



PERU ~ RIVER PIEDRAS: DEEP IN THE PERUVIAN AMAZON

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Adozen years ago I sat in a floating hide in the middle of a swiftly flowing river deep in the Peruvian Amazon, transfixed by a crimson blur.

About 15m away, a flock of scarlet macaws descended on the riverbank in a frenzy of feathers and flapping wings. They were so densely packed, it was difficult to distinguish individuals – but I counted at least 120.

Elsewhere on the river, I saw similar flocks of blue-and-yellow macaws and dusky headed parakeets. Above, howler monkeys whooped and swung through the canopy and toucans looped their beak-heavy flight across a slice of sky hemmed by impenetrable jungle.

No-one really knows why the birds – not just macaws, but parrots and also mammals – congregate en masse on the ‘clay licks’ (colpas), on the riverbanks of Peru’s Tambopata region. Scientists speculate that the clay counteracts toxins from poisonous fruits and seeds ingested by the animals. Whatever the reason, it makes for one of the world’s most colourfully profuse wildlife spectacles.

In the years since my parrot epiphany, farming, tourism, logging and other pressures have increasingly encroached on the jungle. In Peru, thankfully, large tracts have been hived off into protected reserves, among them the Manu and Tambopata reserves, both of which hold world records for biodiversity.

The adjacent River Piedras system connects Tambopata and Manu. It is equally diverse and important, but it is not protected – although a lot of scientists and conservationists believe it should be.

Enter Biosphere Expeditions – and a posse of willing volunteers. Teams of paying volunteers are collecting data to present a case for formally protecting the Piedras rainforest. A typical expedition day might involve walking with a partner through the forest, tracking, spotting and noting animal and bird species along the way: but you’ll have to write quickly to keep up! The forest is jumping with various monkey species, including Capuchins and howlers; peccaries, ocelots, tapirs and deer; dozens of species of birds – even jaguar.

You’ll climb to platforms in the canopy to observe monkeys and birds and take night walks where you’ll learn the difference between the red-coal eyes of a nocturnal cat and those of a caiman.

And best of all, you’ll get to sit in a hide on the river and count the birds, and to hear the sound – like river rapids – as they lift off as one and swoop away.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL CREDENTIALS

- **The Manu/Tambopata area is the largest uninhabited tract of rainforest on earth. The research expedition’s aim is to collect enough data to inform decision-makers to enable the creation of a private protected reserve.**
- **Biosphere Expeditions offsets the carbon debt incurred by its field operations.**
- **At the conclusion of the expedition, Biosphere produces a report detailing the scientific results, which is distributed to participants as well as made public through academia and the media.**
- **Biosphere Expeditions is a non-profit organisation. Two thirds of the expedition cost goes directly towards funding the research project.**

WHEN TO GO

The expeditions are held during the dry season – which is still fairly wet – in May and June. Subtropical temperatures can range up to 35°C.

GETTING THERE

The research area is located on a remote stretch of the River Piedras, around seven hours from Puerto Maldonado, the assembly point for the expedition. There are flights to Puerto Maldonado from either Lima or Cusco, and the Biosphere Expeditions team will transport you by boat to the research site.

Base camp is basic but comfortable twin-share accommodation in a lodge built from local materials. All meals are included.

No special skills are required – training will be provided, but you do need to be reasonably fit.

The expeditions run for two-week, back-to-back periods.

Participation costs £1100 for the 13-day expedition (departing Puerto Maldonado) and teams are limited to 10 people.

Further information: www.biosphereexpeditions.org