



CRUISING THE *Amazon*

A trek formerly reserved for only the hardest adventurers can now be a luxurious trip through the world's largest rain forest



BY GREG RIENZI

On day two of his traditional Amazon River and Negro River nature cruise, Carlos Probst takes guests out for some early afternoon piranha fishing. Probst makes the ship's captain guide the 70-foot shallow-hull riverboat toward the lush tree-canopied shore, so that passengers can depart on canoes to do battle with the notoriously ferocious fish.

The tackle is simple: bamboo rod, fishing line and a hook. For bait, Probst prefers raw meat, but anything will do for this not-so-finicky scavenger. He deadpans if anyone is willing to spare a finger.

The joke invariably gets laughs from a crowd of around 16 who have already had a full day of activities. Even before breakfast, passengers were treated to a dramatic Amazon River basin sunrise and a

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—Carlos Probst,
Amazon Clipper Cruises

The omnivorous, freshwater piranha, far left, has tightly packed teeth and is found throughout the Amazon. Mangrove trees populate the rain forest, right. Squirrel monkeys jump from tree to tree in the rain forest’s canopy layer, below.

bird-watching canoe trip to see such winged creatures as egret, macaw or hoatzin, pheasant-sized tropical birds known for their spiky head crests.

After a meal and some slow cruising, passengers go on land for a guided tour of the rain forest followed by a visit to a small coastal village whose inhabitants subsist off the river and forest. Then it’s back on the boat for lunch and more cruising. The day ends with dinner onboard and a night trip to see nocturnal animals such as snakes, alligators, sloths and toro-rats. To spy the creatures, a guide shines a headlamp on the water and land to reflect the animals’ eyes.

And it’s only day two of a six-day journey into the planet’s most diverse ecosystem. Like the online retail giant that bears its name, the Amazon River offers up a seemingly endless bounty—and a little something for everyone.

In recent years, the river cruise business has exploded, a trend that mirrors the overall boon in ecotourism. Roughly 50 years ago, an Amazon River tour amounted to a day trip on a small wooden boat. Over time, the industry grew, and so did the boats. New outfitters popped up to offer three-day to weeklong cruises on 50- to 60-foot riverboats that featured small cabins with bunk beds, toilets and eventually air conditioning.

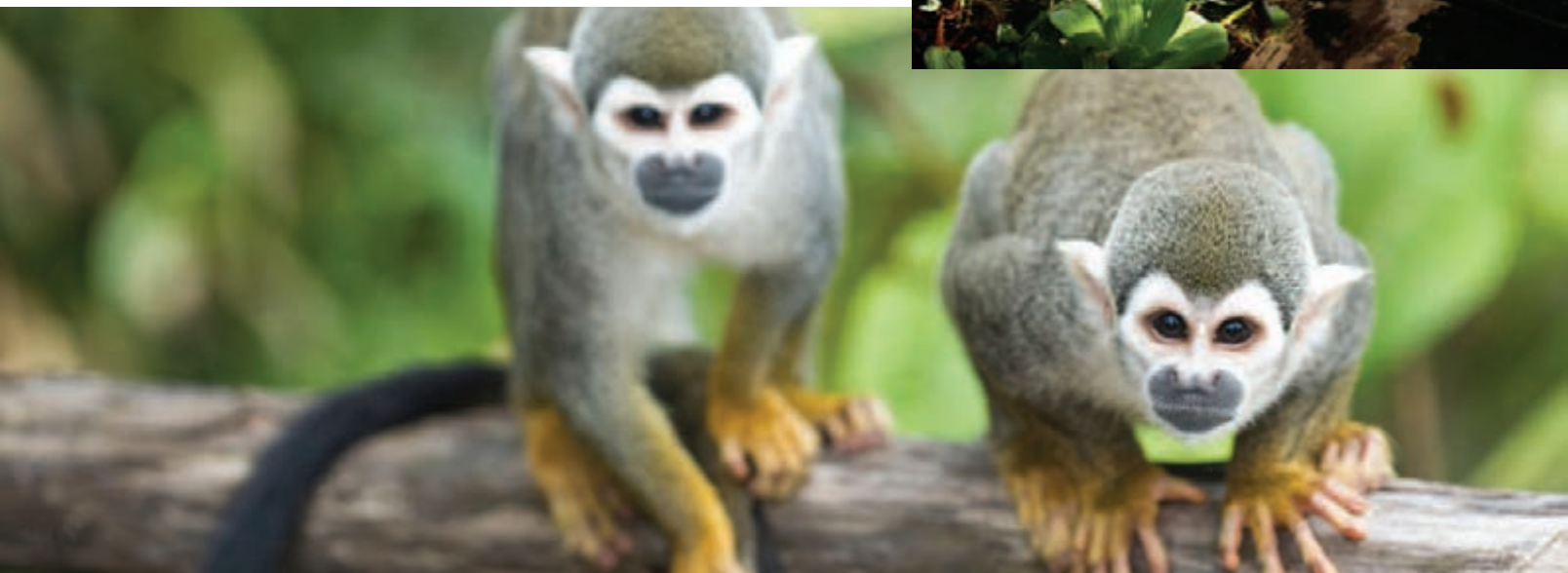
Probst, founder and owner of Amazon Clipper Cruises, started his business 25 years ago. Today, he has a fleet of five boats ranging from the 66-foot *Amazon Clipper* to his newest vessel, the 106-foot luxury riverboat named the *Premium* that allows guests to cruise the Amazon

in pampered, five-star style. The *Premium*, which features spacious cabins with cozy beds and hot showers, in 2007 hosted German President Horst Kohler and several German ministers. Probst actually counts several celebrities among his clientele, but he’s wary to name drop.

Probst says what draws people of all sorts to the Amazon is the region’s rich symphony of life.

“They come for the ultimate environmental experience in the world,” Probst says. “Here we have the most species of plants, animals and insects in one natural paradise. And we can make it all possible in comfort, and in one trip.”

The Amazon River, which stretches from the Peruvian Andes across northern





MAP COURTESY KARL MUSSEY

The Amazon River stretches from the Peruvian Andes across northern Brazil to a wide delta on the Atlantic Ocean (left). With thousands of tributaries and subtributaries, the Amazon is the largest river in the world by volume; its total flow is greater than the next eight largest rivers combined.

Amazon Essentials

How to get there: Fly into Manaus' Eduardo Gomes International Airport, which serves most major carriers and has direct flights from Atlanta, Miami and Panama. Shuttles and taxis will get you into town. A popular accommodation is the Tropical Manaus Hotel, situated on the shores of the Negro River.

The hotel, more a resort, features spacious and comfortable Colonial-style rooms, all with air conditioning. The 594-room hotel is an ideal starting point for visiting the Amazon rain forest and its grounds are filled with trees full of singing birds and wild monkeys.

When to go: Amazon River tours are offered year-round. In the Amazon basin, flooding often occurs between June and October. The rainy season starts in November and ends in April. If you plan to go between June and September, tour operators recommend that you book a reservation at least six months in advance.

Weather: The climate is warm and humid, with an average temperature of 79 degrees Fahrenheit (26 degrees Celsius) and an average yearly rainfall of 80 inches.

Language: The official language is Portuguese, but English is spoken nearly everywhere.

Nature's predators: The Amazon's bark is worse than its bite. True, the river contains alligators, piranhas and snakes, but most keep to themselves and attacks on humans are rare. Snakes, for example, will attack only if they feel threatened. There are mosquitoes, but they are not nearly the nuisance one would think. On the boats and in the jungle lodges, rooms and open areas are screened. Even so, repellents are recommended.

Public health: Waters from the Negro and Amazon rivers are not polluted despite their color and are fine for swimming. Visitors should be vaccinated against yellow fever, but anti-malarial shots are not needed.

Money: The national currency is the real, but euros and U.S. dollars are accepted at many stores. Some banks and agencies are authorized to exchange money. Hotels, travel agents, jewelry stores and airlines will accept all international credit cards, but restrictions will be made by some restaurants and in small stores when shopping for arts and crafts.

What to wear: Bring light clothes, cotton shorts, a hat and T-shirts. Sunblock lotions are recommended during the summer. The nights can get cool, so pack some long pants and a jacket, too.



The city of Manaus, Brazil, also known as the "Paris of the tropics," is the main hub for Amazon River tours.

Brazil to a wide delta on the Atlantic Ocean, was believed to have been named by Spanish explorer Francisco de Orellana in 1541 in honor of the female warriors he encountered on his voyage through the territory previously called Maranon.

The Amazon River basin is roughly 4,200 miles long and covers about 2.72 million square miles in area, including its 15,000 tributaries and subtributaries. Two-thirds of this area is filled with the world's largest and oldest tropical rain forest that supports a profusion of life.

The width of the river ranges from one mile to 35 miles, although the thousands of islands that dot the river make it appear narrower in many locations. Most of the Brazilian part of the river exceeds 150 feet in depth, although portions near the mouth reach nearly 300 feet.

The city at the heart of the basin and the capital of the state of Amazonas is Manaus, the "Paris of the tropics," which lies along the north bank of the Negro River. Manaus, the one-time port town that today is a sprawling metropolis, is situated on a terrace overlooking the river and is the main hub of nearly all Amazon River tours.

In general, the tours range from three days and two nights, to six days and five nights, and can cover from 150 to 350 miles [241 to 563 kilometers] of river.

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Amazon Essentials (continued)

Do this: Fish for peacock bass, a favorite of anglers worldwide. These bass, which can range from 10 to 50 pounds [4.5 to 22.7 kilograms], put up a nasty fight and can jump several feet out of the water.

Eat this: Piranha soup, a local delicacy and reported aphrodisiac. If you find pirarucu fish on the menu, order it. In addition to being one of the largest freshwater fish in the world—pirarucu can grow up to 8 feet long and weigh more than 220 pounds [98 kilograms]—it's also rather tasty, especially cooked over charcoal.

What to do in Manaus: The town's origin goes back to a Portuguese fortress built there in 1669.

Arguably, the town's most distinct landmark is the Amazon Theatre, an opera house that opened in 1896. Made during the rubber boom, no expense was spared to make it the grandest opera house in the world. Its construction was done in eclectic and neo-classical style, with nearly every element imported from Europe. The wrought-iron staircases, for example, were brought in from England and the crystal chandeliers from France. Even the Brazilian wood used was sent to Europe to be polished and carved. The building is crowned by a golden cupola inlaid with 36,000 ceramic tiles and painted the colors of the Brazilian flag. The building's Noble Room, decorated by Domenico de Angelis, was made with 12,000 pieces of wood fitted together without the use of nails or glue.

In case you didn't get enough wildlife on the cruise, check out the Amazon Natural Science Museum, where a large variety of embalmed animals and insects can be seen.

Those who appreciate a good engineering marvel should go down to the floating docks that rise and fall with the Negro River's water level, which can range over 10 meters. The docks, inaugurated in 1902, serve ocean-going vessels.

To get a shopping fix, go to the Municipal Market, a replica of the former Les Halles Market in Paris. Here you can buy all sorts of Amazonian products, such as hammocks, stuffed piranhas and bio-jewelry made from seeds and other materials originally found in the rain forest.

A popular first stop is the "Meeting of the Waters," an area 11 miles from Manaus [17.7 kilometers] where the Amazon and Negro rivers converge but, because of temperature and density, don't mix. The result is a miles-long swirling soup—think cream poured into black coffee—of the dark slow water from the Negro and the "white" muddy water from the Amazon.

From this point onward the true adventure begins.

Riverboats navigate down the river to the Xiborena region for canoe trips to small creeks to see life on the flood plains. A welcome sight are several species of monkeys, including squirrel, spider and howler, which can be viewed from the boat as they swing from trees. If you're extremely lucky, you might spot a resting jaguar in the treetops.

When the water level is low, the river teems with giant water lilies, which are large enough to lie on. In fact, alligators can be seen resting on them.



The round leaves of the largest water lily in the world, also known as the *vitoria regia*, reach 2 meters [6.5 feet] in diameter, left. The venomous two-striped forest pit viper dwells in the lowland of the rain forest and feeds on small mammals, above. The "Meeting of the Waters," where the dark slow water from the Negro River meets with the Amazon's "white" muddy water, far right.

It's then up the Amazon to Lake Janauaca and a visit to January Ecological Park, an ecological reserve that offers a unique opportunity for tourists to discover many species of plants and wild creatures. Located on the Negro River, just 45 minutes by boat from Manaus, the park unites several ecosystems of the region.

Many tours feature guided walks into the rain forests, with commentaries by area experts. These side trips also allow visitors to see the local way of life, such as the preparation of manioc flour, an Amazon staple.

Another Amazon River cruise favorite is a jaunt through the Anavilhanas Archipelago (chain of islands), the largest of its kind. The Anavilhanas is made up of 400 islands and hundreds of lakes, rivers, swamps and sandbanks, all rich in animal and plant life. The area, protected by federal law, is a paradise for biologists and ecologists.

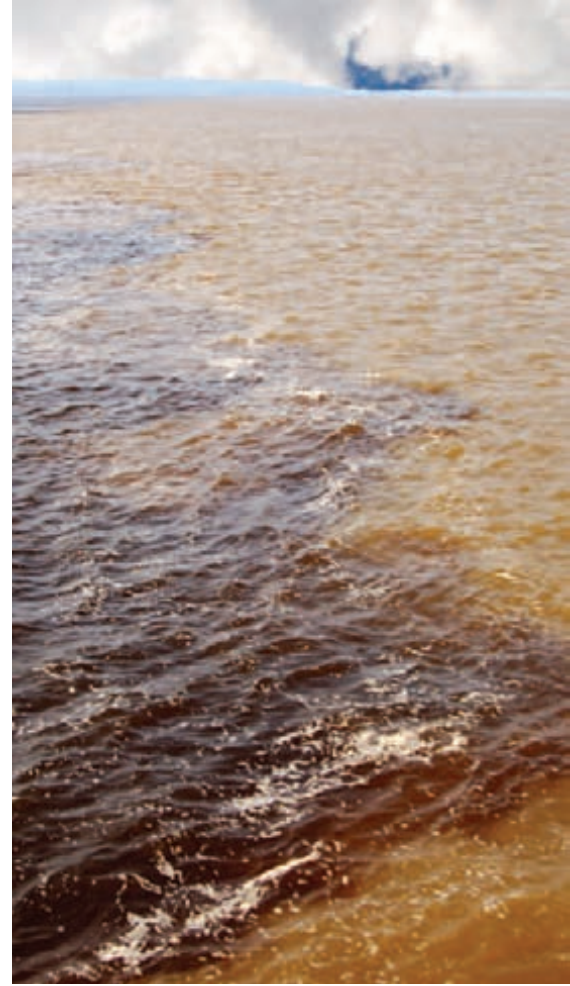
From November to April, the high water season on the Negro River, half

the islands are submerged, forcing the animals to take refuge on higher ground.

Anavilhanas is near the Jaú National Park, the largest forest reserve in South America at 5.6 million acres. It is named after the park's main river, and one of the largest Brazilian fish. Jaú Park features several breathtaking waterfalls.

Toward the end of his tours, Probst makes sure that guests get a chance to swim in calm tributaries with the famous Amazon River dolphins. He says the experience is unforgettable.

"The whole journey, in fact, brings you a completely different view of life," he says. "You see a native people integrated with nature, living a very simple and happy life. The experience also dispels some people's notion of the Amazon as a place with rampant destruction. To get here, you fly over uninterrupted forest for more than two hours. You see the awe of the Amazon just arriving here." —



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