

The native arts museum on the Tapajós river reveals a region of myth and mystery. Below: Matueté's Tupaiú riverboat.



A River **RUNS THROUGH IT**

A trip to the Amazon can be the experience of a lifetime. It can also be a nightmare. **ISABEL VINCENT** gets it right, traveling the great river with style *and* authenticity.

CURUPIRA IS THE SPIRIT OF THE jungle—a wild trickster with shocking red hair and green teeth, whose feet are turned backward to confound poachers and others. According to Amazon legend, if you hunt for pleasure or harm the rainforest in any way, Curupira and his backward footprints will



make sure you wander through the thick foliage in circles, making it impossible for you to retrace your steps. Anthropologists say that for hundreds of years, Curupira was a mythological figure to the Tupi Indians in the region. But to Joaquim Dias Pedroso, our guide through a particularly dense patch of the Brazilian Amazon on the banks

Experiencing the locals, from the people to the plants (such as *Victoria amazonica*, below), is what this trip is all about.



of the Tapajós river, Curupira is very much alive. “Grandfather,” says the 60-year-old Pedroso, addressing his remarks in Portuguese to the canopy of trees towering above him on our seven-hour hike to see the “queens of the forest”—the two largest *samaúma* trees in these parts. “Grandfather, don’t be angry with me. We are here to visit the trees, not to hurt the forest.”

Pedroso has lived his entire life at

“but who also want to experience a place through its people.” And for those who value more than the typical trappings, Matueté’s tour of the Tapajós region is one of the most specialized.

Our journey began in Santarém, a port city of 500,000. On the riverfront crammed with colorful boats, men hawk enormous fish named *tambaqui*, *tucunaré*, and *pirarucu*. Black vultures perch on the tin roofs of the open-air market called Mercado 2000, in honor of the millennium.

But Santarém’s real attraction—and its claim to fame—is that it sits at “the meeting of the waters,” the confluence

of the muddy Amazon and the crystalline Tapajós, which by some fluke of nature never mix. This is the area of the Amazon’s famous blue, black, and yellow tributaries. The Amazon river is opaque and yellow—a hotbed of mosquitoes. The Tapajós is clear blue and virtually free of the dipteran flies. It’s the reason that the Tapajós, along with the Río Negro (the “black” tributary of the Amazon), is an ideal starting point for such adventures.

You can spend the late afternoon on the upper deck sipping cupuaçú juice, snacking on manioc cakes, and spotting slow-moving iguanas.

the base of the Tapajós National Forest in Maguary, a small settlement with a handful of thatched houses and sand roads where we started our trek. He is one of several local guides considered key to São Paulo-based luxury tour operator Matueté’s authentic trips throughout Brazil. Matueté is Tupi for “very well done”: an apt description of the company’s excursions, which feature riverboats stocked with fine wines, plush towels, and high-thread-count sheets.

The combinations of itineraries Matueté offers are endless, but one of its most intriguing and eye-opening experiences is in the Amazon. A region of legendary myth and mystery, the Amazon covers more than 60 percent of the Brazilian territory. Its rainforest contains one of the largest rivers and most biodiverse systems on earth.

Yet much of the Amazon remains untouched by the outside world. Which may explain why river voyages in this area are the most misunderstood and potentially misguided trips one can ever experience. By last count, more than a dozen outfitters were booking excursions in the region. Just google “amazon adventures” and see for yourself. If you’re not careful, you’ll end up on an uncomfortably crowded boat with unsophisticated and less than informed guides. To avoid the inevitable disappointment, you’ll want to book with the only tour operator offering luxury outings whose experts are fluent in English—and that is Matueté. “We have designed our trips for people who want an adventure with great style,” explains Martin Frankenberg, one of the company’s founders,

On board *Tupaiú*, the medium-size riverboat that was to be our home base for the next five days, the five roomy cabins were turned out with fluffy white towels and an assortment of fragrant toiletries, such as rose-geranium shampoo and mint-and-cedar conditioner. The staff consisted of two very knowledgeable multilingual tour guides, a cook, and two crew members, who had spent their lives in the region.

Our sail took us 20 miles upriver from Santarém through the black waters of the Río Arapiuns, stopping at the villages of Arapixuna, Maguary, Jamaragua, and the resort town of Alter do Chão, where wide white-sand beaches form in summer and riverside bars get jammed with vacationing locals. During the rainy season, which ends in June, the river floods and the beaches

