

Last Wednesday we were picked up from our hotel by our young local guide and walked through the backstreets of Iquitos to meet our boat for the trip up the Amazon and to our village, some 120km away. Our guide and his interpreter carried our bag full of supplies across planks of wood floating on the water, and onto our boat, the good ship Lollypop. Geez, this boat was more like a floating shoebox and was about fifty-feet long and jam-packed with locals travelling back up the Amazon to their respective villages.

We walked onto this floating chunk of Balsa wood and sat in the cargo hold with fifty or so people, twenty chickens, fourteen turtles, three-thousand cockroaches, nine rats, six snakes and one monkey. As we sat down I noticed we also shared the hold with the boat's engine, in fact, I had to sit right next to it - a six-cylinder Chrysler engine that had definitely seen better days. This seven-hour journey was going to be interesting...

A guy started the engine then, and I kid you not, poured can after can of diesel fuel into a large steel drum sitting just feet away from the now-active engine. A small feeder hose ran out of the top of the open fuel drum and into the engine. After he finished pouring the fuel into the drum, he covered the drum with a plastic bag and tied string around it so it wouldn't blow off. I sat there next to the engine waiting to become another boating statistic and, if you reckon' that's rough, you should have seen the battery wiring. Alligator clips attached to the battery terminals and dodgy looking wires also feet away from the diesel fuel drum. A nail was wedged between a battery terminal and insulation tape was the order of the day. Children used the battery as a step to climb up to the next deck. Smoke bellowed from the engine and filled the hold up with lung-wrenching fumes...Amazon Jungle, here we come!

The journey was peaceful (apart from the roar of the engine in my left ear for seven hours) and just 'sailing' up The Amazon was amazing in itself. We arrived at our village late afternoon and were greeted by thirty or so curious children (the village is quite remote and they don't see many Gringos). Our home was a simple wooden hut with a thatched roof and had no running water, etc. Our bed was the floorboards on the porch outside with a mosquito net draped overhead and I can honestly say that I have never had so many consecutive nights of shitty sleep (Malaria tablets give you amazing dreams though, I thought I would mention). Our backs ached after every morning we woke up.

Our guide's cousin and family lived in the house with their four young kids and a few chickens. These people had a hen nesting in their bedroom and a litter of puppies in the corner. The village itself consisted of a dozen houses (shacks), with each family owning ducks, chickens, pigs and lots of dogs. Under my 'bed' each night, a litter of puppies whined the night away and every time a dog barked, the whole village's dog population would join in. Fantastic at 3am. It was like living at Taronga Zoo!

For dinner we were served two nice-sized Piranhas, the first time I had eaten Piranha. Nice, soft flesh and lots of tiny bones, and, those famous teeth! As there's no electricity and zero entertainment (apart from the fighting pigs), everyone in the village goes to sleep as soon as the sun sets, more or less anyway. We were in 'bed' by about 6:30 for a very long night of puppies whining, dogs barking, pigs squealing, babies crying, mosquitos buzzing...

In the morning we woke to the sound of crowing chooks then set out in a wooden canoe, carved from a tree, to go Piranha fishing. My fishing rod was a metre long wooden stick with a piece of semi-worn fishing line and a home made, blunt hook. This would test the old Bondi fishing skills, I thought. We rowed out into the swamp in the middle of the jungle and tied up against a tree and threw our lines in, using Berries as bait. I caught an undersized Catfish and was amazed

when our guide kept it - they keep literally everything they catch because some days they may go without, so every little bit counts, I learned. After a few hours (and awesome scenery sitting there in the jungle listening to monkeys, birds, frogs...) we had caught about a dozen, small Piranha that I swear were going to shrivel up to nothing once cooked. Pathetic, I thought, but I had to bite my tongue. But what do they say? The worst day's fishing is still better than the best day at work? It was also nice to catch Piranha instead of boring old Bream.

Later that night we jumped back into the canoe to go Alligator hunting with our guide's Uncle. This mad guy looked every bit the jungle hunter - bare feet, gun in one hand, paddle in the other. Under a blanket of stars and the sound of millions of crickets and frogs, we paddled back into the swamp in search of Alligators. Using my trusty torch we found a set of eyes just above the surface of the water some one hundred feet away. The jungle hunter quietly paddled the canoe over to the reflecting-eyes and like lightning, grabbed the motionless Alligator from the water with his hands! A small baby, probably sixty centimetres long. He tied the angry little fella' up and we continued our journey through the swamp in search of our catch's Daddy. In a mad sort of way, I'm glad the Baby's Daddy was out of Town...

After an hour, we returned to our village with just our small catch on board, to retire for another Taronga Zoo sleep. Our Alligator spent the night hanging by its neck in the 'kitchen'. And I thought I got a bad night's sleep. We woke early again and packed a day pack for our trek further into the jungle to spend a night with a nearby tribe. We took basic supplies to trade with the tribes people, then set out in our canoe for the edge of the rainforest, a twenty minute canoe trip and a forty-five minute jungle trek to the tribe's village. When we arrived at dry land, we were confronted with a small Cattle farm in the middle of the Rainforest. Not a good look, Fish Lovers.

We hiked through the jungle towards the tribe's village and walked along a kilometre-long corridor of devastated forest taken away by loggers years earlier. The corridor was approximately two-hundred metres wide so we're talking a lot of lost forest here. I was ashamed to see all this, you read about it and see it on TV, but to stand there in the middle of it was an experience I won't forget. Very, very sad. I'm talking massive trees with trunks so wide that four people could join hands, wrap themselves around the tree and still not reach the other side, if you know what I mean.

We arrived at the tribe's village and found simple huts on stilts with no rooms, just a floor and a roof. I left our small group and went for a walk into the jungle alone but was soon joined by our guide who began pointing out various plants, explaining their medicinal values, etc. He handed me a red, furry seed, about the size of a small Passionfruit. Once opened, smaller seeds inside are rubbed with your fingers and the red 'paint' painted onto your face for ceremonies and KISS concerts. I looked like a tribal warrior but the guy looked bemused when I painted my face aka Ace Frehley from KISS. These guys have no sense of humour...

I spent the afternoon playing with the local kids in their creek and 'built' for them a waterslide out of the clay creek bank. I joked with my Brother that if we return in twenty years time, we'll probably find a full-on waterworks made out of wood, complete with waterslides. Anyway, the kids loved it and enjoyed playing with a funny-looking Gringo. We returned to the main hut just in time to see the Hunter returning with a Monkey and an Alligator! Scott and I posed for photos holding the dead Monkey in one hand and the Hunter's Gun in the other. The folks at the photo development place in Sydney should love those shots ("Hello, this is Sally from Ace Photos in Bondi. Please send the RSPCA around immediately please..."). The tribe's women prepared the Monkey for dinner by throwing it on the fire (ever smelled burning hair?). Scott and I ran for

cover; the smell was disgusting! The women then scraped the Monkey's hair off with a knife before cooking the little guy. The expression on this Monkey's face was priceless. Can't wait to get the photos back! Monkey, by the way, tastes like tough Beef but I don't think I'll be going back for more. The tribes people live on Monkey and eat at least four or five every week. A very different experience for a couple of city boys.

In the morning (and after a monkey shat centimetres away from our Mosquito net during the night) we were given a 'show' by the tribes people in their traditional clothing. I got to shoot a blow dart into the forest, complete with poisonous dart. I half expected a local to scream out from behind the bushes as I shot him in the bum. Scott fired his dart into a tree but think he was aiming for me. Thanks, Scotty. Scott and I got painted-up with the red dye and joined in on the dance and took one thousand photos of these amazing people strutting their stuff.

For the record, the tribe was 'discovered' ten years ago, 'civilised' five years ago and 'named' two years ago. I was told that they were filthy with the logging company who came in and raped their forest and they raged a war of sorts against the loggers to try and stop them. They eventually won and had the logging stopped. But as I said earlier, the damage had been done. They were also shocked to learn that many Australians were genuinely concerned with their forest and they thanked us profusely after being told through an interpreter. I bought a few necklaces and a bow-and-arrow (as you do) that Sydney customs should love so they can purchase batteries for their cassette player.

Our twelve-hour boat ride back to Iquitos that afternoon was fantastic in that there was no engine and we weren't in the cargo hold (twelve hours because we travelled against the Amazon current). A moment that will always remain special to me was sitting on the front of the boat, eating smoked Alligator wrapped up in a Banana leaf (from the night before) and watching an awesome sunset over the Amazon River. Soon after, the stars appeared and I lay there on the deck of this boat looking up at the Southern Cross (and yes, another shooting star) and smiling to myself that I was not worthy!

We arrived back in Iquitos at 3am and walked to our Hotel for a well-earned sleep on a soft bed...no puppies, no pigs, no babies, no chooks, no barking dogs...

Frankly, I have just experienced enough to return home quite satisfied. I'm one month into my three month trip and there's still Bolivia and Chile to come. From here it just gets better...but seriously, my time in The Amazon was inspiring and I'm glad that I have fulfilled a life-long dream. Words cannot describe the beauty of the rainforest nor the sounds of the forest at night. I wish you were all here with me to experience this truly magical place. I just hope it's all still here in years to come. The Shaman wasn't 'in town' so I didn't get to have Ayawaska, the LSD-like drug used in various ceremonies.