



A woman in the town of Salasaca on the road from Quito to Shell in Ecuador. Opposite, a waterfall in the Huaorani territory



Heart of the AMAZON

Ecuador's rainforest is one of the most biodiverse and least explored regions in the world. Stanley Stewart ventures to its centre as a guest of the Huaorani people who are striving to find new ways to protect their unique and ancient way of life

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW ROWAT

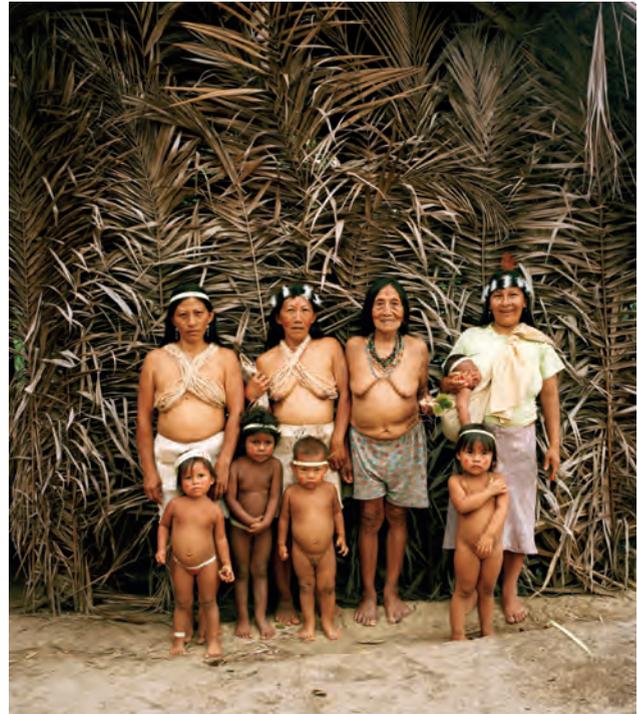


DEEP IN THE AMAZONIAN JUNGLE, I was discussing maggots with a Huaorani tribesman. Sinking his axe into a fallen trunk, Bei opened the rotten wood as deftly as a surgeon and lifted out a handful of squirming yellow grubs, the larvae of an Amazon beetle. His smile was as wide as the river mouth. Bei is a maggot aficionado. In reverential tones, he explained the best seasons, the best state of decay, the best varieties. Maggots, according to Bei, are the greatest gift of the forest. Not really a main course, naturally, but as a starter you couldn't beat them.

Other people's food is often a bit of a wonder. For the Huaorani, monkeys have always been firmly on the menu, but they remain resistant to deer. Apparently it is those great, brown, doleful eyes. The tribespeople believe they hold the souls of dead ancestors, and no one wants to dine on grandfather.

Maggots, of course, are another matter. No one could possibly have any objection to maggots, the prawn cocktail of the Amazon. Rocking back on his haunches, Bei began to munch on handfuls of the raw yellow larvae. 'Eat, eat,' he said in the manner of an

Right, members of the Huaorani tribe. Below, the countryside on the road from Quito to Shell. Opposite, Gabriel, a Huaorani guide, in the trunk of a ficus tree



I was heading for the eastern province of Oriente to visit the Huaorani, who have only been in touch with the outside world since the 1950s



Italian mamma. 'You are too thin.' I ate. What was the point of coming halfway round the world to the depths of the Amazon if you were going to go all squeamish about maggots at the last moment? I lifted a few from Bei's outstretched hand. They were squidgy, like shrimp. Curiously, they had a strong, fishy smell. Closing my eyes, I popped one in and chewed gently.

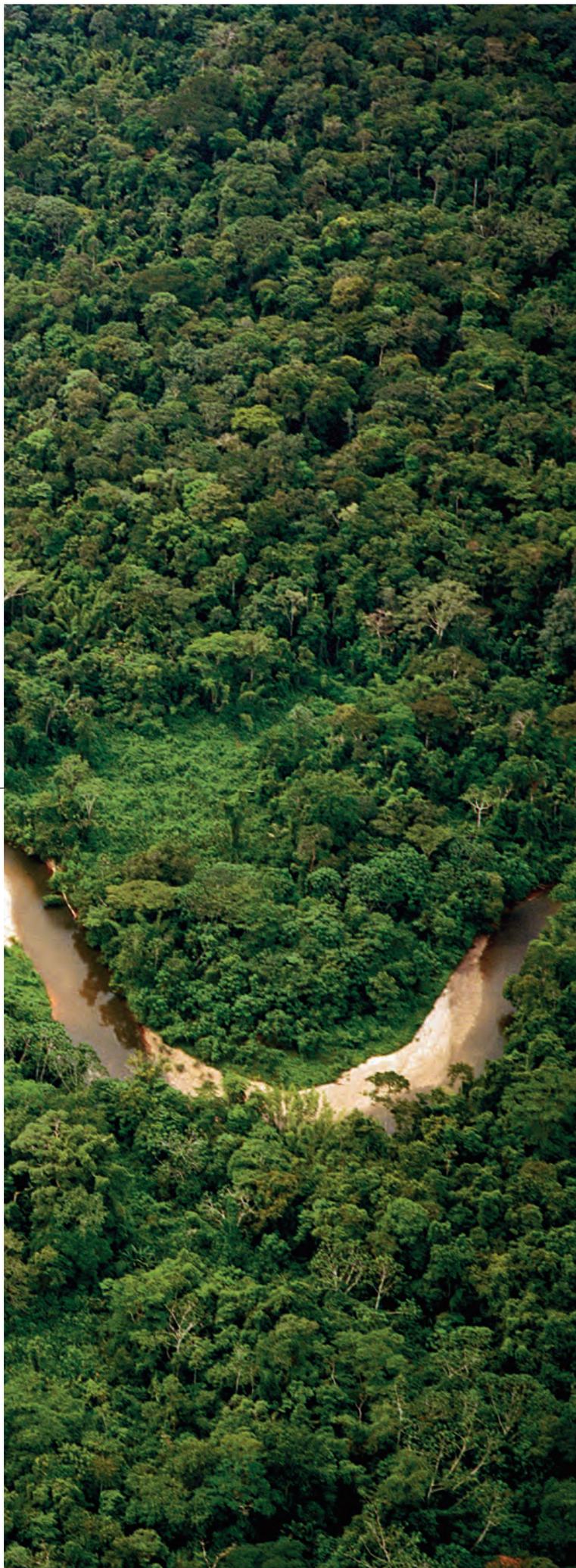
There are many wonders in the Amazon. It is a cornucopia of marvels, of the weird and the bizarre. But squatting beneath a kapok tree, while the great forest gently dripped around me, I encountered one of Amazonia's oddest facts: maggots taste like olives.

LIKE MAGGOTS, the scale and complexity of the Amazon Basin can take some getting used to. The whole river system, from the Andes to the sea, is more than 4,000 miles long, almost the width of Asia or the equivalent of the distance from Istanbul to Beijing. Spread over seven different countries, this single system drains more than 2.7 million square miles, an area not a long way short of the 48 contiguous United States. Carrying a fifth of all the earth's fresh water, it pushes 1.2 billion tons of sediment into the Atlantic every year, staining the ocean for 200 miles offshore. Depending on the season, its mouth is 200 to 300 miles wide and contains an island that is larger than Switzerland.

I had come to Ecuador, where I was heading for the eastern lowland province of Oriente, one of the Amazon's most biodiverse regions and the one with







From top: Bai, a Huaorani boy, with a tayra, a native mammal; a crab from the Shiripuno River. **Left,** an aerial view of the Curaray River



the most 'uncontacted' tribes. I wanted to visit the Huaorani, who have only been in touch with the outside world since the 1950s. The past 40 years have confirmed the fears of the old Huaorani, who doubtless warned that no good would come of such contact.

The deforestation of the Amazon, through logging and cultivation, is a familiar issue. The incursion of the oil industry, and the havoc it has wreaked in regions

such as Oriente, is a less familiar scandal. Beneath the Huaorani lands lie vast reserves, and the people have been battling the oil companies in the hope of saving their forests and themselves. To provide an alternative source of cash revenue, the Huaorani have recently turned to tourism, building a small lodge in the depths of their ancestral lands. I had come to the Amazon to see if small-scale tourism could be a useful weapon in the battle against Big Oil.

A CAR CAME TO COLLECT ME from my hotel in Quito in the pre-dawn. In the empty colonial square, stout women from the highlands, wearing layered shawls and serious fedoras, were setting up handicraft stalls. Beyond the city we took the highway known as Avenue of the Volcanoes.

This is hacienda country, a big, windswept world of green valleys slung between Andean peaks. We passed trucks full of people wrapped in colourful blankets, and Jeeps packed with men in cowboy hats. The rock and snow summits of El Corazón and Rumiñahui loomed above us. We rose over mountain ridges through bunched clouds, then dropped down again to grassy plains where cattle patrolled the horizon.

And then we began to fall. For three hours the road wound downward from the dry, sierran world of the Andes towards the dense, tropical landscapes of the Amazon Basin. Expanses of pasture and corn gave way to orchards, vegetable plots and banana plantations, which in turn disappeared beneath encroaching jungle. Streams tumbled through a tangle of ferns, palms



Above, Huaorani guide Bei's house. Above right, Moi Enomenga, the Huaorani tribal leader. Right, Gabriel on the Shiripuno River. Opposite: a bridge under construction in Coca; pipelines along Via Auca; a bedroom at Huaorani Ecodge

and bedraggled epiphytes. After the breathless altitude of Quito, the air became thick and warm.

At midday we reached the town of Shell, named after the oil giant. A sprawling settlement, it is the centre of the region's drilling operations as well as an important missionary post. In Oriente, God and oil have become strange bedfellows.

At the airfield the pilot was waiting beside a six-seater Cessna. I asked if he had flown into Huaorani territory before. He gazed at me from behind his Ray-Bans. 'Hua who?' he said. 'There are a lot tribes out there. And most of them are a lot of trouble.'

THE HUAORANI (pronounced Wow-rah-nee) occupy an area of just over 8,000 square miles in Oriente, between two tributaries of the Amazon, the Napo and Curaray. They are said to have a population of 3,000, outnumbered almost 100 to one by their aboriginal neighbours, the Quichua and the Shuar. Their ability to maintain a large swathe of territory against numerous and land-hungry neighbours reflects two key characteristics of the tribe – their fierce independence and their reputation as warriors.

Until the 1960s the Huaorani were living a Stone Age existence, slipping naked through the shadows



of the rainforest with their blowpipes and spears, unconnected to the rest of the world. Outsiders were aware of their existence – people had glimpsed members of the tribe from time to time on the far banks of the Napo River – but no one who had entered their territory ever returned. The Huaorani were in the habit of killing intruders and were known only as 'Auca', a Quichua word for savages. As for the Huaorani, they called all outsiders *cowode* (cannibals). In this confusion of cultural misconceptions, it is we who were thought to be in the habit of eating one another's children. An early missionary pamphlet offers a few useful Huaorani phrases. Prominent among them is 'Do not spear



me' and 'Let me live'. An indication of the tribe's isolation is that the Huaorani language bears no relation to any other language on earth, not even those of their aboriginal neighbours. They have no numbers greater than 10, no form of writing, no clear idea of their own origins. They are expert trackers and can keep their bearings through vast stretches of forest; when they are unsure of the way they fall back on the old technique of following a butterfly. They make little

I have ever seen. Not only is the scale breathtaking – it stretches to the horizon without a break – but when you look down from the window of the plane you can see that the forest is a dense patchwork; each tree is individual – a different colour, texture and shape from its neighbour. Oriente is reputed to have the greatest genetic diversity of plants and animals on earth. Botanists studying the forests have found 473 species of trees in an area the size of two football

6 The flight from the Petroleum Age to the Stone Age, from Shell to Quehueri-ono, took 40 minutes. Beyond the tin roofs the forest closed in 9

distinction between the physical and the spiritual, and hope to become jaguars in the next life. They practise polygamy, and possibly polyandry as well.

THE FLIGHT FROM the Petroleum Age to the Stone Age, from Shell to Quehueri-ono, took about 40 minutes. Beyond the tin roofs of the oil town, the forest began to close in. The tracks and clearings dwindled and disappeared until the only breaks in the billowing arboreal quilt were snaking, clay-coloured rivers. Amazonian forest is different from any forest

itches: more than the number of native trees in Western Europe. They have also identified more plant species than are found in North America.

Animal species are just as prolific. The forests support three dozen species of monkey, 50 or more species of snake, including a giant anaconda more than 38ft long, and about 1,500 bird species, from bee-sized hummingbirds to king vultures with a six-foot wingspan. As for insects, no one can agree, other than that the number is almost incomprehensibly vast. One estimate suggests that a single square mile of Amazonian forest





“The forests provide tribes such as the Huaorani with everything that they need in life. They are a larder, a pharmacy, a wardrobe and a corner shop”

contains more than 50,000 insect and arachnid species. This is fine when they are butterflies, fluttering picturesquely between the trees, but less appealing when the variation stretches to the human botfly, whose larvae burrow into and consume human flesh, and a 12-inch tarantula called the Goliath bird-eater.

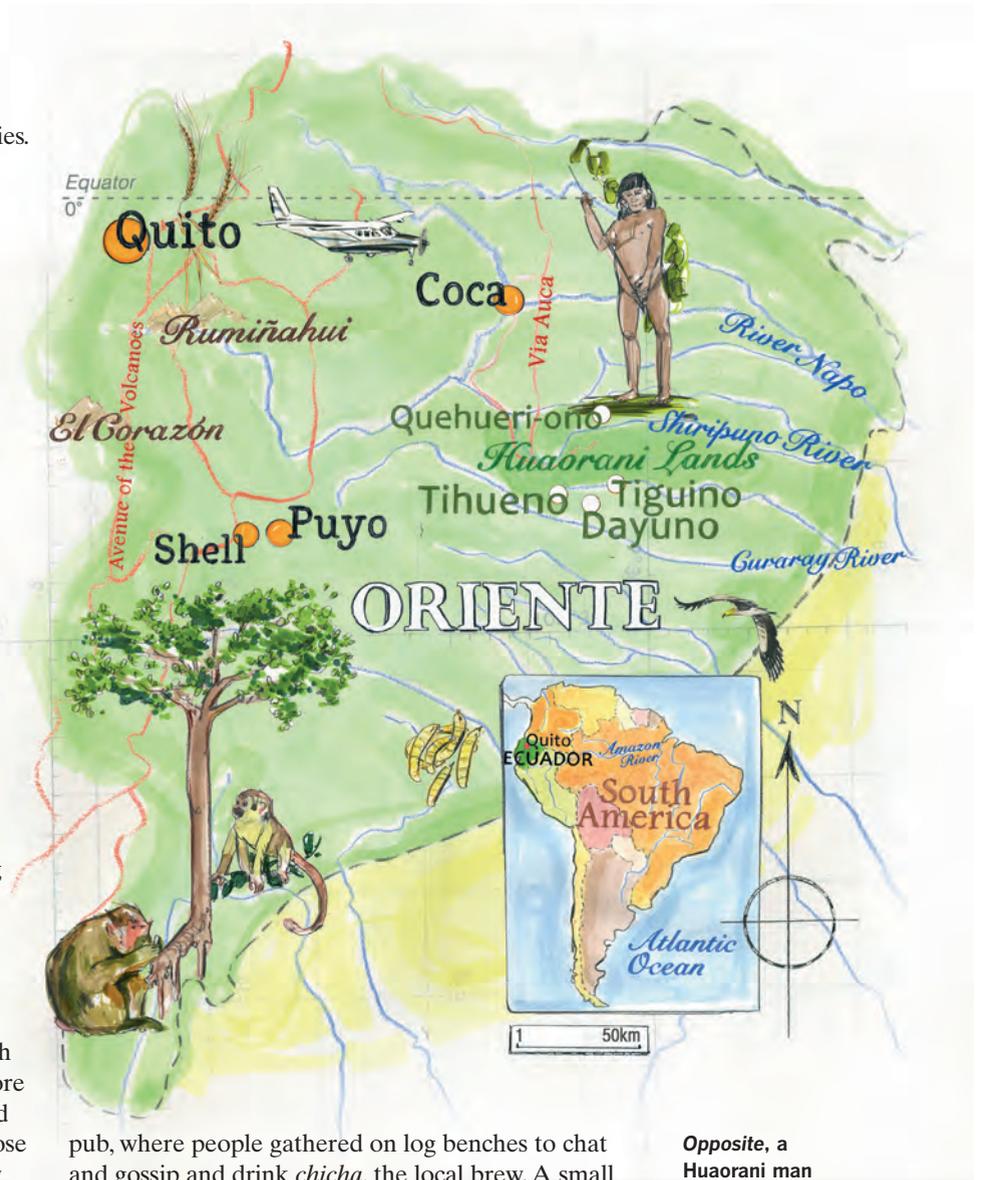
Compared to the spiders, the human population of the Amazon is surprisingly small. There are reaches of these forests that have the same population density as the Arctic. Yet the forests provide tribes such as the Huaorani with everything that they need in life. The forests are who they are. If the forests are destroyed, or if the tribes lose their connection to them, they will face their greatest fear – that they will be no one.

THE FIRST BREAK in the forest canopy was a grass airstrip. The pilot made a flypast just above the treetops, peering out the window to check the condition of the runway, then we circled and came down, bumping on the uneven grass, sending up sprays of muddy water as the plane splashed through deep puddles.

We climbed out and gazed at the forest enclosing the airstrip. One by one, people emerged from among the trees: a man with a spear, a woman balancing a toddler on her hip, three children with their faces painted, a young man in a pair of wellington boots. All were clothed, in jeans and T-shirts; tribal nakedness never survives contact with outsiders. They came forward, shyly at first, then more boldly, until some 20 people of all ages had gathered to stare at us – the curiosities, the *cowode* – their close examination faltering only for a moment when they turned to watch our plane bounce away again down the airstrip and lift into the blue Amazonian sky.

A man in his fifties took charge of us. Bei was to be my Huaorani guide. He was a shy, slender man with high cheekbones and a crooked smile. He wore a crown of toucan feathers and had two criss-crossing strips of woven palm leaves across his chest. He had been educated in a mission school and he spoke some Spanish.

Bei led us through the trees to the ‘village’, a scattered group of wooden huts almost hidden in the exuberant greenery. At its centre was a long, open-sided pavilion with a thatched roof: the communal longhouse, a cross between the village square and the



pub, where people gathered on log benches to chat and gossip and drink *chicha*, the local brew. A small fire was burning on the earthen floor, tended by a boy roasting nuts. More and more tribespeople arrived to stare, smile and nod. Children gazed at us then ran off into the undergrowth, shrieking with laughter.

The outside world, in the form of US missionaries, first tried to contact the Huaorani in 1956. The meeting didn't go well. The missionaries landed on the river in a seaplane. Unfortunately, neither their gifts nor news of the Gospel seemed to impress the tribes, and the lack of a translator led to a series of misunderstandings. Rumour spread among the Huaorani that the missionaries had eaten a girl who had gone missing some years before. Tensions rose, and some of the women became hysterical.

Some weeks later, when news emerged from the jungle that the visitors had been speared and decapitated, the headlines flashed around the world: 'Amazonian savages murder five missionaries'.

IN THE LONGHOUSE an elderly woman motioned for me to take a seat beside her. She had flat breasts, a confusion of beaded necklaces, extended ear lobes and a number of faded tattoos trickling across her torso.

Small talk with strangers is difficult at the best of times. When it is with a topless Amazonian tribeswoman who has a nasty-looking scar across

Opposite, a Huaorani man climbs a tree near the settlement of Quehueri-ono

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GETTING TO THE AMAZON

The Ultimate Travel Company (020 7386 4646; www.theultimate.com) offers a 15-day trip from £3,895 per person, including four nights at Huaorani Ecolodge, three at Mansión Alcázar, Cuenca, three at El Monte Ecolodge, four at Anahi Hotel, Quito, flights from Heathrow, transfers, activities and some meals.

 **Journey time** The flight from London to Quito takes 15 hours. The transfer to Huaorani takes about six hours.

Weather to go

 Temperatures in the Amazon Basin are high throughout the year, with a daytime average of about 29°C.