

JUNGLE

The highs outweigh the lows of travelling in the Amazon in Bolivia, discovers **Kate Armstrong**

READING Yossi Ghinsberg's *Back from Tuichi* just before setting off in a rickety wooden boat on the Tuichi River in the Amazon watershed, in northwest Bolivia, doesn't exactly instil me with confidence.

The true account tells of Ghinsberg and three other adventurers who set off into the Bolivian Amazon jungle in search of a rumoured remote Indian community and gold. After neither the village nor gold materialise, the exhausted group want to fast-track out of there. They are faced with two options: the dangerous and dense jungle or travel via the Tuichi river to Rurrenabaque, the region's main town.

The river seems the better option: they organise locals to construct a balsa raft and take off. It isn't that simple. The gentle meander turns into a ferocious whitewater event. Two members decide to toss it in and trek through the dense jungle. They are never seen again.

Ghinsberg and one other decide to persevere on the raft, not realising more whitewater lies ahead. After one terrifying spill, Ghinsberg's companion scrambles ashore, then watches horrified as Ghinsberg, gripping on to the raft, plunges down a canyon's waterfall. The two travellers are separated.

Unbeknown to his fellow traveller, Ghinsberg amazingly survives the dive and is washed up on a gravel beach. But perhaps a god was on his side. Pachamama is the Andean earthmother deity, worshipped by many Bolivians and integral to their lives. Ghinsberg spends the next 20 days alone in the jungle, with all its perils, including jaguars and quicksand. Meanwhile, his companion stumbles across the local Tacana people in the village of San Jose de Uchupiamonas (San

Jose). With their help, Ghinsberg is rescued.

There is more to this tale, however. Ghinsberg wanted to show his appreciation to the community where he'd spent a long time recuperating. He assisted in writing grant applications to the Inter-American Development Bank for \$US1.45 million for the construction of a pioneer ecotourism project, the community-run Chalalan, 57km downriver from San Jose. He also put it in touch with Conservation International.

Together with passionate environmentalists, Conservation International successfully lobbied for 1.8 million ha of pristine rainforest and jungle around San Jose to be declared as Madidi National Park.

Today, Madidi National Park is frequently touted as one of South America's most intact ecosystems, with everything from lowland rainforests to soaring Andean peaks. An astonishing variety of Amazonian wildlife, much of it now protected, lives in this nature utopia: 44 per cent of all New World mammal species, 38 per cent of tropical amphibian species and more than 10 per cent of recorded bird species.

Unlike Ghinsberg's fast-action adventure, my Tuichi expedition is more akin to jerky 30mm film images in slow motion. It is the dry season; our 12-seater wooden boat is constantly grounded on the rocks as we make our way 95km upstream from Rurrenabaque to Chalalan. The boat's motorman stands at the stern grasping the tiller of the worn outboard motor, while a young man in a torn red T-shirt casually sits facing forward on the bow, his legs dangling. He rhythmically plunks a wooden pole into the water to gauge the ever-changing depth.

Now and then he sings out suddenly. The captain cuts the engine and five strong youths

PARADISE



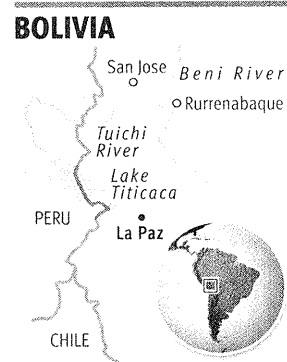
Slow boat to Chalalan: The journey along Bolivia's Tuichi River to the rainforest around San Jose de Uchupiamonas

Picture: Rafael Estefania

wearing Chalalan T-shirts jump out. Grunting and with biceps popping, they push and pull the boat off the rocks and into deeper water. My buttocks are perched on top of a reconstituted Volkswagen Kombi seat, a 7cm plank and, frequently it seems, a rock. Overhead is a sun canopy. Our companions are a gregarious tour group of Greeks, good-humoured about our slow-mo odyssey. Our boat grinds forward. A promised four hours becomes eight.

A canopy of thick, bright-green bush drips over the bank and into the river. Screaming monkeys (later identified as howler monkeys) leap from tree to tree as birds of all varieties, including eagles and egrets, dip and soar alongside us.

Eventually, we arrive. Stiff and hot, we trudge sloth-like for 20 minutes into the lushness to Chalalan. Before us is a clearing with a series of basic thatched-roof huts of beautiful mahogany (mahogany trees are protected in the park; the wood was brought in from outside for their



construction). Each hut has a small balcony, slippery from wax, and a hammock. Silken mosquito nets are stretched tautly over the bed frames.

While the more basic huts share ablution blocks and are grouped in threes (there's not much room for modesty; wire netting forms the upper walls), the more luxurious

options have secluded settings and private bathrooms. Up to 30 guests can stay at any one time. To one side of the clearing is the dining room, a large, shaded retreat with a bar, and Harry Potteresque refectory tables. Here, visitors consume generous meals, mainly pasta and fish. Nearby shimmers idyllic Lake Chalalan, bordered by thick foliage.

So this is jungle paradise. As I approach the lake's jetty, a guide assures me cheerfully that there are caiman (freshwater crocodiles) in the lake, "but no one has ever been taken", he responds as I momentarily absorb the concept of docile crocs.

I dive into the inky depths; in this magical setting, it's well worth the plunge. As the sun sets, we paddle around the lake's lush perimeter in shallow dug-out canoes. From the dense greenery booms a symphony of insects, frogs and birds.

At nightfall, after a communal feast of dumoquavi, a traditional meal of river catfish wrapped in leaves, our assigned guide Sandro

approaches us for a walk. A well-rehearsed storyteller, Sandro has us eating from his hand faster than a tame monkey. First, there's the snake warning: "A snake's culture is to kill. When a snake wants to bite, it goes and hides at the side of a path. On day one he doesn't bite; on day two he doesn't bite ... but he waits for day three and ..." Sandro jerks out his arm in imitation of a striking snake: "He bites."

Then there's Sandro's personal tale. A child when Chalalan was being built (it was opened in 1998), he fulfilled his traditional role in his family and village as a young hunter but easily converted to the environmentalist cause to have ongoing employment at the lodge and to help preserve the environment.

"I used to kill birds and monkeys, but now birds are my life for other reasons," he tells us.

Chalalan changed San Jose's inhabitants, whose livelihood had been living off the river and the jungle for centuries. But not all the locals

agreed with the project's inception: many left the community to seek lives or employment elsewhere.

Sandro, earmarked as Chalalan's master ornithologist, has been trained by world-renowned birders. He carts around the mother of all telescopes, given to him by a team of scientists. "Sssshh," he instructs (he has a habit of putting his hand up suddenly and shushing): "Golden-coloured toucanet." He articulates every syllable deliberately. Then it's a blue-crowned manakin, a violaceous trogon, a short-tailed pygmy tyrant.

Within no time I tot up 12 bird species. Lawrence's thrush is my favourite: it imitates 25 bird sounds to protect its territory.

Macaws, the noisy bright blue and red wonders associated with the Amazon, pass over us frequently. These beautiful birds are under threat due to logging and hunting.

Plants, too, are integral to the Chalalan experience. Mahogany trees soar through a canopy of vines and lush palms. Sandro points out *una de gatto*, cat claw, a plant used to treat rheumatism, kidney complaints, stomach ache and asthma, and a type of palm tree, the root of which is boiled, prepared and offered to women after they've given birth, to coagulate the blood.

Our two days are very brief: we miss out on numerous walks, river-boat excursions and thousands of animals and plants, including the white-lipped peccaries (wild pigs) and a tarantula the size of the human hand (or so the Greeks claim).

We are promised our return boat trip to Rurrenabaque will be faster; this time the current will help us slide smoothly over the rocks. As we race along the track towards the river, an elderly man passes us from the other direction. He points up to a tree. Barely 6m from us sprawls a bulk of fur: it's a giant tree anteater. We giggle with delight. Sandro whispers urgently: "This is rare to see. Only once in my 10 years as a guide at Chalalan have I seen one of these. You are so lucky."

His lines don't sound rehearsed. "See? You give to Pachamama and she gives back to you, too," he smiles.

Kate Armstrong is co-ordinating author of the sixth edition of Lonely Planet's Bolivia guide, to be published in April.

Checklist

Several Amazonas flights depart each week from La Paz to Rurrenabaque. The flight passes over the stunning snow-topped Cordillera Real, via a series of volcanoes. English-speaking America Tours in La Paz also organises tour and accommodation bookings.

www.america-ecotours.com
www.chalalan.com