



# Amazonia!

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## Dear Steph,

I'm back from the Amazon. You are one of the very few people whom I know would be willing to travel the distance to visit this incredible place to kayak, swim and bathe in the rivers, trek through untouched jungles and fall asleep each night in a hammock slung between two trees. Every night, I was lulled to sleep by the soporific sounds of insects, frogs and howler monkeys. In the mornings, I woke up to the sound of birdcalls. There were seven of us and sometimes, when all seven hammocks were slung in a row under a tarpaulin to protect us from rain, it felt like a Newton's cradle; one hammock could rock and the other six would too. It was novel, but I also felt very much out of my comfort zone as I am afraid of bugs and the forest is rife with insects of every size, colour and variety.

There are many things that made me glad I went despite the physical hardships. I have memories of fishing off a little boat tethered to our main riverboat in the evenings as the sun was setting and the sky colours changed. As I waited for a bite, the pink and grey river dolphins would approach, attracted to the splashing

sounds made by my fishing line. They were near enough for me to hear the sucking sound they made as they surfaced for air. *Surreal*. I remember the thrill and terror the very first time I reeled in a piranha and how I carefully removed the hook, mindful not to have my fingers snapped off. Alex, our cook, would fry the piranha for our dinner. It tasted like pomfret.

I remember jumping into the river to wash our hair when we first arrived at the mouth of the Jatapu River and our riverboat was moored. Our eyes widened in horror when we were drying off on the boat and noticed our cook reeling in piranhas from the very waters that we had just emerged from. We later learnt that piranhas only attack animals that are bleeding or moving about erratically in the water. Another time, my travel mate was washing her hair in the river when our guide cheerfully called out, "Come and see this!", as he pulled a metre-long snake out of the water to show us. My friend jumped out of the water, hair still full of suds.

The absence of any kind of connectivity meant no checking of emails, texting or phone calls. That



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kind of headspace for nine days was pretty incredible. When the afternoon sun made it too hot to do any kayaking or trekking, we spent our time playing cards, making up games, reading books or having real conversations. Sometimes, Erikes, our guide, would make Caipirinhas, a Brazilian cocktail of lemons muddled with sugar, cachaca and ice. The buzz from the alcohol took the edge off some of the hardship.

Another thrill was paddling in the night. The image that my camera could not capture is burnt into my memory; the vast expanse of starlit sky mirrored in the still water, and fireflies against the backdrop of the forest canopy. It was my first time seeing the Milky Way. Our guide pointed out caimans lurking in the marshes. We could spot them by their orange eyes reflecting the light from our head torches.

We tried spotting animals on a night trek through the rainforest. But with seven of us walking hardly stealthily and whispering loudly, I think the nocturnal creatures could either hear or smell us from a mile away and made themselves scarce.

The Amazon is a birdwatcher's paradise though. We saw toucans, ospreys, kites, vultures, macaws, swifts, kiskadees, egrets, herons...

I also learnt an interesting fact: more people are killed by falling Brazil nuts than anacondas in the Amazon.



We didn't manage to sight anacondas but saw lots of Brazil nut trees.

I liked the stopovers we made to the villages to visit the locals who live in the Amazon. At one village, a group of sullen-looking children greeted us and seemed fearful of us. We learnt later from the guide that they thought we had arrived to give them immunisations. Their frowns quickly melted into smiles when they were told that we were just visitors. It was interesting to the physician in me that when anyone in the Amazon presents with fever, the first disease they have to exclude is malaria as it is endemic there. In larger communities like Ararinha, there is a small medical centre manned by a medical worker

who can do blood films for malaria parasites with a ready stock of antibiotics. In smaller communities without a medical centre, their only recourse is to send the person with fever to the city by boat as soon as possible, to exclude malaria.

We met a village school teacher who had been struck by malaria thrice. She told us matter-of-factly that it was no fun, but hasn't gotten malaria since she began religiously using the insect repellent daily. I made a mental note to myself not to be slack with my application of DEET. I was also fascinated by their practice of ethnobotany. The locals knew how to make insect repellent from the sap of one tree or burn the resin







**Legend**

1. Friendly water snake
2. The channel-billed toucan is so named because of two deep indentations located on either side of the bill
3. A baby Caiman. We let it go after every one got to pet it
4. The seeds from this plant produce a dye that can be used as sunblock or decorative body paint
5. With the children of the Ararinha community
6. A squirrel monkey
7. My sit-on-top kayak
8. Misty morning in the Amazon



from another for fumigation. They also knew which vines would provide drinking water.

Our boat soon ran out of beer and we tried unsuccessfully to procure some at the villages. I was actually rather glad. The reason is that I've travelled to fairly remote Inuit settlements in Greenland and the steppes of Mongolia, where alcohol from "the West" had made its way there and inevitably led to social ills from alcoholism. I was glad these villages were still untouched.

I am home now and happy to sleep in my soft bed, but I would do it all again in a heartbeat. ♦

**Love,  
Su**

