



A wildlife adventure

[from "Land Rover" - October 2005] by James and Kerry Cockburn

Wildlife spotting in Colpas and the need to use the 130's recovery equipment en-route to Cuzco.

Bidding farewell to all the overlanders and La Paz, we headed North East to the Yunga valley, starting what was to become almost a month of driving on dirt roads. The drive was beautiful, taking us through evergreen forests and across many little streams and waterfalls.

The Yungas is where most of Bolivia's coca production is done on the sides of the hills – we came across hundreds of coca plantations which were continually being harvested. The locals use the coca in tea but, more importantly, they chew it. Placing about 40 green leaves into the side of their cheek.

As the saliva and catalyst work with the leaves it curbs hunger, elevates the effects of altitude and increases endurance. Unfortunately these leaves, with a very expensive and illegal chemical process, are converted into cocaine and therefore the farming of coca is discouraged and frowned on by many countries in the world.

Untouched jungle

We meandered slowly north to Rurrenabaque taking about three days. The scenic road in many places cut into the side of a high cliff. 'Rurre', as it is referred to by the locals, is the jungle tourist town which thousands of tourists use as a stepping stone to do tours of the pampas or into the Madidi National Park. This park is still primary untouched jungle and is believed to be one of the largest untouched Biospheres left in the world. We managed to find a hotel which let us camp very cheaply in their garden and spent three days researching all options for tours.

While in town we met a 'local' Amish American gentleman whom gave us an address further north into the jungle where we could visit by our own transport without having to do a jungle tour. We



settled on doing an organised tour to the Pampas and would drive out to Ixiamas, the last town in virgin jungle, where we would have access to Madidi National Park. The Pampas tour involved a 4x4 vehicle drive for three hours to the Pampas and then a boat ride on the River Maduro, staying in a basic lodge for a two night three day tour.

Well, our first disappointment was the fact that our 4x4 was a Landcruiser. After packing up and setting off on an exceptionally bumpy ride (as the vehicle suspension was almost non-existent) we had our first tyre blow out about an hour into trip. The rather dubious looking spare tyre was changed. Some 45 minutes later, blow out number two.

Unfortunately, no more spares and no more traffic for three hours. We finally arrived four hours late.

The tour involved numerous boat trips on the swamp river with what appeared to be enough mosquitoes to furnish the entire northern hemisphere. Repellent appeared to be an aperitif and the mosquitoes dived in, sucking for all they were worth. We saw various primates, caimans and literally thousands of birds – mainly water birds – but were lucky enough to spot a few Macaws flying overhead.

On the final day we took a four hour walk in the Pampas looking for Capybara (the largest rodent in the world) and Anacondas. We saw one family of Capybara, numerous Caiman but alas, no Anaconda. Kerry did, however, find a rather large rattle snake, which kept us all on our toes for the remainder of the walk.

Camp hospitality

On returning to Rurre we stocked up and set out 100kms north into the jungle where we were hoping to camp in the garden of a young Amish family. Although the parents lived in the South of Bolivia, the older children of the family were rebuilding a house to sell on and we spent three very hospitable nights camped near the house with the family.

On the first day we went on a jungle walk with Mervin to another house they own. In the garden they had flocks of Macaes and all sorts of exotic birds flying around. The next day we took a walk up a river for about four hours where we saw fresh Tapir tracks among numerous wild pig, deer and puma. On the return journey we stumbled upon an ocelot, arguably one of the most beautiful cats in the world, about 30 meters away from us who totally ignored us for about five minutes before melting back into the foliage.



Large macaws

There were a few large Macaws in the trees, but on this day they did not come down to feed. The rest of the day we spent walking through the jungle with Nardir giving us an excellent informative talk on all the plants and animals. We were also lucky enough to see Squirrel monkey in the trees above us at close range. Jorge, the boat driver, had been fishing during our walk and had caught lunch, which Kerry declined due to the way it was cooked – head on and all in a stew. An early night beckoned for another 5am start to go

The following day we drove another 70kms into the jungle, to the end of a seldom used 'road' on the edge of the Madidi and camped the night on a river bed. Once again abundant birdlife, but still no Jaguar or Tapir. Bidding fairwell to our hosts, we drove back to Rurre after having lunch with the family. Their way of life is uncomplicated and pure, living off the land the visit was a surreal modern day experience.

A final shopping trip in Rurre and we commenced our journey further North to the Brazilian border at Cobija. It was three, slow, long days of driving along, once again, bad dust roads, first through pampas and then jungle. Wild camping was very easy as the whole area is sparsely populated.

The border crossing into Peru involved first entering Brazil for 100kms and then into Peru, as there is no direct access in this area. After eventually finding the correct offices, we did our one day paperwork for out of Bolivia and in and out of Brazil and headed into Peru, country number seven. We had just completed three countries border formalities in one day.

Mining and logging

Next was a two-day drive down to Puerto Maldonado, a mining and logging town on the banks of the Madre de Dios in the Peruvian jungle. We had researched this as the best place in South America to visit a Macaw lick – a high bank on the edge of the river that exposes mineral salts eaten by numerous parrots as a supplement to their diet. We spent the first night in Maldonado, camping for free about 14kms out of town beneath palm trees next to a small stream where we were woken up by about 40 small Red Bellied Macaws feeding and squabbling in the trees above the Landy.

Our nights spent wild camping over the prior week had exposed us to mosquitoes one night, sand flies the next night, then bees, and the worst of them, Jigger ticks (a small tick about the size of a grain of sand that burrow into the soft skin around tight clothing and then itch like crazy) of which we had many. The only way we could rid ourselves of these parasites was to wash in Ariel Clothes washing powder which has an acid that burns the bites. Then to round it all off, James was bitten by a mongrel dog in one of our free camp spots, fortunately only just breaking the skin.

down to the Colpa, where we managed to get a little closer to the bank, about 50 metres away from the birds.

Once again the same birds visited in the first shift. The large macaws arrived and then left, then arrived and left again. A few hours later, at about 10am, they arrived again and, with about 40 large Macaws present, they came down to feed on the Colpa. We managed to get some excellent photos by using the binoculars with the camera for extra zoom.

Ingenious. The trip had a complete success.

Another few days were spent in Puerto Maldonado before doing a full vehicle check and, once again, heading west towards Cuzco on what is arguably one of the worst roads in Peru. A 500kms stretch of dirt road running from the lowland jungle and rising up to the Andes and mounting a pass at 4,800 metres. In the dry season, this is possible in three to four days of solid driving. In the wet season, trucks can take up to 30 days to complete.

The road is an excellent example of a rocky riverbed where we spent the first two days driving in first and second gears all day. As usual, the scenery was stunning jungle, but we drove through dry river beds, waded through streams and huge water puddles. The ditches created in the road by the trucks in the wet season were evident all the way and, if they were full of water, Lodzi would be submerged to above the wing mirrors.

Bogged down

We also had our very first serious bogging down, forcing us to use the sand ladders and the hi-lift jack, although not on the road as one would expect. On the third night we found a quiet camp spot just off the side of the road next to a river. It was late and getting dark, so we pulled in quickly without assessment and managed to bury the whole driver's side of the vehicle up to the sills in a sloppy mud. Two hours later and a lot of energy exerted, we finally pulled out of the bog to camp just in front of the mire.

The climb up the Andes was hard on Lodzi as the road was still second

All the package tours to the Macaw licks (locally known as Colpas) are exceptionally expensive, so we decided to try organising an independent tour ourselves. We found another hotel in town as a base where we camped in the car park next to the pool. We met Nadir – an Italian guide (who spoke excellent English) whom has lived in town for about 15 years. He agreed to be our guide on our three day, two night trip to Colpa Chuncho, and we organised a boat and driver. To start the tour, we were taken out for the evening to experience the town's energetic night life. Leaving Lodzi securely parked at the hotel, we headed off early to the port and jumped in our hired boat with Nadir and boat driver Jorge. The camp spot was a relaxing boat six hours up river, where we were able to get up close to a family of Capybara en route. The following morning we were up at 5am to cross the river and await the arrival of the birds at the Colpa. Within an hour, there were about 300-400 Blue Headed Parrots, and numerous other large parrot species.

gears. At the top of the Andes we joined our first bit of decent road at the town of Urcos before the final 40kms drive into Cusco.

We are camped in an Overlander campsite, 20 minutes walk from the town centre on the side of a hill overlooking Cuzco, having acclimatised to the altitude quite quickly but not to the cold nights again.

We are currently researching options of visiting the infamous Machu Picchu of the Inca. Our introduction to the people in Peru has been a friendly and welcoming one. Unfortunately, the costs here – especially the fuel – are high. We will need to watch our budget a lot closer than we did in Bolivia, but are looking forward to exploring this amazing country of the Inca Empire.