds here, including the yellow-rumped cacique, several types of toucan, and hoatzin, notable for their spiky plumes. Cormorants and egrets frequent the riverside, while giant caiman slide beneath the surface of the water.

Most famous of the reserve's inhabitants is the Uakari monkey that gives the lodge its name. This rare red-faced monkey, endemic to the region, is somewhat elusive, but many visitors are lucky enough to catch a glimpse.





Recommended packing list

Expect to be a long way from stores, pharmacies and ATMs for most of your time in the jungle, and pack accordingly.

Essentials will include:

- Any medications needed, plus surplus if possible.
- A lightweight daypack for excursions.
- Comfortable, lightweight hiking shoes, ideally waterproof.
- Camera, waterproof camera case and spare batteries.
- A lightweight, foldaway rain jacket.
- At least one fleece or warm sweater for cooler evenings.
- Sandals for the beach.
- At least a couple of changes of swimwear - bring protective clothing with sun protection for children.
- Several changes of layerable clothes, including lightweight trousers and long-sleeved shirts to prevent insect bites.
- At least one smart outfit for dining/nightlife.
- Tropical strength insect repellent and repellent wrist bands for babies and young children.
- Several pairs of cotton socks and underwear.
- Sunglasses, hat and sunblock.
- Spare contact lenses/glasses.
- Post-bite cream.
- Water bottles.
- First aid kit, including essentials such as diarrhoea tablets, paracetamol, band-aids, bandages, antiseptic, blister plasters and antihistamine cream.

Eating and drinking

The Brazilian Amazon is a dream destination for gourmands and those with a taste for culinary adventure. With so many types of fish, fruit, vegetables and nuts native to the jungle and its rivers, it's little wonder that many fine dining restaurants in Brazil and overseas have begun incorporating Amazonian ingredients such as acai berries, tapioca flour and cassava into their menus.

Visitors to the Amazon will be able to experience these ingredients at their freshest, cooked with flair and imagination by locals who really know how to maximise the potential of native ingredients.

Dining well doesn't necessarily mean formal dining - some of the most delicious dishes in the Amazon may be prepared by unassuming local restaurants, and there are some delicious street foods that will have visitors feeling saudades (a Portuguese word for a sense of longing for something or somebody) for a long time after they leave the jungle.

Chefs on board the best yachts will create culinary miracles with the riches of the river and the forest, while the handful of high-end lodgings in the Brazilian Amazon also use native ingredients to create a true fine dining experience.

One of your most memorable dining experiences will be enjoying a piracaia, a traditional fish barbecue on your own private Amazonian river beach.

Other highlights you cannot miss

include maniçoba - a traditional dish made with pieces of meat, sausage, manioc, and chicory leaves, the delicious freshwater fish such as pirarucu - said to be the largest freshwater fish in the world - and of course piranha, which is delicious when grilled.



Smaller fish including curimatã and acari are typically grilled, fried, or baked with a brazil nut crust. When served in a tomato sauce the dishes are known as escabeche.

Energy-giving Amazonian fruits such as acai, guarana and cupuacu are pulped and turned into delicious juices and smoothies with a kick, and are also made into mousses and other tempting desserts, while simple root vegetables such as cassava are used to make everything from tapioca pancakes to butter-baked oven chips and filling cakes enriched with coconut. The sheer variety of food on offer means that there are plentiful options for those with allergies or food restrictions, and high-end lodgings - as well as chefs aboard private yachts, are able to cater to most dietary needs and wants.

Useful phrases

Brazilian Portuguese can be tricky for foreigners to master, and local dialects make communication still more complex. But efforts to communicate in Portuguese will be warmly appreciated, and mastering even a few basic phrases will enhance your trip. Note that Brazilians don't take kindly to visitors trying to communicate with them in Spanish!

One thing to remember is that, due to masculine and feminine nouns and adjectives, some words differ according to whether the person speaking is male or female. For example, a male speaker wishing to thank somebody would say 'obrigado', and a female speaker would say 'obrigada'.

Hello - Ola

Hi - Oi

Good morning - Bom dia

Good afternoon - Boa tarde

Good night - Boa noite

Excuse me - Dar licença

Sorry - Desculpe

Please - Por favor

Thank you - Obrigado (male speaker)
/ Obrigada (female speaker)

What time is it? - Que horas são?

May I...? - Posso?

Nice to meet you - Prazer

My name is... - Me chama...

What is your name? - Como se chama?

Food - Comida

Dish of the day - Prato do dia

I am vegetarian/vegan. - Eu sou vegetariano/vegano. (male speaker) / Vegetariana/vegana (female speaker)

Gluten-free - Sem Gluten

Where is the...? Onde fica o/a...

Where is the bathroom? Onde fica o banheiro?

Please may I use the bathroom? Posso usar o banheiro por favor?

I am feeling unwell - Estou passando mal

Do you have...(cold water)? - Tem... (água gelada)?

I am looking for (a present)... - Estou procurando...(um presente)

What a beautiful view! - Que vista bonita!

About Matueté

Founded in 2002, Matueté is Brazil's leading travel design company, specialising in travel experiences that cannot be booked online.

Brazil is a vast country with an enormous number of travel destinations and experiences, each with their own seasons and complexities. By understanding each guest's goals and preferred travel styles we guide them through the trip planning process to help them build the very best itinerary for their needs.

But our job goes way beyond trip planning. In a world with over-abundant (but often dubious) advice, our role is to make sure travellers have an authentic encounter with the best the country has to offer, keeping well away from tourist traps and stereotypes.

But what really sets us apart is our ability to open the special doors that

provide a unique perspective on the country. Private villas, yachts which cannot be booked online, especially in the Amazon, are some of our greatest specialties.

Over the years, our expertise has gained us some important recognition. Travel and Leisure Magazine has named our founder, the only Brazilian on the 'A list' of the World's greatest travel experts and Conde Nast Traveler Magazine has consistently named Matueté as their Top Travel Specialist for Brazil.

Our guests come from all over the world. What unites them is that they are all extremely well-travelled and are not impressed by the obvious. Their rarest asset is time, which they consider the one true luxury, and they come to us to help them make the most of it, wherever they decide to go!



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