

COLOMBIA'S AMAZON EXTENDS A WILD WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE

By Cathy Senecal

A visit to Colombia reveals a culturally rich tropical forest in the Upper Amazon where Brazil, Colombia and Peru meet

We motor across the milky brown Amazon, rain drops pelting our faces as a late afternoon shower falls. The rain stops and the sun lowers, casting a rosy veil as two gleaming dorsal fins rise and fall in unison off the bow. Then, another off to the left. Soon, dolphins are all around us, their arched surfacing and resurfacing a sleek dance we marvel at as much as the colour of these Amazon river dolphins—clearly pink.

It was the promise of birds, monkeys and dolphins that drew me to the Colombian Amazon, an ecosystem that makes up a third of Colombia. This country has the largest number of species of birds, butterflies and orchids on earth. But it was also the stories of conservation and ancestral revival that intrigued me, and the delicious fusion of foods.

I experienced Colombia's Amazon via off grid Calanoa Amazonas, a low impact grouping of seven unique cabins designed by artist and owner Diego Samper, a Colombian Canadian who, with his wife Marlene, splits his time between Gibsons, BC, and Calanoa.

A MAGICAL LOCALE FROM WHICH WE LET THE AMAZON FLOW THROUGH US

Cut off from the rest of the country by road, far removed from the colour of Cartagena, the comfortable, palm roofed structures at Calanoa stand on stilts, some with views over the vast river. This is our magical locale from which we let the Amazon flow through us.

One day, our small group of 12 heads upriver in a long narrow motorboat. We're mesmerized by high banks, villages on stilts and swallows swooping past. After mooring on the Peruvian side, we climb up a slippery bank, walk across rickety log bridges and past Ceiba trees

with bases the size of trucks. Immense butterflies flit about. Violet hummingbirds whiz past, and our guide spots a macaw.

Guide Herman Osorio tells us about Foundation Entropika, which protects nomadic owl monkeys.

"Supporting such foundations is the way Calanoa Amazonas works with and helps the surrounding Indigenous communities, with tribes including Cocama, Huitoto, Yagua and Ticuna, the biggest, who came from Brazil 700 years ago."



Besides afternoon walks, we kayak up a shadowy river tributary, or dance with locals who show us a traditional coming of age ceremony. Always, sultry humidity prevails. Relief is a cool shower, a nap in an awning-covered bed, or a contemplative sit on the common deck overlooking the river.

Refreshed, we walk from well spaced cabins on raised wooden walkways to the communal dining area. We feast on renowned Brazilian, Colombian and Peruvian fusion cuisine, developed by Samper's wife Marlene, and created using local traditions by Mary Rojas and Guillermina Sinarahua. The chefs serve grilled Dorado fish wrapped in a banana leaf. Yucca is flattened and grilled. They use a soft yellow fruit that grows everywhere to make a tart, delicious araza sauce; and they make tucupi, an ancient recipe blending a smoky flavoured manioc juice with leaf cutter ants, which adds a surprising herbal flavour. A cake made from acai berries is amazing.

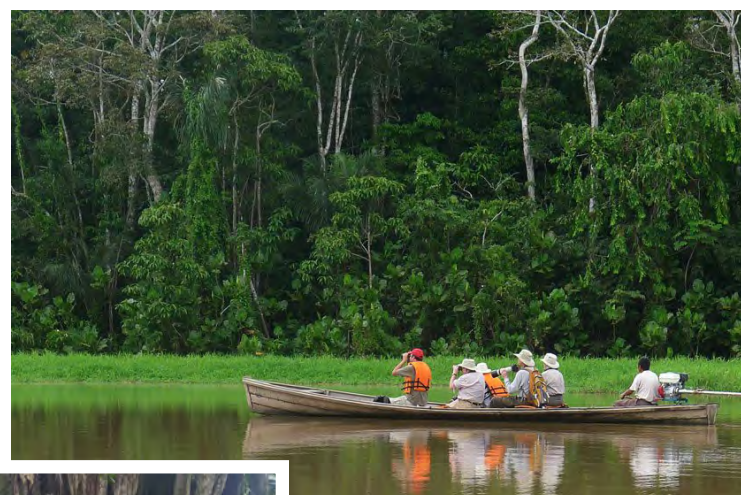


THE MOST IMPRESSIVE SOUND IN THE JUNGLE

Wildlife is everywhere. Oropendolas, birds that are an intriguing part of Calanoa’s soundtrack, wake us with raucous “glop a glop, bleep” sounds, described aptly as sounding like laser beams or gargling liquid metal. Later, we watch oropendolas fly from long hanging “bag” nests they weave in the trees in Mocagua, a hibiscus scented village next door, where many of the staff live. Adorable squirrel monkeys appear for treats doled out by the staff or visitors. Tarantulas reveal themselves on nightly jungle walks (and sometimes in the cabins, where staff will gently

return them to the forest). The pink dolphins, of course, joined us on our sunset ride.

“The Amazon inhabits people’s imaginations, and what we try to achieve is that visitors, through an immersion of the senses, leave the forest with it inside,” says owner Samper. “The relationship between the forest and its people is based on reverence and respect. Calanoa not only provides jobs, but welcomes forest inhabitants—such as Jorge Llerena, lead guide and one of the best trackers in the region, or the chefs in the kitchen—to express and share their culture and explore the untapped potential of Amazonia.”



► IF YOU GO

Access Calanoa Amazonas by a two hour flight from Bogota south to Leticia, the frontier town on the tri border of Brazil, Peru and Colombia. It is five minutes by taxi to the river port from the airport, followed by a sensory filled 90-minute boat ride to Amacayacu National Park and Calanoa. Calanoa Amazonas has rooms for individuals and groups but also offers workshops on photography, yoga, music and field school. Visit calanoaamazonas.com for more details.

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