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Laze amidst Nature, elephants and snakes in Konni

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Where the road ends

Hollywood may have led us to believe that anacondas and other deadly creatures wreak havoc in thick jungles, but the truth is that the Amazon rainforest is a perfect destination to unwind, spot wildlife and swim with piranhas

•• RISHAD SAAM MEHTA

Remember the Howler monkeys guffawing as they throw ripe fruit at Captain Haddock in *Tintin and the Picaros*, or that army of ants marching home with merchandise as seen in cartoons?

It actually happens in real life, and experiences like these that seem to be in the realm of fantasy (like swimming with piranhas) can really be experienced in Peru's Amazon Rainforest.

Think Peru, and Machu Picchu comes to

mind. Yet, just a 50-minute flight away from Cusco, the base from where Machu Picchu is explored, is Puerto Maldonado, Peru's gateway to the Amazon Rainforest.

Cusco sits high in the Andes at 11,151 feet and Puerto Maldonado is behind the Andes at 600 feet, so arriving there feels like stepping from a freezer into a sauna.

The Amazon Rainforest experience is usually an all-inclusive one at lodges that have been built on the banks of the Rio Madre De Dios.

One such is the Inkaterra Reserva

Amazonica, an eco luxury lodge.

A 20-minute drive from the airport brings visitors to the rudimentary jetty, from where it is a 40-minute-long boat ride to the resort. Cell phone network disappears in about 10 minutes, as do the last views of urbanity that's replaced with dense forests on both banks.

The resort features 35 wooden cabanas, some with a private plunge pools and open-air showers, set within the rainforest and inspired by the Ese'Eja culture, one of the many indigenous cultures that exist in

the Amazon region.

Five hundred and forty bird species have been inventoried around the property. Sometimes a snake might slink past, and the sight of spiders, even tarantulas, is not uncommon. But the most common sight is the Capybaras – the world's largest rodent – scurrying about.

Since everything is self-contained and the river is the only way in and out, the interpretative centre on the property, with its knowledgeable in-house guides, sets up a detailed programme for guests after they

have arrived and settled in.

There are a number of activities that range from quarter day, half day to full day, and they are categorised into difficulty levels 1 to 3.

The guides help guests plan a schedule for their stay, taking into consideration factors like if there are kids in tow, energy levels and interests, so that visitors can get the most from their Amazon Rainforest experience.

Here are some of the interesting activities:

LAKE VALENCIA

This is a paid excursion but well worth the price, because it starts off at 4.30 am with a misty two-hour boat ride downriver to the sparkling Valencia Lake that is perfect for fishing. The main catch is piranha. Unlike what Hollywood would have people believe, piranhas cannot strip a person down to the bone in a matter of minutes. In fact, there is no danger in swimming along with piranhas and they happen to be quite tasty, as guests find out, when they are cooked for lunch, along with local food, during this excursion. It ends with an hour-long walk through a primary forest and Brazilian nut fields.

RAINFOREST BY NIGHT

This quarter-day excursion starts after dark, and is eerily exciting because most have preconceptions about creatures that live in these jungles. Movies might have one believe that an anaconda is waiting to strike, but in reality they are shy creatures. Yet, there is a tinge of fear, because the only source of illumination is the narrow beam of the guide's flashlight. Even if it is a clear starlit night, the dense canopy doesn't let much light through. Sometimes though, a stray ray might reflect off something darting past in the foliage. However, it is the sounds that add atmosphere to this nocturnal walk. The guide's trained ears pick these up and he will swing the torch to show a nocturnal frog momentarily dazzled by the light. Something shining blue-black on a tree are usually the eyes of a tarantula that has emerged from its den to hunt. And all through the walk, one has to brace himself for the caress of cobwebs that just cannot be avoided.

LAKE SANDOVAL

This half-day excursion starts at dawn and results in a beautiful sunrise en route the 30-minute boat ride to the Tambopata National Park. From there, it is a three-kilometre walk through a trail often filled with Howler monkeys and Macaws. At the end of the trail is the beautiful lake that is explored with a dugout canoe. Experience the sights and sounds of the rainforest while floating on the mirror-like surface of the lake. Caymans glide by, a Sea otter might break the surface, a family of turtles basks on a rock, herons fish with deliberate steps, and sometime monkeys throw fruit at canoes. All through this, the guide's interesting commentary about the ways of the flora and fauna makes it very engrossing.

GET, SET, GO

The hills are alive



The annual Ladakh festival will be held from September 17 to 24 this year and will be celebrated across several villages in Leh. The festival will begin with a large procession involving cultural groups from different parts of Ladakh and will present a tapestry of traditional music, attire, cuisine, masked dances, archery and polo.

The festival is also synonymous with the end of summer in Ladakh. Later this month, Arunachal Pradesh will play host to the Ziro Festival of Music from September 28 to October 1. At Ziro, 167 kilometres from Itanagar, look out for a line-up of music groups from across the country, that includes Reggae Rajahs, Damo Suzuki, The Kathmandu Killers and Alaska Snack Time, among others.

Biblical marathon



The third Bible Marathon, scheduled to be held on October 6, 2017, will have runners following in the footsteps of the first marathon man who ran the 42kilometres from the battlefield at Eben Ezer (modern-day Rosh Ha'ayin in Israel) to ancient Shiloh. Centuries later, the founder of Maccabiah games, Yosef Yekutieli, measured the length of the course from Rosh Ha'ayin to Shiloh, in the Benjamin region. The length of this historic path matched that of the modern marathon – 42 kilometres. This year's event will have runners from Israel and overseas participating in the 42-kilometre full marathon from Rosh Ha'ayin to ancient Shiloh, 21-kilometre half marathon from Rosh Ha'ayin to ancient Shiloh, 10 kilometre through the vineyards and olive trees of Binyamin and 5 kilometre run around ancient Shiloh.

In cowboy country



If you're looking for an offbeat travel experience towards the year-end, consider the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo. Each December, for 10 days, the fest runs at Thomas & Mack Center in Las Vegas, located at the University of Nevada. Each of the 10 days, you will see the top 15 money winners in each of the seven different events that they compete in – bull riding, bareback riding, calf roping, saddle bronc riding, team roping, steer wrestling, and barrel racing. The Wrangler National Finals Rodeo is the largest prize money rodeo in the world. Last year, it paid out more than \$5.5 million to contestants, and is also considered the most prestigious rodeo, deciding which cowboys will get to wear the gold buckle as world champion each year! This year's event will be held from December 7 to 16.

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