

Amazon Basin



The sheer vastness and impenetrability of the Amazon Basin has protected its diverse flora, fauna and indigenous communities from the outside world for time immemorial. Tribes exist in its depths that have never had contact with outside civilization. As the 21st century slowly dawns on this enticing expanse of jungle territory, the abundance of natural resources contained within it – ranging from oil to ranch land – is set to threaten and possibly forever change it. The jungle here comprises 50% of the nation, yet only 5% of Peruvians live in it. Stretching away from beneath the eastern flank of the Andes for thousands of kilometers to the Atlantic Ocean, this wilderness has long been synonymous with the word ‘adventure,’ and Peru’s portion of it has been judiciously preserved. More plant types flourish in a single rainforest hectare here than in any European country. Some of the world’s most diverse nature reserves beckon, making this one of the continent’s premier wildlife-watching spots.

Divided into three primary areas, the Peruvian Amazonas not only offers a mixture of birding and animal-spotting, jungle trekking and river life but also a dash of raucous rainforest city living. There are only three towns of any size: Pucallpa can be reached by a paved road, Puerto Maldonado is accessible mostly by dirt track and Iquitos is connected to the rest of Peru by river and air alone. This lush region begs for the attention of adventure seekers but it also begs for protection. Its natural wealth also attracts loggers, energy companies, slash-and-burn farmers and developers. This is frontier country. Travel is tough but rewards are unlimited: forging your way by rough road, raging river and overgrown path, you’ll feel like the explorers who first brought outside attention to this region.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Travel overland through mountains, cloud forest and jungle to **Parque Nacional Manu** (p477)
- Spot Amazonian animals and birds at the **upper Río Tambopata** (p471) and **Reserva Nacional Pacaya-Samiria** (p493)
- Visit the Asháninka people from **Puerto Bermúdez** (p484)
- Swing in a hammock on a riverboat heading to **Iquitos** (p488 and p497)



■ BIGGEST CITY: IQUITOS, POPULATION 371,000

■ AVERAGE TEMPERATURE: JANUARY 22° C TO 32° C, JULY 21° C TO 30° C

Geography & Climate

Three key jungle areas of Peru are accessible to the traveler. In the southeast, near the Bolivian border, there's Puerto Maldonado (right), a port at the junction of the Ríos Tambopata and Madre de Dios reached by air from Lima via Cuzco or by a slowly improving road from Cuzco. South of Puerto Maldonado lie numerous lodges and campsites in the Reserva Nacional Tambopata (p471) and in the Parque Nacional Bahuaja-Sonene (p471).

Northeast of Cuzco, and fairly easily accessible from there, is Parque Nacional Manu (p477), one of the best-protected areas of Amazon rainforest.

In central Peru, east of Lima, the Chanchamayo area (p480) consists of the two small towns of San Ramón and La Merced, both easily accessed by road from Lima, and several nearby villages, including Puerto Bermúdez and Oxapampa. From La Merced a paved road continues to the boomtown of Satipo, a major coffee-growing area.

A rough jungle road goes north from La Merced, via Puerto Bermúdez, to the river port of Pucallpa (p484), capital of the department of Ucayali. Most Pucallpa-bound travelers, however, take the better roads from Lima via Tingo María, or fly.

Further north, in the department of Loreto, is the small port of Yurimaguas (p491), reached from the north coast by road. Sequestered far in the northeast, and accessible only by riverboat from Pucallpa or Yurimaguas, or by air, is Peru's major jungle port, Iquitos (p494).

Wherever you go in the Amazon Basin, you can be sure of two things: there will be rainforest and it's going to rain. Even in the drier months of June to September, the area gets more rain than the mountains do in their wettest months. When it's not wet, it's scorchingly hot and, whatever the weather, humid.

SOUTHERN AMAZON

Abutting the neighboring nations of Bolivia and Brazil, the vast tract of the southern Amazon Basin is one of the Peru's remotest territories. Ecosystems here have been less disturbed than in any other part of the Amazon, yet there are also some of the best-developed facilities for ecotourists.

Travel here is challenging, but the benefits are clear: visitors will be rewarded with a vibrant treasure trove of unforgettable close encounters of the wild kind.

PUERTO MALDONADO

☎ 082 / pop 56,450 / elev 250m

At first sight a mayhem of mud streets and manically tooting *mototaxis* (three-wheeled motorcycle rickshaw taxis), Puerto Maldonado soon endears itself to you. Its money-spinning proximity to some of the most easily visited animal-rich jungle in the entire Amazon Basin is its blessing but also its curse: travelers arrive yet all too quickly leave again en route to the lodges and wildlife on the nearby rivers.

Yet the town's languid, laid-back ambience invites you to linger. Whether you arrive by air or by road, Puerto Maldonado will certainly be a shock to the system. Unlike Peru's larger Amazon cities further north, this is a rawer, untidier jungle town with a mercilessly sweltering climate and a fair quantity of mosquitoes. But its beautiful plaza and burgeoning accommodation options will, together with a lively nightlife, provide plenty of reason to hang around here for a couple of days.

The town itself has been important over the years for rubber, logging and even for gold and oil prospecting, and its role as a crossroads is about to take on greater dimensions as the Interoceanic Hwy (p76), linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans via Brazil and Peru, takes shape. For the moment, though, it's of foremost importance to travelers as the jumping-off point for a voyage on the Ríos Tambopata and Madre de Dios, converging here. These watery wildernesses offer the most unspoilt yet accessible jungle locales in the country, yet are served by some excellent accommodation options for travelers who want that touch of luxury. Undisputedly, Puerto Maldonado gives the traveler the chance to see, feel and hear the Amazonian jungle like nowhere else in Peru.

ORIENTATION

The town is fairly compact. The small airport is 7km north of the town center, while buses arrive and depart from individual offices on Tambopata, some twelve blocks north of the center. Small river ports on both the Ríos Tambopata and Madre de Dios close to the town center serve the closer jungle lodges; more distant lodges are served by a jetty at Infierno, a 45-minute bus ride away.