

Peru 2000

An Amazon Adventure

by Allan James (allan@scotcat.)

This is my own personal experiences over a twelve day period on a trip that for me was a once - in - a - lifetime adventure and I hope that it will give you an insight on what to expect if you ever have the fortune to experience it for yourself, and of course to also have an understanding bank manager!

Day 1

My adventure actually started at Glasgow Airport on the Wednesday evening flight to London/Gatwick on the 12th July and an overnight stay at a B&B near the Airport.

Next morning I met Steve Pritchard and Alan Appleton at Gatwick, meeting Alan for the first time, as I had known Steve for a number of years.

The flight for Atlanta USA was leaving at 1155 am and at 11 am there was still no sight of our traveling companions the husband and wife team of Julian (Jools) Dignall (from www.planetcatfish.com) and his long suffering wife Clare!

We boarded the flight ready to fly when the aforementioned couple scrambled aboard all stressed out before we had even started our adventure, their flight from Edinburgh was late but no worries as we all settled down for the 8 hour flight to Atlanta, Georgia.

Day 2

We arrived at Atlanta Airport at 4.30pm after a good flight and had a 6-hour wait for our next connection, the Delta flight to Lima, Peru. If you ever have to hang about at this airport try the yoghurt on offer, lovely, lovely!

We boarded the 10.20pm flight to Lima and tried to sleep on and off which was only broken by the hilarious antics of Alan when he woke up with a start and sent his dinner halfway down the aisle, priceless!

Day 3

Arrived in Lima, capital of Peru, at the unearthly hour of 4.30 in the morning of the 14th (I think) then we were off again on our internal flight with TACAS Airways to Iquitos on the edge of the Amazon.



Flying over the Andes

The highlight of this flight was the view of the snow-capped Andes Mountains from the plane window, fantastic, then again from the window our first look at the Amazon Rainforest and its meandering tributaries. Landed at Iquitos Airport which by the way has the longest name for an airport that you will ever see in the world, so long that I couldn't remember it.

Cezar, the local manager for Margarita Tours, met us and if there ever was a man organised, he is that man. Off we went in the minibus into town to our Hotel, the short journey was memorable as I had never seen a place like it,



Flying over the Amazon Basin

there seemed to be a soap opera being played out on every corner and the taxi's were something else, a fantastic and vibrant city.

We arrived at the Amazon Gardens Hotel or Hostel as they are called here where we had a small pool situated just outside the reception area. The rooms were pretty basic but comfortable.

We went for a short walk around to get our bearings then retired for a short nap to recharge our batteries. Before we went out for a meal at night we met our tour guides and operators Drs. David Schleser and Devon Graham who turned out to be the two most enthusiastic people I had ever met.

We took our meal at Ari's Diner, which was recommended to us and known to the locals as "Gringolandi" as tourists usually find their way here. This is where I ate something that I thought I would never eat, Catfish! it was the local *fasciatum* variety labelled in the menu as 'Delgado', it was very nice and I put my guilty conscience to the back of my mind.

It was a fun relaxing evening and the five of us rode back to the hotel in these fantastic taxi's which was basically a motorbike with the back cut off and double wheels welded on with a seat and canopy, great fun. Steve and I retired for the night and we woke at 5.30 a.m. with Steve suggesting that we head down to the fish market before breakfast. Well, why not? I was on holiday.

Day 4.

This was the time that I wished that I had learned some Spanish as we had trouble communicating with the taxi driver and ended up at the Fruit Market instead, it was still interesting and I had never seen so many bananas in the one place before. After breakfast we headed off for a look at the fish exporters in town.



Iquitos Taxis

First one we stopped off at was Rio Mamon and let me tell you we only got here and most other places by taxi with Devon, who was pretty fluent in the lingo.

Rio Mamon is run by an Austrian who breeds believe it or not Asian Siamese fighters which were lined up in rows on half a dozen shelves. They had lots of Cory's here notably *C. fowleri* and *C. aeneus* (Peru Gold stripes). We then headed for the second exporter, Yacarunas International Enterprise that had some nice Loracariids and Characins In the afternoon we visited the fish and food markets an experience in itself. In the evening myself, Devon, Jools, Clare, Steve and Alan went for a few beers, the Peruvian beer is to be well recommended. We then went on to a Chinese Restaurant for a great sweet and sour and a few more beers of course.



Siamese fighters at Rio Mamon

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Day 5

This is the day when the serious adventure begins. After Breakfast at 8 we repacked our bags and headed for our boat the Amazon Explorer where we were given our cabins for the rest of our journey down the Amazon.

They are a bit cramped with two bunk beds and a shower/toilet. I shared with Robin Warne from Huddersfield who joined us along with two other CSG members, Giles Barlow and Chris Ralph, who all came to Peru a week earlier and had done the grand tour of Cusco and Machu Pichu, which I fancy doing myself sometime in the future.

The boat had an ongoing problem with its generator so we just got out the fishing rods and hung them over the sides and preceded to catch large hatchet fish, *Triportheus sp.*, with would you believe it, bread rolls on the hooks, wow!



The Amazon Explorer

what a start. We had still not left Iquitos yet because of the generator so we left the boat by skiff (long boat with outboard motor) and headed across to the opposite bank to do our first fish collecting. This was good training for our trip as I went up to my knees in the water as you sink in the muddy clay at your feet.

We caught small characins (*Hemigrammus sp*) and pims (*blochi and maculatus*). After about an hour we headed back to the Amazon Explorer.

We then set off at 2 pm for the Rio Nanay picking up a new generator on the way.

After a short trip up the river we laid anchor and took the skiff across to our first village. We lighted and proceeded to follow Dr.Fish (David Schleser) and Dr.Bird (Devon Graham) through the village.



On the Skiff

What really enthralled me here was a full-bodied game of football going on between two teams fully rigged out with strips and a commentary going on by megaphone! Nothing changes around the world where football is concerned, not even in the Amazon jungle. We fished, with our nets two shallow blackwater creeks at Padro Cocha where I caught my first catfish, an unusual one for me, a small gold parasitic cat and also small *Ancistrus*, *Hyanuary* tetras and a small Pike Cichlid which I later found out to be a male *Crenichila lucius*. The pH of the stream was about 6.5 and temp 75°F.

Our first night on the boat comprised of a meal of pineapples, avocados, carrots, tomatoes and Shovelnose Catfish (dorado), rice and bread, we then finished that off with a few beers. We then fished off the side of the boat and caught a few 10 inch *Cetopsis* (parasitic whale cats) I didn't think I would hear myself saying this about a catfish but they were gruesome looking and not the least bit pretty. Retired to bed at 1-15 am after a few more beers.

Day 6.

Woke up with a rotten headache this morning, I think due to the noise of the generator, definitely not the beer! The weather so far has been overcast but nice and comfortable (70°-75°F). We had breakfast at 7 am and headed down river and berthed at an Indian village of Atun Cocha where the headman of the village informed the party about a forest stream part of the way through the jungle. We walked the jungle path for about 20 minutes and I was enthralled with the amount of Butterflies flying around especially the Morpha which is electric

blue and apparently is illegal to take out of Peru, dead or alive. There was an abundance of different trees, hollow Balsa wood trees and one tree with porcupine type spikes (palm trees), which I can assure you are quite sharp and sore! We at last stopped at the clear water stream but it was quite disappointing, as we didn't catch too many fish here another small Pike Cichlid being my only catch. The weather is changing now and is getting quite sunny and hot so on with the sun cream and the silly hat.

The water levels are still a bit too high this year and this makes it harder to catch fish.

We made our way back to the Amazon Explorer where we had the 'Dorado' again, done this time in a batter, which was delicious. We now headed again down the Amazon towards the Rio Orosa and stopped in the afternoon at a mud sandbar on the upper Amazon adjacent to a small Village, this was one of the funniest episodes of the trip especially trying to walk the gangplank from the boat and ending up to our knees in mud. If you have ever tried to walk in knee deep mud its not to be recommended especially when you start sinking in it and you find that your travelling companions are all taller than you and I'm 6' 1"!

I was pulled out by Steve who, by the way, was standing on my feet under the mud, and a native boy who must have thought that we were all mad. Then Chris Ralph decided to follow my example and started sinking in the goeey mess and he is only 5' odd! I don't know how we got him out with all the laughing that was going on, but we managed.

With all the hilarity going on, I never caught any fish. When we got back on board a (cold) shower was definitely on the cards. After we all cleaned up we all sat down to our dinner where the Chef had made a fruit cake which went down well with a cup of tea. We made our way into the Rio Orosa and on to the Madre Selva Forest Preserve, which is run by the Amazonian Project, this area covers 50 sq. km. and is one of three on this clear water tributary.

We berthed by the floating house/office and later started fishing from the deck pulling in *Calophysys macropus*, a large pim which is known as an Amazon vulture and will eat just about anything. We pulled in quite a few large pims here. I retired to bed at midnight after an enjoyable but hectic day and crashed out, apart from the ever-noisy generator of course!

Day 7

Up bright and early at 6 to photograph the sunrise and then a sit down for breakfast.

One of the local Indians came around to visit us in his canoe and showed us his catch of *Pimelodus fasciatus* and a woodcat species; the cameras were out in force.

This was the most superb day of all as I caught my first *Corydoras*.

We crossed the short creek from the boat at the Madre Reserve, walked about 450 yards across a timber bridge and down to the Tunche Cano stream where we caught *Corydoras elegans* by the score and the adrenaline is really running high now. Jools and I were really up for it and we couldn't stop talking and laughing at the same time as we scooped up Cory after Cory with sometimes three or four in our catch nets. The substrate here was rusty red clay covered with a leaf litter over a closed canopy.

All good things have to come to an end but things were to get even better in the afternoon.

We travelled about a ½ mile back down the Rio Orosa to a small flooded cocha at Eloise's house, a local Indian woman who's husband had died a few years earlier and had lived alone ever since with her dog and chickens for company.

The rest of the group crossed the cocha, which was waist deep to net near the house. I decided to head in the opposite direction from the house at the head of the small lake as I had quickly learned that when there is a lot of netting activity going on, the water gets quite turbid and lessens the chance of catching fish.

The first few sweeps brought up young *Amblydoras hancocki* (talking catfish). They must have been spawning here as they were really tiny, I kept a few but there was too many and released quite a few of them back to their home. (As an afterthought it wasn't until 2 months later and these fish were growing on in tanks in my fish house that I realised that they were in fact *Anadoras grypous*). There was also Cichlids here of the *Aquidens* genus. I then started to catch *Brochis splendens*, which were a stunning green colouration, which heralded the arrival of

the rest of the party. I must have caught about 30 *splendens* all about young adult size, a good day by anyone's standards.

We went back to the boat happy and I was ready for our evening meal. We relaxed at night playing cards with Steve and the two American boys, Stuart and Corrie. We had a few beers of course but retired early at 11 pm for a good nights sleep (in spite of the generator).



The author catching *Corydoras elegans*

Day 8.

Slept well and woke about 6 am and wandered up to the main deck.

A couple of local families had caught a few whiptail cats under the Madre Serva Reserve Station and I went down to the lower deck to barter with them.

I swapped a t-shirt and 2 batteries (for their torches) to each family for their catches, one of the tops being my much coveted Heart of Midlothian football top, so the Hearts now have a supporter in the Peruvian jungle! One of the fish traded was a rather large *Sturisoma* species and the rest were common whiptails, which are now safely tucked up in a tank in my fish house.

After breakfast we sailed back up the river to a village where the locals were expecting us. This was a part of the trip that I was looking forward to as we met the local village folk and traded our t-shirts and batteries for the locally made souvenirs such as dried seeds and an enormous pair of Dorid pectoral bones, which must have made this fish about a foot long! I also snapped up a set of panpipes, which were made to order on the day! which I still can't play properly. We then set sail back down the river for about 2 hours to the next reserve, the Paucarillo Forest Preserve.

We docked here and went quite a trek through the jungle to a small stream where we found *Apistogramma agassizi* in abundance, youngsters and large adults in their colourful livery.

In the evening we stopped of at a large village/town as the crew of the boat wanted to see the World Cup qualifier between Peru and Colombia. Jools, Stu and I joined the crew to watch the match in the local school hall on satellite TV. with one of the local youngsters of the village stationed beside the screen to swipe away the flies of the screen!

We stayed for about half an hour with most of the village crowded around us and it came to a head when Jools suddenly shot out of his seat and explained in a pained expression that he had to go a place, he was certainly a funny colour and I don't think I have ever seen him move so fast, all the way back to the boat in Olympic time! Inca's revenge strikes. Stu and I headed back, had a beer and retired for the night.



Jools with his dead Pleco!

Day 9.

It was my turn for the Inca's revenge this morning as I had terrible stomach cramps and the rest of the day was lost and just a blur as I slept off and on. I missed the night trip when a few of the lads went collecting in the skiff with their torches. I would have liked that but I just crashed out again at 8.30 to bed.

Day 10

Felt a bit better today but tired. I didn't eat anything, just drank, not beer, but tea and plenty of it. I spent most of the day changing water in the basins, which were supplied to us for that purpose, but I had lost a few fish due to not being able to change the water the previous day.

We also relaxed on deck as the Amazon Explorer made its way back up the Amazon River to the Port of Iquitos. We arrived late afternoon and disembarked where we were driven back to our hotel, the Amazon Gardens. The first thing I done was to dangle my feet in the hotel pool, fantastic! Jools, Clare and I said our goodbyes to our fellow passengers who were either staying over for another week or leaving the following day (Saturday).

We flew out of Iquitos on the 8.10 pm flight to the capital city of Lima and were met there at the airport by the representative of the Manhattan Hotel.

He drove us over to the hotel and if any of you have ever been in Lima traffic it was a very scary experience! It was a first class hotel where we had a couple of drinks at the bar where the barman spent his time practicing his English on us (in a Scottish accent) a lot better than my Spanish. The three of us then retired for the night in a nice comfortable bed.

Day11

Woke up the unearthly time of 4 am and decided to have a long hot shower, it was bliss! Breakfast at 5.30 and then off to the Airport for the early morning return flight to Atlanta.

After we arrived in Atlanta we declared our fish boxes at U.S. Customs and he checked most of the fish bags. He was only concerned that we hadn't any Piranhas or electric eels so we just made the 6.30 pm flight to Gatwick, London as we had It was along flight made only bearable by the good movies on board. Arrived Gatwick at 7.30 am London time and I had to sit around for the 12.15 connections to Glasgow. We just drank tea and coke and we all felt like s**. I said my goodbyes to Jools and Clare (who had fallen asleep) who were waiting for a later flight to Edinburgh.

I arrived back in Glasgow and was picked up by another CSG member, Mark Bryson, who dutifully dropped me off from where I had started 12 days earlier at the ferry for the Clyde crossing. Arrived home at 4.00 pm shattered and still not feeling too well.

It must have been at least two weeks before I was back to normal but I must admit that I would do it all over again with a bit of luck in the not too distant future.

My thanks go out to my travelling companions Jools, Clare, Steve, Alan, Chris, Robin, Giles and Terry for making this trip such an enjoyable experience and of course Drs. David Schleser and Devon Graham for their invaluable help and patience and I hope that I haven't bored you too much with my meanderings.

