

## Forging a Path through Peru

*(written on the 10-year anniversary of the March 2006 trip)*

My eyes are open, but the world around me is black. The Peruvian nightfall has quickly cloaked our craft in impenetrable darkness. After hours afloat on the Tambopata River, the clattering outboard's last gasps yield to the primal cacophony of countless rainforest creatures. The long, narrow vessel languidly glides to shore as our leader clicks on a heavy-duty searchlight, scanning the muddy banks for a suitable place to put in. No longer lulled by the moving boat's breezes, I wipe fresh moisture from my brow. The expedition leaders' anxious Spanish shouts pierce the night like verbal gunfire. Finally the group disembarks, hoping to God that the guides have found the correct clearing in this nocturnal landscape. If we've missed the path to our lodgings, there isn't another human settlement for dozens of miles in any direction...

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It was fall 2005, and I'd just started grad school at West Chester University of PA. Despite abundant dreams of world exploration since childhood, a potent mix of practicality and introversion had prevented me from studying abroad as an undergrad. Venturing home after class one evening, a flyer in the timeworn hallway of the geography building beckoned: *Explore the Amazon Rainforest, the most biologically diverse place on earth.* My backpack fell emphatically to the floor, echoing in the empty corridor. My overly practical thought process, which ordinarily would have engaged, was conspicuously tardy. A smile slowly spread across my face as the possibilities flowed like South American tributaries. The list of reasons not to go was long: can't afford it. Don't speak any



Spanish. Never been south of West Palm Beach. Don't know anyone else who's going. After a bit more pondering, I realized I'd never wanted to do anything more in my life. Humans' relationship with nature had always captivated me, and what better place to study this than in far-flung Amazonia. Six months and many a reassuring word to family and girlfriend later, I boarded the shiny metal cylinder that would cross the equator, South America-bound.

Squiiiiish. My first step off the boat and the mucky embankment nearly slurps the hiking boot off my dumbfounded left foot. Despite the late hour and collective fatigue, our diminutive local guide Silverio is setting an intense pace on the narrow trail. Our destination is Refugio, the aptly-named lodge where we'll spend our first muggy night in the rainforest. My muscles are stiff from several tranquil hours on the boat. Disoriented by the vertigo of the adventure, I assume it's nearly bedtime, but a quick check of my Timex confirms that it's barely 7:00. Sensing my own accelerated heartbeat, I turn around and recognize I'm last in line, led along by Silverio and the others like a hesitant yo-yo dragged by an eager toddler. The incessant screeching of monkeys and other late-night revelers continues, when something suddenly smacks my chest. A fly? A bat? A tarantula? The nearest member of the group is a dozen feet ahead. The heavy breathing I hear must be my own, whooshing over the wildlife's clamor; I desperately strive to keep up the pace. This is nature's pulsing sauna, and the only reprieve is at the lodge that should be, must be, just ahead.

One day earlier I'd been short of breath for other reasons. A combination of lofty altitude and the soul-stirring Machu Picchu panorama had momentarily squelched the air from my lungs. The dreamlike backdrop, stuff of travel posters worldwide, had materialized following a brain-jangling ride up the dusty switchbacks. The stone stronghold confirmed its authenticity, dispelling any notion that a settlement in this dizzying locale



was an invention of oxygen-deprived explorers. The intense Andean sun advanced, and I stood slack-jawed in silent awe as thousands have done since Hiram Bingham's 1911 rediscovery of this epic scene. Not sure if we'd been there for hours or eons, we departed the Inca sanctuary without fanfare, bumping back to Cusco on buckled, pockmarked roads. Preparations for our rainforest quest were underway.

Flying from Cusco to the frontier rainforest town of Puerto Maldonado, one is thrown off a precipice like a monkey's plaything. While the two airports are only an inch apart on the map, the latter is nearly 10,000 feet lower in elevation. Upon takeoff, the plane's nose tilted downward as we left the realm of the Inca for a humid Eden of biological diversity. From my sky-high post at the plane window, an endless expanse of ripe broccolitos spread below, belying the variety and intricacy of life beneath the canopy.



My face is a leaky faucet, rivulets of perspiration continuing to trickle earthward. The trail contracts further, branches stretching forth like prickly panhandlers. As my shirt and backpack scratch through the undergrowth, I note a faint fragrance of food that temporarily takes over from the frequent whiffs of moist earth and leaf matter. A few moments later, a dimly-lit wooden structure materializes in the clearing ahead. Relief. Silverio and his sidekick Carlos, unruffled by our sweltering scramble in the 99% humidity, show us to our rooms and grant us a few moments' rest before dinner. I toss my gear onto the dusty plank floor, collapsing onto the bed while inquisitively fingering the mosquito net that will keep us malaria-free this evening. I find it curious that the din from the canopy has not subsided despite my being indoors. Slowly swiveling round on the bed I discover why- the room's fourth wall is non-existent, leaving us vulnerable to the sundry denizens of the forested abyss.

Several hours into a sweaty slumber, I'm awakened by a rustling in the room. The needle on my portable thermometer hasn't budged since twilight, fixed on 86 degrees Fahrenheit. The sound becomes closer. Sluggishly peeling my head off the pillow, I peer toward its source. In the dimness there is a roundish ball of fur on the tiny, teetering bedside table. For better or worse, my movements abruptly scare it away; in the morning, the wrapper to a granola bar that I foolishly left out lies on the floor, evidence of a rodent caller. I later learned that the likely visitor was none other than an agouti, bashful cousin of the guinea pig.

This rodent's shyness mirrored my own as the voyage began, wary as I was of traveling with a group of strangers and rooming with two of them in primitive Peruvian lodgings. Spence, a brooding, bespectacled student in his late 20s provided a sure contrast to Brian, whose dirty blonde locks befitted his laid-back surfer personality perfectly. An inquisitive outdoorsman, he developed the curious habit of collecting stones during each of our stops. By trip's end, his persnickety assemblage of pebbles, laid out carefully each night, was the source of ceaseless amusement for the group. He'd often preface our 8:00 nightly bedtime with "time to crash out!" Despite wildly different backgrounds and life outlooks, I got along famously with Spence, Brian, and the others. One's capacity to survive with his fellow man and woman seems enhanced under extreme circumstances, including that of a jungle underworld.

"Welcome to Hell," Silverio deadpans as our ramshackle bus rattles to a halt. Thick plumes of red-hot dust rush forth, briefly clogging the nostrils of everyone on board. Rubbing my aching back, I see that we've arrived at Infierno, a minuscule village of the indigenous Ese'Eja people. The village's unusual name, we're told, comes from the tribal ancestors' hellish journey upriver to Puerto Maldonado and back. As we prepare to enter a clearing surrounded by a half-dozen plain wooden structures, Carlos gravely warns us to tuck our pant legs into our socks to avoid the risk of chigger bites. The specter of contracting leishmaniasis, a skin-eating disease that doesn't appear until several weeks after a bite, is a fitting welcome to this unforgiving outpost.

I fretfully alight, led to a somber tour of the infirmary which is staffed by one part-time nurse, and the dilapidated one-room schoolhouse. Several moments later I'm face-to-face with an Ese'Eja elder in the comparatively grander artisan building. I can't tell if she's 55 or 95, her gnarled visage as intense as that of a jaguar stalking its prey. A timid "Hola" escapes from my parched mouth. She doesn't seem to speak Spanish, let alone English. My shyness has returned; I'm flummoxed by the fact that this is the first individual I've ever met that does not know a single word of my language. She guides me in crafting a traditional necklace, hand signals and eye movements our only feeble lifelines of communication. At last, my childlike creation complete, the elder smiles slightly for the first time. The universality of her gesture strikes me profoundly, and I respond with a goofy grin. I depart the sweltering building, aware that with a bit of flexibility, common ground can be found between any two humans.



That morning we'd left our encampment, trooping through the morning mist for another day on the river. Six months earlier, none of us had even heard of the Tambopata, overshadowed as it was by the rock star of all rivers and retail behemoth namesake. Now its cloudy currents gurgled around us for hours each day, introducing us to capybaras, egrets, and soaring leafy sentinels on its flanks. Satiated from our midday repast of chicken and

seasoned rice in a steaming banana leaf, I struggled to contemplate the totality of our present isolation. There are significant connections between what happens here with the rest of the world, I daydreamed, despite an “out-of-sight, out-of-mind” mentality that persists even in developed countries. I looked to my right and saw a fresh clearing, felled trunks on their way to become the latest piece of discount furniture or inter-office memo. Perhaps regular folks like me are the isolated ones, going about our daily lives of comfort detached and unaware of the planet’s lungs dying a slow death each day. Mournful teardrops began to shower us all from above.

Unbeknownst to the group, our lungs are about to receive their own challenge. The Ese'Eja soccer team, comprised of a half-dozen cinnamon-skinned, shirtless young men, has invited us motley gringos to a match on the uneven pitch. I'd seen them warming up minutes earlier, impressed as their tattered ball whizzed precisely between them and through the naked timber goalposts. Our co-ed side takes the field in slow motion, and the absurdity begins: playing for the first time since high school, in hiking boots, against a barefoot indigenous tribe. Upon kickoff, general rustiness ensures that the handful of spectators will not recognize this as 'the beautiful game.' After a few moments though, the movements come back to me. Juli, a member of our group who's played at the collegiate level, is our captain and quite frankly, our only hope. I settle in to my old position on the wing, surprising myself by defending well against the Ese'Eja's deceptively swift striker. I loft a pass to Brian, who centers to Juli. Her clever move tricks the goalkeeper, but she shoots wide right. A tribesman covertly raises an eyebrow to his comrade, perhaps impressed with our shabby squad. Ten more minutes of surprisingly close play elapse with chances for both sides. Then, someone mercifully declares it a nil-nil draw. Juli and I share sweaty high fives with our teammates, and in a gesture of goodwill known the globe over, exchange post-match pleasantries with the competition.

We drift back to the bus, lit by slanting brushstrokes of dazzling sunlight. Strolling beneath skyscrapers of teak and mahogany, my new companions and I converse about the journey. Dusk will soon return, but for now the path is aglow.

