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Peru's Wilder Side: Go Beyond Machu Picchu to the Manu Biosphere

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The mystical ruins of Machu Picchu are not the last undiscovered treasure in Peru. Lynn Langway reports from the Manu Biosphere Preserve, an unspoiled wilderness in the Southeastern Amazon basin that neither the Incas nor the Spanish ever conquered—and most travelers still miss.



The red howler monkeys had barely finished roaring at the dawn when our dugout canoe beached on the shore of the Madre de Dios River. Trooping silently along the jungle trail behind our guide we listened to the rising cacophony of cackles, whistles, and squawks. And then, climbing the stairs to a treetop pavilion, we witnessed the singular spectacle that had lured us to this remote place: brilliant red-and- green macaws by the score, swooping into view from

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every side, their wings flashing azure. Soon they were joined on the branches by a rainbow of parrots, all preening and squabbling and scanning for predators on the clay bank below.

By 7 a.m., the bravest began to descend to the dry riverbank: big macaws first, followed by dozens of small blue-headed parrots, who crammed into a crevice like commuters on a rush-hour train. By 7:30, my husband and I were enjoying breakfast with more than 200 magnificent birds. (We had the whole wheat toast and elderberry preserves; they had the mineral-packed clay—a natural antidote to toxins in their food.)



An hour later, the birds had flown. But we never ran out of fascinating wildlife to watch in this natural wonderland of 7,300 square miles, roughly the size of New Jersey. UNESCO declared Manu a World Heritage Site in 1987, proclaiming that its biological diversity “exceeds that of any other place on earth.” In this varied terrain—ranging from Andean lakes to highland cloud forests to lowland jungle—you can find up to 1,000 species of birds, more than 1,300 butterflies, and 200 exotic mammals—including 13 species of monkeys.

But you will not see crowds; tourism officials estimate that only about 6,000 people visit in a year. The Peruvian government restricts access to the national park and surrounding preserves, reserving some sections for native tribes or scientific researchers, and requiring that tourists come with a licensed tour operator and guide ([Map](#)).

Manu is also tricky to reach. Although it lies only 53 miles northeast of Cusco as the macaw flies, there’s currently no local air service or direct roads; the trip by van and boat can take 7 hours or more

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Ruth Stevens

This looks like a good trip. I was in Manu many years ago but now would like more sophisticate arrangements. How rough are the roads? Is the boat wooden? Are the boat seats cushioned?

How long in the van? How long is the boat trip? Thank you.

Ruth Stevens "riki" rikistevens@cybermesa.com

7 months ago

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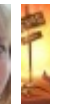
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