

YOUR JOURNEY BEGINS WITH US

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# VIRTUOSO LIFE

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AT THE WORLD'S TABLE



# A Toast to Travel

**O**F ALL THE MANY REWARDS OF TRAVEL, I MUST ADMIT that dining is at the top of my list. It's not just about sustenance; I love getting to know a place through its food and drink, from sipping local beers and sampling regional dishes to visiting with the restaurant owners, chefs, and staff who create and serve them.

Indeed, that's another reward of travel: the people you meet along the way. On my recent Amazon cruise with Aqua Expeditions (where the dining was definitely a highlight), the staffers were clearly happy to welcome guests back onboard after a long pandemic-forced pause. One guide earnestly told me that he had the best job in the world and was grateful for the return of tourism. Though "mindful travel" might be a buzzy term now, the concept has long been at the core of Virtuoso-style travel.

We recognize the impact and importance of travel, and Virtuoso advisors work with the travel companies in our portfolio to create high-end experiences that make a difference.

"From the start, we've been committed to doing our part," says Francesco Galli Zugaro, Aqua Expeditions' founder and CEO. "We ask ourselves, 'Can we leave the place better than how we found it?' whether it's through wildlife conservation projects, community programs, or supporting the local economy."

On that cruise, I asked one of our guides about his tattoo, which was a quote in Spanish. He said it translated as "Live the life you love and love the life you live." How's that for a worthwhile toast and reminder to seize the moment?

As we wrap up yet another year of ups and downs, travel remains central to a life well-lived. Please enjoy this issue of *Virtuoso Life*, and raise a glass to the many rewards of exploring the world – cheers!



**On the Amazon and (inset) a souvenir porcelain plate depicting a kingfisher. Read about my trip on page 80.**

*Elaine Snrka*

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# Amazon Primer

A reluctant adventurer's guide to South America's most revered river.

BY ELAINE SRNKA

**A**S OUR SKIFF MOTORED THROUGH PERU'S PACAYA Samiria National Reserve in what's known as the mirrored forest, I peered into the surprisingly clean, clear water below. Its glassy surface reflected the sky above, dotted with fluffy clouds and framed by dense foliage that lined the banks. The driver cut the boat's engine and we floated, surrounded not by silence but by the sounds of nature: A pair of long-tailed blue and yellow macaws squawked overhead; tree branches rustled as capuchin monkeys swung from limb to limb calling to each other; catfish splashed as they jumped from the water, chasing a



From top: Aqua Nera in expedition mode and skiff reflections in the mirrored forest.

(SMIFF) SCOTT SPORLEDER

## Cruising

cluster of tiny white butterflies. A glossy green kingfisher, my new favorite bird, landed on a tree stump nearby, commanding attention with its strident, bossy song. I made a mental note to remember how I felt in that moment, relaxed and connected and awed by nature.

I'm not particularly outdoorsy. I prefer high heels to hiking boots, my hair frizzes in humidity, and it's difficult to look fashionable while wearing a life vest. I'm not the type to have a favorite bird. But after nearly 18 months of hunkering down at home, I was ready to step away from my computer, get back out into the world, and *do* something. The launch of Aqua Expeditions' newest yacht on the Amazon River promised just the right amount of easy adventure with an emphasis on stylish refinement, so I somewhat impulsively dusted off my passport and boarded my first long-distance flight in two years.

My husband and I flew to Lima and then connected to Iquitos, a port city in northeast Peru, for a four-day cruise on the 40-passenger *Aqua Nera*. Aqua Expeditions' founder and CEO, Francesco Galli Zugaro, and his family were on board to welcome us, and the mood was cautiously celebratory: The ship was supposed to have launched in 2020, but the pandemic put all plans on hold. This inaugural sailing was not only the family's first time seeing the *Nera* but also the company's first scheduled cruise to operate since the pandemic began. (Aqua also operates the *Aria*, which pioneered luxury cruising on the Amazon, and two other ships on the Mekong River and in Indonesia.)

It was worth the wait. With just 20 cabins on two decks, the sleek vessel is a floating boutique hotel with a sexy vibe and contemporary interior design overseen by Birgit Galli Zugaro. In the chic main lounge, a DJ-curated playlist sets the mood throughout the day, and a bar anchors an inviting seating area perfect for conversation and cocktails. We clearly weren't roughing it: There's



**Clockwise from top: A Peruvian chocolate sampler, catch-and-release piranha fishing, an Amazon kingfisher on alert, and *Aqua Nera*'s lounge.**

(CHOCOLATE TASTING) ELAINE SRNIKA, (FISHING AND LOUNGE) STEVIE MANN, (KINGFISHER) JOHN TREVOR PLATT/LAMY



From left: Pedro Miguel Schiaffino, one of Peru's first chefs to specialize in Amazon cuisine; breakfast *tamales*, plantains, and a yellow tomato-chile sauce; and a guest suite with a view.



## TIP

“Consider bringing clothing, school supplies, and toys to give to village children.”

— Dori Peterson,  
Virtuoso travel advisor,  
La Jolla, California

a billiards table and screening room, a gym and spa, a sundeck and plunge pool, and indoor and outdoor dining areas. A leather-wrapped curved staircase connects dramatically lit corridors that lead to the spacious cabins, which cosset guests with California king beds, decadently outfitted bathrooms, and floor-to-ceiling windows that let you take in the rain forest as it glides past.

And that’s the real draw: the mighty Amazon. One of the longest rivers in the world, extending into eight countries, it flows from the Andean highlands of Peru across Brazil into the Atlantic Ocean. Aqua Expeditions operates in the Pacaya Samiria National Reserve, a protected area at the heart of the Peruvian Amazon.

“It’s one of the most biodiverse regions on earth, as well as the birthplace of the Ama-

zon,” says Francesco. “It’s smaller here than in Brazil, on a narrower portion of the river, which lets us get up close to views and sights that larger ships can’t.”

Days were structured much like those of a land-based safari, with skiffs departing on three daily excursions led by naturalist guides. The guides, including “George of the Jungle,” as he called himself, wowed us with stories and superstitions about flora and fauna, monkeys and sloths, and dangerous predators. They told of the nearly 3,000 freshwater fish species, from armored catfish (its “jungle caviar” a regional delicacy) and prized peacock bass to giant paiche that can grow up to 400 pounds (“you don’t fish for it, you hunt it”). They carried thick books on the region’s wildlife and knew every bird’s call. Juan, who learned about

## Cruising

jungle medicine from his grandfather, a shaman, told me how to use herbs and roots to cure various ailments.

About the Amazon's maligned piranhas: They're much smaller than I'd expected, but you can't miss their rows of tiny sharp teeth. We fished for them, using simple wooden poles baited with raw meat to lure schools of them, but most would frenetically snatch the meat away before we could catch them.

On one outing, rare pink dolphins frolicked around our skiffs. Their translucent skin gives them their hue – and an air of mystery for locals who may fear the bad luck they're thought to bring. Another morning, we kayaked through a black-water tributary, paddling past people aboard makeshift log rafts and waving to children in thatched-roof villages along the shores. Our guides assured us that the water was safe for swimming, but there was no way I wanted to fall in.

We boarded tenders at dusk, our guides brandishing torches as we plied the dark water in search of caiman, among the river's most dangerous inhabitants. Vine-covered branches closed around us, and the jungle symphony grew ominous as bats swooped low overhead and red eyes peered out at us from the riverbanks. As we cut through the brush to spy white, black, and even a tiny baby caiman, I couldn't shake my (irrational?) fear that an anaconda might drop into our boat – and was happy to return to the safety of the *Nera*.

The ship provided a serene foil to the wilderness surrounding it, and life on board was relaxing and laid back. As much as I enjoyed the excursions, dining was admittedly my favorite part of the cruise, from alfresco breakfasts to festive meals in the dining room. Peruvian chef Pedro Miguel Schiaffino's innovative menus showcased ingredients sourced from the Amazon, elevating everything with a delicious sense of place.

When our cruise came to an end, I was fulfilled, inspired, and ready to sign up for another Aqua sailing. The creature comforts and luxury touches, balanced with destination immersion and responsible tourism operations, struck just the right chord and served as the perfect launch for my return to travel. After all, life itself is an adventure – and I'm ready to live it fully.



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## AMAZON ADVENTURES

Trips to channel your own inner explorer.

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**LATAM** flies to 19 cities in Peru from four gateway cities in the U.S., including nonstop flights to Lima from Los Angeles, Miami, New York, and Orlando.

**Aqua Expeditions** operates two ships on the Peruvian Amazon, with year-round sailings ranging from four to eight days. Aqua Nera *departs from \$4,230*. *Aria Amazon is available for*

*private charters, starting from \$155,000 for up to 40 guests.*

Follow the Amazon from Brazil to Peru on a 10-day cruise aboard the **Seabourn Venture**, a new 264-passenger luxury expedition vessel complete with two submarines for an entirely different perspective. Sail from Manaus through Brazil before ending in Iquitos,

Peru. *Departure: March 29, 2023; from \$11,599.*

See Peru's highlights on the water and off with **Lindblad Expeditions'** nine-day tour that visits Lima, Cuzco, the Sacred Valley, Machu Picchu, and more, before boarding the *Delfin II* riverboat for four days on the Amazon. *Departures: Multiple dates beginning February 12, 2022; from \$8,150. VI.*