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# Distinction

THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA LIFESTYLE

*Travel Issue*



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The author and fellow travelers paddle down a tributary of the Amazon in search of wildlife.

## Amazon Adventure

Getting back to nature in the deep heart of the jungle.

Text and photographs by Dawn Moore

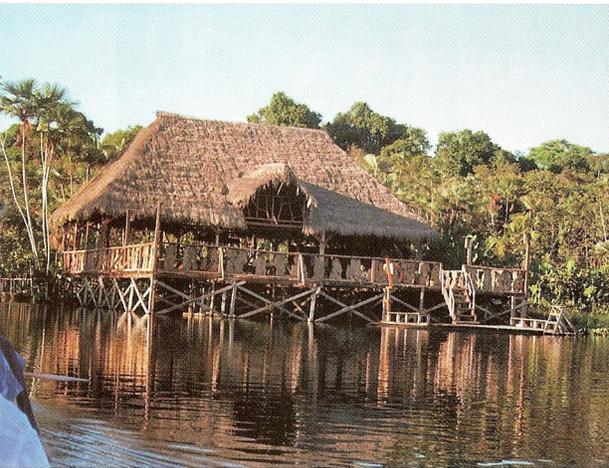
**3** IT WAS 9 O'CLOCK AT NIGHT and we were gliding precariously across a lagoon in the Amazon on our dugout canoe. Pitch black doesn't begin to describe it. With no ambient light, not even from the moon (as rain clouds add yet another layer of darkness), there was not even the tiniest reflection off the water to provide a sense of bearing. Your imagination is no longer your friend.

The only man-made sound was that of our Seth's oar breaking the lagoon's still surface, causing water to ripple against the canoe. After what seemed to be an hour, but certainly was



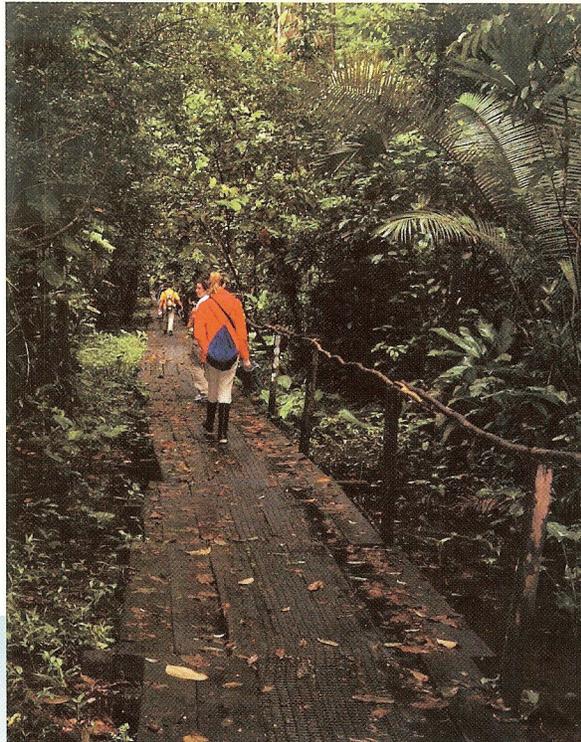
only ten minutes, he told us to turn on our flashlights and gently wave them across the sky like klieg lights at a premiere. We heard them first—the flutter of leathery wings quickly displacing air—and then saw the hundreds of bats darting around our heads in and out of the beams of light. This ethereal experience was the perfect ending to our four-day visit to the Ecuadorian rain forest.

The Amazon is not only a river but also the term for the basin extending east to Ecuador, Peru, and Brazil. On the banks of the Napo River, one of the Amazon's main tributaries through Ecuador, is the 15-year-old Sacha Lodge. Considered one of the rare



luxury lodges in the rain forest, Sacha Lodge is tucked away on the edge of Pilchicocha Lake (but, frankly, it was hard to tell where lake ended and land started) and built by native craftsmen in the indigenous style with raw woods and thatched roofs. “Electricity 24 hours a day,” the brochure noted. It was sunset as we came upon the lodge. Graceful water lilies clumped all around the edges of the lagoon, with tall reeds as their backdrop.

It is no small feat getting here: I had a diverted flight (courtesy of wreckage from the morning's plane crash), a three-hour bus ride across unpaved roads (with a change of vehicles midway due to a dead radiator and then a flat on the replacement bus), an hour by motorized canoe, a half-hour walk through muddy forest with my luggage, (I had missed the luggage cart as the bathroom had taken priority) and then the dugout across the lagoon. I was ready for a double Manhattan, courtesy of Luis the bartender.



The lodge had about 35 guests (it can hold 50 or so) and we were immediately divided up into groups of eight and given rubber boots. I was assigned to four giggly British twentysomethings who, apart from giggling, were mute. Another Manhattan. Seth, our guide, (also a healthy, strapping adolescent) rounded us up after dinner for our first night canoe ride, which was simultaneously exciting and strangely calming. There were incredibly amplified sounds—frogs calling to one another, bat wings overhead, and insect chirps—not to mention eyes glowing just above water level. It was beautiful and completely enveloping. Seth caught a baby caiman and, not seeing its mother anywhere, I thought it safe to have an interactive experience with jungle wildlife. I held him for closer inspection.

**IN THE JUNGLE** (clockwise from left): The approach to Sacha Lodge's landing by dugout canoe; the group gets respite from the muddy jungle floor on a walkway cut through the lush overgrowth to the lodge; dramatically marked blue morph and owl-eye butterflies make a lunch of plantains.

The caiman patiently tolerated being turned upside down and simply glared at us. He didn't quite feel like my mother's alligator handbags—maybe when he gets bigger. Of course, the giggly Brits were appalled—that is, until one of them had a rather large and amorous spider crawling on her, and then the American nutcase became very handy.

The next morning at 6:30 a.m. we climbed up a 135-foot-tall tree tower where I spotted my first Toucan—so chic—all black and white with a tiny streak of yellow along the top of his beak. The wooden tower is built around a giant kapok tree considered very spiritual by the local shamans, who sit and meditate at its base. On the ground, there were mushrooms of all types growing on a wide assortment of host plants. The vegetation and the insects were huge—moths the size of your hand and ants that

could carry off a quarter. Out in the distance, a howling in the treetops caused me to investigate what I assumed was the wind kicking up, but it was the call of the howler monkey. When six or ten of them are calling to one another, it sounds exactly like the wind.

That afternoon, our guide led us to the lodge's pièce de résistance, the canopy tower, 94 feet high. It's attached to a second and third tower via a suspension bridge that covers about a quarter-mile over the jungle's treetops. Even in the torrential downpour, the view was breathtaking. When the rain stopped, more than a dozen species of dazzling birds came out from hiding and shook and preened their wet feathers. Bright turquoise, brilliant yellow, and green—seeing them in the wild is heartstopping. Coming (*continued on page 112*)

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down, I only fell in the mud once—of course, with mud once is all you need. Luis saw me coming—three Manhattans.

The lodge's commercial butterfly farm became my salvation from the twentysomethings. Hundreds of blue morphs, tiger longwings, and owl eye butterflies flutter from flower to flower in their conservatory, where I would reflect on the day's sights. Finally, we visited the Yasuni National Park's clay lick

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that attracts hundreds of parrots daily—very early in the morning, as in a 5 a.m. wake-up call with a 5:30 breakfast. We spotted five species, each more brilliantly colored than the next, and the sound! There was much happy chirping and squawking.

There were very few flowers. Occasionally, a deep burgundy columbinelike cocoa bloom, lavender water lily stalk, or rosy pink trumpet flower would present itself, but far more sparsely than I expected. The jungle emitted an alchemist's brew of musky freshness, although we all smelled like wet dog. With no TV, no cell phones, no air-conditioning, and no motors, there was absolutely nothing to muffle the pure sound of bird whistles, frog croaks, and monkey screeches, each trying to be heard over the other. The wooden structure of my room held the warm scent of moist earth and bark, a heady mix I will not soon forget. (Besides, when I get nostalgic, I can re-experience the whole thing on the Jungle Cruise at Disneyland. No kidding; it's pretty close.)

I was soaked to the bone 60 percent of the time, trudged through ankle-deep mud 90 percent of the time, and was 100 percent overwhelmed with the intensity of jungle life. I caught a piranha on a bamboo fishing pole, encountered a family of squirrel monkeys 20 feet above my head, and held that baby caiman in my hand. And when I discovered that there are still headhunters in the region, I tried to send the Brit-twits off on an uncharted trail, but they weren't going for it. **D**

*For information about Amazon adventures, contact Mountain Travel Sobek, 510-594-6000; [www.mtsobek.com](http://www.mtsobek.com)*