



CREATU COMF



Duncan Madden switches London's urban jungle for the Manu National Park in Peru, getting up close and personal with rainforest wildlife and learning how to preserve its fragile beauty for future generations



ADVENTURE SPORTS

It's about practising a tourism that's sustainable and educational as well as fun and exciting," my guide Ronnie, barely audible over the incessant hum of a million mosquitoes, says. I nod in silent agreement, wondering exactly what that means.

We're standing in the thick of the Manu Biosphere Reserve, deep in eastern Peru, straining to peer through murky light to the canopy overhead and the pack of brown titi monkeys resting contentedly there.

The question of sustainable tourism has been playing on my mind ever since I landed in Cusco and met up with Quinn Meyer, the charismatic founder of the not-for-profit Crees Foundation. A Brit who decamped from New York in 2003 and now divides his time between the urban and tropical jungles of London and Manu, Quinn set up Crees to conduct research into rainforest ecology and help local communities practise sustainable agriculture.

It's a worthy ambition, and one Quinn discusses with subtle but convincing urgency. He talks of the devastating slash and burn agriculture spreading through Peru like a plague, leaving unmanageable, barren soil in its wake. He speaks of the students, volunteers, researchers and scientists from around the world who have gathered to work and live in the Crees camp deep in the Manu Biosphere Reserve – a ramshackle global family with a single collective goal – and of his ambition to spread the message to the world as educator and guardian of his little slice of paradise.

That paradise, the Manu Rainforest, is Peru's largest national park. It's a vast, diverse and abundant ecosystem that stretches 15,328km² from the chilly heights of the Andean foothills to the steamy depths of the Amazon jungle. Exploring Manu is the purpose of my visit to Peru – but for now, my current surroundings are holding my attention as I stroll cobbled streets in the ancient Andean capital of **Cusco**.

It's raining hard. Drains have turned to fountains and streets to rivers, hampering our exploration of the extraordinary Inca ruins that were revealed by an earthquake in 1950. We take shelter in the cathedral and watch locals busying themselves with preparations for a festival – women in rainbow colours with layers of pollera skirts and bright llicllas, the woven

Cusco was once the capital of the Inca empire. Its indigenous name is Qusqu, from the phrase qusqu wanka (no laughing at the back), meaning 'rock of the owl'.



ABOVE: The Andean national bird cock-of-the-rock, no doubt preparing for a 'lek' – to entice the less colourful brown females

cloth shawls about their shoulders that often conceal a sleeping toddler on their backs. Bowler hat monteras sit on top of every head in a riot of jaunty angles.

Morning dawns grey and wet as we start the day-long drive to our first port of call, the wonderfully named Cock-of-the-Rock Lodge high in the cloudforests of the Manu Biosphere Reserve. We chug along the winding roads of the Sacred Valley, through ravines wet with rain that has run off from the surrounding mountains and over a 4,100m pass where we find ancient wall paintings and a lone farmer tilling the land.

The final ascent along the Kosnipata Road to the cloudforest entrance is steep and perilous, but rewards us with incomparable views from the summit over a dense jungle that stretches to the horizon. Quinn picks out the tiniest trail in the distance, and soon we're trundling along it.

The Cock-of-the-Rock Lodge takes its name from Peru's national bird. And after a comfy night in my own private cabin (a luxury I definitely wasn't expecting), we're up in the dawn murk to see whether we can catch a glimpse of these bizarre and ethereal creatures. Our destination is a ramshackle treehouse a 30-minute tramp away where, if we're lucky, we'll see the lek – a collection of males engaging in competitive displays with the aim of enticing visiting females.

Before the sun rises and the predators wake, a dozen male cock-of-the-rocks are putting on a show on dripping branches amid a tangled mass of ferns. Fire red, with bulbous heads and piercing white eyes, they hop madly from branch to branch as a troupe of brown females watch, aloof, deciding which has earned their courtship.

As morning dawns, the show comes to a close. Birds pair off and the lek is over for

another day. We drift back to camp, our first chance to properly investigate the strange and abundant environment around us.

Manu's diversity is almost unparalleled. More than 1,000 bird species call it home (twice as many as the whole of Europe) – blurs of colour flitting between branches too fast for my eyes to see. I walk with Andy, a likeable northerner who heads the Crees Foundation's research and conservation activities while undertaking his PhD. Mesmerised by tropical rainforests since a trip to Tanzania seven years ago, he lived in the depths of Ecuador before Manu, and his knowledge of the jungle around us is profound. He identifies birds from their calls – highland motmots, silver-beaked tanagers, many-spotted hummingbirds – describes different bromeliads, points out alien-looking insects and sparks an interest in the intricacies of nature I never knew I had.

We pile back into the minibus for our descent through the famous **cocaine** town of Patria, where the roads are lined with mounds of cocoa leaves left in the sun to dry, to the rickety dock at Atalya on the banks of the Madre de Dios River.

Swollen and raging from the recent deluges, the Madre bounces our riverboat downstream in a rollercoaster ride as we dodge trees and other debris. We pass a series of lodges that have crashed into the river as the ground below them gave

Peru's cocaine heritage runs deep – it's the biggest producer of the narcotic in the world. It is thought sales of Peruvian cocaine amount to around £12.8bn.

way, with residents scrabbling to save what they can before it's lost to the angry brown depths. Yelsin and Willy, our sibling pilots, show deft touch though, and

WE SEARCH FOR MONKEYS, ANTEATERS, DEADLY SNAKES AND THE RUMOUR OF A JAGUAR

soon we pull up safe and dry(ish) to an almost unnoticeable gap in the dense river bush at the Manu Learning Centre.

A cluster of beautiful open-air thatched huts set in a small clearing on the edge of prime regenerative forest, the learning centre is the jewel in the Crees Foundation crown and the hub of its scientific research. After lunch, we tour the bio garden and then venture deeper into the jungle in search of monkeys, giant anteaters, deadly fer-de-lance snakes and the rumour of a jaguar.

We stumble upon Crees volunteers rigging camera traps high in the trees and erecting safe bird nets, and huddle with some new arrivals in a viewing cabin over a wetland as the heavens open once more. ▲

Photograph (top left) by Bertie Gregory





ABOVE: Manu's intoxicating mixture of wetland and dense rainforest provides a home for more than 1,000 species of bird

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That night, Andy describes Crees' primary research purpose – to establish the value of conserving regenerative secondary forest rather than focusing on older primary forest. “Old research that hasn't been properly quantified describes secondary forest as supporting only 30% of wildlife species in Manu, but Crees' research shows it's closer to 90%,” he explains. As he talks, another researcher unveils some catches from around the camp in large boxes. A huge, angry emerald tree boa snaps at us, while Andy demonstrates what a snake bite looks like by letting another harmless specimen clamp down on his forearm.

Later, in the ink black night and to the sound of a deafening frog chorus, we don wellies and head back into the saturated jungle. Torches pick out deadly caterpillars, orb spiders, a moustached jungle frog that oozes toxic white foam and, back at

the wetland, the silvery eyes of a smooth-fronted cayman as it drifts silently across the waters. Sleep comes surprisingly easily that night, although I dream of eyes blinking in the dark.

The morning sees us back on the river, heading to our deepest jungle point – the pristine forests around the Romero Lodge on a tributary of the Madre de Dios. The river ride is long, but we're kept entertained by the spectacular wildlife shows all around. Blue, gold, red and green macaws flap and screech overhead, snowy egrets fish in the shallows, and we keep a watchful eye for a glimpse of that elusive jaguar.

Quinn teaches us how to chew cocoa leaves, and we stop for a dip in a natural thermal pool with numb tongues. Explorations here take us even further into Manu's tangled depths, and we're greeted with families of spider monkeys swinging through towering ironwoods, responding to Andy's calls with their own throaty roars, making them sound something like chainsaws in the distance.

Our last day brings us out of the depths to Manu Wildlife Centre, a sprawling jungle bound complex of cabins that's as close to civilisation as we've seen since Cusco. We take a silent float over a nearby oxbow lake in search of giant river otters but instead spy a three-toed sloth hanging lazily from a cecropia as prehistoric **hoatzins** lumber comically from branch to branch, their strange dimensions making flight seem impossible until, finally, they rise ponderously from their perches.

Manu has one last treat in store for us that night. As we're gathered in the candlelight at the Wildlife Centre

The hoatzin is also known as the stinkbird, because of its odd manure-like odour. It's thanks to its unusual digestion system, which is very similar to that of cattle.

to toast the jungle with bottomless pisco sours, Ronnie bursts in to tell us, excitedly, that Vanessa has come to say hello. I wander out expecting to meet another member of the Crees Foundation, only to be confronted by a large tapir. Revelling in the attention, Vanessa gobbles the fruit that we offer her, happy to let us rub her nose and pat her meaty and scarred haunches.

“She was raised here as an orphan and lives wild in the area but comes back for treats from time to time,” Ronnie explains.

Over a final pisco sour, my mind wanders back to Ronnie's dictum of sustainable and educative tourism, and I begin to understand what he means. For Ronnie, born locally in Puerto Maldonado, guiding us through the rainforests is about letting the jungle magic rub off on his guests, opening our eyes to its precarious future. We're aliens in this astonishing environment, but we're still somehow in control of its future. It's a powerful persuader.

At the airport, I wait to say goodbye to Quinn, Andy and Ronnie, and find that I am in awe at these three guys from different worlds, who are so dedicated to the mission of making a difference in their chosen corner of the world. I realise it isn't only the jungle that has left its mark on me, but also these jungle ambassadors, these self-appointed guardians. With the Manu Biosphere Reserve has a fighting chance – and, in me, it has an ardent new supporter. But it could always use more. **C**

Exodus has a 12-day Amazon Wildlife Discovery trip supporting the Crees Foundation in the Manu Biosphere Reserve, including return flights from London, most meals, a professional local guide, and stays at The Cock-of-the-Rock lodge, Manu Learning Centre, Romero Rainforest Lodge and Manu Wildlife Centre from £3,299pp. exodus.co.uk