

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

become submerged once more.

The boat has no Internet access and cell phones are out of range, guaranteeing you a chance to watch the sunrise with just the symphonic chatter of the rainforest. After fishing for piranha with raw meat as bait, you can spend late afternoons sitting on the upper deck sipping *cupuaçu* (Amazon pear) juice, snacking on manioc cakes, and spotting slow-moving iguanas in the branches that hang over the Canal do Jari.

The food on the *Tupaiti* was brilliant, prepared with fresh local ingredients by the head chef Maria do Carmo de Sousa Santos, known as Dona Carmita. Breakfasts offered a variety of just-baked breads, tapioca crêpes filled with cheese, scrambled eggs, and fruit salad. Fresh juices made with star fruit, acerola, and *cupuaçu* were served several times a day, along with a thirst-quenching lemonade squeezed from limes and enhanced with a type of lemongrass grown in the Amazon. Dona Carmita also created wonderful

SAMPLE

The Amazon covers more than 50 percent of Brazil. Trying a riverboat lets you see its sights in comfort.

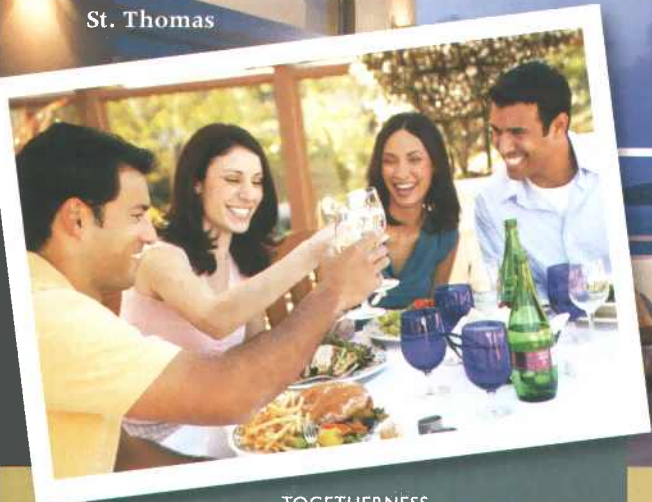


local specialties such as *tucumaré* cooked in coconut milk and exquisite *crème brûlée* made with fruits exclusive to the region. At one point my six-year-old daughter, who accompanied me on the trip, developed a cough and Dona Carmita quickly remedied it by whipping up a potent syrup of Amazonian plant leaves, sugar, and garlic.

On our off-boat excursions, artisans and rubber tappers worked with our guides to prepare traditional meals in the forest. One night in Urucureá, a settlement of nearly 400 people founded in the thirties, a family of rubber tappers shared their stories over river fish grilled the way many of the Amazon Indian tribes still cook—laid across a hole dug in the ground, the fish splayed open and attached whole to wooden skewers.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: COURTESY MATUETE; ZORAN MILICH (2)

St. Thomas



TOGETHERNESS
Wilson style

Drew and Ann treasure vacations as times to connect. They gave up the responsibilities of a second home for the freedom of having fun. You'll find this Ultimate couple snowmobiling at Lake Tahoe with the kids for the holidays, relaxing in St. Thomas with his brother's family in summer, and weekend sightseeing in New York with her parents.

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Rubber tapper Antonio Ferreira Rodrigues grabbed his machete and used it to point to the elaborate pattern of markings on a rubber tree. A small stream of white sap was oozing out. These days, the community, which is so close to the equator that it is baking hot by seven in the morning, barely makes its living anymore from tapping rubber trees. Instead, a local weaving cooperative made up entirely of women brings in most of the outside revenue.

The legacy of rubber tapping stems from the late twenties, when the Ford Motor Company set up a rubber plantation on a patch of riverbank it named Fordlandia. Henry Ford believed the town, and later another plantation at Belterra, would be the epicenter of a worldwide boom. But after building model American towns, complete with fire hydrants and Midwestern-style bungalows for company executives, the bottom fell out of the rubber market. And there were other problems: The trees Ford planted all succumbed to a fungus, which generated "leaf disease," and local workers could not conform to American workplace practices of punching time clocks and

eating in U.S.-style cafeterias. By 1946 it was clear that the experiment had failed, and Ford executives abandoned the region. After spending what today would be the equivalent of \$23 million on the plantations, Ford sold them back to the Brazilian government for \$260,000.

Historically the rainforest has attracted everyone from former U.S. president Teddy Roosevelt—for whom one of its tributaries is named—to Confederates from the American South who came here in the late 1860s believing they could own slaves and start new plantations. Their descendants still live in the region. Many of the early settlers ended up dying of yellow fever or intermarrying with the local Indian and black populations.

In Arapixuna, a settlement fixed around an imposing whitewashed Catholic church that dates back to 1880, 75-year-old Gabriel Pinto spun tales over steaming plates of wild duck cooked in manioc juice and seasoned with cilantro. He spoke of how his parents, Jews from Portugal, came to the Amazon to plant cocoa and jute. They never left.

Our journey ended where it began, at the port of Santarém. As I thought back to the first day of our trip, I remembered the personalized card left among the toiletries in our cabin. The message read "I hope that the lights, images, and stories of the local people become sources of inspiration for your work and for your soul." I couldn't have put it better. ■

NOTES ON THE AMAZON

A six-day boat trip exploring the Amazon's Tapajós river begins at **\$5,230 per person** for double occupancy and includes hotel accommodations for one night in Manaus, ground transfers, and city tours. All meals on the boat and gratuities for the crew are also included. Flights must be booked separately. River beaches appear during the dry season, from July to December. The wet season is from January to June. **The best time to visit, however, is between August and April**, when the beaches are completely formed. You can contact Martin Frankenberg or Bobby Betenson at Matueté, 71 Rua Anacetuba, Sala 22, Itaim Bibi, São Paulo; 866-709-5952; matuete.com.

SAMPLE

Ultimate fun

Steamboat Springs



TOGETHERNESS

Gibson style

Ultimate members Sue and Michael love skiing with family, but now the kids are grown, and their extended family numbers 11, from 2 to 62. Unlike a hotel, this spacious slopeside home at Steamboat has 4 large bedrooms to welcome everyone in comfort and style. Hot chocolate all around!

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