

ECUADOR



Christian Zavala is one of the knowledgeable Ecuadorian guides at Sacha Lodge in the Amazon.

Lore of the jungle rules luxury lodge

SUZANNE MORPHET returns to the Amazon

You won't see anything," laughed my friend Julie when I told her I was going to a lodge in the Amazon rainforest.

As a teenager, Julie lived for a year in the jungle of Bolivia when her father volunteered his services there as a doctor. "It's just a wall of green," she recalled.

Still, I was determined to include the Amazon for a few days out of a three-week trip to Ecuador. It's so close, yet so remote; why not?

A 30-minute flight from Quito, Ecuador's capital, brings us to the newly oil-rich city of Coca on the banks of the Napo River. From our van we see pizzerias, lingerie shops and young women riding fast motorcycles. The Amazon River flows wide, white and fast, bringing water from the Andes.

From Coca, we board a long, motorised canoe for a two-hour ride downriver. Along the way, we pass numerous barges carrying industrial equipment. Arriving at a sandy beach, we walk through the jungle for 15 minutes, then board smaller canoes for another 15 minutes or so, arriving at Sacha Lodge just in time for lunch.

Before we can take a sip of plaintain soup or a bite of baked



Helping mash yuca at the Indigenous community of Nueva Providencia.

fish, we hear excited voices behind us. Giant river otters. A family of four lives in the black water lake that the lodge overlooks.

After lunch we head to our air-conditioned cabin for a nap. This is when I should say that I tried once before – 32 years ago – to visit Ecuador's Amazon. While backpacking, my husband and I caught a ride to the town of Puyo on the Rio Negro, but it was so hot and humid all I could do was lie on the bed under a fan.

Sacha Lodge is absolute luxury by comparison. Our spacious cabin has floor to ceiling windows that look out on — yes — a wall of green — but on two occasions we'll see squirrel monkeys swinging through the trees. Even our shower is glassed in, allowing for wildlife-watching while bathing.

There's also a natural plunge pool at the lodge.

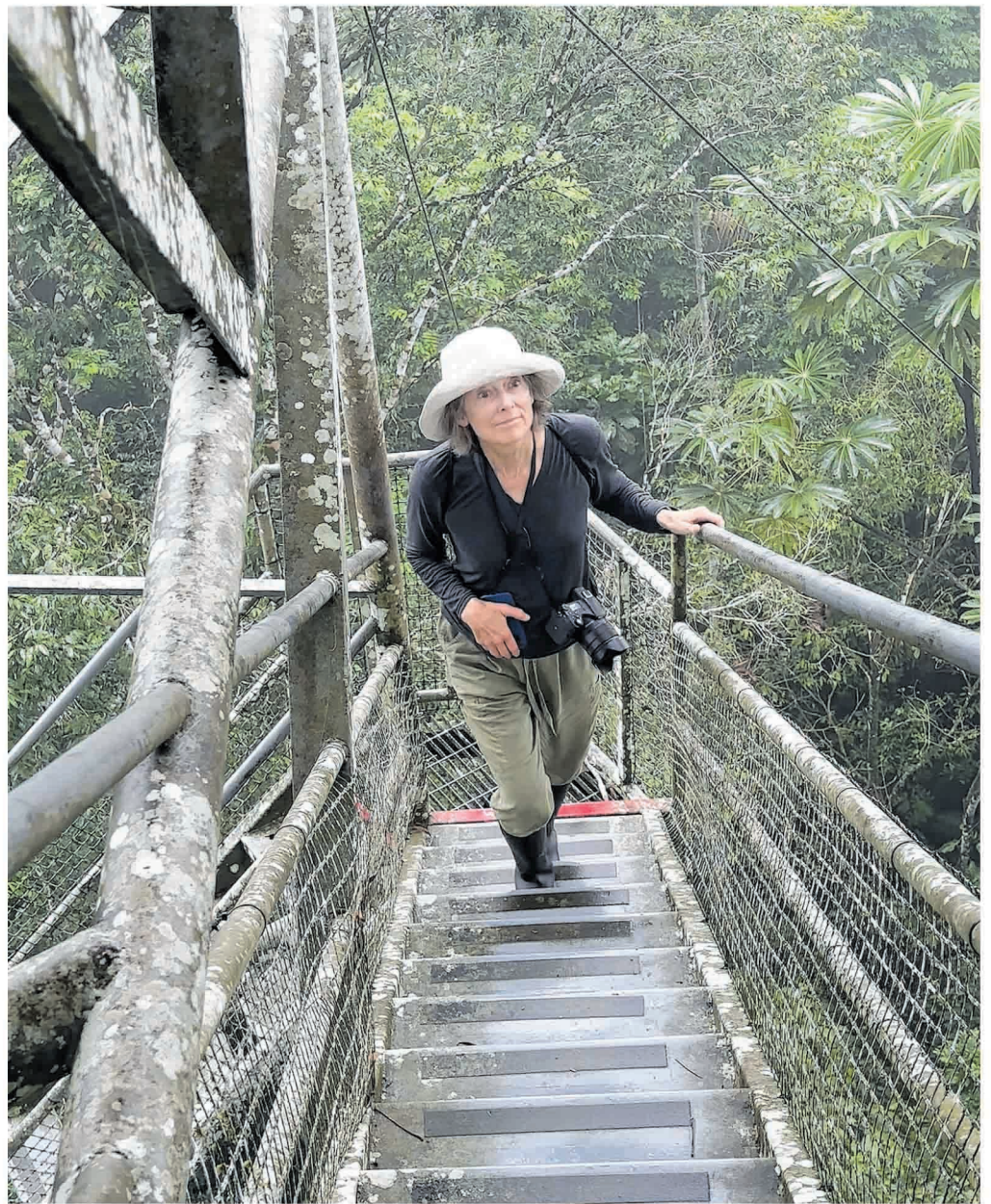
A small section of Pilchicocha Lake has been enclosed so guests can swim without fear — those river otters have big teeth.

That night, while walking back to our cabin after dinner we spot two tarantulas on the boardwalk, one as large as my hand.

"When people come with good energy, the animals come. The forest co-operates," says Christian Zavala, our Ecuadorian guide, as we set off the next morning by canoe for the Kapok tower.

Built next to a giant Kapok tree, the 43m-high tower provides views over the forest canopy. Soon we're spotting one bird after another.

A blue dacnis flits in and out of a



Suzanne Morphet climbs the Kapok tower at Sacha Lodge.



Howler monkeys.

bromeliad. "Beautiful bird," says Christian, adjusting his scope.

Then, "a green and gold tanager".

"Look, look, look, an orange bellied euphonia!"

"Come and see now — a green honeycreeper!"

Finally, an unmistakeable roar fills our ears.

"Howler monkeys, look, you can see the whole tree shaking!"

Another day we go by motorised canoe to the Indigenous community of Nueva Providencia, where women raise money by sharing their lifestyle and food with guests from Sacha Lodge.

Two barefoot women, one pregnant, are roasting plantains, yuca, fish and skewers of larvae from palm weevils over an open fire.

Translating from Kichwa, our guide tells us they start their days at 3am by preparing a drink from the leaves of "a magical plant, the Red Bull of the rainforest".

And when they greet each other in the morning, "they are not going to say, 'how are you?' They say, 'hello, what is your dream yesterday?'"

Dreams can portend the future and hunting success.

And while the men hunt — or more commonly now — go to paid jobs at oil camps, the women tend

fact file

- Sacha Lodge: sachalodge.com
- Adventure Life, the agency which booked the trip: adventure-life.com

the crops, collect firewood, and raise the children.

"They have three rules," one of the guides tells me. "Don't be lazy, do not steal and don't lie. You live with these three rules, you have fantastic life with happiness."

Back at Sacha Lodge, we're enjoying life too, even the more intense parts.

On our last evening we're paddling Anaconda

Creek as darkness descends. Frogs begin to chirp and the whole forest comes alive. What looks like a bat careening towards me is a large owl butterfly.

The creek narrows. We turn a corner and the canoe scrapes against tree roots, sounding like nails on a blackboard.

A wet branch slaps my face.

In the light of Christian's headlamp, the red eyes of a caiman peer from the swampy bank.

"It's coming!" he yells.

He means the rain, of course. We heard it from afar and we hurry to pull on black ponchos just as the sky opens and the first big drops hit. When we go home and Julie asks me what we saw, I'll probably say, "Not much, a few birds and just a wall of black that last night."

Suzanne Morphet was a guest of Sacha Lodge and Adventure Life. They have not reviewed or approved this story.



In the pool at Sacha Lodge. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet