

Dolphins, alligators and tribes in Brazil's Amazon forest

By PETER PRENGAMAN
Associated Press

MANAUS, Brazil — The warning from our guide made clear that this “forest walk” would be anything but a leisurely stroll.

“Look before grabbing any branches because the ants bite. You will be in pain for 24 hours,” said Jackson Edirley da Silva, wearing a bright yellow shirt and rubber boots. “And watch where you step. You don’t want to get bitten by a snake.”

Our group, about a dozen tourists, got quiet.

“Don’t worry,” I whispered to our sons, ages 6 and 7. “We will be careful where we step.”

My wife and I had flown with our kids from Rio de Janeiro to Manaus, a major jumping-off point for Brazil’s Amazon rain forest. From there, we took a boat for an hour ride up a tributary of the Rio Negro, or Black River, and then walked 15 minutes to an “eco lodge” in the middle of a forest.

Even at the edge of the forest, the sounds made a strong impression. Monkeys screeched, birds bellowed and bugs buzzed, a cacophony that felt both terrifying and calming. Ironically, we would learn that it’s rare to actually see most of the animals. You are in their house, and they know how to hide.

Our cabin was sparse but had some essentials: a small refrigerator for bottled water, mosquito screens on the windows and an air-conditioning unit that combated the oppressive humidity that would cling to us upon walking outside.

Despite its worldwide fame, not to mention increasing importance as climate change becomes a global issue, the Amazon is not visited in great numbers. Amazonas, Brazil’s largest and heavily forested state, which includes Manaus, was visited by just under 1.2 million foreign and Brazilian tourists in 2014, the most recent year for available statistics. By comparison, the Eiffel Tower in Paris gets roughly 7 million visitors a year.

For those who get here, it’s hard to imagine disappointment. Over the course of a week, we swam with fresh water dolphins, gawked at alligators wrestled from river banks by scrappy guides, fished for piranhas and stood in awe at “the meeting” of the Negro and Solimoes rivers (called the Amazon River in Manaus and eastward), where a difference in density and temperature means that for miles black and yellow waters flow side by side.



In this Oct. 12 photo, a sunset in the Amazon rain forest is seen from a tributary of the Rio Negro outside Manaus, Brazil. Boat travel is common throughout the Amazon basin, both for forest dwellers and tourists.



In this Oct. 11 photo, a member of the Dessena tribe poses for a picture in her village outside of Manaus, Brazil.



In this Oct. 13 photo, tourists touch the shell of a large turtle during a forest walk in the Amazon rain forest.



In this Oct. 11 photo, young tourists look on as a man feeds fish to pink dolphins in the Rio Negro outside of Manaus, Brazil. The dolphins, called “botos,” live in the wild in many areas of the Amazon basin and are a popular tourist attraction.



In this Oct. 11 photo, Amazon dwellers and tourists enjoy a waterfall on a tributary of the Rio Negro outside of Manaus. Many people live along the hundreds of large tributaries that feed into the main rivers in the Amazon basin.

The food also has unique tastes. Massive tucunare fish get chopped into fillets that taste like chicken with an extra dose of zest, potato-like manioc roots are prepared with forest spices that most people have never heard of and acai berries are ubiquitous — the kids particularly enjoyed sucking on acai popsicles during the afternoon heat.

The Amazon basin, which spans several countries in South America and is nearly as large as the continental United States, has always been central to Brazilian identity, even if most Brazilians will never visit. Conspiracy theories periodically erupt about other countries’ alleged attempts to take the territory or plunder its myriad resources, and pressure from international organizations to stop deforestation often

draws the ire of politicians.

Luiz Inacio “Lula” da Silva, president between 2003 and 2010 and poll leader for next year’s race, once famously said: “I don’t want any gringo coming here asking us to let an Amazon dweller die of hunger under a tree.”

Te Batista, a boat operator who we hired two days to take us to several areas of the Rio Negro, told me tourists always ask him about conservation.

“Foreigners are afraid about the future of the forest,” said Batista, who added flatly that he was not. “They worry that the cutting here will mean they die in their countries” because of global warming.

At the heart of conservation discussions are indigenous tribes, who provide windows into life in the Amazon both before

the arrival of Portuguese colonists in the 16th century and today. While there are still scores of “uncontacted” tribes in the Amazon, most are at least partially connected to Brazilian society and live in ways that combine their traditions with aspects of modern-day life.

One day we visited a small village of about 100 people belonging to the Dessana tribe.

As they have for centuries, the women wore hay skirts and were topless. The men wore small woven cloths on their hips, though noticeably with tight black briefs underneath. They all had red face paint and many wore feathers on their heads and necklaces made with alligator and jaguar teeth. Recently caught fish cooked over a fire and a pottery bowl of large baked

black ants were available to snack on.

Speaking limited Portuguese, a young man named Bohoka told me the tribe lived as they always had — in little huts without electricity, running water or cellphones — but with a few modern twists that included allowing tourists to visit.

“Tourism allows us to maintain our way of life,” said Bohoka, 24, who showed us necklaces and other handcrafts for sale.

The village was only about a 90-minute boat trip from Manaus but worlds away. The gritty port city of over 2 million people is an eclectic mix of a colonial architecture, urban sprawl and hustle from hard-scrabble touts trying to eke out a living. It reached its splendor in the 19th century when growing global demand for rubber brought

thongs to the area to cut and gather sap from rubber trees. A beautiful opera house built during that time, which today hosts several shows each year, is the city’s main tourist attraction.

As I chatted with Bohoka, a small boat pulled up on the riverbank. About a dozen members of the tribe, all dressed in slacks and T-shirts, got off carrying plastic bags. They disappeared into their huts and remerged a few minutes later wearing traditional clothes.

Bohoka explained they had gone to “the city,” or Manaus, to buy sewing materials.

“Why couldn’t they just wear traditional clothing there?” I asked, somewhat jokingly.

Bohoka laughed. “Impossible,” he said. “Indians’ home is the forest.”

‘Ants in a Tree’ is a classic crowd-pleaser

By SARA MOULTON
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“Ants in a Tree” is the English translation of the Chinese name for this classic recipe. Built of spicy pork, bean thread noodles (aka cellophane noodles) and scallions, it earned its name because it’s not so far-fetched for the finished dish to call that image to mind — the noodles look like tree branches, the scallions like tree leaves and the little bits of ground pork like ants. Admittedly, it’s not a very appetizing image, but the dish itself happens to be a crowd-pleaser. Indeed, it’s a refreshing break from the usual holiday fare.

Cellophane noodles can be tough to find in your supermarket, which is why I’ve listed capellini (very thin strands of pasta). If you’re not a fan of pork, you’re welcome to swap in beef, turkey, or chicken. And if you can’t source Asian chile paste (made of chiles mixed with oil or vinegar and salt), use your favorite brand of hot sauce. Of course, if you’d prefer the dish to be mild, leave the hot stuff out of it.

Make sure you prepare every ingredient before you begin cooking. Many of them cook very quickly



“Ants in a Tree.”

and are added to the pan in rapid succession. If at any stage the next round of ingredients isn’t ready to go, the ones in the pan will overcook.

As a way to help the noodles absorb the myriad flavors of the sauce,

par-cook the noodles and finish them in the sauce. If, in the end, you’re more in the mood for a bowl of soup than a plate of pasta, add more chicken broth.

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ANTS IN A TREE

Start to finish: 50 minutes Servings: 6

- Kosher salt
- 1 pound ground pork
- ¼ cup low-sodium soy sauce, divided
- 1 tablespoon toasted sesame oil
- 2 teaspoons cornstarch
- ½ cup thinly sliced white and light green part of scallion, plus ½ cup thinly sliced dark green part of scallion for garnish
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger
- 1 tablespoon minced garlic
- 1 to 1 ½ tablespoons Asian chile paste (or to taste)
- 3 cups shredded Napa cabbage
- 6 ounces capellini
- 1 cup chicken broth
- 2 tablespoons toasted sesame seeds for garnish

Put on a large pot of salted water to boil for the pasta.

In a medium bowl combine well the pork, 2 tablespoons of the soy sauce, the sesame oil, the cornstarch and the 1/2 cup white and light green sliced scallions.

In a wok or large skillet heat the oil over high heat until it is almost smoking. Add the ginger, garlic and chile paste; cook, stirring, for 30 seconds or until the mixture smells fragrant. Add the pork, breaking it up, and cook, stirring until most of the pink has disappeared. Stir in the cabbage and the remaining 2 tablespoons soy sauce and cook, stirring, until the cabbage is slightly wilted, 1 to 2 minutes.

When the pot of water has come to a boil, add the pasta, stir, and boil it for 2 minutes. Drain the noodles and add them to the skillet along with the chicken broth. Bring to a boil and simmer for 2 minutes, stirring occasionally (the mixture will be soupy at first and then become less saucy as the pasta absorbs the broth). Divide the pasta and pork evenly among 6 bowls, pouring any liquid over it, and garnish with the scallion greens and toasted sesame seeds.

Nutrition information per serving: 428 calories; 236 calories from fat; 26 g fat (7 g saturated); 0 g trans fats; 54 mg cholesterol; 588 mg sodium; 25 g carbohydrate; 2 g fiber; 2 g sugar; 19 g protein.