



SPECIAL REPORT: CRUISES



*Cruise line throws in the towels*

In addition to chocolate on the pillow and turned-down sheets, Carnival Cruise Lines has added cuddly terry cloth creatures to its nighttime amenities. Among towel animals created by cabin attendants for passengers' enjoyment are pigs, bunnies, peacocks and parrots. Carnival says stewards get more than 10 hours of training in tying towels. Passengers who want to learn towel origami may buy *Towel Creations With Freddy*, a how-to book starring a Carnival mascot. It's available for \$15 aboard the line's 22 ships or by contacting the company (1-800-277-6482; [www.carnival.com](http://www.carnival.com)).

**CRUISES**

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Large cloud formations and calm, reflective waters make for spectacular sunsets on the Amazon River.

# At ease in the Amazon

## Rivers' newest ship is a floating eco-lodge

Story and photography by **GLEN PETRIE**  
Special Contributor

**N**OVO AIRÃO, Brazil — Pink dolphins? I thought my impish Brazilian guide was pulling my leg. All doubt was banished when, standing on a wooden dock in the Amazon village of Novo Airão, I was greeted by three robustly pink dolphins thrusting their heads from the water.

I followed my guide's prodding to slip into the tea-colored river holding a sliver of fish, which was deftly plucked from my fingers. The dolphins playfully jostled me for more, bumping and rubbing me with their cool, rubbery bodies.

The Amazon basin is a place of natural astonishments, and pink dolphins are just the start. Many are albino, with coloring ranging from rosy gray to flamingo pink. They apparently grow pinker when excited, as if blushing.

A small pod has become friendly with a village family that innocently started to

feed them fish scraps. The dolphins became daily visitors, and word spread, putting Novo Airão on the small but burgeoning Amazon tourist circuit. The French hotel group Accor is building a 100-room hotel nearby, slated to open in 2010. Hilton also plans to build an eco-resort here.

I arrived by luxurious riverboat from Manaus, a Brazilian city of nearly 1.8 million people in deep rain forest, 1,000 miles upriver from the Atlantic coast. Dozens of small boats carry tourists on river trips from

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A guide leans from a tour boat to show passengers a giant lily pad.



Pink dolphins such as this one have become attractions in Novo Airão.



A local girl and her parrot drift in the fading daylight on the Amazon River in Brazil.



The Grand Amazon was built to cruise the Amazon basin.

## Shake it up with dance cruises

Caribbean zydeco, blues trins put the emphasis

cruises available to enthusiasts of both mas dancing and some Ken dolls, too, but for the most part we were fun-loving aver-



# Amazon ship an eco-resort modeled on Nile cruisers

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Manaus, but the one on which I traveled has caused a splash by being the newest and largest.

The Grand Amazon is a floating resort modeled on Nile River cruisers. It offers 72 balconied cabins on four decks, a good restaurant, sun deck with pool and bar — all the amenities of a large passenger ship.

Based in a jungle lodge, I had explored the area before, visiting the wilds in motorized canoes.

I feared that a cruise ship would offer a more superficial experience. That is, until I grasped the concept. The Grand Amazon is essentially a lodge that moves. The ship carries small boats for exploring. And this lodge can relocate overnight.

The vessel was custom-built in Manaus (Brazilian hardwoods lend a rich glow to its interiors) by Spanish hotel company Iberostar to make this difficult environment easily accessible to the growing number of eco-tourists.

Like the lodges on land in the area, the ship offers a choice of two or three excursions each morning, afternoon and evening.

After breakfast, we'd clamber into the boats — about 20 people per group, accompanied by local guides — and head off on our chosen tours. Skimming across water as glassy as a polished mirror, I loved how the river reflected the mountainous clouds in the blue sky. At night, with the moon and stars duplicated in the black water, I had the sensation of cruising across the universe.

On hikes through pungent forests, we learned which plants could be eaten and which were poisonous, which were best for building shelter and which could sterilize wounds. We learned that potable water can be found in vines, filtered by the plant. We ate açai berries, a nutrient- and antioxidant-rich fruit considered a superfood.

With eyes trained to spot things we could not, the guides found ant



GLEN PETRIE/Special Contributor

## The more heavily populated Rio Solimões bustles with local river traffic.

into two tributaries: the cola-colored Rio Negro and the muddy Rio Solimões. The rivers present two distinct environments, and Grand Amazon explores both waterways.

Rio Negro is the Amazon of our imagination: dark, deep, mysterious. Rio Solimões resembles the Amazon of headlines: pockets of settlement, river traffic and trees cut to make room for cattle.

During an onboard buffet lunch of local specialties, the ship would sail to a new spot, and we'd reboard the small boats for a slow cruise through channels and flooded forests. Or, we'd be transported to another hiking trail.

"You won't see an anaconda in the wild," said Rafael, one of our guides. "They are too secretive." Yet, on the second day I spotted one of the giant snakes swimming.

"You won't see a jaguar," the guides told us, and we didn't.

But we did see toucans, scarlet macaws, parrots and dozens of other exotic birds. We saw sloths, and howler and spider monkeys. We fished for piranha.

At night, our shallow-draught boats slipped through reeds in search of crocodiles, their eyes glowing red in our strobe lights.

At Manaus, the Amazon splits

## WHEN YOU GO

### GETTING THERE

■ Fly to Miami and connect with TAM Brazilian Airlines, which flies nonstop from Miami to Manaus, a five-hour flight. Or fly to Panama City and connect to COPA Airlines to continue to Manaus.

### DOCUMENTS

To enter Brazil, U.S. citizens need a passport valid at least six months before expiration and a visa. A yellow fever inoculation may be required. Details: [www.brasilemb.org](http://www.brasilemb.org).

### WHERE TO STAY

■ As at Iberostar hotels in Mexico and the Caribbean, the Grand Amazon price includes meals, snacks and bar service. Fares for the three-night Rio Solimões cruise (departing Thursdays) start at about \$1,275 per person.

I preferred the unspoiled Rio Negro (and the pink dolphins of Novo Airão), while others onboard enjoyed the Solimões with its river traffic and greater concentration of wildlife. More people live on the So-

limões because there are more fish, and more fish also mean more birds and animals.

A four-day itinerary focusing on the Rio Negro and a three-day route on the Rio Solimões can be booked separately, but it makes sense to do both. In a week, I felt I'd seen and learned a lot.

### WHEN TO GO

■ Weather tends to be hot and humid year round, with temperatures between 79 to 91 degrees. The rainy season is January through May.

In August, water levels fall, revealing sandy shores.



JAMES A. BLACK/Staff Artist



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booked separately, but it makes sense to do both. In a week, I felt I'd seen and learned a lot.

The explorer in me was secretly disappointed, though, that it was so easy. And so comfortable.

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