

# AMAZED IN THE AMAZON

By **SUE JOLLY**

**You'll have a wild time  
in Ecuador's rainforest**

BE careful what you wish for, they say. I've always longed to go to South America and I happen to like frogs. But now I'm in the Amazon rainforest in deepest Ecuador, I've decided that if I ever meet Kermit I may strangle him.

I'm due for a dawn wake-up call. But the noises Kermit's froggy pals and other creatures of the rainforest night are making are too interesting to let me sleep.

I'm getting used to the shrill peeps and trills - and a lot of loud chirping and buzzing - but something like a cross between a demented duck and a barking dog is getting going. What the heck is it? Insect? Amphibian? And something else sounds like a mechanical click. And it's getting closer. This is silly. On they go, peep-cheep, cheep-peep, trill-trill. It's fascinating.

That's what they don't tend to tell you about a rainforest - it's noisy at night. Especially if you are staying somewhere with just mesh in the windows and 5,000 acres of pristine forest outside.

Getting to Sacha Lodge was an adventure in itself. You fly over the Andes from Ecuador's capital of Quito, then take a two-hour, 50-mile motorised canoe trip down the River Napo - a wide, muddy-coloured tributary of the Amazon.

From there you amble along a raised

boardwalk through about half-a-mile of flooded palm forest, clamber into a dugout canoe, get paddled along an inlet and emerge into tree-lined Pilchicocha Lake - at the opposite end of which is the eco-friendly lodge and private reserve ([www.sachalodge.com](http://www.sachalodge.com)).

There isn't a road for at least 30 miles. There's just you and your fellow guests, the lodge/restaurant/bar, 26 cabin rooms and the endless stretches of rainforest.

Oh, and about those fellow guests. You'll be thinking they must be an adventurous lot. Which they were. But they wouldn't be going home and telling Mum, Dad and the grandparents all about it. They were the grandparents.

Sacha Lodge is a destination for over-fifties specialist Saga. And some of my lot had gone a long way over 50. To 79 and 80 to be exact. But flying to Ecuador one day and journeying deep into the jungle the next didn't faze them a bit.

For some, nor did swimming in the lake with piranhas - which is something I drew the line at, even



though there was no danger (piranhas, like sharks, have had a bad Press, apparently. No guest has ever been sent home as a skeleton).

Besides, there was too much other stuff to do. The Amazon rainforest is all you have been led to believe by wildlife programmes - and then some.

Of the two million known species of plants and animals, about half live *only* in rainforests. And Ecuador's chunk of the Amazon Basin has the lot - incredible vegetation, birds, beasts, reptiles and insects. I've never been anywhere so bursting with life. Not surprising really given that I was staying in an area next to the Yasuni National Park - said to be the most biologically diverse place on Earth.

Yes, it's hot and humid. Yes, there are things that can bite or sting - but none got me, and even mosquitoes weren't a problem as the water is too acidic for them to breed.

On our first evening, dusk found us being paddled up one of the backwaters. Bats - some of them fish-eaters - flitted over the water. We

saw lilies that come out only at night, so bats can pollinate them, and the frogs and other night creatures calling up in the trees (some frogs never come down).

Howler, squirrel and capuchin monkeys scabbled overhead, fireflies darted about and we caught sight of

a caiman (small crocodile) whose eyes glowed an eerie red by torchlight.

Just as I thought it couldn't get better... we came out on to the lake and were paddled back under a magnificently starry sky.

The next day we spent hours on Sacha Lodge's unique claim to fame, a 94ft (30m) high, 940ft (257m) long walkway that puts you ABOVE the forest. Eat your heart out David Attenborough. He was famously winched into a rainforest canopy to see the wealth of life that lives only in the tree-tops. We just walked up.

About 550 species of birds have been recorded in the Napo region. Purple-throated fruit crows, toucans, parrots, macaws, double-toothed kites, hawk eagles, spangled cotingas (small birds like

turquoise jewels). I saw the lot, along with butterflies with huge, electric blue wings, a pygmy marmoset, the smallest monkey in the world - and three crested owls asleep in a tree. And then there's the "ground" life. Army ants, leaf-cutter ants, caterpillars, vast termite nests, stick insects, a praying mantis and - on a night walk - a huge, furry tarantula and a cicada emerging from its pupa case. "That's a rare sight - like something on a wildlife film," our guide said. Quite.

Oh, and there was a cute red and black frog he picked up to show us. A poison dart frog. The sort that kills if the toxin on its skin gets into your bloodstream. Best not give Kermit ideas.

For a country only about half the size of France, Ecuador packs in an amazing range of scenery. Because it is on the equator (where do you think they got the name?) the coastal areas are warm enough to have coconut palms and mangrove swamps. Between them are the Andes, with snow-capped peaks that tower to more than 6,300m (20,700ft).

There are also 40 volcanoes - 12 active - including Pichincha near Quito, the second highest capital in the world, which last had a minor eruption in 2006. "Sleeping with the enemy" the locals call living there.

It's not a prosperous country, but neither does it have the extremes of poverty of some of its neighbours. And, for a lot of that the locals thank

the fertile volcanic soil. They grow everything - bananas, sugar cane, rice, potatoes, wheat, barley and 40 different types of corn. That's not to mention the fruit. I've never eaten so much or drunk so many different juices. Oh, and there's another thing (best cover the children's eyes at this point). Ecuadorians love guinea pigs... roasted, on a spit.

Quito is vast. There's an old town with splendid colonial Spanish architecture and churches and it is dominated by a huge statue of the Virgin Mary which is worth visiting for the views over the city.

Another must, 14 miles north of the city, is the Mitad del Mundo - Middle Of The World - monument, where you can stand with a foot in each hemisphere. Or not. Don't let on, but that's a myth. GPS technology now shows the REAL Equator is a couple of hundred yards away and is covered by... a bypass (best not to try straddling that). And 62 miles away is the town of Otavalo, which has a daily market which, on a Saturday, is one of South America's largest - and the atmosphere remains hassle-free and laid-back.



And if you want to be REALLY laid-back, take a trip to a high pass on the Andes, stopping at Termas de Papallacta. It's a hotel with a series of pools of water heated by volcano. First time I've ever gone in a pool during a thunderstorm. And it was gorgeous. I went from pool to pool staying in the hottest I could stand with water thundering over my shoulders from spouts. Then a humming bird started feeding from a fuchsia bush inches from my nose.

Not all Saga visitors to Ecuador go to the rainforest. Some do the next best thing - take a trip to the tropical cloud forest about 80 miles west of Quito.

The Arasha Resort ([www.arasha-resort.com](http://www.arasha-resort.com)) is in a biodiversity "hot spot", with 35,000 species of plants, 664 species of amphibians and about

500 species of birds in the area.

I was up at dawn to see the bird life and then did a three-hour trek in a primary forest area, scrambling up rocks and fording shallow rivers. There was loads of wildlife and I even saw a sloth doing, well, not much really, in a tree.

After lunch I was down to do one of the "Saga walks". Not all the Saga clients do them, of course. Some opt to stay by the pool or do classes in making your own chocolate from raw cocoa beans or in tropical flower arranging.

But many do - and love that sort of thing. And I thought I'd see what they got up to on a Saga walk in Arasha. Bound to be a gentle ramble, I'd thought. Three hours later I emerged from the forest, red-faced, clammy with wobbly knees.

We'd forded more rivers and gone down to a waterfall at the bottom of a gorge - then, of course, had to come back up again. "The walk of the endless steps" they call it. Endless puffing more like it.

At night you can be taken into the forest. You may see tree roots showing a rare phenomenon - they glow in the dark. Fireflies flit about, cicadas buzz and, down by the water, there are huge toads with skin like sandpaper and... frogs. The sort that climb trees. And make a lot of noise. Just where DID I put those ear-plugs?

Pictures: ALAMY / SAGA HOLIDAYS / SUE JOLLY / PICTURES COLOUR LIBRARY

## What's the deal?

● SAGA Holidays offer a number of holidays to Ecuador for over-50s. The 12-night Into the Amazon trip includes a stay in Quito and a seven-night cruise on the Amazon river, from £2,099 based on November 19 departure.

● A 10-night trip to Ecuador and Galapagos, including a three-night cruise around the Galapagos islands, starts at £2,799 based on October 15 2009 departure.

● For more information see [www.saga.co.uk/travel-shop](http://www.saga.co.uk/travel-shop) or call 0800 056 5880.



The main building at Sacha lodge





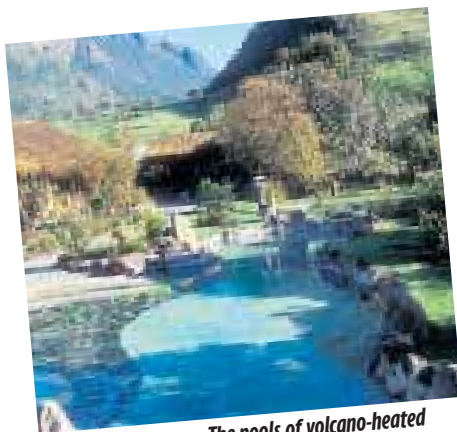
*Doing an Attenborough... Sue on the treetop rope walk above the rainforest*



*Black and red alert... the poison dart frog, which can be deadly*



*Some of the Spanish colonial architecture in the capital Quito*



*The pools of volcano-heated water at Termas de Papallacta*





*A motorised canoe  
on the River Napo*

