



ECUADOR

by Topez Patterson

Quito, and Volcano Alley. Ecuador is also home to a portion of the Amazon Rainforest. There are many eco lodges in the rainforest that promote environmentally friendly and sustainable tourism.

When I began my search for a lodge, I was surprised by the vast array of prices. Some lodges were over a thousand dollars a night, and some were only fifty dollars a night. Knowing I couldn't afford \$4,000 for one person for a few days, I had to choose a more reasonably priced option. When I found the Yarina lodge website with a package for four days and three nights with availability during a holiday week, offering me a "last minute discount" costing only \$360 total, I was a little suspicious. The pictures on their website looked great, but would I end up sleeping in a tent and bathing in a river instead of in a nice hut with mosquito netting and indoor plumbing?



The trip to the lodge consisted of a 30 minute flight from Quito to Coca where we were dropped off at a shabby looking motel and given rubber rain boots. While we were waiting on the deck on that typically rainy afternoon I continued to worry that my choice based upon budget may not have been the best decision. I reminded myself that I had read great reviews about the lodge put my suitcase in the black garbage bag they provided to keep our things dry on the ride and hoped for the best.

Eventually, we boarded a motorized canoe for the hour-long journey on the Napo River to the lodge. The river looked hostile, fast moving and the thick dark color of the soil it was dragging with it. Along the banks of the river we saw faces of the Quechua people against the thick greenery. We watched them and they watched us. Eventually we turned into a narrow stream branching off of the river. Tree branches scraped the canvas canoe roof and we saw the Yarina

Lodge sign. This was the only way in and out of the lodge, the point of no return. By this time the rain had stopped and the sun was trying to peek out from the clouds.



I looked to the left of the boat and saw a fallen log blocking off an even smaller stream of water. Along the top of the log was a

highway of leaf-cutter ants feverishly carrying large pieces of bright green leaves back to their colony. The jungle was thick and I started thinking of all that is crawling within it. Just then we turned a bend and I saw a beautiful clearing. The sun illuminated a sprawling beautifully manicured lawn. At the top of a long set of wooden stairs, I could see the grass thatched pavilion roof providing shade for four beautifully colored hammocks which just seemed to call out inviting weary passengers in.



My Hut

The staff carried all of our bags to our cabins and welcomed us to the lodge. Each cabin had a grass roof, hammock on the porch, mosquito netting draped over the beds, and a full bathroom with hot water. I was thrilled and relieved. Maybe this Long Island girl could handle the Amazon after all. There was even electricity for charging cameras and phones but only from 6pm-10pm. I soon realized I didn't really need any more than that.

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We canoed down the streams watching monkeys race above our heads. We listened to the calls of the Oropendola (pendulum birds) who dip like a pendulum on a branch to make each strange video-game-effect-like sound. We hiked in the rain and swung on a vine across the jungle floor. We hiked at night to search for tree frogs, stick bugs, and more spiders than I ever would have liked to find. In fact while we were eating dinner, one particularly large tarantula came down to the pavilion floor to see what was for dinner...luckily we were not on their menu.

Over the next few days we wore our galoshes and hiked through the trails day and night, always returning for some rest and a shared meal with all of the guests at the lodge. The communal tables were a bit surprising at first but allowed strangers to bond over new experiences and share conversations and travel tips. Some of the guests were taking daily Spanish lessons in the pavilion. Our guides Eduardo and Winter, led my boyfriend, his friend and me in a small group on two to three excursions each day to learn about the culture, wildlife, and ecosystems of the Napo River Basin.

One of my favorite trips was at night. We boarded the canoes and went upstream just after dark. With our headlamps on, we could see bats crisscrossing the stream catching the pesky insects flying above. We then canoed around a small lake searching for an alligator type of reptile called a Cayman. On the surface of the still water green lightning bug larvae glowed in the moonlight. We sat as quietly as possible as our eyes scanned the scenery for the head (including the mouth and sharp teeth) of a Cayman. It was moving to see how timid they are and how it is quite possible for humans to share space with these creatures and others just by taking simple precautions.

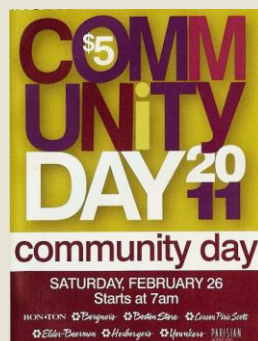


On my trip to the Amazon, I went with open eyes and receptive ears. I saw the beauty of nature, the endurance of the native people, and the heart of the locals.

I also saw the encroachment of civilization on nature and traditional ways of life, as a new suspension bridge was being built into the rainforest and we could hear the oil companies' helicopters flying nearby every day. I left cautiously optimistic and more committed than ever to making better everyday decisions to live a more environmentally responsible life.



Thank You



Reen Cook



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