

Year of Discovery competition: wake-up call from the Amazon morning chorus

Laura Smith is a runner-up in the cruises category of our Year of Discovery writing competition for this account of the wildlife on a river cruise in Peru.

By Laura Smith

Last Updated: 10:19AM GMT 24 Dec 2008

We woke early the to the sounds of the jungle orchestra warming up for a day of activity. The first twitters of waking birds soon crescendoed into a full cacophony of whistles, hoots and screeches and by 7 am there was no more ignoring it - it was time to get up. We emerged, refreshed, from our cabins to find ourselves cruising through the thick rainforest of the Pacaya Samiria Nature Reserve. I adjusted my eyes to the sudden assault of colour. Overnight, rain had cleared the air; the sky was blue and the air fresh. The banks displayed a full palette of greens, punctuated only by bright tropical flowers in reds and oranges.



A riot of colour and life can be seen - and heard - from the Peruvian Amazon Photo: GETTY

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After a hearty breakfast on board our 60-foot river cruiser, MV Delfin, we headed out on skiffs with the boat's expert guides, Adonay and Juan Luis, to learn about the wildlife and unusual flora of the Peruvian Amazon. At first, we could barely see past the dense foliage, but after a couple of hours' quiet observation, we grew receptive to the movement.

The waters, the trees and the undergrowth teemed with life. Cheeky capuchin monkeys leapt from tree to tree, while red howler monkeys shrieked in the distance. Sloths hung from upper branches, stretching lazily in the strong morning sun. The sky buzzed with parrots and toucans; horned screamers lurked at the river's swampy edges, and black-collared hawks perched on collapsed branches and tree stumps. The rainforest was putting on quite a show for us.

We dedicated the afternoon to a search for the Amazonian Pink River Dolphin. Unlike its more famous Chinese and Indian cousins, this mystical creature has been largely protected by jungle superstition. Our guide, Adonay, grew up in Nauta and is well-versed in local folklore. He explained gravely that the dolphin is the jungle's most powerful creature, thought to bring a curse of impotence upon any captor - a risk few would wish to take - and so the Pink River Dolphin continues to thrive.

After twenty minutes or so, we noticed some disruption amongst the giant lily pads. A large pod of Amazonian Pink River Dolphins slithered eerily beneath the dark water. Our skiff driver turned off the engine and we sat in silence, mesmerised. Unlike Oceanic dolphins, these pink creatures can't jump. They just glide underneath the water surface, breaking it occasionally with their snouts as they take breath.

The late afternoon sun was hot, and we decided to join the dolphins for a swim. One by one, we lowered ourselves into the cool water. Though the river looked as dark as flowing tar from the boat, the water was surprisingly clear, like freshly-brewed black tea. While the dolphins kept their distance, we paddled in circles around the skiff to the sounds of the evening jungle orchestra before returning to Delfin, wrapped in fresh towels and sipping flasks of hot coffee, in time for a Pisco sour at sunset. It had been quite a day.

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