

KAYAKING ON THE AMAZON

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Imagine paddling alongside a traditional dugout canoe loaded with the morning's catch of fish, or gliding silently between the treetops in the flooded forest. Our small group of paddlers experiences the rhythm of this mighty river as active participants.

We use our plastic kayaks to explore tributaries and lakes, and visit stilt and floating houses of the caboclos (river people). Exploring quietly by kayak is the ideal way to absorb the sights and sounds of the river and the forest.

Pink botos (freshwater dolphins) surface to breathe as they feed. Howler monkeys screech raucously as they swing between tree tops, well camouflaged three-toed sloths sleep hanging from high branches, and a bewildering variety of the Amazon's 1000 bird species call from the trees and reeds. Macaws, parrots, kingfishers, hoatzins, hummingbirds and tanagers of all colours of the rainbow decorate the green tapestry of the forest.

Kayaking requires an adventurous attitude as river currents and the elements influence our activities.

1. How experienced do you have to be?

You should have paddled before and be comfortable in a kayak. You do not have to be an expert but should have an adventurous spirit and recognize that the weather and river currents will influence greatly what we can and can't do. This should not be your first paddling experience. Try to rent a kayak locally before leaving home if you feel you need some additional experience or seek out a local operator for some paddling tuition. We will not have any opportunity to instruct before our first paddle, and are likely to be boarding our kayaks directly from zodiacs. Through there are not ocean swells, we may be paddling in currents and sometimes wind chop.

We'd be happy to talk to you about your level of experience, and it is likely that we can advise you how to obtain the necessary experience before your trip.

2. Will there be a guide?

Yes, there will be an experienced kayak guide on the ship who accompanies all the kayak excursions. In addition there will be a Zodiac inflatable rubber boat in radio contact nearby.

3. What kind of kayaks do we use?

We use 16 and 17 ft Prijon plastic double kayaks. These hard-shelled kayaks live on the "Polar Pioneer" and are used for our Arctic and Antarctic trips. They are well suited for paddling around vegetation and the odd encounters with floating logs, and are launched easily from the ship. The guide often paddles a single kayak.

4. How stable are they?

The kayaks are quite stable and we will endeavour to find a sheltered spot out of the current for our first paddle.

5. *Can they tip over?*

Yes – it is possible but unlikely. In the event of a capsize we would self-rescue by righting the kayak, pumping it out, and re-entering with the guide's help, or maybe using a Zodiac for support. It only takes a few minutes to pump out enough water for paddlers to re-enter.

6. *Can the kayaks sink?*

No, the kayaks have separate compartments with bulkheads, so they can float with the cockpit full of water.

7. *How do we get into the kayaks from the ship?*

If the ship is not in strong current, we will launch directly from the ship. Each kayaker climbs down a short ladder off the back of the ship to a Zodiac tied alongside, then into the kayak. Alternatively, if there is strong current, we will take the kayaks into quieter waters by Zodiac, and then transfer into our kayaks.

8. *Are the waters calm?*

There is no surf or swell, but occasional wind chop. The primary consideration is the strong current in the main channel of the river, but we will generally paddle in nearby tributaries, lakes or flooded forest, which are the most interesting places to explore. Logs and grass islands float down the Amazon, so we will keep a look out for these obstacles.

9. *Can I carry anything in the kayak?*

Yes, you will be supplied with a dry bag for extra clothing, binoculars and anything you want to keep waterproof. You should also carry a water bottle.

10. *Can I bring my camera?*

Yes, but we highly recommend a waterproof or throw-away camera for use in the kayak. If we go on to land, you may prefer to use an SLR camera but will need to provide a waterproof case or bag for it. Pelican cases are highly recommended for good cameras, but a small dry bag with a t-shirt wrapped around the camera may suffice for smaller cameras. The kayak hatches are not large and will not take a Pelican case larger than the 1400 model. However, you may be able to strap a larger Pelican case onto the back deck of the kayak.

11. *How long will we paddle for?*

The paddling time varies, depending on how long the ship spends at each spot and how much the group wants to paddle. Generally the excursions will be 2 to 4 hours. We would expect to have 10 to 12 paddling excursions on the Amazon. We may go out twice in one day, perhaps including a pre-breakfast excursion to take advantage of the attractive early morning light and cooler temperatures.

12. *Do we need any special clothing and equipment?*

All kayaking and safety equipment is supplied, so you should not require any specialist gear. Though mosquitoes are far less prevalent than most people expect, it is a good idea to cover up. Long cotton pants and long sleeved shirts offer good protection from insects and sunburn. Sun glasses and sun hats are recommended. At times, you may prefer to paddle in shorts and T-shirts. Sand shoes or sandals are ideal footwear.

13. *How many kayaks will be used?*

We generally limit the group size to ten kayakers plus your guide.

14. What if the weather changes or I get tired?

We will be in radio contact with the ship and Zodiacs. The ship's captain, expedition leader and kayak guide will all maintain close contact to ensure a safe paddling experience. If someone needs to return to the ship a Zodiac will be called.

15. How do we get back aboard the ship?

If the river currents allow, we will unload from the kayaks to a Zodiac that is tied to the back of the ship. Alternatively we load into Zodiacs in quieter waters and transport the kayaks back to the ship.

16. How far will we paddle?

We will not be aiming to paddle big distances, but will seek out the most interesting things to view – eg birds, dolphins, monkeys, stilt houses and encounters with local people. How far we paddle will depend on the group's preferences and what there is to see.

17. Is the wildlife dangerous?

The caboclos (Amazon "river people") regularly swim in the water. We are visiting the river in flood, when food for the fish and animals is plentiful. Tales of dangerous piranhas are generally exaggerated – we are much more likely to eat piranhas than to be nibbled ourselves. The Amazon wildlife does not generally pose a threat to people, but rather the reverse is true and many species are now endangered due to hunting.

Al Bakker
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