

## Three Days in Iquitos

*An extract from Maggie Aiston's diary on her trip to Iquitos in Peru, referred to in December 2009 Newsletter.*

It is 2-20am and I am on my way to breakfast! The financially astute have never signed on and many who had, have preferred losing all their money to taking part in this journey to the 'nth circle of hell. There is no juice, only coffee cruise ship style i.e. warm and wet.

We are sent down early and sit in the coach. By departure time one is missing and three have been so totally confused by contradictory verbal and written messages that they have no passports. 03-05am, 03-10am, 03-20am and by now even the local guide is losing his cool. The plane leaves at 04-20am and we still have to get to the airport and check in. Peru may have a more relaxed attitude to check in times but even they must have limits.

The missing guest is found but does not know where his passport is. We leave without him and drive through several sets of red lights.

At the airport we are told that mosquito spray has to go into hold luggage and so suddenly a walk on becomes a mad dash to weigh in. Our flight has already been called twice. We race for gate 16 – well as fast as cripples and crumbles with an assortment of sticks and limbs can race. – rather like tortoises not knowing where the lettuce is.

Finally we crash into our seats as they slam the doors and gabble in flight attendant speak which is equally incomprehensible in either Spanish or English. We gather that the flight will be one and a half not two and a half hours and sink gratefully into a collective coma. Did our luggage make it?

Ten minutes later we are awakened to partake in a second, even weirder, breakfast – re-constituted powdered orange juice, a custard cream biscuit, banana chips and mini bread sticks! There are so many 'e' numbers that further sleep is impossible

Dawn breaks and there is a river down there. It snakes and breaks its banks, flooding the surrounding area. There are houses, or are they rafts? We land as if they do it every day – they do. Inside the terminal there are already mozzies in the lavatory waiting to pounce.

Our luggage arrives and actually on the same plane but leaves in a separate bus. We are on another planet. Our open-sided bus does have windows and a windscreen but they have to be hauled up when required as if we were in a fifties railway carriage. We share the road with hundreds of three-wheeled motor-cycle tuc-tucs which buzz around and overtake us.

Bare foot children stare from the dark doorways of palm-thatched shacks. Mangy dogs gnaw on what might be a bone but could be a stone.

We get into town. The streets are swarming and the market is piled high with bananas. Stalls sell cress?-filled bread rolls and juice from oranges which have had the zest removed? Some are still lashing sticks to make the supports for the stall roofs. It feels like ten o'clock but it is only seven.

We stop by the old quay where the river has silted up and can no longer take big boats. There are rafts and floating stalls. We buy palm frond fans to stir the air and swat insects. Our dollars are still accepted but not for long.

We reach the main square. Eiffel has sent another flat-pack, this time for a corner café. Armoured police labelled SWAT along with two uniformed dogs climb off the back of a truck. A tourism conference is in town and all must be made safe.

We sweep into an incongruous luxury hotel to change money but it offers an ATM and we only have cash. We sweep out again and swarm back onto the bus wafting our palm fans in desperation. We pick up a couple of ambulatory money changers and drive round and round the block while they do sums on a wonky calculator. I get fifty Nuevo soles and some bits as money is passed along the bus. Is it correct? Who knows.

We are off again and reach a B&Q or is it an Easy Jet version of the African Queen, here re-named the Amazon Queen. Our garish, orange and white three-tiered wedding cake floats us out onto the river and we are into another world

The dark waters of our tributary change to brown as we meet the Amazon and the banks recede. There is debris everywhere – great patches of floating weed, bamboo, stray logs. The current moves swiftly, and here and there sudden ripples and swirls hint at hidden dangers below the surface.

Speeding launches overtake. Juggernaut log rafts- pushed rather than pulled- power in the opposite direction. Peru loses two football pitches worth of virgin forest per day. In Brazil it is four. Closer to the banks cheaper, covered boats carry goods to Iquitos and, barely above the water float dug-out canoes with one or two adults and sometimes a couple of children in the middle.

At first we see nothing but trees but then become aware that twenty or so feet back from the river there are huts on stilts. A path ends and a woman washes clothes. There are lines of drying laundry, an illegible sign, the occasional radio mast. There is after all human life.

A tree, taller than the rest is pointed out. We are nearly there. We climb wooden steps and follow walkways to a huge linea. We drink cocona juice with gratitude, our recently received bottle of water already empty. We are to go for a walk.

Soon settled into our 'cabins'- well mine has a seven foot square bed- we set out again with hats, fans, water, sun-block and mosquito- repellent , binoculars, cameras and a brand new poncho for the rain – it doesn't.

In two groups we circle the surroundings. Occasional wooden steps or a handrail reassures us that we are not totally lost. We hear of shamans and cures, of walking palms and of monkeys but we only see the tame relative of the turkey and hear promising rustles in the undergrowth. Having proved out lack of fitness, we return for lunch, oozing from every pore.

A glutinous, dark, fruit jelly follows soup and chicken with rice and beans. Food undigested I fling myself into the pool and swim alone and to my heart's content – but not for long.

We are off again, this time in two open boats with outboard motors to catch piranhas. It is still sunny but the breeze of our movement keeps us cool. After half an hour along a backwater we reach a shady pool and cast, using basic canes and hooks. The fish love the raw beef on mine but do not wish to make closer acquaintance. Others are luckier. The fish are smaller than I expected and are quite pretty but can still eat a cow in twenty minutes if it comes down to drink in the wrong place.