

Amazon Basin



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Although it lies more than 1000km upstream from the great river, Bolivia's portion of the Amazon Basin better preserves the classic image many travelers associate with the mother of all rivers than the real thing itself. While Brazilian rainforests continue to suffer heavy depredation, the archetypal Amazon forests of northern Bolivia remain relatively intact. Although facing similar threats, they still offer a glimpse of the deep and mysterious Eden (they've also been called the Green Hell) that beckons from the glossy pages of travel brochures and adventure magazines.

Despite all the attention focused on the drug issue and the environment, northern Bolivia is not all cocaine and rainforest. Cattle ranching continues on a large scale, especially in the savannas around Trinidad. All the region's main thoroughfares are Amazon tributaries that elsewhere would be considered great rivers in their own right. Along these jungle waterways, riverboats, barges and bathtubs are the predominant modes of transportation. Villages are still thin on the ground, and some remote tribes have had only minimal contact with modern civilization. All that is changing however, with the recent spate of road construction, leading to an influx of highland settlers and a subsequent upsurge in logging and slash-and-burn agriculture.

The Beni, Pando and surrounding Amazon Basin areas have weathered continuous human immigration and boom-bust cycles. Only a few of the original forest-dwelling tribes remain, and even fewer have been able to maintain their traditional subsistence hunting-and-gathering lifestyles.

TOP FIVE

- Go gaga over wildlife on a jungle or pampas trip from **Rurrenabaque** (p314)
- Hop on a slow boat down the **Río Mamoré** (p338) between Trinidad and Guayaramerín
- Immerse yourself in the richness of the jungle at Chalalán Ec lodge, deep inside **Parque Nacional Madidi** (p320)
- Explore the transition between savanna and rainforest and observe wildlife at **Reserva Biosférica del Beni** (p322)
- Float by the impressive waterfalls and hike through the fabulous landscapes of **Noel Kempff Mercado National Park** (p330)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 03 (EXCEPT WHERE NOTED)

■ ELEVATION: 0–200M

HISTORY

Indigenous peoples occupying the western Bolivian Amazon were conquered early on by the Inca. Then came the Spanish, who wandered all over the Americas chasing rumors of a mystical city of unimaginable wealth, which they called El Dorado (The Gilded One).

One such tale was of Paititi, an unfathomably opulent land east of the Andean Cordillera near the source of the Río Paraguai. It was said to be governed by a particularly affluent king named El Gran Moxo. Though the would-be looters scoured the region for traces of the coveted booty, they found nothing but a few muddy jungle villages and hostile tribes. There was neither a single street paved with gold nor a single royal treasury. In the mid-17th century the Spanish turned elsewhere in their quest for El Dorado.

The Spanish may have found nothing in the Moxos region that interested them, but the Jesuits did, seeing an area that was rich in souls that were ripe for the plucking. The first significant European penetration of these lowlands was staged by these hardy missionaries, whose first mission was founded at Loreto, in the Moxos region, in 1675.

The Jesuits set up a society similar to the one they would establish in the Llanos de Chiquitos and Llanos de Guarayos during the following century. While they imposed Christianity and European ways, they also recognized the indigenous people's natural expertise in woodcarving, which eventually produced the brilliant carvings now characteristic of the missions. They imported herds of cattle and horses to some remote outposts, and, thanks to the prolific natural vegetation, the animals fared well. The descendants of these herds still thrive throughout most of the department.

From the locals the Jesuits learned about tropical agricultural methods. They, in turn, introduced unfamiliar crops, and the Beni today produces bananas, coffee, tobacco, cotton, cacao, peanuts and a host of other warm-weather crops.

After the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767, the Franciscan and Dominican missionaries, as well as the opportunistic settlers who followed, brought slavery and disease. Otherwise, the vast, steamy forests and

plains of northern Bolivia saw little activity for decades.

CLIMATE

The seasons are less pronounced here than in other parts of Bolivia, and temperatures are uniformly hot year-round. Most of the rain falls during the summer in unrelenting downpours and, during wet times, the streets fill with mud and the air fills with the sound of croaking frogs. Although winter is drier than summer, it also sees a good measure of precipitation. Even in the hot, humid forest regions of the north, frosts are not unheard of during a *surazo*, a cold wind blowing from Patagonia and the Argentine pampas.

NATIONAL PARKS & RESERVES

Blessed with some of the richest wildlife habitats on earth, the Bolivian Amazon is home to some of the country's best-known national parks and reserves. For bird watchers, monkey lovers and jaguar seekers, this region is heaven. From the jungles and wild rivers of Parque Nacional Madidi (p320) to the less-frequented, wildlife-rich Reserva Biosférica del Beni (p322) and the virtually unexplored 'lost world' of Parque Nacional Noel Kempff Mercado (p330), the Amazon Basin has it all. Conservation International is attempting to raise awareness of the need for protection of the headwaters of several major Amazon tributaries with their ambitious new Vilcabamba–Amoró Conservation Corridor initiative.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Rurrenabaque is by far the Amazon's most visited settlement. Although it's worth the treacherous bus ride from La Paz, flying is highly recommended. It's no coincidence that buses heading back to La Paz from Rurre are less crowded – many people decide to wing it (or take a faster Jeep) after surviving the initial bus ride.

Transportes Aéreos Militares (TAM) and Amazonas fly daily between La Paz and Rurrenabaque. Their low-flying planes afford great glimpses of Lake Titicaca after takeoff before squeezing past Chacaltaya and soaring over the Yungas. You can see the landscape change from desolate, rugged highlands to lush, forested lowlands. And