

Seeing and saving Peru's rain forest firsthand

By David Goodman
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

PUERTO MALDONADO, Peru — As my son stood in front of his first-grade class in Vermont this spring to give his report about army ants in the Amazon rain forest, the thought occurred to me: Why not see what he's studying up close? It wasn't as crazy as it sounded; we were planning a summer trip to Peru, but until that point we were focused on going to Machu Picchu and Cusco, the famous Andean mountain town.

It turns out that combining mountains and rain forests is easily done in Peru. The world's second highest mountain range plunges precipitously into the world's third largest expanse of tropical rain forest (only Brazil and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have more jungle). The flight from Cusco, at over 11,000 feet, to the jungle town of Puerto Maldonado takes just 40 minutes.

Six weeks after my son presented his report, we were standing on the banks of the Tambopata River, a tributary of the mighty Amazon, mesmerized by a straight line of thousands of these long-legged ants marching back and forth as they foraged for food. Jasper warned us to stand clear. "These could be the soldier ants!" he said excitedly as he darted back and forth to observe, clearly amazed to see his research subject spring to life in such dramatic fashion. "One won't hurt you, but together they'll attack. They can even kill small animals."

Our guide, Sixto, smiled. "Jasper's right — they will bite you if you get in their way. But they normally just eat insects."

Sixto, who was born and raised in the rain forest, works with Rainforest Expeditions, which operates three lodges along the Tambopata. My wife, Sue, my daughter, Ariel, 15, and Jasper, 7, and I were headed to Refugio Amazonas, which Rainforest Expeditions opened in 2005 and is oriented to families and groups. We were eager to share with our kids the fragile beauty of this threatened ecosystem, and the five-night program for younger children and teenagers was the solution.

Refugio Amazonas is a 24-bed-room lodge located on a 200-hectare private reserve that abuts the sprawling Tambopata National Reserve in southeastern Peru. The proximity of the river to Machu Picchu has made it an increasingly popular draw for ecotourists, some 40,000 of whom visited the jungle region last year. The Peruvian rain forest is under intense pressure from logging, gold mining, and road construction.

Getting to Refugio Amazonas from the airport at Puerto Maldonado involved a slow, bumpy hour-long bus ride to a sweltering jungle outpost aptly named Inferno, where we transferred into 55-foot-long motor boats that resembled hollowed-out bananas. The 2½-hour ride upriver instantly oriented us to our new environment. Sixto pointed excitedly to a black caiman, an endangered reptile that resembles an alligator, sunning itself on the riverbank. We drew in for a closer look, which prompted the fierce reptile to eye us warily and slither into the water, its eyes still trained on us like periscopes. Moments later, we were distracted by the primordial shriek of a scarlet macaw. Perched on a clay outcropping were two of the storybook birds with their coats of crimson, gold, and green. Our normally skeptical teenager took in nature's technicolor with disbelief. "Can you believe where we are?" she said.

Our boat finally pulled ashore at a set of wooden steps that rose up from the river. We had been hiking for 10 minutes when the lush green forest suddenly parted to reveal what looked like an enormous ship's prow cutting through the vegetation. This was Refugio Amazonas, a giant open-sided structure with a thatched roof and spacious two-story common area that included a bar, dining room, and hammock lounge. Our rooms had three bamboo-lined walls and beds draped with gauzy mosquito nets. The fourth wall was open to the rain forest. The bathrooms had running water and cold showers. Candles and kerosene lanterns provided our only light (the dining room has several hours of electricity each night where you can recharge camera batteries). We fell asleep that night to a thrilling cacophony made by howler monkeys, macaws, parrots, and crickets.

The next morning, guide Carol Wendorff approached Jasper. "Ania needs your help to save the rain forest," she informed him



On their family rain forest vacation, Jasper Goodman, 7, and his father kayaked on the Tambopata River in southeastern Peru, guide Carol Wendorff showed Jasper a butterfly, and with Sixto as her guide, Ariel Goodman, 15, spied a macaw from her perch 75 feet high in the forest canopy.

PHOTOS BY DAVID GOODMAN/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

If you go . . .

How to get there

Puerto Maldonado in southeastern Peru is reached by a 40-minute flight from Cusco (the gateway to Machu Picchu) or by air from the capital, Lima. One-way flights from either city cost around \$100. LAN Airlines (lan.com) offers several flights per day. Refugio Amazonas is located on the Tambopata River, 3½ hours from Puerto Maldonado by bus and boat.

What to do

Refugio Amazonas is operated by Rainforest Expeditions (peruna.com; 877-870-0578), which runs programs of varying duration. The five-night kids family program costs \$1,020-\$1,335 per person,

depending on number of participants; a five-night teen family program costs \$750-\$1,430 per person. Cost includes all meals, guides, and transportation to and from the lodge.

Travel requirements

US visitors to Peru do not need a visa for stays of 90 days or less. Visitors to the jungle areas are advised to be vaccinated against yellow fever and carry a vaccine certificate. Malaria is extremely rare around Puerto Maldonado, but some visitors choose to take antimalarial medication. Consult a doctor for advice on what vaccines and medications are currently recommended.

ior by the light of our headlamps.

While Jasper was helping to save the forest, Ariel was out with another group climbing a 75-foot tree with ropes and a harness. Another day featured kayaking and fishing on the Tambopata, hiking a remote clay lick to observe macaws and parrots, and following Sixto as he showed us how he used rain forest plants as medicines. "I don't go to a pharmacy," he said, motioning to the dense growth around us. "I have all the medicine I need right here." He won over Ariel by curing her nagging stomachache with a potent tea he brewed from a forest vine.

On our last morning, we climbed an 80-foot canopy tower to bird-watch with Sixto and take

the coolest — they can eat you!"

We spotted more birds in an hour than I had ever seen, including a toucan, tanager, parrots, macaws, and parakeets, to name a few. A full-throated symphony of bird-song rang out around us.

We had come a long way from Jasper's first-grade class, but it wasn't far from his mind. As we bounded back down to earth, Jasper broke into a babble about what he wanted to report on in second grade. "Birds are way cooler than insects. Actually, I wanna do a report on piranhas. They are

the coolest — they can eat you!"

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cryptically. Jasper looked puzzled, but accepted Wendorff's invitation to help search for "gifts" from a girl who was trying to save the earth. This was the start of a day-long odyssey along a special children's rain forest trail created with help from a Peruvian nonprofit organization, ANIA, which aims to teach children about natural and cultural resources of the rain forest. The trail and its story are geared for kids 4 to 10. Unfortunately, Jasper, was not buying in. When Wendorff pressed him about how he could help Ania preserve the rain forest, he blurted, "Ania's fake."

Wendorff was undeterred. She pulled out a map, and informed him that he had to help find clues and solve riddles throughout the day that offered keys to saving the forest. He wasn't so sure about Ania, but he would never pass up a treasure hunt. He grabbed the map and took off running into the forest with Wendorff. He began picking up colored seeds that al-

ternately represented love, truth, bravery, friendship and freedom — all of which he would need on his mission. As he encountered challenges, from climbing a rope ladder on a massive shihuahuaco tree to finding brazil nuts on the forest floor, he would toss seeds to help him. In under an hour, our skeptic was fully engrossed in the task of saving the world.

The trail lured him deeper into the forest throughout the day. At one point, we arrived at a pristine lake, where a boatman on a large wooden catamaran waited with fishing poles fashioned out of tree branches. Jasper trolled eagerly for piranha, using raw meat as bait. The boatman finally pulled in one of the famous carnivorous fish, which wowed Jasper by baring its razor-sharp teeth and taking a bite out of a leaf that he offered it. A full day of hunting and problem-solving concluded with Jasper finding the "treasure of the rain forest." We hiked back with our newly minted rain forest sav-

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