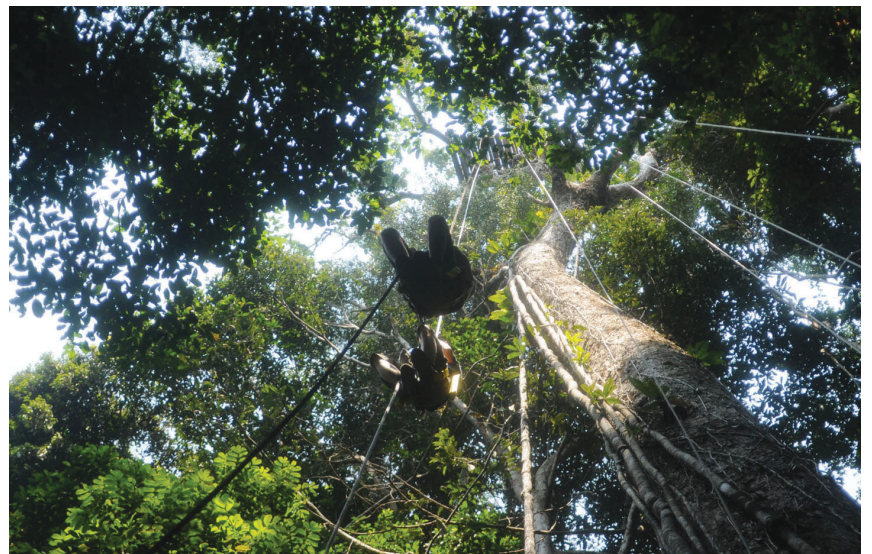


# The Amazon? Always!



TEXT AND PHOTOS: RICHARD EMBLIN

A trip to the Amazon allows tourists to visit three countries. One research facility, Palmari, is the lodge recommended recently by *National Geographic*.

The canoe inched its way through fallen branches to the lake edge. Axel Feille, my host at Palmari and proprietor of this jungle lodge, kept the balance as we searched for our elusive companion. Whispering and fumbling for binoculars, we spotted the black Trogon perched and silent in the lower canopy of the trees. As we crept out of the canoe on dry shore, Axel reached for his camera and began photographing the creature from all angles. He knew that back at the lodge, the Belgian birders who were out in the swamp looking for Equatorial migratory birds, would be intrigued over our discovery.

When our posing bird flew off into the wild, it was time to resume our fishing excursion up the Mata Mata lake: a natural water reserve brimming with bass, piranhas and deep swimming *pirarucu*. My traveling companions were having better luck than we were, catching a veritable feast to take back to the lodge for a planned cook out on the golden shores of the Yavari River.

Built as a research centre on the Brazilian side of the Yavari, four hours south of the Colombian Amazon port of Leticia, Palmari welcomes visitors



who want a genuine Amazon experience, far from the tour boats and day trippers. To enjoy Palmari, you need to fully take advantage of the exuberant surroundings of the lodge, thanks to tropical rainforest, a meandering river and the possibility of hiking up into nearby hills with fresh water lagoons and streams.

Rising over the Yavari on a green ravine and decked with an open wooden terrace, Palmari, offers spectacular views of a river documented by Irish nationalist Roger Casement and subject of a recent novel by Nobel Laureate, Mario Vargas Llosa. Once the guests are assembled in the Welcome Center in the late afternoon, after having gone off into the jungle with local guides, you can find a hammock to lie in or sit around with friends exchanging stories on the day's activities.

My sighting of a black Trogon and catching a 13 inch piranha was just one of many stories around the communal table at dinner. Our Belgian birders had been diligently noting all the rare species spotted during their afternoon trek into the swamps. Sitting within arms reach of fresh lemonade and jugs of chilled caipirinhas, they assembled their recording equipment and binders filled with sketches and notes, before

retreating to one of the wooden cabins.

With a staff of locals from nearby communities, Palmari offers a tailor made vacation. The day starts early with visitors deciding on kayaking, fishing or doing canopy in the trees. There are also walks to indigenous hamlets on the Peruvian side, where several hundred-year-old acacia trees have survived. Having abandoned a second attempt at lake fishing, our guides Pelé and Elias, offered to accompany us into the pristine rainforest on a four-hour walk and at our own pace. Choosing a route that would involve various types of vegetation and the chance to see monkeys, we strode off into a green void. Climbing gentle ravines and stopping to take in the lush vegetation, Elias cut through the jungle growth with his machete. Every now and then my guides stopped and pointed towards the foliage where a sloth was making his way down a tree trunk. The heart wrenching ritual of descent was interrupted by a group of monkeys swinging from branch to branch and doing what they do best: disturbing the peace. We moved on, finding shade to sit and talk. Timing the walk to be back at the base for lunch, we completed our mission with plenty of digital memories. A warm lunch of beans, rice, plantain and fried

fish was served by Palmari's cooks and our next objective was to get out on the river to be with the pink dolphins.

Besides being one of the most beautifully located and maintained lodges in the Amazon, Palmari is unique in that your stay is as recreational as it is educational. A must destination for biologists during field research, there is a well stocked loft with books on the Amazon, tested travel guides and Axel's impressive photo archive with pictures of virtually every critter, bug and 'bicho' known to man. On the understanding that Westerners are part of the mosquito food chain, Palmari has all the sprays and creams necessary for spending hours in the outdoors.

Built to take in school outings and up to sixty persons at a time, Palmari is an international outpost of civility. As the mastermind of holiday memories, Axel, is also the soul of Palmari. This Colombian and German entrepreneur, educated in England and with impeccable command of languages, effuses charm and efficiency. Overseeing the coming and going of boats to Tabatinga (the Brazilian town bordering Leticia), Axel is strict about punctuality and safety when it comes to moving in this terrain. Yet the direct involvement of the lodge in community life and Feille's knowledge of its peoples and wildlife makes Palmari a very high standard to match in Amazon travel.

Sitting back on the veranda while a red sun drops over the Amazon, I see the cusps of dolphins in the river. Skirting currents and our idle canoes, these mammals at play give Palmari a magical dimension in a landscape of infinite sensations. Five days there and I had lived my own version of 'Avatar' walking a fluorescent path at night in the jungle and climbing 40 meter high trees to overcome a fear of heights. If ever asked to return, my answer is clear: the Amazon? always!