

PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE PERUVIAN AMAZON

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“Extending over an area of almost 500,000 square miles, Peru is South America’s third largest country (about three times larger than California and just slightly smaller than Alaska). It is fourth largest in population with only Brazil, Argentina, and Colombia having larger populations. The Amazon Basin, a riparian area of mighty rivers and vast forests, covers nearly half of the territory of Peru. While battles rage and economic pressures are applied by various interest groups, (hunting, fishing, oil exploration, logging, to name just a few) in other areas of the Basin, the Peruvian portion of the Amazon remains largely intact, protected by its relative geographic isolation.

The Andes Mountains pose a barrier to the construction of roads and railways, as does weather and geographic conditions. Heavy rains, landslides, and earthquakes regularly destroy roads, railroads and bridges. The lack of stone or gravel in much of the region also makes it difficult to build and/or maintain roads. While lumber and other natural products can be shipped by boat down the Amazon River, the distances involved are great. Water levels can vary greatly, making bridge building difficult, and even preventing boat access during the low-water season.”

(Excerpted and revised from an article by Devon Graham, PhD, Director of Project Amazonas

<http://www.projectamazonas.com/index.htm>)



Access to my favorite area in the Peruvian Amazon is through the port city of Iquitos, and is actually fairly straightforward. Flights to Lima are available from most large cities in the States, generally with only one stop. From Lima, a short flight to Iquitos brings you to the gateway to the Amazon.



You then travel upriver by “taxi”. The trip upriver serves not only to help you unwind, but is also an

introduction to the region, with numerous opportunities to photograph unique scenery and local human activity along the way.

A “pamacari”--
Amazon water taxi



Tips for photography from a moving boat:

Use your Vibration Reduction (Nikon) or Internal Stabilization (Canon) lenses, as fast a shutter speed as you can, and raise your ISO a higher than usual. With most modern cameras, you can use ISO 400 to 800 without introducing objectionable noise. For Nikon users, use the “active” setting for VR, since both your camera and subject may be moving.

Amazon Trailways Bus

PHOTOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES:

Dealing with Water:

In the Amazon, water exists in two forms, rain and humidity. The main purpose of these two forms is to destroy photographic equipment. Plan accordingly!

Carry protection for everything! I used to purchase pounds of silica gel, but now, for trips of two weeks or less, I rely more upon material covers. Carry plastic bags of all sizes, from ziplocks for small parts to 30 gallon trash liners which are also handy to kneel on. (I have not used any specialty camera/lens covers, but plastic is lighter and cheaper). Many modern packs come with rain covers. Don't leave yours behind!



Amazonian Poison Frog
(*Dendrobates ventrimaculatus*)

Flash units in particular need to be protected. I have had the experience of having a flash unit explode after one drenching drizzle—not fun next to your ear! And not inexpensive. Plastic shower caps with elastic bands liberated from hotel rooms work just fine.

Protecting **you** is also important, because a light drizzle or heavy fog should not keep you from

taking advantage of that beautiful soft light, and I, personally, photograph better if I am comfortable and dry. Rain suits are better than ponchos. Ponchos are noisy, flappy in the wind, and have a habit of opening to allow large amounts of water in when you least expect it. Choose subdued colors. For trail hiking, rubber boots, at least calf-high, with a decent tread are ideal.

In spite of all the extra care you must take, overcast days are a blessing in many ways. Ambient lighting within the forest is usually very contrasty, with patches of bright sun alternating with deep shade. Carry your diffuser and split neutral density filters with you at all times! Be prepared to bracket and use digital means to save images that contain more of a contrast range than even your digital files can handle. These include the “Merge-to-HDR” command or layer masks in Photoshop, and third-party software such as Photomatix.



Pygmy Hatchet-faced Frog
(*Sphaenorhynchus carneus*)

Electrical Power:

Make sure that your boat and your final destination have generators and electrical power that is accessible to you. It is your responsibility to have the correct adapters, if needed. A short multi-socket extension cord can also come in handy, especially if there are others in your group. Carry spare batteries for everything, as well as the appropriate chargers.



Amazonian Milk Treefrog
(*Phrynohyas resinifictrix*)



Jeweled Weevil
(Curculionidae)

Back-up:

Backing up your files can mean the difference between coming home with hundreds of priceless memories or coming home with nothing. You can use:

- Laptop
- Peripheral drive
- CD or DVD

I recently had the very unpleasant experience of discovering that many of my files from an older camera had become corrupted and unreadable when I transferred them to a new back up hard drive. Fortunately I had originally backed up on CD and DVD as well and no images were lost. If I had been relying totally on a solitary hard drive back up, I would have been out of luck!



Fer-de-lance
(*Bothrops* sp.)

Dangerous stuff:

Although an Amazon "safari" is generally very safe, it is not your street corner and there is cause for vigilance, i.e. venomous snakes, scorpions, bala ants, etc.

Following a few common sense rules will usually keep you out of trouble:



Kelep Ant (*Ectatomma tuberculatum*)

Don't turn over rocks and logs with your bare hands—use a stick!

Don't pick up any cute slithery critters unless you know what they are.

Don't lean on anything without checking it out carefully. Shake out your boots in the morning before putting them on so whatever may have slept in them overnight can find their way home.

There's an old woodsman's saying, "...on the trail, don't step on anything you can step over, and don't step over anything you can walk around". Not bad advice in the rainforest either, where "wet and slippery" is the rule, not the exception. Or you can spend time as I did on my last trip, wrapping a broken ankle with ace bandages and photographing with a hand-made crutch.

Vision:

I am an experienced macrophotographer, and accustomed to having to search out my subjects, but even so, my first trip was a challenge. My initial response to the Amazon was total sensory overload.

Our guide was constantly pointing out things that I had just walked by, unaware.



Leaf Katydid (*Roxelina* genus)

An experienced hunter can often spot a deer in an overgrown thicket just by the twitch of an ear or tail, or just by the change in the normal "field pattern". Once you become accustomed to the patterns of the forest, you will begin to pick out patterns that declare themselves "different". It takes some time, but if you pay attention, it will happen. Your senses will sharpen as you become part of your surroundings. Soon, it will be a contest to see who can find the hidden subjects first!



Lichen Mantis (*Liturgusa*)



tree frog silhouette

Metallic Leaf Beetle (Chrysomelidae)
attacked by ants



Amazonian poison frog (*Dendrobates ventrimaculatus*)