



— Staying at the Yacumama Lodge allows adventurers to explore the legendary Amazon and the surrounding jungle.

PHOTO BY
WYATT COUNTS

The Reign Forest

Most people imagine the Amazon to be an unspoiled paradise. They don't realize how tough a vacation in Eden can be.

BY JUDY ALEXANDRA DiEDUARDO

The cry of the black caracara echoes across the glassy tributary that is the final leg of a 110-mile odyssey up the Amazon from Iquitos in northern Peru. Far from the roar of the city, the bird's distinctive call resonates over the black water and throughout the compound of thatched-roof cottages. The Yacumama Lodge is the only semblance of modern civilization in a world untouched by technology—and time. Many of the Indian tribes here live in remote jungle villages as their ancestors did thousands of years ago.

Four degrees from the equator, the heat is stifling. The air is thick with moisture and scented with a musky earthiness. Mosquitoes swarm relentlessly in pursuit of exposed flesh,

especially at night, when the tangerine-streaked sky evaporates into darkness and the jungle takes on an eerie blackness. The night is punctuated by a chorus of shrieks, whistles, grunts, and cries not heard anywhere else on the planet.

Welcome to the heart of the 4.7-million-square-mile Amazon basin, home to the world's richest biomass.

Traveling to this part of the world is not for the fainthearted or those who can't part with CNN or styling gel—an especially useless item since even the most obedient hairstyle cannot be rescued from the year-round 85 percent humidity. Even hard-core travelers wilt on this trip. But whether you've harbored dreams of this wild region or are simply eager to see life beyond the beaten path, traveling to the

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Amazon is an adventure like no other and well worth the discomfort.

As big as the United States, the Amazon basin covers more than half of Peru, a large chunk of Brazil, and parts of Bolivia, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Guyana, and French Guiana. Many medicines are made from the huge variety of tropical plants here, and scientists believe there are numerous new medicines waiting to be discovered.

The Yacumama Lodge is located at the Amazon's headwaters, where the eastward flow to the Atlantic begins. The Amazon rivals the Nile at more than 4,000 miles in length. Its journey begins just above 18,000 feet in the Andes, and it drops more than 17,000 feet in its first 500 miles, creating powerful six-knot currents that push 4.5 trillion gallons of water each day across northern Brazil and into the Atlantic Ocean. That's enough water to run every household in America for five months.

The Amazon, 100 miles wide at its mouth, is so big that ocean liners and cargo ships can sail upstream to the port of

Iquitos, located at the foot of the Peruvian Andes. With 400,000 people, it is the country's largest jungle town and the biggest Amazon river port for cruises to remote riverside villages. This is where most Amazon adventures begin.

The first thing that becomes apparent about this legendary river is the navigational difficulties that arise from floating debris caused by erosion. We watched 20-foot-long floating logs barrel toward us during the four-hour boat ride to Yacumama and understood why only the pros belong here.

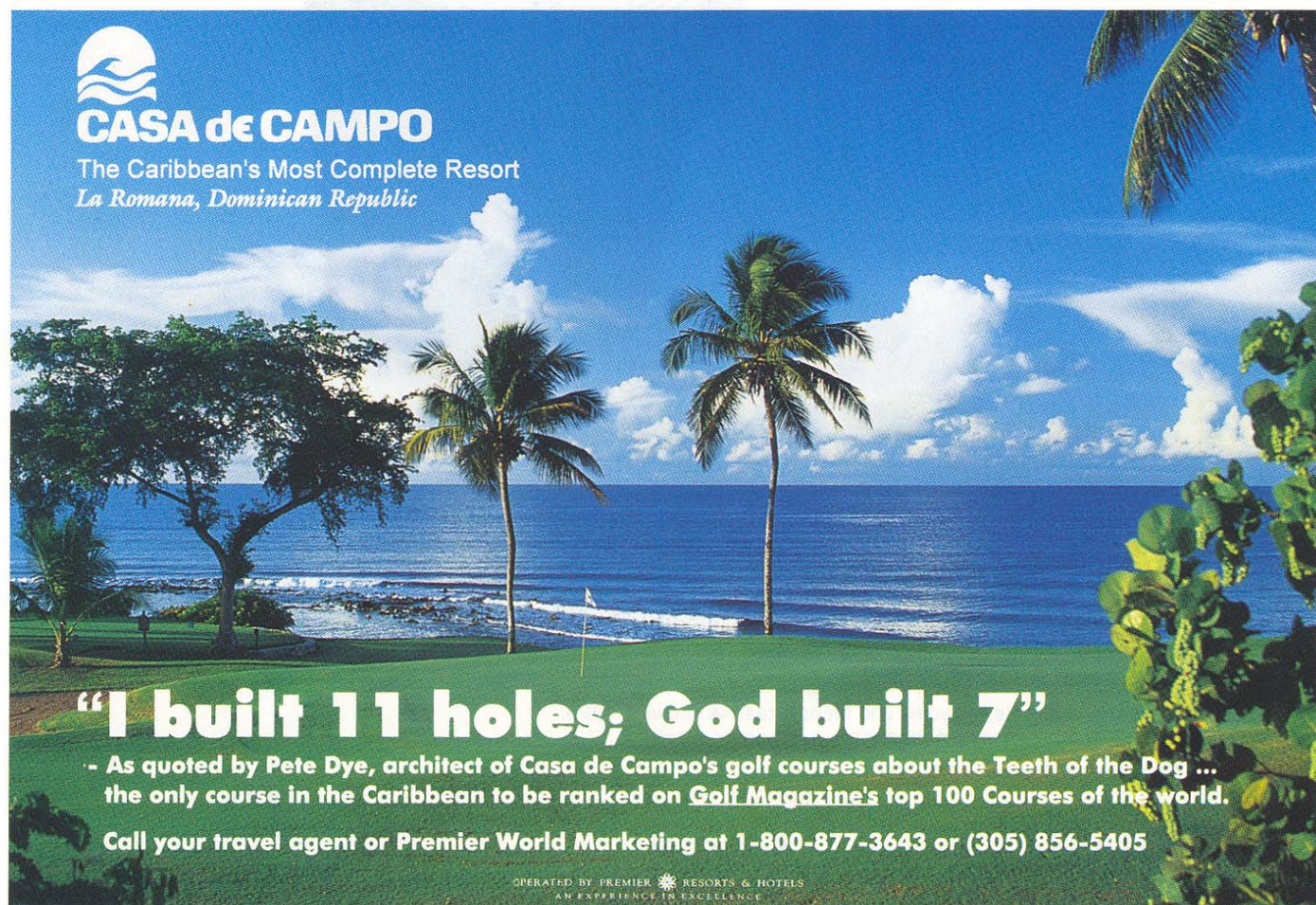
Although not especially scenic, the long boat ride past thatched-roof villages perched above the river's muddy banks gives stark insight into life on the Amazon. It is the perfect way to shed the trappings of the modern world and prepare oneself to experience this amazing biosphere. The Yacumama Lodge, a compound of 31 thatched-roof bungalows that accommodate up to 77 guests, provides the ideal introduction to the Amazon and the surrounding jungle. Day trips along several different tributaries are offered as well as lightweight jungle hiking for all age groups.

The lodge experience is much like camping, with the added benefit of mosquito netting. The screened cabins are sparse but more than adequate. At night, kerosene lanterns and flashlights are the chief source of illumination. Yacumama also has two communal bathrooms, one each for men and women, with—yes—flush toilets. Small comforts go a long way, especially in a place where unyielding heat and humidity can dampen even the sunniest spirits until one begins to acclimate.

This level of forethought and ingenuity extends to the food and the kitchen in which it is prepared. A refrigerator, a stove top, and a blender—all powered by kerosene—round out the list of appliances. Yet surprisingly, a diverse and satisfying array of meals emerge from this modest operation three times a day.

No Ugly Americans

The lodge is the brainchild of Americans Lawrence Bishop and Norman Walters, childhood friends and former dyed-in-the-wool hippies who are no strangers to remote locations. They homesteaded across the United States,



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living in tepees and log cabins during the 1960s. In the mid-'70s, Walters started the first natural food co-op on Maui. The two men parted ways in the late '70s when Bishop traded in his alfalfa sprouts for a career as a commodities broker while Walters stayed in Hawaii and worked as a contractor building multimillion-dollar residences throughout California and Hawaii.

Their paths crossed again 15 years later when Bishop proposed building a tourist lodge in the Amazon. The Shining Path insurgency had made Peru a dangerous place for tourists, but Bishop sensed the end of this group of radical rebels, which dissipated as predicted. The two men bought 5,000 acres of land from the Peruvian government on the River Yarapa and began executing their plan.

Bishop, a self-taught architect, designed the Thai-style structures that both men had seen during their travels to the Far East, and Walters built them. But recruiting and supervising the 60-man labor team from the nearby village of Puerto Miguel was more than a building project.

It carried with it the social and moral responsibilities of being guests in a foreign land.

From the beginning, the lodge's day-to-day operations have been performed with maximum attention given to their environmental and cultural impact. Despite the enormity of the Amazon and the basin region, the natural balance of aquatic systems in the area is increasingly threatened. Deforestation by colonists and corporations has contributed to serious erosion problems in the region. Increased use of pesticides has threatened more and more animals dependent on the aquatic environment. Increasing human population pressure has led to the depletion of once abundant fish and mammal species.

Walters maintains a meticulous policy that covers everything from the cutting of trees to fishing in the tributaries that front his property. "I didn't want to be the insensitive ugly American who comes on the scene with his bulldozers and blueprints without regard for the land or the people," he says. "These people knew how to build their four-poled *tombo*-style homes, but they'd never worked with dimensional lumber. And to whose advantage would it

have been to place power tools in the hands of men who had never used anything other than a machete?"

Walters' solution was to import a separate staff of workers from Iquitos to use the power tools while local workers used their machetes, hammers, and saws. From this initial workforce, Walters recruited the permanent staff of 35 that now works in and around the lodge.

"To live in a culture like this you have to discard your own beliefs and try to accept theirs. It's very difficult learning to think with my heart and not my head, especially for a type A person like myself. This has been the hardest—but most rewarding—of all my business ventures."

Lest anyone think Walters is all work and no play, a highlight for every lodge guest is a trip to the nearby jungle tower that offers unparalleled views of the rain forest canopy. Walters built the 115-foot-high tower (that looks like a giant nine-level tree house with staggered ladders) for one very simple reason: "I got tired of looking up all the time. I wanted to see what was up there," he laughs.

For an added thrill, guests can take a ride on the canopy skyline that spans the

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70-foot distance from the tower to an adjacent tree. The high-tech rigging network was designed by Hollywood's Mike Weiss, whose work has been featured in *Medicine Man* and *Cliffhanger*, among numerous other films.

The Amazon is nirvana for herpetologists, entomologists, and botanists who come to Yacumama to study their specialties. The Michigan-based Children's Environmental Trust began hosting semi-annual trips for children ages 11 to 14 in 1994 as part of a two-year study program of the region's ecology and biology. The trust is the lodge's biggest client and one of Walters' favorite groups.

"I love watching these kids experience what we have here," he smiles. "They light up with earnest enthusiasm and a hunger to learn. I can't think of a better classroom."

There are a few misconceptions about this region. Though the Amazon is a Darwinian wonderland, you aren't likely to see more than several different species of anything. You'll need a well-trained eye, patience, and the expertise of the

lodge-provided guides. Just as one acclimates to the heat and humidity, the senses take time to adjust, especially when they've been calibrated to 20th-century sights and sounds.

Initially, the silence is deafening, but by week's end, the same jungle seems surprisingly noisy. Even inexperienced bird enthusiasts find themselves entranced by the exotic sounds—and are quickly able to identify different bird species. By the third day, I was able to identify nuances that had previously escaped me, such as the goatlike bleating of the horned screamer, the rooster call of the scarlet macaw, and the hiss of the blue-gray tanager.

One's vision sharpens as well. Most first-time travelers strain to see wildlife that is in plain view, even with binoculars.

"You need different eyes to see here," instructs one of our guides, a native Yagua Indian. "Look for what *isn't* there as opposed to what *is* there."

With patience, the jungle world slowly awakens before our eyes.

"This isn't a man-made adventure park where the animals perform," laughs Walters. "We are 110 miles from Iquitos for a reason." ♦

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

A one-week package costs \$1,895 and includes round-trip airfare on AeroPeru from Miami to Iquitos, five nights at the Yacumama Lodge, accommodations at the Maria Antonia in Iquitos at either end, all meals, and guided excursions.

Pre- and post-trip excursions to the Inca settlement of Machu Picchu can also be arranged. The lodge is open year-round except for Christmas. Salmon River Outfitters handles all bookings.

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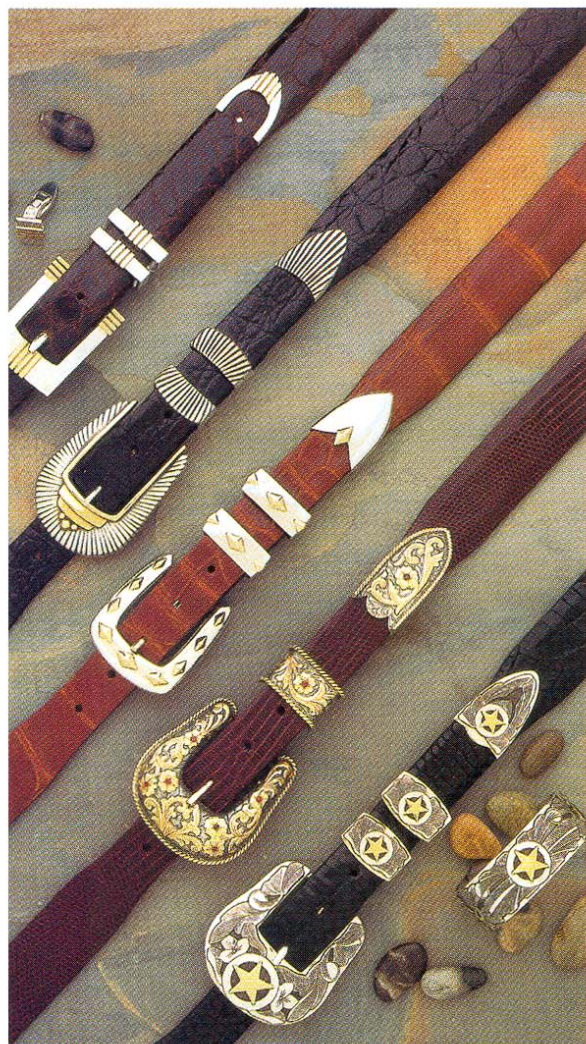
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SUGGESTED READING:

Running the Amazon, Joe Kane (Pan Books, London). This book takes readers along on the first expedition to travel the entire length of the Amazon.

Jacques Cousteau's Amazon Journey, Jacques Cousteau and Mose Richards (Harry N. Abrams Publishers, New York). The *Calypso* voyages up the Amazon to study the wonders of the river. A team also climbs high into the Andes to visit the river's source.

The River Amazon, Alex Shoumatoff (Century Hutchinson Ltd.). American journalist Alex Shoumatoff resolves to spend his 30th birthday in the Amazon rain forest, visiting a cattle ranch, living in an Amazon Indian village, traveling with wildlife rangers, and exploring the Peruvian Andes near the source of the Amazon.



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