

Beyond Leticia



KRISTEN FABER



Kristen Faber heads to a corner of the Amazon where Peru and Brazil share a common waterway: the Yavari.

Looking out the plane window, awe overtook me as I gazed down at the beginning of the Amazon Basin in Colombia. I saw thick, lush rainforest in every direction. My eye followed a river snaking through the bush. Small waterways spread out like a spiderweb prohibiting any easy land transportation. There were no villages or roads.

We land in Leticia, Colombia's frontier town on the Amazon River and 800 kms from the nearest highway, the only access here is plane or boat. Sweltering heat hits me as I walk into this one room airport. The clunking sound of the luggage conveyor bounced around the room, growing louder as the gears stuck from time to time. Grabbing my small suitcase I searched for my ride. I stepped out of the airport and spotted a young boy perched on a brick wall, flapping a paper with my name on it. He wasn't paying particular attention to the crowd of people climbing into air-conditioned vans headed for hotels with pools. His father did spot me however, and he deftly flagged a taxi for our 20 minute ride to the river.

We cross Leticia as motorcycles zip

every which way, cutting in and out of traffic. At first glimpse the Amazon seems fetid and languid. Vultures circle overhead, scouting for refuse while others picked at scraps. The smell of hot, sticky mud mixed with grilling food attacks my sense of place and sense. Colorful umbrellas shelter women selling their snacks. People lounge under a few trees, avoiding the heat while a barefoot man walks past with a mountain of plantains on his shoulder.

The city slopes into the thick muddy river bank of a seemingly distant Amazon. I walk the wooden plank over the low tide to a floating dock. As passengers leap from dugout to dugout, we quickly board our long boat and I find a seat beneath the woven palm roof to protect me from the scorching sun. The motor bubbles to life as we pull away from Leticia. Floating houses line the river, some sun-bleached, other brightly-painted.

We head down river flanked by two countries, Colombia and Peru. After a routine check at a Navy control post, we can appreciate the Victoria Amazonica Lilly floating with its white flower in nearby ponds. A monkey appears and hops on my shoulder for the free ride. We arrive at our floating lodge for the night. Charming hammocks line the balcony. My fellow travelers kick back in the open air, grab a seat on the upper deck and we all prepare to watch the last moments of the sun set on the Amazon.

Day Two. The river teems with families, young and old, men and women, checking their nets. They work their way down the webbing, gently lifting it out of the water, gathering it in their hands, carefully untangling a fish then letting the net drop back into the water. They continue to work, meticulously

moving down the net heedful not to rip any holes. Life revolves around survival. Resting in the boat for the next six hours, my journey takes me towards Brazil. The boat turns off the Amazon River near Benjamin Constant into the Yavari, a river which flows some 1,200 kms from the Peruvian highlands into the Amazon Basin, and still very much uncharted.

The Yavari is lighter in color than the Amazon and a meandering waterway covered by a vast canopy of rainforest. From Benjamin Constant south a new world unfurls. I watch as grey river dolphins leap out of the water, my eyes peeled for the Pink Amazon Dolphin, an endangered species which navigates and hunts in these estuaries.

As we make our way downriver, I am engulfed by the life around me. Parrots dart between trees, dolphins splash in shallow waters and fish leap into our boat. In this stillness there is life.

Small towns perched on hillocks are far apart and only accessible by water. We pull into Atalaia do Norte, (Brazil) to stretch our legs and wander the local market. Flanked by the Yavari's yellow sand banks we are guided by an eagle soaring overhead until pulling into an estuary near our Eco lodge. We are five hours from Benjamin Constant and the Amazon crossroads with the Yavari.

Recreation along the Yavari is not just river games and jungle walks. The lodges are educationally-focused, designed to teach the visitor on Amazonian life, local traditions and the abundant (and often endangered) wildlife.

The water level of the Amazon changes constantly. In rainy season the level can rise 15 meters covering vast forest, turning fields into flood plains. During the dry season, the Yavari retreats, exposing kilometers of white sand, turning swampy lagoons into watering holes for sloths, tapirs and wild deer. Visiting at the beginning of the dry season, the water has dropped so far some 4 meters causing a variation in leaf color and leaving a mark on tree trunks. The ground soaks in the water creating thick muddy banks. As we left the base of a giant Ceiba tree all I can see is abundant green.

After two hours trekking through mud and swinging a *machete* to open the path, I step into the riverine village of Santa Rita, Peru. The village is neat with a manicured central field, some wooden huts overlooking the river and open kitchens with suspended pots and pans. There is an aura of peace. A local offers me creamy white yucca juice and invites me into her home to see a large fish the village had caught earlier that day. Taking up most of the kitchen floor the *pirarucu* is known for its size and soft meat. The fish generally swims on the surface of the water making it is easy to spear from canoes.

When the sun begins to cast its golden hue over a canopy of trees, we head back to our lodge and can hear the cooks preparing a typical Brazilian dinner of yucca farinha, beans and plantain. Another day is ending on the Yavari, but the night has yet to kick into overdrive. As the first stars sparkle above the tree line I can spot the Southern Cross. I know that I cannot stay here but I am glad to have seen and touched the wonders of this fragile corner, which must be protected by the countries which share the Amazon beyond a place called Leticia.