

Amazon takes WING



Huaorani guide



Huaorani Lodge, Ecuador



Tambopata Research Centre



Huaorani man with blowpipe

Peru and Ecuador might not control the largest part of the Amazon rainforest. But the western Amazon has been showing the way in conserving the natural environment and indigenous communities. Phil Chanel reports on how community lodges are coming of age.

The Amazon in Ecuador and Peru has, over the years, offered the traveller an impressive selection of comfortable community lodges in private reserves. These provide wonderful wildlife viewing opportunities and interesting cultural experiences while preserving the local ecology and providing much-needed incomes for the local community.

The latest project to embark on this venture is the Huaorani Eco-Lodge in the southeast of Ecuador. Built by the Huaorani people in the community of Quehueri'ono, this lodge is markedly different from earlier initiatives. Up to now the community lodges have been set up as joint ventures with tour operators, with ownership reverting to the community after a certain number of years. Huaorani is not taking this route. From the outset it is 100% owned by the indigenous population, and will use an Ecuadorian tour operator in Quito only to market the lodge.

The project is the vision of forward-thinking ecologist Moi Enomenga, known for his articles in the *New Yorker* magazine and the model for the main character in Joe Kane's novel 'Savages'. Moi believes that ecotourism is a means by which his people can receive an income while maintaining the integrity of their culture and conserving rainforest territory.

Huaorani Eco Lodge is not solely about wildlife as this lodge also focuses on the community. From the moment of arrival you immediately feel involved. With your native guide you climb trees, learn hunting techniques and fish, picking up information about medicinal plants and how to fire a blowpipe.

Just by visiting the lodge, you can help the Huaorani maintain their way of life without resorting to the alternative: becoming dependent on gifts and handouts from oil companies. If you

want to contribute further, they have established a Conservation in Action Foundation.

Across the border in Peru, the Infierno community is building on its earlier success of their Posada Amazonas. This excellent lodge was set up in partnership with Rainforest Expeditions: after ten years the Infierno now own 60% of the lodge and will own it in full after ten more years. With their new understanding of the needs and tastes of visitors the Infierno have opened a sister lodge, the Refugio Amazonas. Even by Amazon standards the Refugio Amazonas will create an unusually "at nature" experience. Each cabin only has three walls with the fourth opening out directly onto dense rainforest. A canopy tower gives direct access to the upper levels of the forest and, uniquely in the area, they have specifically designed a programme for families.

The Infierno community and Rainforest Expeditions are helping to reduce hunting in the area. The Brazil nut concessionaries who operate in the neighbouring forest would normally supplement their protein needs by hunting in the reserve. They have been persuaded to agree to stop hunting and in return are receiving ready supplies of beef. Where there was previously a sense of conflict now there is peace: the Brazil nut farmers now invite lodge guests to visit their plantations.

Refugio Amazonas is now the springboard for the Tambopata Research Centre, one of our favourite wildlife lodges. This long-established lodge continues with its vital research into Macaw breeding patterns, with a team of resident scientists gathering information from the nearby clay lick, the largest in the world.

Many of the established community-based Amazon lodges are still working well. Kapawi Eco-lodge in Ecuador has just been handed back to the Achuari community after a ten year



Macaw Lick, Peruvian Amazon



Refugio Amazonas

partnership with a company based in Quito. Napo Wildlife Centre in Ecuador is now 100% owned by the Anangu community. This provides invaluable income for the underfunded Yasuni National Park.

It seems a long time ago that joint ventures with local communities were first launched, and many people doubted they would ever work. Would the indigenous communities be able to cook for, accommodate and guide pampered guests from



Huaorani guides

the west? Would the partner companies from the developed world relinquish control as promised? The experience of the western Amazon has dispelled these doubts. Community lodges are conserving the fragile ecosystem, providing a valuable source of income for local people and an amazing experience for visitors to the Amazon.

Phil Chanel

Peru, Ecuador & Galapagos Specialist

FACT FILE

An 18-day trip to Peru, including three nights in the Amazon starts from £3,000 per person. A similar trip to Ecuador encompassing time in the Amazon area and a week in the Galapagos Islands starts from £3,700 per person. For details please contact our Latin America specialists on 01993 838 600.

