

Ecuador's Waorani: The Last Hunter Gatherers of the Amazon Reconnaissance Report 2021

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by Inger Vandyke

The Amazon Rainforest. It is the only place on earth where the humidity of the air has no dependence on the evaporation of seawater. Spanning nine South American countries, this gigantic stretch of rainforest, the 'lungs of our planet, is one of the most threatened regions of biodiversity left on our planet.

The world's tropical rainforests feature nature at its most forceful and diverse. Plunging into the world of rainforests is like entering an arena where every available source of light is competed for by animals and plants. Our rainforests have absorbed so much heat and light from their equatorial surrounds and, in turn, have given us a greater abundance and diversity of life than all of our other territorial habitats combined. They have also given birth to some of the most sophisticated tribal people in the world, yet where they live is no Eden.

Constant incursions for logging, mining and agriculture are slowly stripping the Amazon of its natural treasures and the precious cultures that call these rainforests home.

Life for humans in the Amazon is intensely complex and competitive. We can only prosper here if we foster a deep understanding of how to live alongside nature.

I first became interested in the Waorani people of Ecuador after reading “The River of Darkness” by Buddy Levy a decade ago. This historical tome documented the phenomenal and seminary journey of explorer William Orellana who became the first European to navigate and explore the entire length of the Amazon from his starting point in Quito to the Amazon river delta in Brazil. My interest in the Amazon, however, extended way further back in my past.

I first visited the Amazon in 1997. All those years ago I ended up in the Amazon by chance on a hitchhiking trip through South America. For some reason, I hadn’t planned to visit the Amazon back then but I was wrapping up a mountaineering expedition in the Cordillera Real in remote Bolivia when I met some crazy Swiss travellers who told me they were heading from Sorata to Rurrenabaque overland by 4WD vehicles, 10-tonne trucks and whitewater canoes. They asked if I’d like to join in and share costs. I thought to myself “Why not?”



The author on her original trip to the Bolivian Amazon in 1997 (image by Inger Vandyke)

What happened next was the trip of a lifetime over rugged terrain traversing high Andean passes and plunging deep into the rainforest along narrow, winding and dangerous dirt roads. We travelled on what is often now called the ‘Camino Del Oro’ and while it was relatively safe when we went, the area has since been through stages of banditry and muggings making it still a big adventure for anyone who attempts to traverse it.

When I arrived in Rurrenabaque I went with my newfound friends on a trip that completely blew my mind. We decided to spend a week in the rainforests of the Amazon and through a serendipitous combination of miscommunications and unplanned surprises, the whole time we spent there was like one great big adventure. Travelling mostly in the Rio Negro region of Bolivia, we ended up swimming with Amazonian dolphins, searching for wild Anacondas in swamps, hunting for wild Cayman, holding wild sloths, fishing for and eating wild Piranha, spotting Giant Anteaters and Tapirs, all while sleeping on mats on the ground under large mosquito nets.

I even caught my first wild Boa Constrictor on a nighttime trip to the makeshift toilet. I caught sight of its tiny head peering out from the palm leaf walls, gently took hold of it and went to show my guide. As I did so, it coiled around my wrist, tightened and tried to yank its head free from my fingers. My guide said “It’s a Boa but a baby one” and of course I should have realised this as I felt the constriction around my arm. After identifying it, I took it back to where I found it.

It was quite a rough but incredible journey that involved biting insects and getting covered in mud. After all these years though, those two things are not what sticks most vividly in my mind.

Etched deeper in my memory was an afternoon I spent sitting on the banks of the Rio Negro, watching the sky turn pink at dusk. I found a particularly pretty spot on the side of the river to write my field notes. Back then I wrote my notes with the orchestra of the forest playing in the background. Since I was young my paternal grandmother introduced me to the joys of classical music. From her and my school music studies I learned to discern different sounds in a forest cacophony so even now, when I listen to the forest, mentally I try to single out the crickets, birds, frogs, flows of rivers, cicadas and people, in much the same way I can still discern the violins, oboes, French horns and percussion instruments of an orchestra. Alongside those forest symphonies, my main memories are of the stunning biodiversity of the Amazon, travelling through what is now known as the Madidi nature reserve to a place so untamed, so wild, so untouched that I feel honoured to have truly seen the Amazon back before it became commercialised and exploited to the degree it is now.

I left that trip thinking I may never see the Amazon again. After all, there was so much of the world left to see. I was 27 years old at the time. I had big plans.

Fast forward to today and most of those plans have materialised. I have never been a good ‘talker’. If I say I am going to do something I almost always follow through.

Of all those big plans, returning to the Amazon wasn’t the highest thing on my list if I am perfectly honest. I’ve read a lot about the destruction of the Amazon via numerous nefarious means including deforestation, mining, farming and other reasons to grab land. Every

time I've seen something on the news about more and more of the Amazon being destroyed I've watched the destruction of a place I once found so magical with terrible dismay. I wondered if the places I went to are still intact or more if the people I met when I travelled in the Bolivian Amazon are still surviving. While none of them were true tribal people living in traditional ways, their small livelihoods were, or are, still at stake. Protecting their patch is still important.

Fast forward to twenty-four years after that trip, I found myself sitting in Quito trying to reconcile an incredible two weeks of staying with local Waorani families in the Ecuadorian Amazon. I finally got to meet truly traditional Amazonian people and live alongside them in their homes. My mind raced with everything I learned, from the transference of power that takes place between Waorani people and the nature that surrounds them to learning how to be polite or even how to cure stomach ailments using leaves from the forest.

My journey began with a flight to Coca from Quito. This short hop over the Andes avoided a five-hour drive over landslide affected roads and since I was facing a day and a half of canoe travel along more than 300 kilometres of Amazonian rivers, I wanted to make sure that an arduous road journey didn't add to it. I wanted to be alive, alert on that river trip and I was so happy that I was.

To me, a river journey into the Amazon is like a literal rite of passage. Why would you fly in and forego seeing all that wildlife, the chance to stop in remote communities of people, travel through the Intangible Zones of the 'uncontacted' and soak in the atmosphere of the forest? Doing these journeys at either end of my trip I saw five different species of monkeys, many species of birds, cayman, capybaras and I even watched river tortoises have their nostrils cleaned by beautifully coloured butterflies. I saw my first forest giants that took the form of Kapoks, Figs and Cedars, each adorned with a mixture of bromeliads, epiphytes, bryophytes, orchids and mosses, all forming an ecosystem of their own, like islands in the jungle. We passed by colonies of proboscis bats, swarms of rainbow coloured butterflies all indulging in the minerals of the mud banks and we searched for an elusive wild Anaconda without luck.



River canoes line up to transport us into the world of the Waorani (image by Inger Vandyke)

Curious children would race down from their homes to the river banks to watch us pass by from their grassy lairs. We sped up a bit through the regions of the uncontacted due to a danger they might spot us and attack us passing through. We found small family groups of Waorani on daytime fishing outings or waiting for their hunter relatives to return from forays looking for food. River journeys into the Amazon would beguile even the most sceptical of visitors. Even if all that life wasn't your thing, just to sit in the cool breeze of the boat, snaking around rivers and trying to avoid submerged broken trees while listening to the Waorani crew is a wonderful, relaxing introduction to the ways of the Waorani.

I was already enthralled by the river trip by the time I arrived at my first Waorani family for an overnight stay and I'd only been on the river for around four hours by that point! The family home was located on a sandy bend of the Shiripuno River and featured two dark oxbow lagoons within a short walk from the community itself. Before I visited the Waorani, I'd heard a lot about how they kept wild pets, or Mascote, with them at home and the home of my first family was a perfect introduction to this somewhat quirky habit. Meeting me at the handmade wooden dock was the village headman and his wife, the family matriarch. Their pet dogs ran down the dock to meet us also and as we disembarked I walked up into my home for the night to be greeted by their pet Toucan, numerous Black and Blue-headed Parrots, a Golden-crowned Amazon parrot, a tiny baby Woolly Monkey, a Spider Monkey and a Kinkajou living with their chickens under the more modern building of the community. My first instinct was to gravitate towards these little creatures as, for someone like me who first started my photography career in conservation photography, to actually get up close to them as pets was a true draw. As I found myself talking to their toucan and innately following their little Woolly Monkey around, I had to actually remind myself to be polite to my hosts, enjoy their hospitality and not get too distracted by everything!



A new home is built on an Oxbow that is home to Giant Otters in the Amazon (image by Inger Vandyke)

That night I enjoyed trying the first wild food of my trip – a freshly caught Peccary (wild pig) for dinner which was delicious. I was also shown how to strip palm leaves and make baskets and hammocks and I was surprised to see how strong these fibers actually are! Before I went to bed I hastily wrote my notes in the solar light of the main house. That night I fell asleep to the music of the forest and I slept better there than I had anywhere I could remember.



Joining Waorani family life is a really special experience (image by Inger Vandyke)

The next morning I packed up my things and as I was saying a final farewell to my host family I heard the weirdest screaming sound. The family's resident Red-throated Caracara was calling out to signal the arrival of strangers, acting as their personal, wild house alarm. The canoes, or Uipo, that were supposed to take me into the forest had arrived.

EXPLORING THE AMAZON IN UIPO CANOES

The Waorani call all canoes Uipo and for tourist transits they equip them with wooden seats where you can sit and watch the life of the river up close as you cruise along it. Our journey took us over three Amazonian river tributaries that day – the Shiripuno, Cono Naco Chico and eventually into the Cono Naco proper. I sat watching the world around me while chatting with my guide. He expertly told me when we were approaching each river and also when we entered and exited the 'Intangible Zone' of the Taromenanes and Taegeri, two of the last un-contacted groups of people left on earth. Over a day of travel on these rivers we spotted capybara drinking water from their perches in tree roots over the river and we saw a huge troupe of Squirrel monkeys fly through the air from one side of the river to another, right over our heads! On some river bends we would see huge swarms of butterflies landing on the mud to lick the minerals from it. At other times those same butterflies would land on sunning turtles in order to clean the salt from the turtle's nostrils! We passed through stretches of the river where the air hung heavy with a sweet fragrance and when I enquired about the source of this beautiful smell I discovered it came from orchids growing high in the tree canopy. Piercing the skies above the forest we spotted huge Kapok trees, truly the behemoths of the forest and the one-time home of Waorani people. They used to actually live up in the crowns of these incredible trees. It isn't known exactly when the Waorani decided to live a more terrestrial existence yet I couldn't help but try to imagine what it must have been like to live with a view over the rainforest canopy every day.



Cruising down the Cononaco Chico River to reach one of our camps (image by Inger Vandyke)

Joining us on my trip into the forest was a Waorani elder named Wani who told me of the first time he saw white people. Missionaries had only 'discovered' the Waorani in the 1950s and since then the lives of Waorani people have changed dramatically.

"When the planes came with the missionaries, the people stopped us from fighting with rivalling clans but they destroyed our culture forever…." – *Wani, a Waorani elder from the Shiripuno region.*

It was on that transit day that I learned to recognize a bee hive in the trees and how to differentiate that from the nest of 'lazy ants'. The former is an important source of Waorani food. Waorani people will climb up to gather the mud from lazy ant nests and use it as an insect repellant.

We were able to stop many times. In some places we could linger and enjoy lunch. In others we couldn't stop for long. The intangible zone is something that strikes fear into the hearts of even the most hardy Waorani people for it was only a few years ago that a Waorani husband and wife were killed by the Taegeri when they became stuck after their boat broke down on the side of the river!

The trip to my next family of Waorani lasted a full day and by the time we arrived towards sunset, my mind was in a sensory overload filled with information about the Waorani way of life, new Wao words I tried to learn and my first memory card was already half full! We

landed in our home for the next few days, an extremely remote community of Waorani people who live around a tiny forest air strip in simple homes with a central community building. After enjoying a meal of fresh fish from the river that night, we went out 'frogging' in a local marshland and we spotted some fantastic tree and bull frogs!

My insect-proof tent was set up in a wooden home built to accommodate visiting guests. It was right next to the river and had the most amazing view. Thankfully my stay included a soft mattress, linen and a pillow. It was all I needed to enjoy another amazing night of sleep.

POISON OR MEDICINE?

The next day I was invited to join a hunting party for the morning. After breakfast I was given the opportunity to watch local headman, Penti, prepare his poison darts using the toxin from a Curare vine which he had cooked into a syrup over an open fire. He carefully inspected the long blow dart pipes that he may use to hunt monkeys in the treetops and he sharpened the heads of his spears should he find peccaries to hunt instead of monkeys. We left the community in canoes and found an isolated stretch of the river. Climbing the river banks I walked as silently as possible with the forests until the screeching noise of a peccary was heard. In an instant the two headmen, Penti and Ginti, were off! I could neither keep up with them or stay quiet enough for these guys to successfully hunt so my guide and I went on a slow walk back to our waiting canoes where I learned about medicinal plants like the Cuentobe, a plant with thick, waxy, black leaves that is used to cure stomach upsets. I also learned that the meat of Opossum and Hoatzins is given to people suffering from leukemia type illnesses. During our walk my guide showed me how to scrape the bark of Curare vine. Oddly, when mixed with water the bark of Curare is given as a medicine to cure stomach upsets and it can even be used to cure a bite from a spider or snake! He mixed some up with water on a leaf from the same vine then offered it to me to drink. "You first!" I joked. I had read about the Waorani use of traditional plant medicines but my foreign instinct kicked in and I still felt nervous about trying this orange liquid. After he took some, I did though and the juice of the Curare actually tasted like a sweet cough medicine. It is only when it is cooked that it becomes the poison used in blow darts.



Contrary to what a lot believe, the poison in poison dart frogs comes mostly from the bark of a vine called Curare (image by Inger Vandyke)



Collecting bark from the Curare vine to make medicine and poison for poison darts in the Amazon rainforest (image by Inger Vandyke)



Poison dart toxin, when mixed with water, is actually used as medicine for stomach issues. It is only when it is cooked that it becomes poisonous (image by Inger Vandyke)



Before it is cooked, the sap of Curare vine bark can be used as a traditional medicine drink (image by Inger Vandyke)

Arriving back at the canoes we were met by our headmen who reported an unsuccessful hunt. It was looking like we might eat fish that day instead. Since several hunting and fishing parties go out each day we arrived back to just that, a delicious lunch of fish cooked over an open fire.



Fresh caught fish from the Amazon, vegetables collected that day from local gardens and platano harvested locally. All part of the incredible Waorani diet (image by Inger Vandyke)

That afternoon I simply decided to hang around the community taking photographs. I have always been fascinated by the relationship that the Waorani have with their wild animal pets so I asked if I could set up some portraits with people who had pets in the community and this was a fantastic way to enjoy both meeting Waorani people and actually being able to handle their beautiful wild creatures like Paca, parrots and monkeys.

After another superb dinner of fresh fish I boarded canoes and took a slow cruise down the inky silence of the river searching for wild caymans with my guides using a spotlight. We were in such a remote place and since the moon was new the night sky was peppered with a million stars. Although we didn't see that many cayman, the opportunity to slink through the slow moving waters of the river listening the to the sounds of the forest was magical.

Before I could even make it to breakfast in the morning, my guide had been awake and out looking for frogs. "Inger! I have something really special to show you!" he exclaimed as he opened his cupped hands and showed me a stunning Tiger-striped Monkey frog. This beautiful tree frog normally lives high in the rainforest canopy and only comes down to forest pools to breed so it was quite something to see such a rare and pretty frog that so few others get to see. We spent some time photographing it before going out on another excursion in the rainforest. I gave up trying to keep speed with the hunters so I simply enjoyed learning more about foraging in the rainforest while enjoying encounters with massive damselflies, a Green-lined vine snake and numerous birds.



Portrait of a rare and difficult to see Tiger Striped Monkey Frog in the wilds of the Ecuadorian Amazon (image by Inger Vandyke)

TRANSFERENCE OF NATURE

When we returned to camp, we heard some excited cheers and whoops! The early morning hunting party had returned and I was surprised to see the Tepenya, the village headman's son, carrying a large White-lipped Peccary into the camp that his people had hunted. The Waorani will string the feet of the animal together using vines so the animal can be carried more easily through the forest.

I couldn't help but join the excitement of the hunters' arrival and then I watched what transpired in the community after the slain peccary was laid on the ground. Its feet were carefully untied and the forest vines used to secure it were then used to gently 'whip' a young Waorani boy in an act of transference of power between the deceased animal and a young son in the community. For the Waorani it is shameful to raise boys who are frightened of the forest so these practices act as a method of transference where the whipped boy will gain power from the spirit of the deceased animal. After this the eldest woman in the community approached the peccary and gently rubbed its fur with her hands before she rubbed her hands on her own body. By doing this, older Waorani people will also take a part of the animals spirit in the hope they will live a longer and happier life.

Unlike so many tribal people around the world, the Waorani people do not use the skins of any animal they hunt for any real purpose. Instead, the fur is simply singed off in the fire and the skin is eaten alongside the rest of the animal. I watched a group of younger Waorani women prepare the peccary for the fire and their skill of butchery was amazing. Peccary heads are reserved especially for women and softer organs like the liver are kept aside to feed elderly people in the community.

It took quite some time for the excitement of returning hunting and fishing parties to die down. At the end of fishing trips I watched children run down and collect pretty Mosaic Stingrays and beautiful Leopard Catfish from the boats to t feed the community

Like so many other sustainable acts of the Waorani, nothing is ever wasted from the natural things they hunt, fish or harvest from their surroundings. Absolutely everything is eaten or used.

KEMPERE – THE JAGUAR SHAMAN

Returning to the community I had the pleasure of meeting one of the eldest living treasures of the Waorani. I was kindly invited to the home of legenday Shaman and elder, Kemperi.



He is reputed to be over a hundred years old now but his appearance definitely defies this age. It wasn't long ago that Kemperi was able to walk huge distances in the forest to reach different Waorani communities. These days, however, he is enjoying his retirement in his traditional Peto Baco home with his wife Menemo. It was through my chats with Kemperi that I began to learn about the threats that Waorani people face in the Yasunis.

My message is that we are living here. We are living bien (in a good way). No more [oil] companies should come, because already there are enough. They need to know that we have problems; I want them to comprehend what we are living. Many companies want to enter, everywhere. But they do not help; they have come to damage the forest. Instead of going hunting, they cut down trees to make paths. Instead of caring for [the forest], they destroy. Where the company lives, it smells nasty; the animals hide; and when the river rises, the manioc and plantain in the low areas have problems. We respect the environment where we live. We like the tourists because they come, and go away. When the company comes, it does not want to leave. Now [the company] is in the habit of offering many things; it says that it comes to do business, but then it makes itself into the owner. Where the company has left its environment, we cannot return. It stays bad. Something must remain for us. Without territory, we cannot live. If they destroy everything, where will we live? We do not want more companies, or more roads. We want to live like Waorani, we want others to respect our culture – Kemperi, the Jaguar Shaman of the Waorani people.

He kindly allowed me to take some portraits of him before we left to wander around the village visiting people.

'GATA' – THE WORLD'S NAUGHTIEST PET!

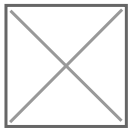
During this amble we met Maria, the owner of the best baby pet ever, a tiny Woolly Monkey she named 'Gata'. Visiting her at her home I learned quickly that keeping a baby monkey as a pet presents the Waorani with some very unique and quirky problems. We arrived to find him swinging off Maria's washing line and tearing the pegged clothes off, dropping them all on the ground. Since we were new to his world we laughed continuously as he alternated between doing this, jumping on my lap, chewing my camera strap and also checking out my camera backpack! He was hilarious and I wanted to kidnap him and take him home with me!!! Alas I had to let Maria keep him but he was so adorable!



Laundry is an issue when your pet monkey uses the line as a gym and a place to tear clothes off before they dry (image by Inger Vandyke)



Unique Waorani issues include pet monkeys attacking your camera gear (image by Inger Vandyke)



Unique Waorani issues – a pet Woolly Monkey takes over a camera backpack (image by Inger Vandyke)

COMMUNING WITH GIANTS

From the very start of my trip I had been admiring the huge Kapok trees of the local rainforest so I asked if it was possible to actually go and see one up close. This swung us all into an impromptu excursion in the forest where we visited one whose roots were so massive, it was impossible to do them justice in photography. That was, until Tepenya offered to go and sit at the base of one and as you can see from my photos, this tree was truly a forest giant! What an amazing way to spend the final hours of that day!



Kapoks are the true giants of Ecuador's rainforests. Here a Waorani warrior looks up into the forest canopy. He is around 6' tall so this tree is truly massive! (image by Inger Vandyke)

HUNTING FOR ANACONDAS

Later that day a suggestion was put forward for me to go and see if we could find a wild anaconda in the forest. Years ago, I actually went 'hunting' for anacondas in the Rio Negro of Bolivia but back then we were on foot in the swamps. This proposed trip involved taking a small wooden Uipo downstream before it was dragged through the forest to a remote Oxbow lagoon. I did my best to help transport the Uipo until conditions became so muddy that the Waoranis told me to get in the canoe as we had almost reached the lagoon. I crept in and got settled. In order to see any anacondas we all had to be extremely quiet and whisper to each other. In the end we never saw one but the excursion into the Oxbow allowed us to see no less than nine Hoatzin which was fantastic.

TURMERIC

Over lunch, I sat and watched a beautiful girl grating turmeric roots using a small tuna tin with holes punched in the base of it as a grater. The roots of turmeric are not only used in cooking with the Waorani people, they are used as a natural dye for fibers. I admired the ingenuity of this girl's grater and the way in which she expertly ground the turmeric down for use.



THE MOST DANGEROUS HAIRY CATERPILLAR OF ALL

As I sat enjoying my lunch I laughed when I saw my guide jump up in shock! He had spotted a caterpillar of the Flannel Moth edging its way across the earth nearby! He said "No! Don't touch it!" and, of course, I would never touch any hairy caterpillar but I asked him what it was and he identified it for me. He then told me how he was stung by one as he ran through the forest as a child and after it he was in agony.



The dangerous Flannel Moth Caterpillar. It has such a strong sting that if you are touched by it you might have a scar for many years! (image by Inger Vandyke)

He showed me the scar that he still bears from the sting many decades later! Given that so many Waorani children were present and running around in the area we decided to extricate this creature using a leaf to transport it to a nearby bush where we could look at it and photograph it with safety! Afterwards I asked if he minded showing me the scar on his arm from one which he did and I was shocked!



The permanent scar left behind from a Flannel Moth caterpillar! They are not to be messed with! (image by Inger Vandyke)

FISHING WITH TOXINS!

Returning to our dining room I was eating lunch while admiring a local fishing net. I'd seen these before in videos and photos of the Waorani so I asked about how they were used and was then invited to go with a group of local women and children on a fishing trip into the rainforest.

Our first stop was at a home in the community where they were growing Compago bushes (Barbasco in Spanish) so we dug some of these up and loaded them into the fishing nets before setting off on foot into the forest.



Traditional Barbasco root in a forest fishing net. The sophisticated way the Waorani understand and use biotoxins in their daily life is fascinating (image by Inger Vandyke)

Arriving at the proposed fishing waterhole I was quite astounded to think that someone might actually be able to catch fish in such a small pool? One of the Waorani women entered the water and started to beat the roots of the Barbasco bushes on a nearby log. This made them emit a milky sap that flowed gently into the river. While she was doing this, another Waorani women collected some fronds of an Oma palm and made a couple of carrying baskets called Lintaye which were going to be used to transport the caught fish back to the community.

All the while the barbasco bio-toxin flowed into the pool and as the water turned a milky brown it began to teem with life with many small fish literally jumping out of the water after being 'stunned' by the poison! When they did, a small group of excited Waorani children sprang to life trying to catch these tiny fish using their bare hands. It began to rain but their fishing continued and it was great to watch their excitement as they slowly filled their Lintayes with tiny fish before they were transported back to the village to be dried and used for fish stock. Although the barbasco bio-toxin is harmful for small fish, it is completely fine for consumption by humans so watching the local women and children fish this way was completely fascinating!



A young Waorani girl shows off her harvest small fish from a forest pool (image by Inger Vandyke)

SONGS OF THE FOREST

When I went back to the village I enjoyed a small performance of Waorani elders singing to me about the connection that the Waorani share with their land. I had learned so much about the threats to the Yasunis and how these amazing people live that I was beginning to feel sad about leaving the community the following day. Even at dusk that day I listened, enchanted, to an older Waorani woman singing to her husband after he returned from his day of hunting. Waorani women compose a unique song that is sung to their husbands only to welcome them home to rest after a day in the forest.

It was the mid point of my trip and I still had to traverse three rivers visiting three separate communities before my solo expedition ended.

We left the next morning to spend a night with the family of Meniwa, another of the more prominent head men of the Waorani people. His home wasn't that far from my previous community but I arrived just in time to catch up on my notes while lunch was being cooked and my camp was being set up. During my note taking I was surprised to be visited by several butterflies who began to lick the salt off my skin!



A butterfly licks salt off my fingers at the home of renowned Waorani headman Meniwa (image by Inger Vandyke)

Meniwa's home was actually a wonderful place to watch and photograph some really beautiful butterflies so in between taking notes, I enjoyed trying to capture their beauty in photos.

After lunch Meniwa invited me to go hunting with him in the afternoon which was a wonderful way to spend a few hours. Meniwa is legendary for his capacity to walk great distances in the same vein as Kempere. Sadly our hunt wasn't successful but I did learn more about the Waorani reverence for trees while taking portraits of Meniwa contemplating his forest home. I also collected a curious looking seed of the Nkatawenca (or Monkey Brush) tree. These spiky seeds are used by Waorani as hair brushes! I also learned that no trip into the forest is ever wasted. Although we didn't hunt any animals to eat I learned how to collect roofing materials from palm leaves through Meniwa. He was such an amazing teacher!



A legendary headman takes a moment to contemplate his next move through the rainforest (image by Inger Vandyke)

The next morning I woke to find that some younger Waorani men had captured a small cayman to eat overnight. They brought it to Meniwa's home who proudly showed it off to us for photographs. While I enjoyed a breakfast of fresh free range eggs from local chickens, Meniwa's wife Awome, cooked the cayman up for us to take on our travels for lunch.

Our penultimate family community was waiting around five hours down the river so we left to enjoy our slow cruise back towards civilization.

RIDING THE SHIRIPUNO SERPENT

Shortly before we arrived at our next family we had an amazing traverse through a very narrow, winding stretch of the river. It was quite harrowing for our boat drivers and crew to navigate the tight bends and semi-submerged logs so as soon as the river widened we found a beach to stop for lunch and I flew my drone up to get a better view of the stretch we'd just travelled. What a fantastic part of the river and such an adventure to travel it with people who knew it intimately. Of course we were rewarded with a lunch of delicious cayman stew that we enjoyed while sitting on a river beach!



Our Uipo canoe is parked on the river bank (bottom) after a snake-like stretch of river cruising on the Shiripuno (image by Inger Vandyke)

THE EDGE OF THE INTANGIBLE ZONE OF THE UN-CONTACTED

The next family home I stopped at overnight was the community headed up by a Waorani elder named Kerue. The most wild of all the stops I made, I arrived in the pouring Amazon rain to find a community of people who welcomed me from high up on the river bank above. Over the course of my stay with this renowned headman I learned more about life living next to the Taromenanes and Taegeri,

two groups of Waorani who deliberately avoid any contact with the outside world. Even Kerue rarely sees them despite the fact he lives right next door! They are shy, secretive and they can be very dangerous if they feel threatened by anything or anyone who is unusual in their world.

Thankfully we never met them during my stay but I did enjoy a few funny moments watching local kids swimming in the river and using a 'ball' made from a wild bush lemon. It was school holidays during my visit so Kerue's community was filled with children who were home from their boarding school in Coca. For a while I went fishing with some of the locals to see if I could 'prove my worth' with my visit to the community. An act that was much harder than it looked, we actually returned with only one Mosaic Stingray for dinner but it was still gratefully received. Thankfully Kerue had also been out fishing that day so he proudly showed me his catch of cayman and piranha that he was preparing for dinner.



Waorani children play in the river with their 'ball', a fresh bush lemon (image by Inger Vandyke)

I stayed a few nights with Kerue where I visited a local parrot clay lick, played with the kids in the river and explored the surrounding rivers of his community by drone. It was so breathtakingly beautiful being on the edge of the wild like this and the extra time allowed me to take some portraits of local children and also Kerue in his home.

On my final night the rain came down in torrents! Even though my tent was set up inside a Peto Baco house, the roof was completely watertight and I remained completely dry as I slept. It was wonderful to listen to the cacophony of frogs and forest noises at night. My guide caught one of the noise makers, a large Smoking Jungle frog that screamed like a small child when it was picked up but otherwise made a haunting croak that echoed through the forest!

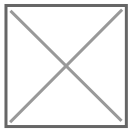
The rain was actually a blessing in the end as it pumped just enough water into the rivers to allow for an uneventful ride back towards Shiripuno the next day.

It took us almost a day to reach the first family I stayed with and the amazing wildlife encounters continued on the river! "Stop! Stop the boat! Look!" I yelled out, trying to be heard over the roar of the outboard engine. "What? We can't stop for long, we are in the zone of the Un-contacted" explained my guides and even then they felt compelled to slow to a halt when we saw two very rare and infrequently seen species of monkeys in the forest, a single Red-bellied Titi Monkey and a small troupe of Equatorial Saki Monkeys. What fantastic animals to see!



Cute Red-bellied Titi Monkeys are an unexpected wildlife treat of the rainforest in Ecuador (image by Inger Vandyke)

By the time we reached my final family home the sun had started to shine and a beautiful sunset was beginning to form. I used the warmth as a reason to wash some of my muddy clothes and boots plus myself in the river in front of the community! Soaking in the sunshine I took some time to catch up on my notes before I was invited to go and see a new house being built. Amazed at how beautiful it all was I asked if I could fly my drone over the roof while it was being constructed. My host family agreed and I think I managed to get some of the first ever aerial images of a Peto Baco house being constructed.



Aerial view of a new Peto Baco home being built by Waorani people (image by Inger Vandyke)

TOUCAN TAILS

"We cannot move house today, the Toucan is calling" – a Waorani headman shares his wisdom with me. The Waorani believe that a toucan's call will bring rain.

Accompanying me on my final afternoon walks was the family's pet White-throated Toucan. I'd met him on my way into the forest and I'd already fallen in love. The ultimate combination of good looks and whip smart intelligence of this bird turned me into an addict and even my host family couldn't believe that I wanted to spend so much time with him.

I will never forget the first time I saw this bird! He'd flown up onto the water tank platform to attack the family cat who had tried to go up there to escape from the Toucan!



Domestic cats have uniquely Waorani issues when they are forced to live alongside other pets like White-throated Toucans (image by Inger Vandyke)

On my final afternoon with the Waorani he continued his antics by inspecting my camera and actually claiming my newly washed trousers as his!



"Your trousers are MINE!" (image by Inger Vandyke)



"This camera is MINE!" (image by Inger Vandyke)

As we walked about the community he simply had to join us by hopping along the ground or flying into lower bushes. Of course I couldn't help but take more photos of him and marvel at his curiosity of all the new things in his world!



Portrait of a White-throated Toucan in a tree at dusk (image by Inger Vandyke)

This toucan had his whole world completely worked out. I remember watching him look at other toucans flying overhead and you could almost see him thinking "Why would I want to be those guys? I have everything I need right here, served up to me by my humans!". Spending time with him was actually more like spending time with a super-intelligent cat!

The next morning I had set my alarm to go off early so I could enjoy my last sunrise on the river. I didn't need to set anything though as the toucan came to visit the camp and proceeded to herald the start of the new day from right outside the door of my tent.

As an animal used to getting what he wants, it worked a charm on us also so we got up and prepared to go to breakfast. Normally the toucan invites himself into the kitchen to take what he wants but today, breakfast wasn't ready for him so he arrived to find the door of the dining room firmly shut in his face! He was so hilarious!



"What? The door is closed? Where's my breakfast?!" A pet toucan isn't always a welcome guest at meals (image by Inger Vandyke)

"I want to take him home with me!" I exclaimed to my hosts. "He would have a fantastic holiday in Brazil and Mexico before coming to live with me in England" I said. They replied "Nooooo!!!!! You can't take him home!" "Oh but I want him!!!!" and as soon as we finished this conversation, I saw my guide disappear into the forest. He was collecting 'forest ivory' or a palm seed that is often carved by the Kichwa and Waorani people of Ecuador for decoration. I saw him taking a sharp knife to the seed but I got distracted watching the local children playing with their pet monkey and photographing them. A short while later he returned and said "Here! You can't take THAT Toucan but you can take THIS one!" and he presented me with a hand carved toucan that he had made for me from jungle ivory. It is now one of my most treasured souvenirs from the Amazon!



Forest Ivory is almost as hard as real ivory! (image by Inger Vandyke)



A Toucan carved from Jungle Ivory (a palm seed) (image by Inger Vandyke)

A FINAL BREAKFAST WITH THE CRITTERS!

As I sat enjoying my last breakfast in the forest one of the Waorani alerted me to the fact that a group of Giant Otters was swimming around the Oxbow lagoon directly in front of his house so we stopped eating and immediately went over to check for them! Creeping through the dense bushes allowed us to get quite close to these fantastic animals on foot so I managed to capture some shots of them before I went back to the village and packed up my things to leave.



A curious Giant Otter raises his head to listen the new sounds of visitors in his world (image by Inger Vandyke)

"You'll come back soon won't you?" my hosts said as I left and I almost cried. I really didn't want my living experience in the Amazon to end. What a fantastic experience of learning and photography it had been to spend time with the Waorani. These people are so incredibly special. To lose them would not only be a tragedy of Ecuador and the Amazon but also a tragedy to mankind.

My time with the Waorani came to an end in Coca, eastern Ecuador. Although my hotel was in beautiful grounds with wild monkeys and turtles, being back in a place where the forest noise was replaced with traffic noise, where hotel food replaced wild food and where canoe transport was replaced with cars felt like a huge culture shock! I found myself longing to return and I hope it will be sooner than the 24 years it took me this time!



A typical entrance to a family of Waorani people living in the Shiripuno region of Ecuador (image by Inger Vandyke)



Domestic cats have uniquely Waorani issues when they are forced to live alongside other pets like White-throated Toucans (image by Inger Vandyke)



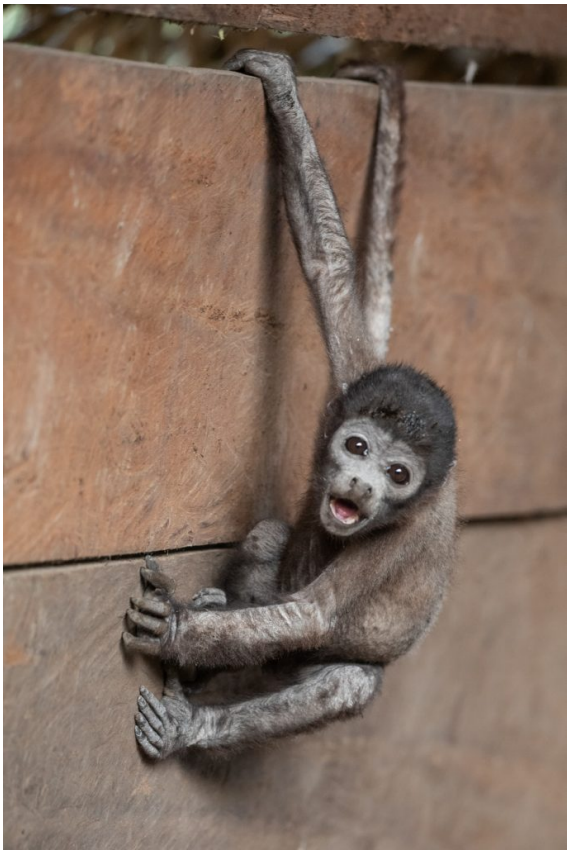
Joining Waorani family life is a really special experience (image by Inger Vandyke)



Raw grasses used to make hammocks and baskets (image by Inger Vandyke)



The Waorani also keep domestic animals like dogs, cats and chickens (image by Inger Vandyke)



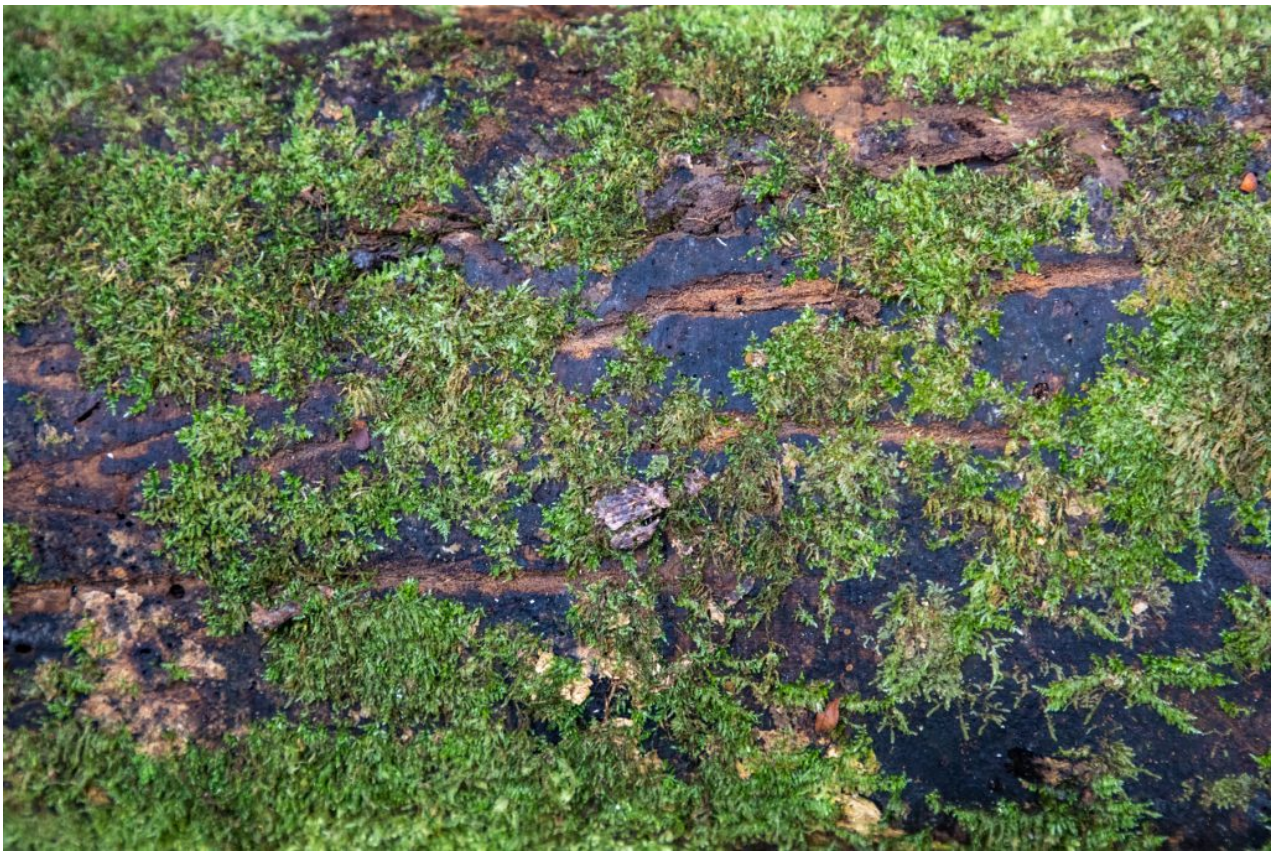
Pet monkeys are a common feature of Waorani life. They are usually called "Gata", the Wao name for baby monkey (image by Inger Vandyke)



Waorani children mostly live free of technology so when a phone is produced it is a source of great excitement (image by Inger Vandyke)



Made totally from natural fibres, hammocks are really strong! (image by Inger Vandyke)



Scratch marks from a Jaguar on a log in the rainforest (image by Inger Vandyke)



Waorani children showing their pet Black-headed Parrot the field notes of their guest (image by Inger Vandyke)



River canoes line up to transport us into the world of the Waorani (image by Inger Vandyke)



A composite of two images, that of a young Waorani girl with a drone image of the Shiripuno superimposed over her. Playing with digital art in the Amazon (image by Inger Vandyke)



Aerial view of a new Peto Baco home being built by Waorani people (image by Inger Vandyke)



A typical Peto Baco house in a forest clearing of the Shiripuno (image by Inger Vandyke)



Lunch on the side of the river anyone? (image by Inger Vandyke)



A group of three Waorani headmen after they've returned from a hunt (image by Inger Vandyke)



The Waorani have a very special relationship with the wild animals around them, keeping them as pets for a short time before 're-wilding' them, like this pet Paca (image by Inger Vandyke)



Using gigantic blow darts and spears, Waorani hunt for wild animals including monkeys and peccaries that are eaten regularly (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a Spider Monkey (image by Inger Vandyke)



Cooking dinner by the fire in a small Waorani community (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a rare and difficult to see Tiger-striped Monkey Frog in the wilds of the Ecuadorian Amazon (image by Inger Vandyke)



A shy young Rufescent Tiger Heron eyes us carefully from his riverine forest perch (image by Inger Vandyke)



Portrait of a White-throated Toucan in a tree at dusk (image by Inger Vandyke)



One of the Waorani's most prominent headwomen (image by Inger Vandyke)



Waorani children are very fascinated by their own photos (image by Inger Vandyke)



The leaves of a Cuentobe plant which, when crushed, are used to cure stomach upsets (image by Inger Vandyke)

