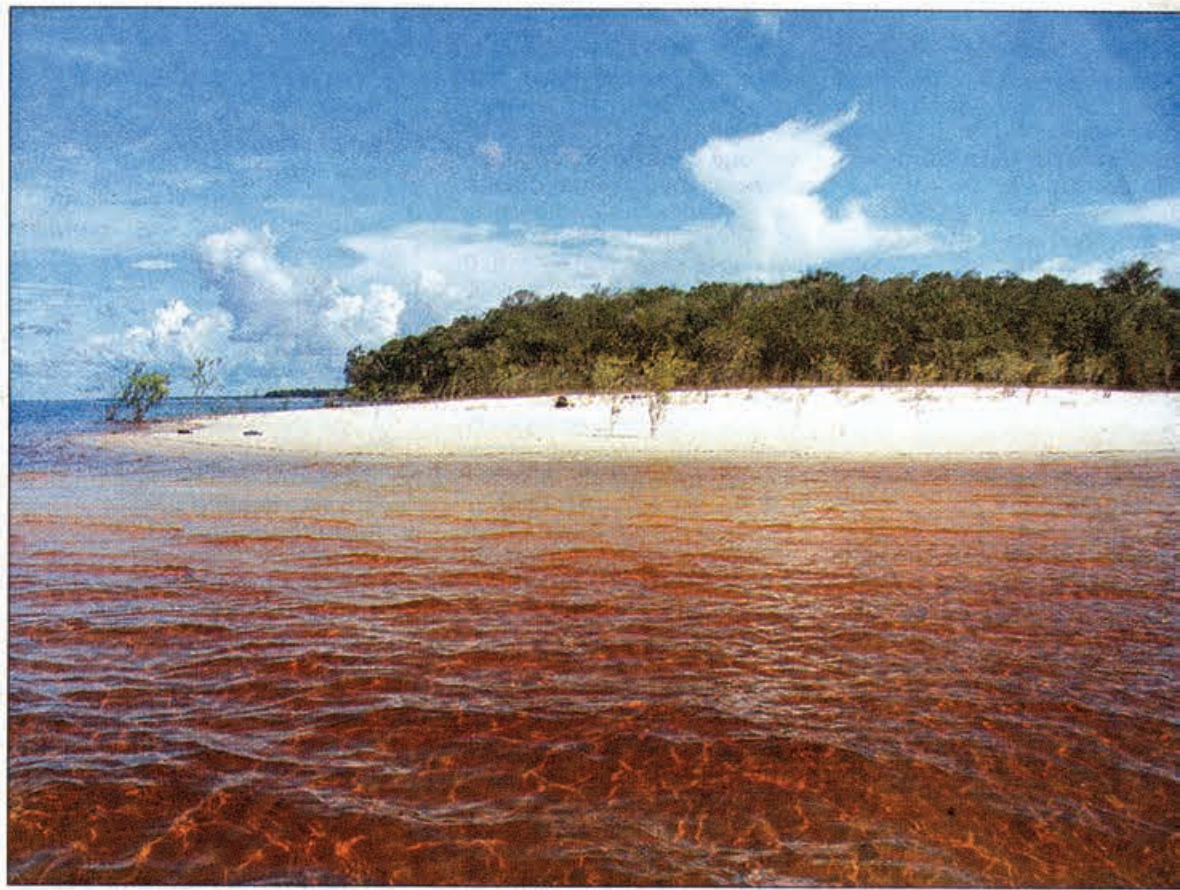


Rio bravo

Motor yacht tours allow visitors to explore pristine regions of primordial Amazonia



BY BETH PARKS
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

This is not your grandmother's Carnival cruise. If it's fancy dining, gambling and a Las Vegas-style show you crave, look somewhere else. But if you want a real change of pace, adventure, and sights and sounds that beat much of what Hollywood has to offer, take a trip to Amazonia. This vast South American region surrounds the gargantuan Amazon River and its tributaries.

You might wish, as I did, to explore the Rio Negro (pronounced NAY-GRO) in Brazil. An acidic, black-water river, which gets its color from dissolved organic matter, this largest branch of the Amazon meanders through a swath of jungle about the size of New England.

The motor yacht Tucano, operated by Ecotour Expeditions Inc., plies the waters of the Rio Negro and visits pristine, primordial regions inaccessible to cruise ships. With a crew of seven, this clean, comfortable vessel can accommodate as many as 18 passengers. Groups may be considerably smaller. My expedition carried only six.

Each day aboard the Tucano begins with a light breakfast before dawn. You will board a small launch and head for a secluded stream or meadow where you sit silently, waiting for the jungle to come alive. Off in the trees, howler monkeys sound like a convoy of tractor-trailer trucks roaring down I-95. Yellow-rumped caciques dart in and out of their colonial pendulous nests, while toucans and festive parrots flap their way toward the rising sun.

After breakfast, you'll be off in the launch again. This time, it will be to explore the flood plain adjacent to the Rio Negro. Perhaps you'll flush out a colorful owl butterfly or encounter a spider the size of your fist straddling an enormous web capable of snaring a bird. Maybe you'll come across shards of pottery left by an ancient indigenous tribe and excavated by an agouti paca (South American rodent) as it dug its burrow. Or perhaps you'll stumble upon a centuries-old kapok tree, its buttressed girth so



The cola-colored Rio Negro (top) gets its name from dissolved organic matter in the river. A Caboclo family (above) waits out a sweltering afternoon in their home along the Rio Negro.

BETH PARKS PHOTOS

expansive that a dozen people cannot encircle it with their arms.

The Tucano generally moves to another point in the river during the hottest time of the day. When you stop again, it may be to visit a small settlement or village. You will find scantily clad caboclos (people of mixed Brazilian Indian and European-Portuguese or African ancestry) sweating out

the afternoon in their wooden shacks on stilts. Perhaps you'll have a chance to swim in the cola-colored river, or fish for razor-toothed piranhas that will make a tasty snack later in the day. And don't forget to check out the eyeball-like guaran (pronounced gwaddanaa), a high-caffeine fruit used to make a popular soft drink that tastes a bit like cream soda.

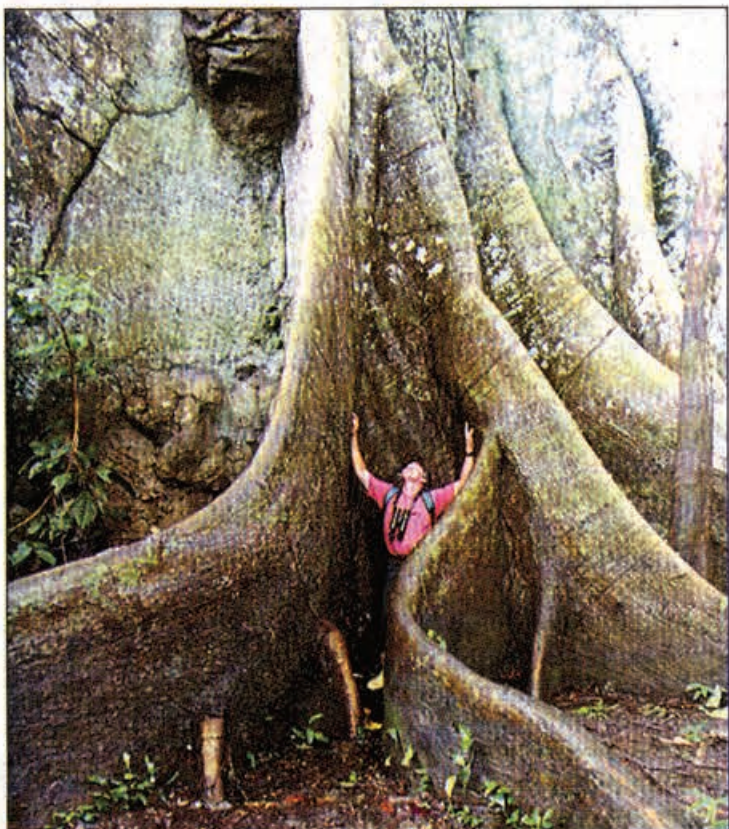
When supper is over and dusk descends, around 6 p.m. this close to the equator, you'll be out in the launch again. Your spotlight will undoubtedly reveal numerous tree boas dangling from limbs above the water. Three-toed sloths, looking like deformed and smiling monkeys, inch their way through the dense canopy at the river's edge, while alligatorlike caimans

roar to each other in the darkness.

Although generally safe and suitable for children and senior citizens, a trip of this nature is not for the faint-hearted. You must be willing to tolerate some discomfort and expect the unexpected. And if the thought of shower-

ing in cool, black-river water makes you cringe, perhaps you'd better go on that Carnival Cruise with your grandmother.

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A Caboclo guide is dwarfed by the roots of a centuries-old kapok tree.

Amazonia travel tips

- Dress in light-weight clothes you can wash easily by hand and that dry quickly.
- Drink plenty of bottled water and eat lots of bananas.
- Slather yourself in sunscreen, preferably SPF 40 or higher.
- Keep a poncho handy at all times; it rains a lot and you will get wet.
- Protect yourself with insect repellent.
- Wear high-top shoes or hiking boots on land.
- Don't explore on your own; you will get lost.
- Never swim at night.
- Don't urinate while swimming in the river (a tiny parasitic fish may invade your urinary tract).
- Take malaria preventative as prescribed.
- Carry Cipro, a prescription antibiotic, for traveler's diarrhea (expect it to happen!).

Touring Amazonia

Heart of Amazonia" Riverboat Tour (9 days)
Book a trip on the Motor Yacht Tucano through Ecotour Expeditions, Inc., PO Box 128, Jamestown, RI 02835. Tel: 800-688-1822; www.naturetours.com; e-mail: info@naturetours.com. Cost, excluding airfare, is about \$2,100.

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