

Positive Tourism in Peru

Give a little, get a lot

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Spend your time learning about flora and fauna and one of the most fascinating, yet seldom acknowledged species; homo sapiens.

As soon as the tour begins you literally taste reality. The situation in Manu is very real. With the box lunches our tour leader provides, we are told that that in the region we are visiting they are not able to grow enough of this kind of food. He means good, healthy food, “with nutrients”. From the window we pass what looks to be lush forest, but we are told it is poor, poor in nutrients and unsuitable for sustaining human life. As we pass down into the Alto Madre de Dios Valley (translated, the mother of god) we are moving inside one giant juxtaposed scene. On one side of us lies the Manu Biosphere reserve, a UNESCO world heritage site and largest national park in Peru, and on the other lies the Amarakaeri Community reserve, comprised of the territories of three indigenous groups. We are driving into the middle, which should similarly be a paradise, protected, a reserve; so why isn't it? That was what we had come to find out over the duration of our trip.

Cusco is an amazing city, it has a little of whatever you want, and a whole lot of what you never knew you liked (not including pan pipes). This is where we started the journey. I say journey, because this was not a normal vacation – we were not passive clients, we were participants and wanted to become involved.

On the day before our departure we were briefed in the modest office of [TOUR COMPANY] located within the historic city of Cusco, the pictures on the walls showed people working, producing and achieving. A stark contrast to the other tourist operators I had seen in the area with their startling pictures of a ‘relaxing jaguar’ or a macro-focus toucan. We were to get a taste of how people lived alongside nature, how priorities were based on family and survival in the short term rather than our tightly held concepts (to them) of long term importance and sustainability. Our idea of Peru was to be shaped by the people living in Peru and not by the concepts fabricated by tour operators.

So we set off in good spirits, into the high Andes past Huacarpay, the Ramsar¹ site familiar to so many bird watchers, up to Ninamarka, the fantastically well preserved burial tombs of a pre-inka culture, finally reaching Tres Cruces. The last high point of the Andes before they drop and drop down to the Amazon basin – on clear days during July it is possible to see the ‘*salida el sol*’ from here, a magnificent view of the

¹ The Convention on Wetlands, signed in Ramsar, Iran, in 1971, is an intergovernmental treaty which provides the framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. There are presently 158 Contracting Parties to the Convention, with 1831 wetland sites, totalling 170 million hectares, designated for inclusion in the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance.

sunrise over the expanse of the Amazon rainforest below. However it was neither July nor clear when we passed. As we descended from a high of over 4000m we dropped down through the aptly named cloud forest, catching a glimpse of the elusive Cock Of the Rock, the national bird of Peru, then down further. We felt the temperature begin to rise, I became uncomfortable in my jacket and I realised we must be entering the humidity and warmth of the lowland Amazon. Despite its unique design our transport, a kind of hybrid bus was perfectly suitable for its task, it handled tight mountainous hairpins, just as well as it did gushing streams and mud. It brought us all the way to Atalaya, the main port along the Alto Madre de Dios river – tributary to the great Amazon River.

We then embarked onto long and slender wooden boats called *lanchas*, to take us on the final part of our journey down to the Manu Learning Centre (MLC). An education and research facility established by Anthropologist, Joe Smith in 2002. It is the focus for all scientific and social research work in the region and was to be our home for the next three nights.

We watched the sunset over the river, just as we were docking at the MLC port; we realised at that moment that this wasn't any ordinary place, Manu has something special and we were keen to find out what. It was clear from our first impressions that this wasn't done for money, this was done for love. We were welcomed into the centre full of people thriving in what they were doing. We were shown our accommodation 'pod'. A grand two story building with an enormous arched roof; helping to keep things cool at night. The sides of the building were open to the feelings and sounds of nature, which, by now, had taken on an a grand orchestral quality.

As we made our way down to the communal dining area, we just soaked up the ambience. Incredible. We ate our meal at a table featuring scientists from Peru and North Carolina, USA as well as volunteers from the United Kingdom. We met a young Peruvian scientist studying frogs. Over the dinner table, we gained a really unique insight into the current conservation worries of people working in the Amazon and how we might help. There was an evening lecture on Macaws scheduled but we declined in favour of an early night, we wanted to get up to catch the sunrise over the river.

I slept a little too long, and contrary to what I had expected, the sounds throughout the night were lovely and I really felt totally safe under my mosquito net. We got up in a hurry and went out with our guide to see some of the projects the centre were working on. Before breakfast we walked down to the bird hide to observe the endangered Blue Headed Macaw. This species is a CITES Appendix 1² and an IUCN

² CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) is an international agreement between governments. Its aim is to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival. Appendix I includes species threatened with extinction.

Red List endangered species³. This is one of the few places in the entire Amazon where they are regularly seen, it was a real treat. It is a sort of mini-macaw with a green body and a bright blue head. We saw it eating at a clay-lick, something it does like an antacid, to neutralise all the seeds and fruit it eats. After breakfast we went out on the jungle trails to see how the centre was restoring exhausted farm land by creating reforestation plots of tropical hard woods. We also helped with the weeding in a series of new kitchen gardens used as an example tool for allowing local people to access new nutritional crops and staples.

Over the next few days we participated in a combination of talks, activities and good amount of getting our hands dirty. We has opportunity to participate in collecting important information on the Macaws and also to really understand the problems of agriculture in the tropics. This understanding was compounded by visits to the farms in the areas to check on the progress of satellite projects. We found that when we did see monkeys, macaws, peccaries, and crocodiles it was all the more special within the real context, it wasn't animals alone in nature, as if in a zoo, but it was alongside people who know the area, and live from its soil. A totally different experience.

We realised that what we got from this vacation, more than any other, was a sense of interaction, a sense of globality and also a sense of the local. We didn't see a tourist version, a westernised place, nor did we see anything that claimed to be off-the-beaten-track or a hidden paradise, what we saw and what we contributed to was simple; a reality of human life. We had a totally organic experience and think that we learned far more than we put in, however our presence at the centre continues to fund the fabulous work of [TOUR COMPANY] within the Manu Region, sustaining the development of these farmers, teachers, and nurses, so we can feel the benefit of the national parks, from which they are excluded.

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³ The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™ provides taxonomic, conservation status and distribution information on plants and animals that have been globally evaluated using the IUCN Red List Categories and Criteria. This system is designed to determine the relative risk of extinction.