

## **Anacondas and The Amazon Via The Road of Death**

The Amazon Basin is not confined to Brazil. It extends through many South American countries including Bolivia. The Bolivian Amazon is a good alternative to the heavily touristed Brazilian rainforest. It is a cheaper trip but still allows for many options.

The most invigorating part of the Bolivian Amazon trip is getting there via “The Road of Death”. I believe this is the legal Bolivian government name for the road. It has this gloomy name because more people die on this stretch of road than anywhere else in the world, a few hundred a year. Not that there are that many accidents, it’s just that if the



driver misses a corner, it’s all over. Further, there is just enough room for two buses to pass. Usually when buses encounter each other, they will crisscross to the wrong side of the road so as to make the next curve.

The expectations are: first, the other bus driver knows this rule of the road and second, that there is nothing coming around the approaching curve.

The road stretches from La Paz, the world’s highest capital, to Rurrenabaque, a low, jungle town where many of the rainforest excursions start. Before the bus trip, a priest may come on the bus and give passengers their last rites. It’s half-serious, half-corrupt moneymaking deal. The first few hours are especially harrowing, as many times passengers cannot see the actual road when looking out the bus. This means the bus is only a few inches from falling off the road. Around the city of Coroico, things begin to

level out and calm down. Only to become steeper again until the bus finally crosses the Andes and heads into the low Amazon basin.

There is an old road and new road that can be taken. One person who works for the government and has way too much power decides which vehicles can take the new road. Passengers lobby this government official with promises of beer and money. The new road is supposedly safer as it has guardrails and is slightly wider. Unfortunately it is not completely finished and all the segments of the road are not connected. A “Y turn” is needed to reach the connecting roads while traveling on the mountain. It requires the bus driver to back into a two-foot high patch of gravel located at the lip of the road to stop the bus before going over the side. If this happens, then the driver can continue with the Y turn and reach the other completed sections of the road on to Rurrenabaque.

“Rurre” is a small frontier town that essentially has four east-west roads and eight north-south roads. Most of the buildings are either people’s homes, jungle tour companies or restaurants. It’s an enjoyable place, which is good because visitors who do not want to travel on “The Road of Death” may be spending more time than they originally expected in this small town. There is only one commercial air company, Amazonas, that has only small 12-seaters. Due to the constant rain, grass airport runway, and oft-intoxicated pilots, flights get delayed. There is a military plane that travels to La Paz three days a week but is even less reliable.

There are essentially two types of tours, one that concentrates on the animals and another that concentrates on the rainforest. The pampas, or grasslands, tour concentrates on seeing animals. The tipsy motorized canoe ride to the Amazon basin allows a view of

several different birds including the Paradise Bird and a four-foot high stork. There are also several capybaras, a large rodent, at the bank of the river.

In the water there are several hundred crocodiles, ranging in size. Our camp had a rather large resident crocodile, but our camp was elevated so the crocs were no real problem. Many crocs can be viewed at night during the red eye tour, in which tourists armed with flashlights shine light into the croc's eyes. The eyes are red and stand out in contrast to the black of night. It's also nice to turn off the canoe engine and listen to the jungle while floating down the river.



From base camp there are several other trips into the Amazon. The hope is to see the lazy monkey, or the sloth, but these are fairly rare. However, there are other types of monkeys than can be viewed including the yellow monkeys. Another animal is the pink dolphin. They are usually found in deeper water and in these areas visitors are allowed to swim, as there are no crocodiles or piranhas.

Piranhas are present in the waters but are not visible without fishing for them. A simple string line with beef for the lure works nicely. It is intimidating to see their sharp teeth. They can be cooked but they are usually fairly small and the taste is nothing special.

Another part of the pampas trip is to go hunting for anacondas. This is where visitors, protected by knee-high boots, walk in the grasslands to look for the snakes. There are several cows as well as insects that leave a painful bite in the grasslands.



Nearing the river, there are old skulls of dead crocodiles. Lucky visitors get to see anacondas along the river; some are only a few feet long and may not be the size some imagine. A large bird can easily break the neck of a smaller anaconda, so they are not as intimidating as one would think.

The selva, or rainforest, tour is the other type of tour offered from Rurrenabaque. This also requires a three to four hour ride via motorized canoe to a base camp. There is no fishing allowed in this area of the river, but luckily on our trip a fish jumped out of the water and hit a fellow tourist in the head before landing in the canoe. If the fish jumps in the boat, than we are allowed to cook it.

The difference in price of the tours is largely based on type of accommodations, as the food served is generally the same on all tours. The accommodations at the pampas were elevated, to keep away from the crocs, with a roof and mosquito protection. The beds included mattresses and some of the better camps have some form of a shower. The selva tours were a little more primitive as it is out in the forest, but does include a covered area, with a bed frame and sleeping bags.

The selva tour is more educational as the guide illustrates the power of the rainforest. There are several things in the rainforest than can make people sick. However, for nearly everything that can make people sick, there is something in the rainforest that

can cure it. The rainforest can also offer primitive accommodation and food for those who know the rainforest.

There are less large animals that are visible on these tours, but some small ones can be seen. In addition to flying fish there are attractive blue butterflies and colorful bright green worms. The Bolivian government regulates the camps and forces them to relocate approximately every 90 days. The animals will migrate if there is a prolonged human presence. The government has found that the tourism business is more profitable than the lumber business, which is an advantage for all of those who want to travel to the Bolivian rainforest.