A Thimbleful of Sky

Who would have thought a down jacket would become my most prized possession in the Peruvian rainforest? The only reason I had it along with me in the first place was because it wouldn’t fit in the large suitcase I’d left in the headquarters of Posada Amazonas in Puerto Maldonado. I’d laughed as I bunched it through the handles of my duffle, bemoaning the fact that I had to carry it along for a week to be spent in 90 degree heat and like humidity, but this morning, as our canoe chugged up the Tambopata River, I huddled deeper into its luscious folds, blessing it for its warmth as a bitter wind blew rain onto my drenched and shivering body. Just yesterday I had cursed the mosquitoes that forced me to wear long sleeves and pants in the sweltering heat, yet today, here I was, freezing beneath a down coat. Was this Global Warming gone wild?

How I came to be in such a situation is another of those weird workings of the universe that I’ve never been able to figure out. To begin with, I’m not much of an outdoors person. I don’t own a tent and, if someone mentions the word “camping,” I ask how close the nearest lodge is. I don’t like the idea of bugs or other crawly things creeping along my body or creatures of any kind who regard me as some kind of exotic smorgasbord. So when I heard about Rainforest Expeditions, I was surprised I found the possibility of such a trip alluring. Maybe it’s because a lot of my friends had been to the rainforest, coming back with stories of sleeping in trees and communing with lizards the size of donkeys (as well as
bug bites the size of saucers) and I didn’t want to be the only kid on the block who hadn’t been. Or maybe I just wanted to challenge myself to go beyond my “comfort zone,” to learn from an experience both dark and dangerous…

With visions of Ernest Hemingway, at his adventuresome best, dancing in my head, alongside images of wilds pumas, hungry caimans, and vicious mosquitoes, I had planned my trip. I thought I had prepared pretty well. I’d read up on rainforests and had dutifully sprayed my clothes with something so toxic I was assured mosquitoes would drop dead of apoplexy before ever actually setting their stringy little legs on me. And I came with a supply of DEET to slather on areas not protected by clothing. I was a walking toxic waste site and should have been wearing a sign to warn the innocent.

And this was how I came to be riding along in a motorized canoe thirty-five miles up the Tambopata River in the midst of a late winter storm that had swept down from Argentina. I couldn’t wait to soak up all the rainforest had to offer. But what would this great unknown have to teach me?

In the spirit of adventure, I had jumped on board the canoe that would take me to Posada Amazonas, the primary field camp for the eco-tourism project co-owned and developed by Rainforest Expeditions and the local community of Infierno. (Tip #1: Never ever jump into a canoe, as they are not as stable as they appear and tend to rock precariously back and forth when weight is suddenly thrown on one side.) Having avoided a precipitous swim in water as thick as molasses, I settled back to enjoy the sojourn up the river and felt rewarded by the sight of a caiman sunbathing near two
turtles napping on a log while a flock of yellow butterflies, each the size of my hand, swarmed alongside our canoe. Dense foliage that rose from the banks of the river glistened in the morning sun. My sodden socks hung on a hook next to my lunch, which consisted of chicken and rice wrapped in a banana leaf and tied with raffia tucked snugly, although a bit damply, inside a cloth bag. I kept checking my feet to see if they were turning blue, but, fortunately, frostbite had not set in.

When the canoe docked, our guide, a young Peruvian woman named Caterina, led us up a flight of rickety steps that led us into the damp lushness of the rainforest. Usually entering something so dark and potentially rife with hungry critters sends me into a paroxysm of anxiety, but maybe it was the smell of the loamy ground or the calls of birds not far away, but there was something so vibrant that it immediately felt, well, welcoming, as if it were in and of itself pulsating, with a hand held out in invitation.

Our lodge (no tents, thankfully) was unobtrusively nestled into the rainforest and set on stilts. On the lawn, hammocks swayed in the breeze and a double row of Wellingtons lined up on the sprawling veranda suggested people were waiting out the heat until the cool of evening. (Tip #2: Always travel with smart people.)

As I followed Caterina down a polished mahogany walkway (the entire lodge and environs are constructed from local mahogany, keeping the impact on the natural environment to a minimum) that led to the rooms set up for tourists, I looked up to find a sky obscured by a canopy of
green so thick the sun could squeeze only the meekest of rays between broad leaves and tangle of vines. Monkeys jabbered in some nearby trees and the whole experience suddenly seemed surreal, as if I had entered Jurassic Park, and I realized that too many rides on Disneyland’s Jungle Cruise had formed my image of anything even remotely tropical.

The “door” to my room was only a light cotton curtain that lifted in the breeze whispering down the sidewalk. As I stepped onto the rough wooden floor (the polishing apparently ends at the doorway), past the twin beds draped with mosquito netting, and the hammock—feeling as if I’d entered a world somewhere between Graham Greene’s and Gilligan’s Island—I discovered something both tantalizing and a little unsettling, to say the least: my room’s “fourth” wall was a three-foot tall, slatted beamed railing opening directly onto the rainforest. My roommate went into something of a panic at such proximity—and, in her mind, vulnerability—to the wild. But to me, it felt like camp. I liked looking out across the small yard into the thickness of jungle, wondering what might be lurking there, gazing back at me. My roommate pointed out there was a reason the entire place was set up on stilts and I responded that since it was, there was no need for worry. Right?

As the sun was beginning to wear itself out from blasting its heat on fair-weather tourists, we hiked down a narrow path that wound its way deep into the rainforest. An ironwood tree, appropriately named as it is the hardest wood in the world, and also one of the slowest to grow, loomed overhead. How long had it been around? What stories could it
tell? Does a long life come from a thick skin, one not easily punctured by the sting of emotion? We carefully skirted three-foot tall termite mounds—yes, you read right, three feet tall! Talk about high hopes. I wondered whether a 50 foot tree would suddenly come crashing down, a million happy termites giddy from a great meal scuttling off. The walking palm, a tree with an exterior root system that makes it look like it could just start storming through the forest whenever the urge struck, made me wonder if this was where Tolkien got his idea for the Ents. I’ve always loved trees and the idea of this one marching through the rainforest to settle elsewhere when no one was looking made me smile. (Maybe that’s why people get lost in the forests of the world: the trees move, destroying their landmarks!) There were also vines that snaked their way up and down trunks, except for the chirona tree, one that lacks any sort of hospitality, as it actually sheds its bark to prevent vines from attaching themselves. A parade of leaf-cutter ants toted leaves a hundred times their size on their heads (I have trouble enough keeping a hat in place!) crossing the path of a baby bird that had fallen from its nest onto the trail; she glanced about in wide-eyed panic as her mother called from nearby, begging her to please, please, please find the courage to spread her wings and get off the ground before some hungry predator came upon her. In keeping with Posada’s policy of non-interference with nature, we stepped over the baby bird, leaving her to her fate, though it was almost unbearably painful to do so. It seemed so cruel not to offer some kind of help when it would have taken so little, but Caterina said that even if we moved the bird, we couldn’t guarantee its safety.
and, indeed, we might even inadvertently put it into greater peril without knowing it. This seemed far too rational and wise, even if painfully so, so I focused on my own inner workings as a diversion, while emotions such as fear and compassion grappled with the idea of trusting some invisible force and letting the consequences work themselves to their own natural end. Though I’d watched such an event on countless documentaries, never would I have imagined myself in a situation where I had to trust nature to take its own course, which, in this case, meant abandoning a chick to her almost certain death. This was so contradictory to my instincts of compassion and desire to alleviate suffering that I trudged on in a state of wretchedness, deeply disturbed by what the rainforest was teaching me.

Night comes down fast in the rainforest, like someone drawing the curtain after a show, so we retraced our steps carefully, using flashlights to light the way. After dinner I returned to my room to find that someone had lowered the mosquito netting so it covered the beds, carefully tucking it beneath the mattress so I could sleep in my own little mosquito-free cocoon.

When you’re miles and miles away from any kind of “manmade” light, darkness is like black velvet. Kerosene lanterns glowed from niches in the walls, providing the only source of light other than candles propped into enormous Brazil nuts halved to serve as holders. Along with the darkness, silence fell. A silence so profound I could hear my own breathing: in and out, in and out, slowly, steadily, with tranquility that seemed to match the pace of the jungle now
fast asleep. The flames quivered in a soft breeze that wafted through our “fourth” wall, mesmerizing me with their little haloes of light.

But before I could climb into my cocoon, I just had to look at the night sky. After all, I had come a long way to see things that didn’t exist back home. I scrounged through my bag until I found my flashlight and an astronomical chart to help me locate stars in the southern hemisphere, then padded out along the mahogany sidewalk where a swath of sky was visible between the trees. Gazing up at the night sky, jittery with the excitement of seeing constellations I had never seen before, I was stunned to find that the sky was so littered with stars that anything remotely familiar was impossible to find. I stared at the star chart, adjusting for time and place, locating the constellations that should be right overhead. But when I looked up again, I still could find no connection between the stars overhead and those on my chart. Even in the Andes I had found Scorpios and the Southern Cross! But here, there seemed to be an equal balance between twinkling lights and darkness, which was so overwhelming I felt disoriented. Stars randomly swimming without any discernible pattern? How could this be? And have there always been that many stars? And how is it possible that so very few can be seen in the northern hemisphere? Even in the desert or on mountain peaks? Struggle as I might, I could not get my mind around the immensity of what I was seeing. It was, quite simply, mind-boggling and, ultimately, ineffable.

Tears blurred my eyes when I raised them once again. This time I did see one thing more clearly than ever:
The Milky Way, which spilled its glow across the heavens like a timeless river. I thought of the story the Greeks told of Hera whose breast milk spewed and created the Milky Way, and of the Celts, who referred to it as The Sky River with the constellation of the swan swimming across it as the seasons passed. And it suddenly made all the sense in the world that early people would project a sense of sacredness onto the night sky. How could they look at such a spectacle and not see divinity within it? And I mean awesome divinity; there is no way the power of such a sky could ever be doubted. I made silent obeisance to whomever it might be that ruled such a domain before tiptoeing back to my room.

Not yet ready to abandon the night, I lit another of the Brazil nut candles, setting it in my lap so I could clasp my hands around it, running my fingers over its rough and lumpy shell, then sat in the hammock, where I could gaze out at the jungle, wondering what all those beasts out there thought of the stars. Cicadas sang a chorus and I hoped their message was carried directly to the deities. Their song was broken by the intermittent shrieks of night birds. As I sat relishing this moment, a bolt of lightning suddenly flashed, crackling between the leaves and fronds; clouds began to swirl, obscuring the happy twinkles. Distant thunder boomed as if the deities were in dire need of placating. Someone swished down the walkway, silently extinguishing the kerosene lanterns, which left only the flicker of my candle. When the rain started, first just drops pelting the earth, then a full-scale downpour, I decided it was time to crawl into my netting.
Beneath the railing, plants rustled; some creature diving into its own shelter, I supposed.

At 4:00 am Caterina knocked on my wall. From the distance, I could hear macaws already rising, greeting the day, and I wondered if they ever slept. But then the eeriest sound I’d ever heard began to rise behind those shrieks, creating the kind of symphony Edgar Allen Poe would have written had he picked up the baton rather than the pen. Howler monkeys, whose cry is aptly named, called from about a mile away in a low, elongated whisper that I first took to be wind rushing through the canopy. The eerie cry rose in intensity until it sounded like a distant train roaring through a tunnel; reaching its crescendo, it slowly dissipated before beginning the cycle again. I shivered. What causes howler monkeys to howl, I wanted to know. Nothing, apparently, or so Caterina told me, as she pointed the way with her flashlight. It’s just the sound they make to wake each other and welcome the day. With such a haunting cry, I wondered what kind of day they envisioned.

This morning we would go in search of macaws at the clay lick. Apparently, dawn is their time for breakfast and they do eat and run—or fly, as the case may be. We crossed the river by our now way-too-familiar canoe to the clay lick, arriving just as the sun began to rise, peering over the horizon, as if checking to see whether it was worth the trouble. Oh, yes, Mother Sun! Here I am! Ready to bask in a day of your warmth, oh Divine One! She must have heard and been impressed by my devotion, or maybe I’m just more powerful than I think because the sun suddenly crested the horizon,
splashing a honey-colored warmth across the clay cliff that towered over the far side of the grassy field we were now crossing. A scarlet macaw swooped down to land on a branch not ten feet from where we stood. Her eyes darted, searching for predators; she began to squawk. A pair of blue and yellow macaws appeared, slicing the sky with a swath of brilliant color, to land on the cliff and join the chorus. Soon two dusky-headed parakeets soared for the clay, followed by a dazzling duo of yellow-crowned parrots. Within moments the cliff was alive with a vibrant rainbow of feathers as birds flew and dove, perched and nibbled on the minerals found in this, the world’s most diverse clay lick.

If a sky littered with stars took my breath away, then watching over 200 parrots and macaws feast but a good “stone’s throw” away brought it back, peacefully, gently, coaxing it into the rhythm of birds enormous and majestic going about their morning routine. The colors were so sharp that the reds were vermilion, the blues iridescent, and the yellows so bright I feared the sun would be jealous and disappear once again. As if orchestrated, the birds swooshed down to eat, then rose again, each calling with their own unique sound and cadence. We sat in silent awe, not daring to interrupt, realizing how truly privileged we were to witness such an event. Once the ritual ended, the flutter of wings was replaced by an uncanny stillness as the birds suddenly departed, as if some magical alarm clock had told them breakfast time was over. Once the last macaw had disappeared, I wondered if any of what I had just witnessed had actually taken place on the same planet as freeways and
high-rises. And I was reminded once again of the sacredness of the natural world. Its cycles of life began way before we humans became aware of them and have been serving them well ever since. Is it possible for humans to place ourselves within such harmony, to become a part of the rhythms of the natural world rather than trying to force them into ours?

Later, we visited a 300-year old kapok tree. Caterina told us the story of the kapok: a warrior fell in love with a maiden, but was killed by his rival; the warrior then metamorphosed into the kapok, which became the Amazon, with its branches the Amazon’s tributaries. The tinamou bird’s cry, which sounds like both, “Where are you?” and “Donde esta?” (the Spanish version) is believed to be the maiden’s as she searches for her lover. It’s light and lyrical; maybe the sweetest melodies are born from loss. I hope she finds him, though it would be a pity to lose the lovely song of the tinamou.

Finally, the time arrived for me to leave the rainforest. The next morning would be my last one here. As I sat in my three-walled room and gazed out into the pitch black of the rainforest, I wondered what, indeed, it had taught me. Had I seen myself in the determination of the leaf-cutter ants, the tough-skinned ironwood tree, or the walking palm? How about the chirona tree that sheds its bark so as not to become entangled in anything that could strangle the life out of it? Or the little bird that cried for its mother while she remained unseen, encouraging her daughter to learn to fly? An environ that seemed so exotic, so beyond anything I could ever truly imagine was whispering to me, urging me to wonder, Are the
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experiences of life universal? Oh, yes, I thought. Yes, yes, yes again and a thousand more yeses!

Yearning for one last look at The Milky Way, I peered through that tiny window to the sky. And again I trembled in ecstasy at the wealth of stars that could be squeezed into a circle so small I could capture it by simply putting my finger and thumb together in a circle. Stars without a pattern in a thimbleful of sky. A million tiny mirrors? (Tip #3: Maybe we don’t need a large canvas to enrich our lives; perhaps a small, richly saturated one will do.)