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About 1,400 words

## PERU'S INCREDIBLE MANU

by  
TERRY REDDING

Some years ago a good friend of mine was leafing through a National Geographic magazine, and he came across photos of macaws feeding on a clay lick deep in the Amazon. At that moment he decided he was going to go there, even though his previous travels merely consisted of a quick family trip to Europe as a teen, and a brief visit to Mexico years ago.

But the call of the wild was strong, and thus we found ourselves late in 1995 on the streets of Cuzco in Peru. Trips to the Manu National Park, a World Heritage Site, originate in Cuzco, the ancient capital of the Incas.

Tourist interest in Manu is starting to boom. It is not only one of the few pristine areas remaining in the Amazon basin, but the area is incredibly rich in plant and animal life. Hunting has been limited for decades, so the animals are less frightened by human presence. The park continues to be a research station for many types of scientists. It is divided into three zones: a Cultural Zone, where anything goes; a Park Zone used for ecotourism; and a Reserve Zone, where only scientists and native groups are allowed.

Along with the increase in tourism has come an increase in the number of tour operators offering packaged visits to Manu. Since a private visit would be astronomically expensive and take many days to arrange, the tours are the only real option.

The first stop to make in Cuzco is at the office of the Conservation Association for the Southern Rainforest (Asociacion de Conservacion para la Selva Sur, or ACSS), a conservation group which can offer information about the rainforest and answer any general questions you have. They have a video to

watch and books for sale. Try to speak with Daniel Blanco. If he is not in, leave messages and ask the person in charge to reach him. The office is at Portal de Panes 23 in Cuzco. Hours are roughly 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., and 3 to 7 p.m., Monday through Friday. Daniel did have E-mail: [postmaster@acss.org.pe](mailto:postmaster@acss.org.pe), and this might be the best way to try reaching him outside of Peru.

Next, stop at a few of the major tour operators. Ask if they belong to EcoManu, a group of tour operators dedicated to ecologically sustainable tourism in the area. The oldest and most expensive operator is Manu Nature Tours, which offered a costly, eight-day tour for about \$1,600. This includes a flight over the mountains, cabins and showers.

Another recommended and seasoned operator is Expediciones Manu, run by birder Barry Walker. They offer tours of five to nine days, which includes all land and river transportation, meals, guides, etc.

We eventually settled on Pantiacolla Tours, run by a Dutch biologist and former guide, Marianna, and her Peruvian husband Gustavo. We found her to be quite honest and straight-forward, and their nine-day tour left on a day convenient for us. The price was \$500, which was about the going rate at the end of the season (The park is closed from January to May, but this may change.).

The success of the camping trip depends mainly on the guide. The ACSS can be helpful in pointing out which guides are most qualified. Everyone recommended a guide named Abraham, who happened to be the guide Pantiacolla had arranged. There are others who are about as capable, but Abraham is renowned for his birding skills.

Our tour left the Pantiacolla office in Cuzco just after 6 a.m. Along with the sleeping Abraham were a boatman and his wife (who served as cook) and our fellow group-mates: an Israeli couple who had studied biology, a German traveler named Wolfie and a middle-aged British woman who was circumnavigating the continent by jeep. My microbiologist pal Mark and myself rounded out the group. Also along were two Greek travelers and Gustavo, the owner, who were going only as far as his jungle lodge, located outside the Park Zone in the Cultural Zone.

The bus takes 12 hours to cross the mountains and reach Atalaya on the Alto Madre de Dios River. We camped there, and in the morning set out in a long wooden canoe to Boca Manu, where we turned and went up into the park. We camped, walked in the jungle, paddled a special catamaran on an ox-bow lake, and floated on a specially built hut-boat to see the macaw lick in the course of the next six days.

The tour company provided all food, tents and transportation, including a special bus designed to cross the Andes on the rough roads and descend into the muddy rainforest basin. Bring along things like candy, fruit or canned treats, as the jungle food gets monotonous after four or five days.

The jungle experience itself was incredible. We saw a jaguar, a rare tamandua (a fuzzy little anteater), giant river otters, caimans, an assortment of monkeys, fascinating plants, myriad insects and a rainbow of birds, including, of course, the Holy Grail for Mark, the macaw lick.

Bring along bug lotion, a hat, shoes or boots to get muddy, binoculars, a telephoto lens and very high speed film. Sturdy rain gear is essential; this is the rainforest and you will get wet, guaranteed. Small plastic bags which can zip closed serve many uses. Malaria tablets are not needed, but a first-aid kit would be wise. Fishing, hunting, chopping wood and other harmful activities are forbidden.

Providing your guide is competent, the success of the trip will depend upon how well you can endure minor hardships (you are, after all, camping in the middle of the rainforest) and how you bear your fellow travelers. Eight days together with people you have just met can be great fun or agony: be prepared and be patient.

I should also note that some trips return having seen only a smattering of animals. Nature simply refuses to be present on cue for tourists, so anticipate that there may be disappointments: jaguars, for example, are rarely seen. All that said, everyone I met had an excellent time, returning with unparalleled memories.

My friend Mark had along a small video camera which worked splendidly, outperforming my camera in low light and in telephoto situations. It was also wonderful to record the fabulous range of jungle

sounds, especially at night. Mark brought two extra, heavy duty batteries, a must since there is nowhere to recharge in the jungle.

One last note: you may come into contact with local peoples (we had a Machiguenga boatman who joined us on the river, for example). If you are feeling sick you should not go on the trip, both for yourself, the group and any native peoples you could infect with unknown viruses.

Spend time planning both before you leave and while in Cuzco. If you get on with an experienced tour company, even a beginning traveler will have smooth adventures. Just use common sense and make "Mud and Macaws" your battle cry, and you'll be fine.

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Amazon sidebar

Here are some contact addresses:

The Cuzco tourist office was across from the La Mercad church in the Plazoleta Espinar, between the main square and the train station. It seems to move around a bit, but you can leave messages there.

Daniel Blanco  
Asociacion de Conservacion para la Selva Sur (ACSS)  
Portal de Panes 123  
Oficina 305  
Cuzco  
Telephone/fax: (084) 240911  
E-mail: [postmaster@acss.org.pe](mailto:postmaster@acss.org.pe)

Pantiacolla Tours  
PO Box 879  
Calle Plateros 360  
Cuzco  
Telephone: (084) 238323, fax: (084) 233727

Expediciones Manu  
PO Box 606  
Procuradores 50, Plaza de Armas  
Cuzco  
Telephone: (084) 226671, fax: (084) 236706

Manu Nature Tours  
Avenida Sol 582  
Cuzco  
Telephone: (084) 224384, fax: (084) 234793

There are many newer companies, for example Expediciones Vilca. You have to be careful if you book through these companies, because the guide may not know much English, the tour may not leave on the date promised, etc. On the other hand, many of the older companies are owned by expatriates while the new companies are run by Peruvians. There is a brewing conflict which probably won't affect tourists but it is something of which to be aware.

Perhaps a smart stop will be at the Lima clubhouse of the South America Explorers' Club. There you can ask a few questions, and members can look through files of previous travelers' journeys to Manu and many other destinations: Avenida Portugal 146, Brena. To join Stateside, call (607) 277-0488 (\$40, a worthwhile investment).

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