



The Amazon is a river of superlatives. It carries 20 per cent of the world's freshwater. It hosts a third of all animal species, with a new one being discovered every three days. Its discharge is greater than the next seven longest rivers combined. And at its mouth sits a tropical island, Ilha de Marajó, which is the size of Switzerland.

Not a single bridge crosses the Amazon, in an area the size of Europe in which just 30 million people reside. All this makes the mighty 3,456-nautical-mile-long river and its 1,100 tributaries – many of which are huge waterways in themselves – the sole highway. The Amazon is a vital jamboree where container ships, banana boats and dugout canoes skit across a watery expanse that swells to 40 kilometres across. Little wonder that dozens of explorers, superyachts and people alike, are casting off in the coming years.



Top: the yellow-spotted river turtle and the quetzal bird (centre). Above: a river excursion in the Pacaya Samiria National Reserve with yacht Aqua Nera. Right: film-maker Yuri Sanada



Those pioneers include environmentalist and film-maker Yuri Sanada. A former river resident and sole Brazilian member of the Explorers Club (a global society for scientific adventurers), Sanada has navigated the basin dozens of times in kayaks, skiffs, jeeps and ships.

Sanada's latest mission is to cruise the entire length of the Amazon River in a seven-metre hybrid outrigger in summer 2024. En route he will produce an IMAX movie that will be screened in all Brazilian schools. There's a lot to film. The lungs of the world cover six million square kilometres – a full third of South America. It's a destination where black caimans eat piranhas, spider monkeys steal eggs and quetzals (emerald green birds with grappling hook talons) nibble tropical eggfruits.

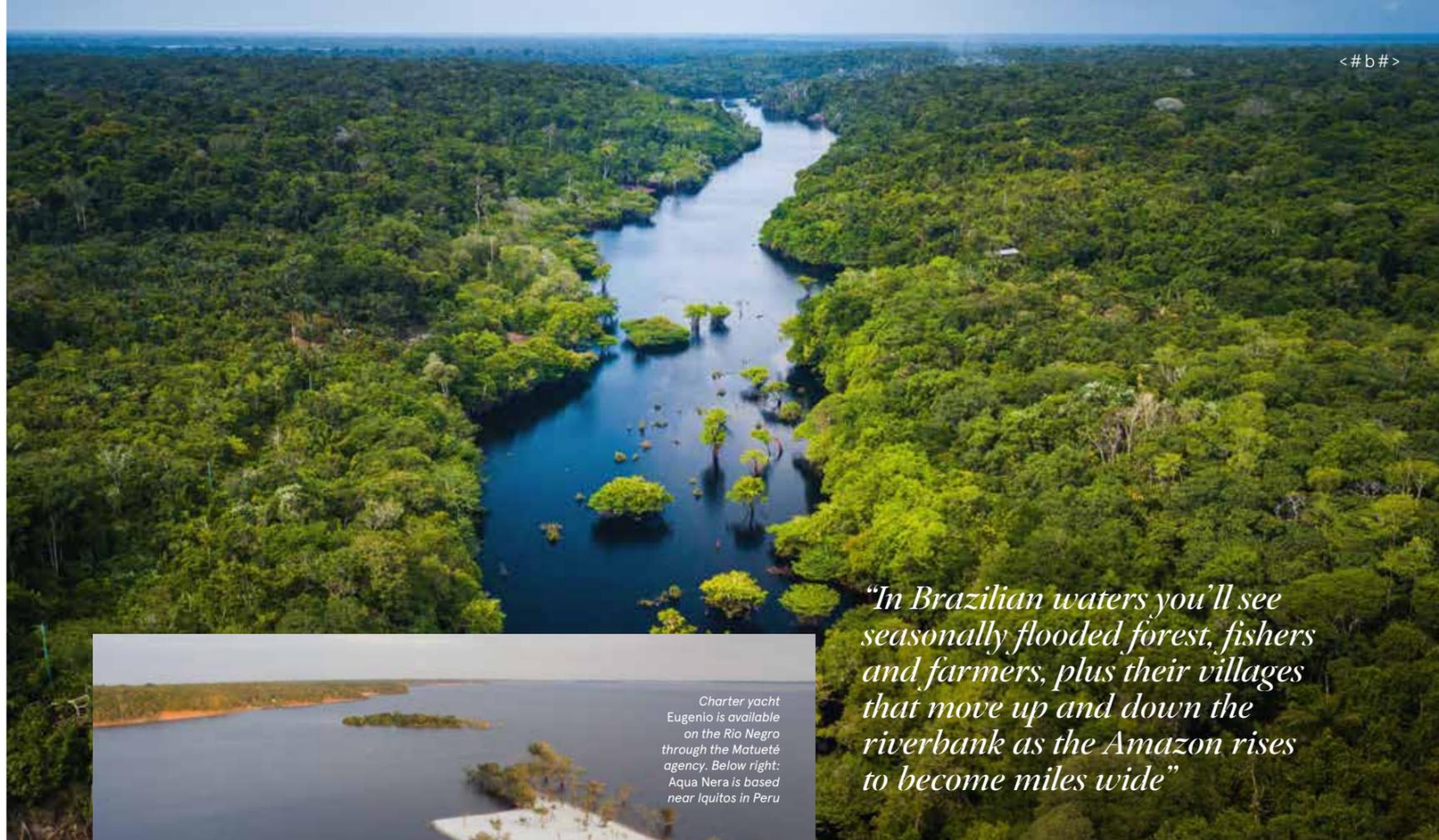
"Do you know how many people climbed Everest?" Sanada asks. "Four thousand." Around 1,500 people have rowed across the Atlantic, he continues. "But less than 20 people have traversed the Amazon from source to sea by their own means."

Thankfully these days the Amazon is not solely reserved for explorers such as Sanada. "At first the Amazon can seem intimidating, which is a shame because a stunning cruise is possible," says Elise Ciappara, head of yacht expeditions at expedition agency Pelorus. At the moment the Brazilian section of the Amazon is like Antarctica, she explains. "It's far to go and people aren't sure if they'll get charters or not, although in my opinion they probably will."

Pelorus is currently arranging several Brazilian Amazon private yacht expeditions, including one in summer 2024. It can also arrange charters on locally built yachts such as 37-metre *Zenith*. And there are no restrictions when to go, Ciappara adds. "It's a year-round destination and, depending on where you are heading, there are itineraries tailored to take advantage of the time the guests are in the region."

In 2021 one explorer yacht cruised 2,000 nautical miles from the river's mouth at Belém into the Peruvian Amazon, where it now welcomes charter guests. Owner Francesco Galli Zugaro, who operates the recently launched 62.4-metre *Aqua Nera*, as well as sistership 45-metre *Aria Amazon*, says his yacht's trip wasn't without incident. "There are no reliable charts," says Galli Zugaro. "No berths and no freshwater hook-ups. When you're on the Amazon, you have to be completely autonomous."

Upriver through Brazil, *Aqua Nera* cruised "against the current, a good two and a half knots", averaging around six knots. "In Brazilian waters you'll see seasonally flooded forest, fishers and farmers,



Charter yacht Eugenio is available on the Rio Negro through the Matueté agency. Below right: Aqua Nera is based near Iquitos in Peru

"In Brazilian waters you'll see seasonally flooded forest, fishers and farmers, plus their villages that move up and down the riverbank as the Amazon rises to become miles wide"



plus their villages that move up and down the riverbank as the Amazon rises to become miles wide," says Galli Zugaro.

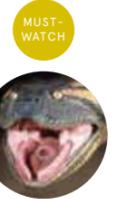
It's for this reason that he positioned his two ships near Iquitos in Peru. With 568,000 inhabitants, it's the largest city in the world to be unconnected by road. "The width of the Peruvian Amazon is far narrower here than that of the Brazilian," rarely more than one kilometre. "That's what I call eye-level cruising: you can relax in your luxury cabin and watch the scenery change." On *Aqua Nera* the cabins were styled by the team behind Raffles Hotel in Phnom Penh. "And the jungle near there is pristine. Think the Garden of Eden meets *Jurassic Park*."

Of course, nothing beats the independence of bringing your own yacht, but "there's a lot to take into account", admits Ciappara from Pelorus. "You have to consider

draught to see how far upriver you can sail. And height, as there will be trees that might hit your deck." Foreign-flagged yachts will also require permits.

Ciappara also looks at moon cycles. "Wildlife visibility correlates to moon phases and the stargazing is phenomenal." Prepping the boat takes time, "right down to obtaining UV polo shirts for crew" to protect against the intense equatorial sun.

Despite this, several superyachts have succeeded in completing an Amazon cruise, most notably Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen, who famously sailed his 60.6-metre *Méduse* upriver in 1997, an unheard-of trip at the time. Thirteen years later yachts were still a novelty when two intrepid travellers embarked on a whirlwind tour of the globe in 2010 in their 46-metre yacht *Golden Compass*. On



Anaconda (1997)
This over-the-top movie starring J.Lo and Ice Cube sees a fictional film crew stalked by giant snakes while exploring the Amazon. Yes it's silly, but it does a good job in making you squirm.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ADOBE STOCK; ARTUR DEBAT VIA GETTY IMAGES; YURI SANADA; RODRIGO CAPOTE; COLUMBIA PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES



Top: the pink river dolphin lives only in the freshwater of the Amazon and Orinoco river basins. Above: the toucan. Right: a skiff excursion from Aqua Nera

the Amazon, the yacht was escorted by hundreds of locals. "The kids paddled in their dugout canoes to greet us. Word of our arrival spread upriver by word of mouth and radio," her owner later recalled to *BOAT International*.

Cookson Adventures is an expedition agency that can source yachts for guests. Managing director Nick Davies advises caution when sailing upriver without local knowledge. "Often your Antarctic explorer yacht is not the most suitable one to go right up the Amazon," he says, as engines can become clogged

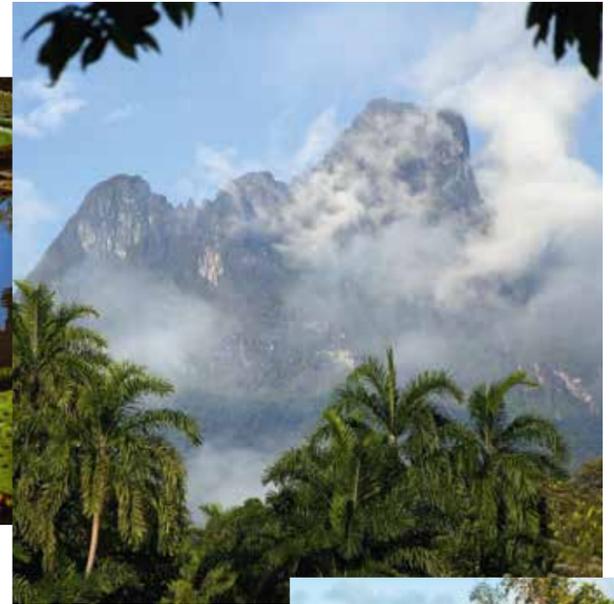
with suspended sediment, while a steel hull is merely an extra weight to carry.

Bobby Betenson from Brazilian luxury exploration agency Matueté agrees. "Yacht support is also a challenge as Brazil has not been receptive to the industry. There are no marinas or refuelling jetties. But it's still possible, as we've helped three foreign owners cruise up the Amazon with guides, pilots, planning and documentation." These trips were achieved by Betenseon "working very closely with BYC, the most expert agent in Brazil, to deal with all the bureaucratic elements of a yacht. From Manaus to the ocean, it is nearly a thousand kilometres. Usually the owner does not cruise in and out of the river on board, so ground support and logistics are also arranged."

In this area local pilots are worth more than marine maps. It's a destination where a tree could be impaled underwater, before attracting sediment and forming a new island six months later.



"The sandbanks constantly shift because of the river's flow, so a pilot or local captain is an asset"



Far left: the Amazon's lily pads can grow up to 3m across. Left: Pico da Neblina, Brazil's tallest peak. Below: kayaking and birdwatching with Pelorus

"There are maps of the river," says Betenson, "but the sandbanks, which are the main challenge, constantly shift, so a technical pilot or an experienced local captain is an asset".

Sanada points out that "the Amazon is immense. If you visit for tourism you will probably stay in a small area that is already mapped." But on a cruise it's possible to "visit places where literally no one has been before", which makes a river expert a necessity.

But go slow, warns Betenson. "The difference in river depth between July, when its tributaries decant the previous rainy season from nine South American nations, and its lowest level is more than 15 metres." This means that "you can't cruise safely with moving sandbanks if you are doing 20 knots in a luxurious 100-footer. You are better off safely cruising at eight knots through the night instead," he says.

Manaus, the biggest Amazonian city and midpoint of the river, is a great place to begin a trip, says Catherine Balston, a São Paulo-based contributor to *Forbes* and *Monocle*. "It's a big city with great food – sample *costelinha de tambaqui*, the ribs of a giant river fish – and an indigenous and Portuguese heritage." Known as the "Paris of the Tropics", Manaus has an opera house and boulevards. The river here is a moveable feast of trade boats that sell river shrimp and giant green beans, plus passenger chuggers where hammocks hang like bats.

Balston also recommends São Gabriel da Cachoeira up the Rio Negro, a huge tributary near Manaus where some yacht guests fly to privately to commence a one-way journey downriver. "It's near Pico da Neblina, the highest mountain in Brazil".

The region is also a birdwatcher's dream, heavily stocked with toucan and luminous orange cock-of-the-rocks. "Bring mosquito repellent and binoculars – Nikon's Aculon A30 is a great lightweight model – as the birds and animals tend to be well hidden in the rainforest," explains Balston. There are several indigenous territories in the area, including one belonging to the Yanomami tribe. Visiting them will require a



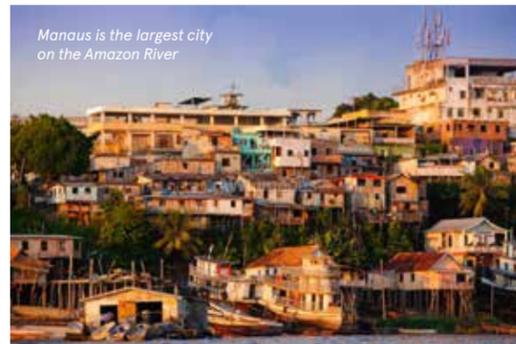
Fitzcarraldo (1982)
Entrepreneur Fitzcarraldo dreams of building an opera house in the jungle and buys an old steamship to raise the cash. The production of this film, which apparently moved the ship by hand with no special effects, was a story unto itself.



permit from FUNAI, Brazil's National Indian Foundation.

Betenson from Matueté says that Manaus River traffic can get busy. "The only major road out goes 600 kilometres north to Venezuela," he explains. "Nobody has a country house; they spend weekends on their boats instead." Furthermore, "the municipality of Manaus is the size of Denmark, but there are only 40 beds of a higher-end standard". For pure luxury, it's best to set sail.

A local charter yacht is a great way to go with the flow. For peace and quiet (and limited mosquitoes) Betenson advises the Rio Negro tributary, a fairytale mix of butterflies,



Manaus is the largest city on the Amazon River

Amazon adventurers

In the 1980s bon vivant **Malcolm Forbes** (below) took his 49.5-metre *Feardship The Highlander* upriver, wowing Amazonians with her Jon Bannenberg design. The yacht, which also sailed to Communist China and Alaska, was recently sold by IYC. A century ago, during the Amazon rubber boom,

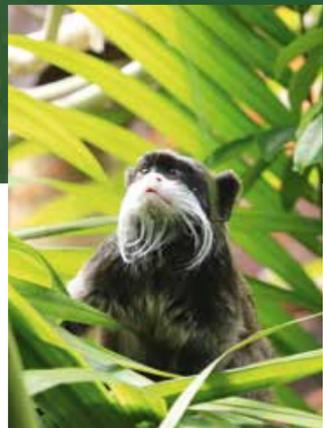
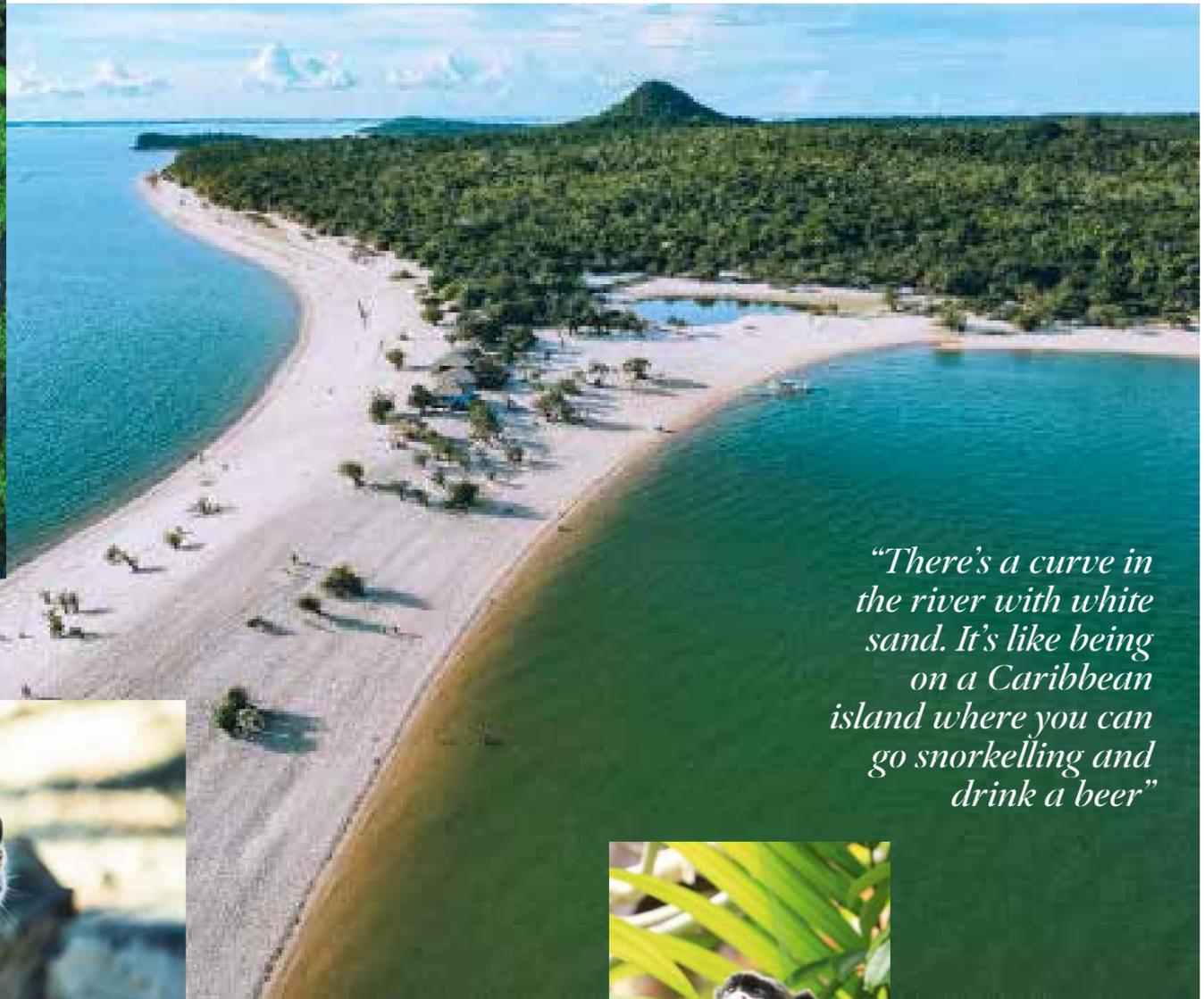
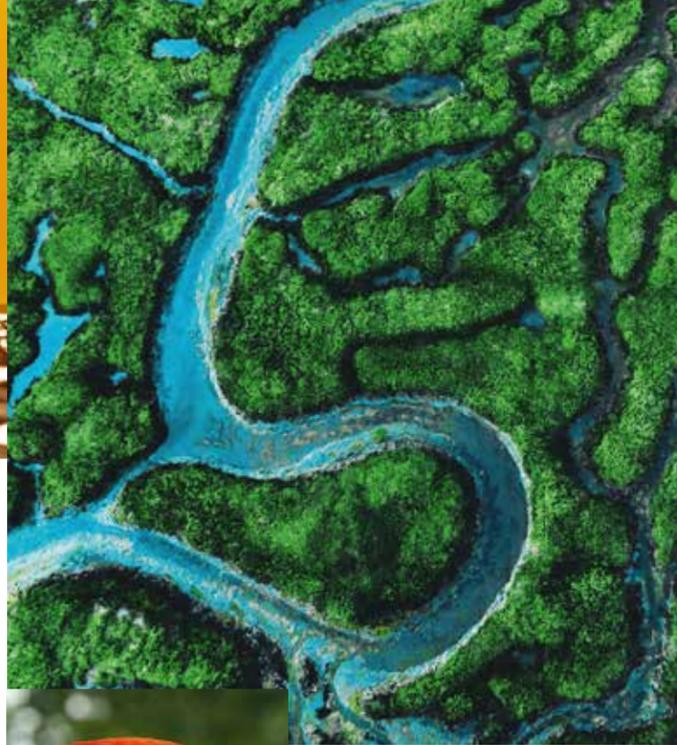
motor magnate **Henry Ford** (below) set up an all-American tyre-making village near Santarém. The puritanical Ford banned alcohol, football and women – so the Brazilian workers simply sailed to a hedonistic pontoon downriver. His vine-choked ghost town, Fordlandia, is a must-visit. Brazilian officer and ace

explorer **Cândido Rondon** founded FUNAI to protect indigenous peoples. Rondon guided former president **Theodore Roosevelt** on a voyage along the River of Doubt, which is plagued by barely passable rapids and waterfalls. After Rondon waved Roosevelt home, the explorer simply turned around and carried on into the jungle.

Uncompromising German film-maker **Werner Herzog** (below) chugged a real steamboat past Manaus and Iquitos for his adventure epic *Fitzcarraldo*. Jungle filming sent staff mad – one assistant chainsawed off his own leg following a venomous snakebite. In 1982 *Fitzcarraldo* won the Best Director prize at the Cannes Film Festival.



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The jungle is home to 10 per cent of the world's biodiversity, including green iguanas (bottom), macaws (right), jaguars (below right) and tamarin monkeys (opposite page)

tropical fish and lily pads you could balance a child on. Expect pink river dolphins and tamarin monkeys with moustaches and the chance to snorkel with more than 700 documented species of fish – more species than in the Mediterranean.

Betenson's agency operates 11 charter yachts there – a mix of GRP cruisers, "which are comparable to European boats", with skiffs and paddleboards, and "wooden regional boats", the latter with the comfort levels of a Turkish gulet.

Betenson also operates two local yachts on the sandy Tapajós River, another Amazon tributary near Santarém, east of Manaus. "People don't know that the Brazilian Amazon has the most perfect, pristine beaches one can imagine," like Praia do Iluminado. Google this beach if you dare. "They are flooded and swept clean every year"

The Amazon is so expansive that it's best to split up an adventure into sizeable chunks. Ciappara at Pelorus divides her most popular charter zones into three sections. The Rio Tapajós, the Rio Negro and the Rio Trombetas, which couple the most spectacular cruising areas with some of the most abundant wildlife.

Explorer Sanada's favourite areas include "Alter do Chão (near Santarém). It's a curve in the river with white sand. It's like being on a Caribbean island where you can go snorkelling and drink a beer." He also adores the Andes in Peru. "The Inca Trail from Machu Picchu to the headwaters of the Amazon on the Urubamba River is epic."

According to Ciappara, one of the best Amazon experiences is kayaking the Anavilhanas, a UNESCO-inscribed archipelago of more than 400 islands close to Manaus, which is alive with margay wild cats, Amazonian manatees and giant armadillos.

Ciappara can also call on the Brazilian Army's Jungle Warfare Brigade (who travel seamlessly through the Amazon tracking drug traffickers and animal smugglers) to assist in the seldom-visited Jaú National Park northwest of Manaus.

Right: Alter do Chão near Santarém is one of explorer Yuri Sanada's favourite places on the river for its Caribbean island-like appeal

"There's a curve in the river with white sand. It's like being on a Caribbean island where you can go snorkelling and drink a beer"

"Activities here include learning adrenaline-raising survival techniques and identifying medicinal trees. Then it's back to the luxury of your yacht."

Cookson Adventures takes to the skies to get close to the jungle's residents. "We work with professional tree climbers who do ropes and rigging for wildlife documentaries," Davies explains, which allows guests to climb up into the rainforest canopy. "They can erect netting, serve drinks and get close to howler monkeys coming through. The nice thing about it is that you're creating a world first up that particular tree and leaving no trace."

Slow travel is rewarded by abundant wildlife. "A jaguar swam right in front of me last autumn during *Aqua Nera's* inaugural cruise," says owner Galli Zugaro. He advises veering slightly off the main river at dawn and dusk, when a crepuscular feeding frenzy invites yellow-spotted river turtles

PHOTOGRAPHY: ARTUR DEBAT VIA GETTY IMAGES; ADOBE STOCK; ARCTIC-IMAGES VIA GETTY IMAGES; CHRISTIAN HEEB/AWL IMAGES; PULSAR IMAGES/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; DRAGAN JELIC VIA GETTY IMAGES

and green iguanas, which hang from trees then dive into the water. "Our night river excursions through the Pacaya Samiria National Reserve are incredible," he says. "It's comparable to an African safari, where our low-impact skiffs are like floating jeeps. Similarly, you must wake up early when wildlife is most active."

"Community interaction is also a key part of the Amazon experience," continues Galli Zugaro. The Amazon basin shelters some 500 ethnic groups with 300 languages. "We visit 15 indigenous communities at random on our tenders, with a maximum of two on each voyage. That means that interaction is spontaneous, so nobody will stop fishing or farming to do a contrived song and dance for tourists," Galli Zugaro says. Those who cruise the earth's

mightiest river become its greatest protectors. According to adventurer Yuri Sanada, there's one final compelling reason to cruise. In 2024 Harvard maps will track his expedition's progress to prove a century-old contention: that the Amazon is longer than the river Nile by an estimated 160 kilometres. "Many people considered the farthest source of the Amazon is the Apurímac River in Peru," Sanada explains. "Now most geographers consider the Mantaro River, four hours' drive from Lima, as the river's birthplace." The twisty waterway in northern Peru would add serious length to the total Amazon course. "From the Mantaro we will whitewater kayak to the Apurímac where they both form the Ene River," another Amazon tributary. "Then it's downstream all the way to the Atlantic." ■



Itinerary must sees



Machu Picchu, the lost Inca citadel at the Amazon headwaters



Pacaya Samiria National Reserve for flooded forests and ring-tailed coatis (left)

Ucayali River for pink dolphins and Amazonian manatees

Leticia for a tiny slice of Colombian culture and a well-served airport



São Gabriel da Cachoeira for remote indigenous peoples and virgin hiking

Santa Isabel do Rio Negro to make secret moorings on Rio Negro islands

Manaus, Amazon's biggest city, for great food and (limited) yacht support



Santarém for the ghost town of Fordlandia and white-sand beaches

Jaú National Park to undertake adrenaline-pumping adventures around tree trunks the width of buses

Porto Trombetas for wildlife encounters in the middle of nowhere



Marajó to moor alongside an island the size of Switzerland with more water buffalo than people

