

AMAZON – GO WITH THE FLOW

25 April to 9 MAY 2005

EXPEDITION NOTES

“The land is one great wild, untidy luxuriant hothouse, made by nature for herself.”
Charles Darwin, *Voyage of the Beagle*

These notes will give you a brief taste of what you may encounter on this voyage. Our emphasis is on discovering the best places to see exotic wildlife, rainforest plants and life on the river. We plan to experience the local culture, from bustling cities to remote Indian villages. However we stress that this is an expedition style cruise. Our actual program will vary to take best advantage of local conditions, spontaneous opportunities and wildlife. No two voyages are the same; there is always an element of the unexpected.

ITINERARY

Day 1, 25 April: Iquitos, Peru

Today we plan to explore this remote outpost, the end of the road for 16th Century conquistadors chasing gold, 17th and 18th Century missionaries saving souls and modern-day expeditioners searching for the adventure of a lifetime.

Iquitos, Peru's largest jungle city, has a population of about 400,000. It's the largest port city without road links in the Amazon Basin. Iquitos is a river town, surrounded on three sides by the Nanay to the north, the Marañón to the east and the Itaya to the south. It still trades in rubber chicle (used in making chewing gum) and medicinal plants.

Recent discoveries of oil in Amazonian Peru have brought new prosperity to Iquitos, the site of the Werner Herzog's film, *Fitz-Carraldo*.

Yet Iquitos retains a certain grace and offers a gentle transition as we board our comfortable expedition ship at 1600 and settle in before departure.

The flying bridge affords commanding views of our departure and the majestic river, with the fascinating array of vessels that ply its waters, and we may be treated to a stunning Amazonian sunset.

Polar Pioneer is not a luxury ship. She is homely and strong, built to be a working vessel and refurbished to comfortable passenger standard. On board, the atmosphere is casual, making it easy for us to get to know each other as we adjust to life on the river.

Ours is an expeditionary voyage, not a programmed cruise. The rhythm of the river – its currents, tides, and tropical climate - determines our daily schedule.

Soft light and cooler temperatures enhance early morning and late afternoon explorations.

We load our Zodiacs from the gangway, sometimes watched closely by exquisite pink dolphins. In secluded tributaries, the screech of macaws or howl of monkeys heralds a startling variety of wildlife. The local caboclo people, an attractive mingling of Indian, Portuguese and African heritage, welcome us to their idyllic villages of stilt and floating homes, and the forest they share with monkeys, sloths and other intriguing creatures. Many floating houses rise and fall with the river level and some feature a raised garden, usually planted in an old canoe shell, or even a raised animal corral.

The noon heat sees us retire to our air-conditioned ship for refreshing showers, cool drinks, lively lectures, lunch and welcome siestas.

Since we visit the river when it is in flood, swollen by rains and meltwater from the Andes, much of our exploration is from zodiacs. Keeping a close watch for rare pink dolphins (botos) native only to the Amazon, we may fish for piranha and catfish, cruise among treetops in the flooded forest or share the excitement of spotlighting for nocturnal creatures in the mysterious tropical night. Occasionally, we have the opportunity to explore among the buttress roots and tangled vines beneath the forest canopy on foot.

We are always keen to explore new territory, so if the opportunity arises, we will!

Days 2-3, 26-28 April: Upper Amazon, Peru

When the ship is underway, we're free to attend lively and informative talks about the river's geography and history, and the plants, animals and cultures we'll encounter, or to step out of the cool interior into the tropical heat of the shaded flying bridge, to watch for

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birds and be mesmerised by the bustling river traffic and stilt villages of the Upper Amazon.

We plan to visit the villages of Huitoto and Bora Indians, where we may see traditional dances and barter for handicrafts, as well as strolling through the villages and perhaps visit a school. These tribes are partially westernised but preserve some tribal customs.

This is a photographers' paradise, for the professional or the amateur. There will be discussions about how to protect your equipment from tropical conditions and tips for taking good pictures.

Delicious meals are served in our cool dining rooms by European or Australian chefs and, accompanied by good conversation, they will become a focal point of our shipboard life. Before and after dinner, we may gather in the comfortable bar and lounge to reflect on the day's adventures.

KAYAKING OPTION

A kayaking option is available on this downstream voyage. Exploring by kayak is an ideal way to surround yourself in the sights and sounds of the river and flooded forest. It allows you to experience the rhythm of this mighty river as a more active participant. To take this option you must advise us when you book. Some paddling experience is required. A surcharge of US\$745 applies.

Day 4, 28 April: Leticia, Colombia

We visit the bustling market town of Colombia's only Amazonian port. Yagua and Ticuna Indian handicrafts add colour, particularly shoulder bags and hammocks made from the fibre of the wild pineapple. On the waterfront, primitive pirarucu, one of the world's largest freshwater fish, are hoisted from boats. Just across the frontier sits Tabatinga, the first Brazilian settlement. Leticia and Tabatinga are beginning to merge and there is no border checkpoint between the two.

Days 5-8, 29 April- 2 May: Upper Amazon, Brazil

The tropical jungle is close to hand and we find ourselves threading a passage among fishermen, riverboats and families in wooden canoes.

We may explore the following places.

- **Rio Jutai**, a pristine place to swim, visit the town or look for cattleya orchids in the flooded black-water forest nearby.
- **Lago Uara**, a chance for fishing and swimming in a black-water lake, or for jungle walks.
- **Cuxiu Muni**, a traditional village where the staple food manioc and beans are grown. Three-toed sloths live in the forest nearby. We may try a spotlighting tip after dark.
- **Rio Badajos**, a tributary where we'll search for the *Victoria amazonica* waterlily, one of the world's largest flowers.

THREE WATERS OF THE AMAZON

Three fundamentally different kinds of waters feed the Amazon basin.

'White-water', not to be confused with boiling rapids, is sediment-rich - the colour of coffee with cream. All the great rivers that are born in the Andes, including the main artery of the Amazon, fit this category.

'Clear-water' rivers such as the Rio Tapajos drain Brazilian highlands to the east of the Andes and tend to be nutrient-poor. Chemically they range from acidic to nearly alkaline.

Finally there are 'black-water' rivers (eg Rio Negro) that are free of heavy sediment, but dark in colour. Black-water tributaries are found mostly in the western and central part of the Amazon Basin, including waters coming from the Guyanan shield to the north, where sandy soils are too poor in microorganisms to easily decompose organic matter. As a result the water seeps through soils and is carried into the streams, rendering some as dark as tea.

Life on a white-water river is quite different from life on a black-water river. In the black-water river flood plain there is no rich alluvial soil; the flooded areas are usually on white sand. The fish population is also smaller than in the white-water areas. As a consequence, there are fewer settlers along the black-water rivers than in the white-water areas. One compensation for settlement in a black-water area is the absence of noxious insects, as mosquito larvae do not breed here.

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Day 9, 3 May: Manaus, Brazil

The “Wedding of the Waters” – where the silt-laden Rio Solimoes and the clear, dark waters of the Rio Negro meet, to form swirling yellow and black whirlpools – heralds our approach to Manaus, the capital of the Amazonas state of Brazil. The Rio Negro (“black river”) is the largest and most famous black-water river in Amazonia. It’s also the fourth largest river in the world.

In Manaus, the harbour is made up of floating wharves that allow for docking despite a ten-metre change in water level. The Opera House, with its green and golden dome, Florentine façade of Italian stone and interior of ornate balconies and gilded columns, along with other architectural wonders of this historic port town, bear testament to wealth derived from the rubber industry in the late 1800s.

With the end of the rubber boom, Manaus gradually stagnated until 1967 when it was declared a free port. This brought prosperity once again, in the form of new industries including electronics, jewellery making and watch factories. Thriving markets abound in Manaus, with unusual river fish, colourful tropical fruits, medicinal roots and herbs. We may visit the fascinating National Institute for Amazon Research (INPA).

Days 10-14, 4-8 May: Lower Amazon, Brazil

As the river widens even more, we stay close to the bank for the best views of the passing forest and to give us easy access to the tributaries we hope to explore. We may visit the following destinations.

- **Lago Carauau**, home to two species of freshwater dolphins: the small grey Tucuxi and the pink Boto.
- **Alter do Chao**, “the altar of earth”, a beautiful white-sand beach and charming village along the Rio Tapajos where we may enjoy a scenic hill climb and a cooling swim.

- **Parintins**, a town best known for its outrageously flamboyant Boi Bumbá dance presentations
- **Rio Curua**, where bird lovers will delight in fork-tailed flycatchers and horned screamers, while red-handed howler monkeys prowl not far away.
- **Rio Pucurui**, a tributary known for exotic flowers and magnificent birds, including green ibis, Amazon kingfishers and red-billed toucans.

The flying bridge makes a great viewing platform as we thread a route through the Narrows, aptly named channels only 30 metres wide in places and lined with stilt houses of the caboclos, on our approach to Belém.

Day 15, 9 May: Belém, Brazil

Belém, Brazil’s main Amazonian port, is “Bethlehem” in Portuguese. It has evolved from seaport to graceful Victorian city, with avenues and plazas shaded by magnificent mango trees, mainly as a result of the 19th Century rubber boom. Today it’s the capital of Pará, Brazil’s wealthiest state, and has become well known for its open-air waterfront market, exotic botanical gardens and beautiful architecture. The Goeldi Museum has a small botanical garden and zoo, and an excellent exhibit of Amazonian archaeology. It’s a great place to learn about the history of Amazonian Indians and see plants of the region. Belém is one of the world’s rainiest cities, the cooling showers bringing welcome relief to an often-oppressive heat.

We arrive amid the bustle of Belém around 0700 and say goodbye to our ship’s staff and crew before disembarking for our flights back to the outside world.

As we leave we’ll carry a newfound sense of the Amazon’s immensity, its exuberant life and a greater understanding of its importance to our planet.