

# TRAVEL + LEISURE

# COSTA RICA

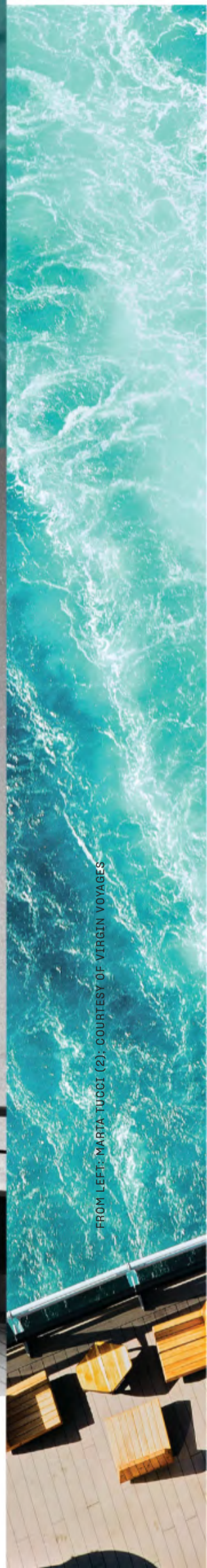
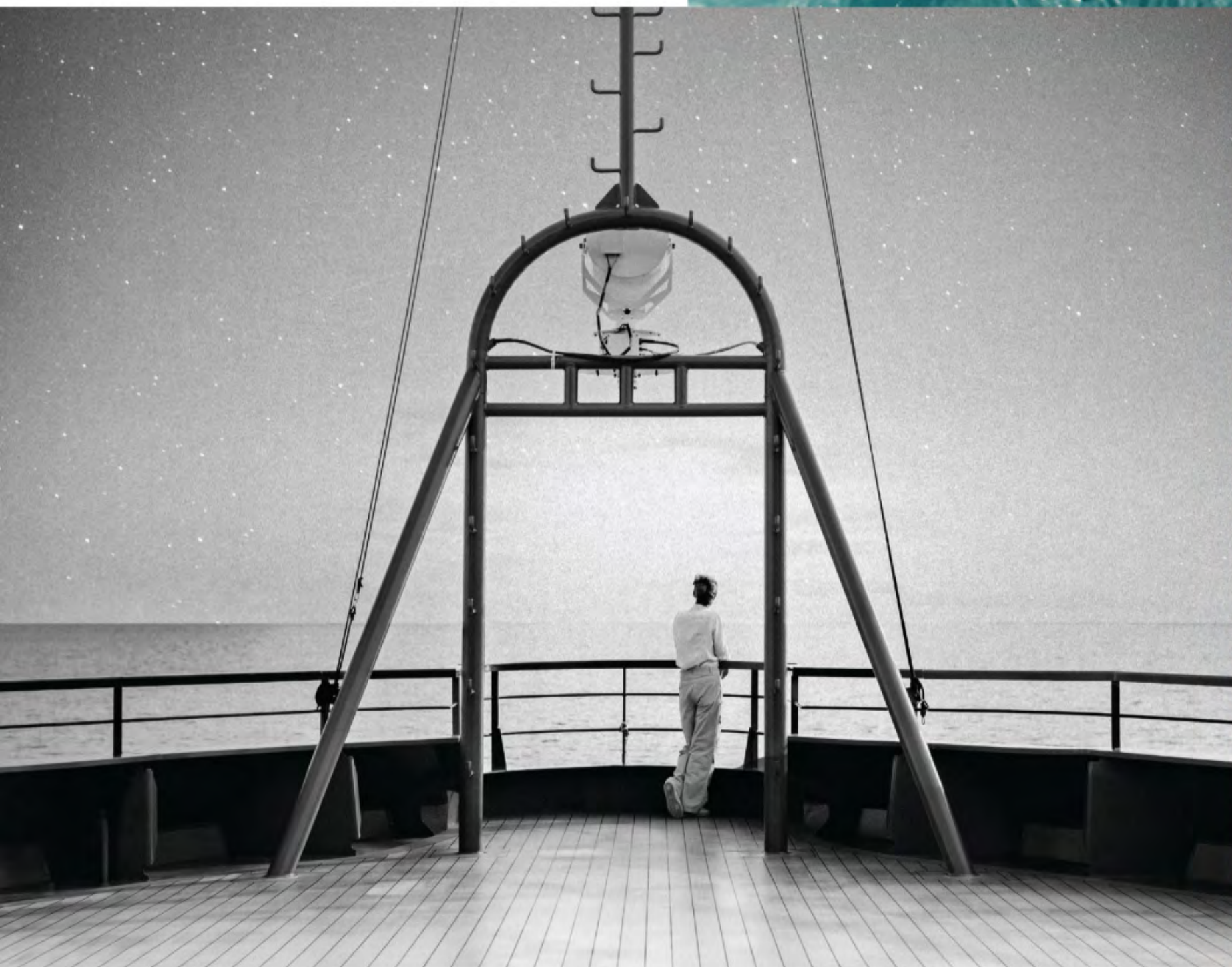
DOUBLE  
ISSUE

DESTINATION OF THE YEAR

CRUISE SPECIAL

# FRESH PERSPECTIVES

If you assume cruise vacations are about little more than relaxing in a deck chair, think again. These days, ships offer windows on the world's most dazzling corners: Indian Ocean atolls, the fjords of Alaska, the Amazon River. T+L's correspondents report on the latest must-see spots and the newest ships—and reveal why some of today's most memorable trips are those by sea.



FROM LEFT: MARTA TUCCI (2); COURTESY OF VIRGIN VOYAGES

# INTELLIGENT



TIPS + TRICKS  
TO HELP YOU  
TRAVEL SMARTER

EDITED BY  
PAUL BRADY

# TRAVELLER



*Clockwise from top: A starfish from the sea near Búzios, Brazil, on a cruise on the Seabourn Venture; Virgin Voyages' Resilient Lady; a daytime infrared image shows the stars above the Venture.*

Expedition essentials, including required reading, aboard *Seabourn Venture*.



## A River Runs Through It

On an expedition from Rio to the Amazon, **Marcia De Sanctis** discovers moments of joy, both big and small.

IN THE CONSTELLATION of human emotions, there is little that compares with the excitement one feels before setting sail on a voyage—about to plunge, as Guy de Maupassant wrote in his 1888 book, *Afloat*, “into the deep silence on the sea, far from everything.” As my taxi careened through Rio de Janeiro en route to the port, my nerves were crackling with anticipation. I was about to board a new expedition ship from **Seabourn**, the *Seabourn Venture*, which would soon glide into the ocean, up the Atlantic coast, and into the Amazon River.

That evening, we sailed on a mirror of water past Sugarloaf Mountain. From a distance, the 1,296-foot peak, shaped like a whale’s snout, is one of the world’s most formidable sights. But in the twilight, it appeared as little more than a dark paper cutout. On the horizon, the city of more than 6 million people was reduced to a thin strip of white dotted

with tiny lights. As we headed out toward open sea, they vanished entirely.

Standing at the bow, glued to my binoculars, I was struck by the first of several epiphanies I had on this trip. To travel by sea is to encounter both the epic and the intimate, and I was about to experience both ends of the spectrum. The *Venture* was designed primarily for exploring the polar extremes, but on this trip it would traverse the equator, from the Southern to the Northern Hemisphere and back again. From Rio, we would travel a total of 3,622 miles, going as far as Manaus, in the country’s interior. I was looking forward to the restorative presence of ocean and sky, but I also felt an eagerness

to learn about the cultures of this storied part of the world.

First, though, I got an orientation to the 558-foot *Venture* from expedition coordinator Claudio Schulze. He led me to the ship’s Discovery Center, a theater designed for lectures and films. We then took in the Bow Lounge, where rows of screens replicate what the crew sees from the bridge, including a dotted red line that indicated our course.

While *Venture* can accommodate 264 passengers, just 145 were on this cruise, accompanied by a 245-person crew. Among them was a team of 21 expedition specialists who would prove to be the most critical element of this trip: experts who imparted their





◀ The basilica of Nossa Senhora do Carmo, in Olinda, Brazil, near the port of Recife.

▲ *Seabourn Venture* on the Amazon River near Santarém.

▼ A Signature suite on the *Venture*.

▶ The view from a suite balcony.



## YOUR NEXT ADVENTURE

The cruise lines and itineraries to consider in the year ahead, as selected by T+L news director Paul Brady.

▶ **Seabourn Pursuit** will be sailing the South Pacific. In April and August, it will offer itineraries that focus on the history of World War II, with visits to islands involved in the conflict, including Chuuk and Guadalcanal.

▶ A favorite of T+L readers, the **Paul Gauguin** will spend Christmas and New Year's going round-trip from Tahiti to the Society Islands.

wisdom in an array of fields, from marine biology and anthropology to astronomy and geology. (On my trip, there was also a submarine pilot, Sebastian Coulthard, a former aircraft engineer for the Royal Navy: *Venture* counts among its many amenities two custom-built submersibles that, unlike the ill-fated *Titan*, adhere to strict design and safety standards.)

By the time I'd oriented myself on the ship, we'd reached the seductive beach town of Búzios, about 150 miles northeast of Rio. The *Venture* has 24 Zodiacs for offshore expeditions, and one of them zipped me to shore for a snorkeling adventure. At the port, I boarded a wooden schooner for a sightseeing excursion. Soon enough, I snapped on a mask and was swimming above soft, swaying corals and schools of shimmering sergeant majors. Back on the schooner, caipirinhas appeared on deck, and a man boarded to sell cashews baked in a sublime concoction of coconut, honey, and lime. When we returned to Búzios, I scoured the beach looking for the nut vendor, but didn't bump into him. Back aboard the *Venture* that evening, Schulze tracked me down:

he saw how enamored I had been with the cashews and, as a surprise, bought me a few extra bags.

As we sailed northward that night, a handful of expedition team members gathered on Deck 9 under a sky aglow with stars. Marine biologist Dan Olsen pointed out the Southern Cross, a surprisingly humble constellation, but a quiet thrill to behold nonetheless. As we got to chatting, I mentioned my interest in seeing bottlenose dolphins. Olsen was quick with some advice: "You have to be outside early."

So the next morning I was up at 5 a.m., and I wasn't alone. Gathered at the bow were several of *Venture's* ornithologists and naturalists. I almost did cartwheels when we spotted a trio of the joyously acrobatic mammals, right around the time the sun was coming up.

Then, as we glided toward the port of Recife, the weather turned. It happened to be the first day of fall in the Southern Hemisphere, and the season began with velvety dark clouds and heavy rains. Draped in a plastic rain poncho, determined to make the most of my limited time in the city, I met up with a

guide named Hugo Menezes. In Marco Zero Square, a duo of *repente* singers strummed guitars and improvised lyrics—a hallmark of this folk music from the surrounding state of Pernambuco. The genre was made famous by Luiz Gonzaga, whose face adorns a giant mural on Recife's towering town hall. "He's our Hank Williams," Menezes said.

From the square we walked to Kahal Zur Israel, the oldest public synagogue in the Americas, which was founded in the 1600s by Dutch Jews and “new Christians,” Portuguese Jews who converted during the Inquisition. Afterward, we took shelter from the rain in a café with an order of grilled tapioca cakes stuffed with cheese. Next, we drove on to Olinda, the first capital city of Pernambuco, whose historic center is a UNESCO World Heritage site, thanks to its 20 Baroque churches and intact colonial buildings in Life Saver colors. Olinda’s wealth was derived from sugarcane, and the enslaved people who worked the plantations were the bedrock of the area’s economy for centuries. (Brazil abolished slavery in 1888.) Today, the low-slung building where human beings were once sold is, rather unsettlingly, filled with handicraft shops.

There were lighter moments, too. During our amble around town, Menezes pointed out more than two dozen types of fruit-bearing trees. On board *Venture*, I’d been devouring chef Ainsley Mascarenhas’s cooking, which was often inspired by his own Portuguese-Indian background. In Olinda, though, I was able to taste fruits I’d never before encountered: *caja*, bright orange with a flavor to match; fragrant *pitomba*, which reminded me of apricot; *caju*, on which sprouts one lonely cashew nut; and, most refreshingly, a glass of soursop juice, smooth and tart.

From Recife, we pressed onward. I spent hours on deck, gripping my binoculars, watching flying fish skim the surface of the ocean—a deeper blue than I had ever seen—and get swiped by magnificent frigatebirds. I consumed many flat whites in the café just seconds away from my suite. And I attended fascinating lectures, like the one on ancient Amazonian civilizations delivered by Alexandra Edwards, a Chile-born, Wesleyan-educated cultural anthropologist and ethno-astronomer.

It turned out to be an excellent primer for a capoeira performance in Natal, 160 miles up the coast from Recife. The ferociously athletic pursuit is a combination of martial arts, dance, and gymnastics. Capoeira also involves

clapping, chanting, and beats from the atabaque, a tall drum. Created by enslaved people from West Africa, it was later integrated with regional dances. Today, it’s a window into the country’s diversity. After a beachside lunch of *moqueca*, a fish stew, and *farofa*, a dish made with toasted cassava flour, I returned to the ship delightfully stuffed and richer for the thrilling day on land.



ILLUSTRATION BY DONOUGH O'MALLEY



◀ Exploring the Amazon by Zodiac, not far from Santarém.



◀ The living area of a Signature suite on *Venture*.

▼ *Moqueca*, a classic seafood stew, with rice, beans, and *farofa*, in Natal.



◀ Capoeira practitioners at a gym in Natal.

The next day afforded even more action: it was time to cross the equator. Following seafaring tradition—one famously embraced by Charles Darwin and the crew of the *HMS Beagle*—we threw our own line-crossing ceremony, in which a crewman dressed as King Neptune presided over a mock trial, affectionately denouncing as “pollywogs” those on board—including me—who had never crossed the equator before. It was a festive and momentous affair, made more so by multiple mango daiquiris.

The ceremony also marked a pivot point in our journey, as we prepared to leave the Atlantic behind and enter the Amazon Delta. In the Discovery Center one evening, we got an explainer on the wonders to come from Iggy Rojas, an ecologist and expedition leader who got his start with Seabourn in 1989 as a local river guide. “We have a very exciting day tomorrow!” he exclaimed, before piercing our lofty expectations by running through a laundry list of misconceptions about the Amazon. Rojas warned us about anticipating a parade of jaguars,

anacondas, flowering jungles, and howler monkeys. Rather, we should prepare for something more mundane—while also recognizing that we’d soon be sailing on waters that represent the lifeblood of the planet’s largest ecosystem.

“It’s not just a river,” he told me. “The Amazon should not be underestimated,” he continued, adding that beyond it lies a universe of connected pieces: highland forests, floodplains, wildlife, and also “the human element, which is important.” The Amazon, Rojas concluded, “is like love. It’s a concept so big you cannot possibly explain it.”

The next morning, I was back at the bow of *Venture*, alongside Rojas and many others. Despite his warnings about expecting too much wildlife, square-tailed festive parrots and red-bellied macaws soared overhead and a rich band of greenery—cecropia, kapok, and palm trees—lined the banks. To our southeast was Marajó, an island about the size of Switzerland.

I paused to fathom the astonishing vastness. The 4,000-mile-long river cuts



◀ Snorkeling off a schooner, near Búzios.

▼ Fresh Brazil nuts, a common sight along the Amazon.



across South America and empties one-fifth of the earth's fresh water into the sea: 58 billion gallons per second. It's home to almost a third of all the plant and animal species. The Amazon is, as I learned at one lecture, not only the biggest river system on the planet today but the largest believed to have existed in earth's 4.5 billion-year history.

I thought back to a trip, not long ago, when I'd sailed up the Nile. Its banks always seemed within reach. But on this khaki-brown water, dense with sediments carried from the Andes, there

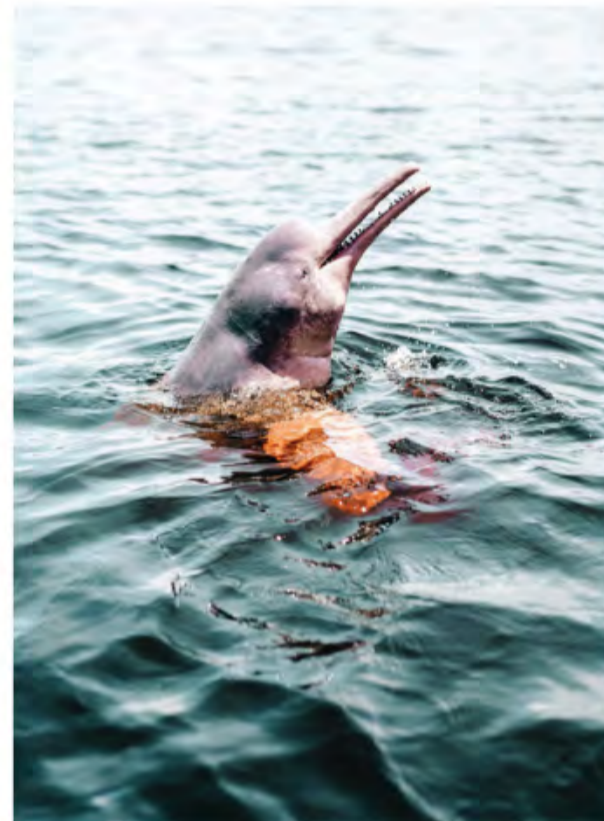
were several points when I couldn't see the shore. During the rainy season, parts of the Amazon can be a staggering 30 miles wide.

The conditions prompted some adaptations on board: because of the sediment, *Venture* switched off its water-purification system, which would typically be used to top up the ship's stores. Guests were asked to limit their use of water by taking shorter showers. Meanwhile, nonessential exterior lights were switched off, and the doors to outdoor areas were sealed after



▲ Bird-watching near the mouth of the Amazon River.





◀ Colonial-style façades in Olinda.

▲ A boto, or Amazon river dolphin, in the Río Negro.



## YOUR NEXT ADVENTURE

► In January, **Ponant** kicks off the first of 12 expeditions in partnership with the Explorers Club, the science-minded nonprofit. The series begins with a 30-day “half-circumnavigation” of Antarctica aboard the luxury icebreaker *Le Commandant Charcot*, starting in South America and wrapping in New Zealand.

► **Lindblad Expeditions** will run a series of domestic trips on the Columbia and Snake rivers aboard the *National Geographic Sea Bird* and *National Geographic Sea Lion*, both of which have 31 cabins. The food-focused itineraries are organized in partnership with *Food & Wine*, which, like T+L, is published by Dotdash Meredith.

sundown, in an effort to fend off swarms of insects—something that’s rarely a consideration at sea. (I could still steal away to my private balcony, though, where I’d spend hours under the crescent moon, after the bugs had flown away.)

As the ship arrived in the port of Santarém one morning, there was just enough light to see the phenomenon known as the “meeting of the waters”: the creamy-hued Amazon and the dark green Tapajós, one of its longest tributaries, whose color comes from decaying vegetation, swirl together.

Santarém is a major shipping port for soy, and there was industrial gloom among the tankers and cargo ships along the banks. But the next morning I paddled away from the working waterfront on a kayaking excursion into a riverine wilderness, alongside three experienced guides from *Venture*. (I took particular comfort in the fact that one of the trio, Santiago Stabile, said that capsizing on the Tapajós was very unlikely.)

Against an easy current, we kayaked past water hyacinths and watched jacana birds trot across giant lily pads.

I felt the water’s mythical force as I paddled through the drenched forest, under massive banyan trees, and into a small village built on stilts. A local man had just picked some pods of *mari-mari* fruit, and the slippery disks tasted like a cross between kiwi and banana.

The next day, I hopped aboard a tender for an excursion to Parintins, a village filled with fruit stalls. I wandered, eating and drinking whatever looked good: strong coffee, sliced tucum fruit, caramelized bananas, and condensed-milk pound cake. I met up with some fellow passengers in an air-conditioned hall, where we witnessed a flamboyant dance spectacle—a re-creation of the region’s annual *boi-bumbá* festival—that served as a powerful reminder that the vast Amazon region is filled with cultural riches as well as natural ones.

By the time we arrived in Manaus, the largest city on the river, we’d been sailing for 12 days. But to spot the Amazon’s fabled boto, or pink dolphins, I traveled an additional 40 miles, this time on a speedboat up the Río Negro, another tributary. I stepped into the water and,

when one of these gentle creatures rubbed against my calf, I felt an instant sense of clarity and calm.

At the same time, seeing this ecosystem firsthand, and feeling its immensity up close, imparted a sense of urgency that no breaking-news headline ever had. “The good thing about expedition ships is that people bring their curiosity,” a member of *Venture*’s team said.

Though I had immersed myself in the pleasures of Brazil—its beaches, forests, and rivers—it was impossible not to think about the estimated 20 percent of the country’s Amazonian rainforest that has already been lost. I had learned so much from the expedition crew. I had sampled sticky fruits I never even knew existed. And deep in the Amazon, I felt the granular and the grand merge once again. The dolphin jumped, snatched a fish, and turned to swim up the river—the soul of a continent, and the heart of the world.

*14-day Amazon Delta trips on the Seabourn Venture from \$5,999 per person, all-inclusive.*