



Amazon prime

The majestic river and rainforest are even more appealing now travel to Brazil is back on, finds **Emma Winton**

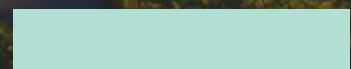


We are all silent, sitting patiently in the boat. All we can hear is the humming of insects in the forest and the occasional cry of a howler monkey from afar. The sun is starting to set, and only an occasional ripple breaks the calm surface of the water.

We are eagerly awaiting a sighting of the famous pink river dolphins, found in the fresh waters of the Amazon. It's a long wait, but most definitely worth it – directly in front of our boat, two of the marine creatures appear, gracefully dipping in and out of the water, oblivious to the excitement they have caused.

The Amazon, the world's largest rainforest and river system as well as the most biologically diverse place on Earth, teems with ➤

PICTURE: Shutterstock/Gustavo Frazao



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Manaus attractions

There's plenty to enjoy in Manaus, the capital city of the Brazilian state of Amazonas and the gateway to the Amazon rainforest.

Teatro Amazonas

More than 120 years old, this architectural delight represents the city's heyday during the rubber boom. Inside, look up at the ceiling, painted to represent the four columns of the Eiffel Tower. The Amazonas Opera Festival takes place here each April and May, and it's also home to the Amazonas Philharmonic Orchestra.

Museu de Amazonia

Sitting on a 100-hectare plot in the lush Adolpho Ducke Forest Reserve, the museum hosts an exhibition of orchids and a butterfly and snake enclosure, as well as a forest trail to a 42-metre observation tower. Climb to the top for spectacular 360-degree views over the Amazon Rainforest.

Mercado Adolpho Lisboa

Opened in 1882, this is a smaller replica of Les Halles market in Paris, and is the place to pick up fresh fruits, spices, fish, souvenirs and traditional indigenous medications. Next door is the working fish market, worth a visit early in the morning to see the vast array of Amazonian fish on display.



life. It might appear serene above the water, but lurking beneath is a whole other world. Our guide, Ralf, born and raised here, describes what lies below, and by the end I'm very glad to be sitting on the water's surface. Piranhas, candiru fish (also known as penis fish, and one that locals fear), caiman and green anaconda (the world's largest snake, pound for pound) are a few of the inhabitants hiding beneath us.

RAINFOREST RETREAT

Juma Amazon Lodge is our home for a few nights, nestled in a remote and largely untouched region in the heart of the rainforest. With no phone signal or Wi-Fi available, you really are escaping the modern world and can embrace nature at its best. Staff at the lodge fill the days with excursions ranging from piranha fishing to visiting the house of a *caboclo* (a local family).

Jungle treks delve right into the heart of the forest. The humidity – and the discomfort of those pesky mosquitoes – are worth it for the captivating way Ralf explains the forest to us. With his years of knowledge, he points out a wide range of animals, fruits and trees on the trek. These include the pau rose, otherwise known as Brazilian rosewood, which has a wonderful smell and has become

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famous as an ingredient in Chanel No 5 perfume.

After a five-hour hike, we are all ravenous, but a surprise awaits us in the opening of the trees ahead. Staff from the lodge have prepared a barbecued lunch of pirarucu and tambaqui fish, meats and salads – quite the luxury given we're in the middle of a rainforest.

WILD NIGHTS

The jungle at night is a whole different experience. As we sail out by boat, we're on high alert, listening to the mysterious sounds of the forest while gliding along the river and looking up at the starry sky. Caiman lie perfectly still on the edges of the banks but, alas, we don't see the largest of them all – the black caiman, which can grow to six metres long. Spiders slither over



ABOVE: Canoeist in the Amazon **FACING PAGE:** (clockwise from top left) The 'Meeting of the Waters', where the Rio Negro and Amazon River collide; caiman; pink river dolphin; restaurant at Juma Amazon Lodge

PICTURES: Shutterstock/Alessandro Zappalorto, Ondrej Prosicky, Coulanges, DroneX

tree trunks, while glow worms, iguanas and tree frogs can also be spotted by the reflection from their eyes in the pitch-dark night.

It's not just the wildlife that attracts visitors here. Six miles outside Manaus is the 'Meeting of the Waters'. One of many natural wonders in Brazil, it's the point where the differently coloured waters of the Rio Negro and Amazon River run side by side with virtually no mixing. The dark torrent of the Rio Negro swirls like vinegar in oil alongside the Amazon's sandy waters, creating a dramatic dividing line between the two. This amazing spectacle is down to differences in temperature, speed and water density, and it takes a surprising distance of four miles for the swirling currents to merge fully.

All these experiences – from glimpsing pink dolphins in the wild

LAND OF WATERFALLS

North of Manaus lies the city of Presidente Figueiredo at the heart of an area known as the 'land of waterfalls'. The name is well deserved. We took a trip with a local guide and spent the day hiking through the fauna and foliage of the rainforest, spotting wildlife, being guided through caves such as the Maroaga Cavern, and seeing many *cachoeiras* (waterfalls).

The highlight of the day was Cachoeira Iracema. As we approached it, the trees opened up to reveal a powerful waterfall amid the rocks – a godsend after the humidity of the forest. It didn't take much to persuade us to get into our swimsuits and cool off under the waterfall. Afterwards, we headed to Parque de Urubui, where you can relax in the shallow waters at the base of Cachoeira Iracema and try local dishes at the many cafes. Restaurant Paulistano is worth a visit; popular with locals too, it serves delicious barbecued fish, meat and salads.

to seeing extraordinary landscapes everywhere you look – bring the debates over global warming and deforestation into sharp focus. Even before the pandemic put tourism-dependent businesses at even greater risk, these were constant threats to the rainforest and to the communities who live here.

Lying in my hammock at the end of the day, taking in all the sights and sounds of the rainforest around me, was a clear reminder of just how much there is here to protect. **TW**

WHERE TO STAY

Juma Opera Hotel, Manaus

This boutique hotel opened in February 2020 opposite the Teatro Amazonas, a few minutes' walk from the central square of Manaus. It has 41 suites and a small rooftop pool offering panoramic views of the city. The highlight is the restaurant, which serves traditional Amazonian dishes with a modern twist. Specialities include fresh fillet of pirarucu, ceviche of dragon fish and tapioca mille-feuille.

Juma Amazon Lodge

This sustainable-focused lodge is erected on wooden stilts, designed for the wet season when the water level can rise by 15 metres. There are 19 bungalows, which all include a private veranda and hammock. A buffet-style restaurant serves regional and international cuisine, and guides dine alongside guests at all meals. A small bar is open until 10pm every night.

BOOK IT

Journey Latin America offers a 12-day private holiday, Signature Brazil: Brazil at a Glance, which visits Rio, Iguazú Falls, Salvador and the Amazon. Prices start from £3,670 per person based on two sharing, including all flights, transfers, mid-range hotel on a B&B basis, full board in the Amazon and excursions. journeylatinamerica.co.uk

Latin Routes has an 11-day itinerary, Brazil Wildlife Discovery, round-trip from Rio de Janeiro. It includes a three-night stay at the Amazon Ecopark Lodge where daily activities include a late-night canoe excursion, a chance to spot river dolphins and other wildlife, and a visit to charitable foundation Monkey Island. Prices from £2,599, plus flights available from £699. latinroutes.co.uk