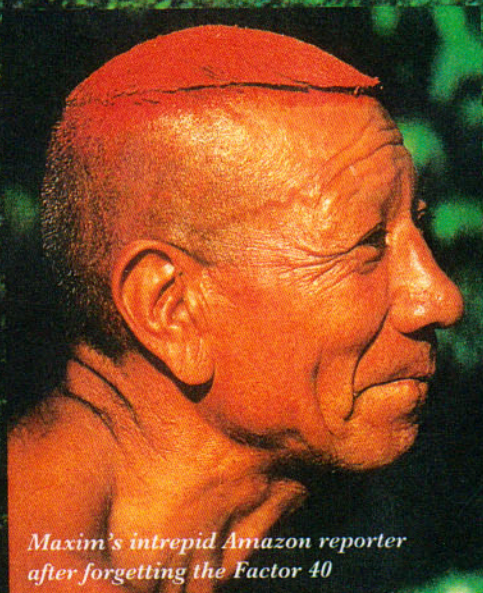


TRAVEL

# HONEY, THEY SHRANK MY HEAD....

KILLER ANTS, DEATH-DEFYING ROPE BRIDGES,  
HUNGRY CROCS, FURIOUS HEADHUNTERS.  
LAURIE NADEL'S AMAZON 'BREAK' HAD IT ALL



*Maxim's intrepid Amazon reporter  
after forgetting the Factor 40*



**I**t was just after dawn when I noticed the scorpion crawling out of my sleeping bag. Fortunately, I wasn't inside it, having just returned from the loo. Not that anything even remotely resembles plumbing out here in the Ecuadorian Amazon. A call of nature means squatting in a pool of steaming mud behind a giant banana plant hoping you finish before the mosquitoes eat you alive.

The scorpion was taking its time, crawling across the dirt floor of the hut that served as shaman's lodge and gathering place for the Shuar Federation of Indians, an isolated tribe that still hunts with blowguns and

poisoned darts. Described by neighbouring tribes as 'hostile and aggressive', the Shuar were known for their quaint custom of decapitating their enemies and shrinking their heads. But that all changed when the missionaries and Christianity arrived. At least, that's what they told me before I signed on.

Yet just a few days earlier, three headless bodies had been found close to this very spot, causing me to conclude that, like biting your nails or smoking cigars, shrinking heads must be a hard habit to break.

Now, as my eyes tracked to the scorpion, I noticed Kitiar, the Shuar's senior medicine man. Wearing only a loincloth and a wide headband of red and yellow feathers, he was chanting strange syllables as part of a healing ceremony for Elena, one of the women in our 12-strong group. An Italian babe with blonde hair and blue eyes, she looked badly in need of assistance after a traumatic night.

The problem was tropical passion. Elena had fallen for expedition leader John Perkins (it was mutual – they were wild about each other), which didn't go down too well with her husband, Gino. They had argued last night, and the mood was menacing.

Kitiar continued chanting, but as he leaned towards Elena, he suddenly collapsed. He was unconscious, his face grey. But that was nothing compared to the angry frowns of the Shuars. They seemed to think that their shaman's collapse had something to do with us, and a dozen of them blocked the exits.

We were trapped. Even if we managed to escape, it could take 25 days of trekking through 105-degree heat to reach the nearest road – if we could find the road.

'They think Gino may have caused this by objecting to Kitiar's performing a healing for Elena,' explained Perkins. 'They won't let us out until Gino heals the shaman.'

Oh dear. Gino, with his Ralph Lauren sports shirt and wire-rimmed glasses, knew as much about healing a sick Amazonian medicine man as you or I. Probably less. Contemplating how I'd look after being boiled in magic herbs, I imagined the tabloid headlines: 'Reporter's Head Shrunk In Tribal Ritual'. Perhaps if I put in a last request: '*Cuando tu cierras las labias de mi boca, favor que pongas el hilo azul. Va igualar mejor con mis ojos.*' (When you sew up my lips, please use the blue thread. It will match my eyes...)

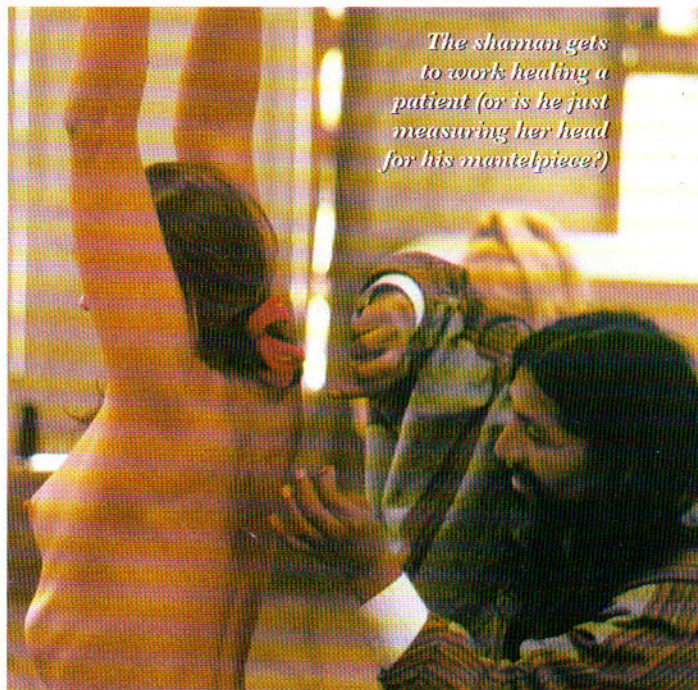
**S**erves her right, I hear you thinking. I mean, what's she doing in the middle of a tribe of half-naked, headshrinking savages in the first place?

Well, let's backtrack a few months. I'd talked my way onto the Amazon expedition by promising Perkins, a former Peace Corps volunteer who had lived with the Shuars in the 1960s, publicity for his environmental projects. Any profits from his expeditions are donated to Dream Change Coalition, a non-profit-making foundation that leases and purchases tracts of rainforest in order to preserve it from destruction.

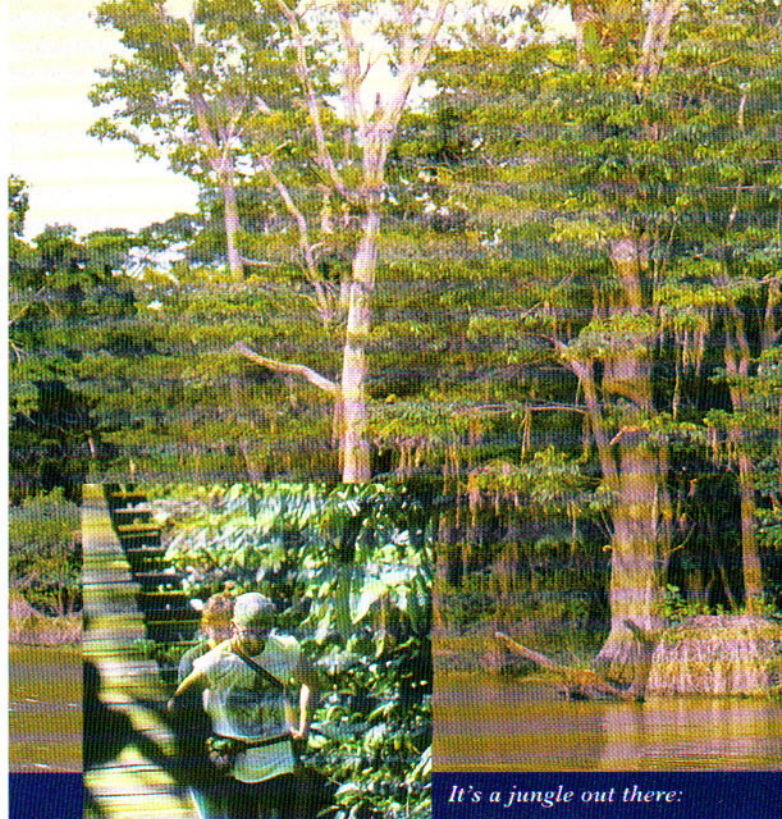
Twenty years earlier, as a reporter for *Newsweek*, I'd covered the arrival of multinational petroleum companies in the Peruvian Amazon. I'd fallen in love with the place and the gentle people. And now I wanted to experience some more adventure by visiting a different part of the jungle.

Yet six weeks before departure no one had commissioned me to write any features, and it looked like I wouldn't be going. Then, as I was driving to a beach near my home one day, a man's head appeared in front of my windshield. Not a real head, you understand – the image of one, belonging to an old man with kind brown eyes and a headband of red and yellow feathers.

'Too much stress,' I told myself. 'Time for medication.' I rubbed my eyes, but the holographic vision maintained steady focus in broad daylight for 20 minutes while I drove.



*The shaman gets to work healing a patient (or is he just measuring her head for his mantelpiece?)*



*It's a jungle out there:*

For all the worries about losing my mind, I found the apparition reassuring; part of me sensed I'd experienced something genuine. I told Perkins about my vision and, far from locking me in a padded room while he called the men in white coats, he saw it as an important sign telling me to go on the expedition. Shamans are thought to be able to project themselves beyond their physical boundaries to communicate and perform healing, he explained. Perhaps I would meet 'the head' in person. I was unconvinced, but at least I had a place on the expedition.

And that's how I found myself, several weeks later, together with my phobia of heights, standing on the edge of a rocky gorge, facing a swinging wooden bridge with no handrails and missing slats, about 200 feet in the air. By the time I'd set off on the trip, I had several assignments to write about multinational drug companies working with the shamans to identify healing plants. Unfortunately, the pictures my articles needed – of an innocuous bamboo hut with a garden of medicinal herbs – had to be taken on the other side of the gorge.

Three steps onto the bridge and my field of vision blacked out. I hobbled back to the cliff, shaking my head. Only when someone walked out in front of me, my eyes focused on his shoulders and the back of his head, clinging for dear life to hands extended behind his back, could I inch my way across.

The relief was short-lived, however. After shooting two rolls of film, I joined up with the others on what was euphemistically called a 'hike' to the sacred waterfalls. Three hours later, in oven-like heat, and under a constant barrage from stinging ants and mosquitoes, we'd fought our way across a sheer rock face, six rushing rivers, and hung onto twisted vines to avoid slipping off treacherous ledges. But the waterfalls were worth it: a set of silvery, twin cascades twisting over a cliff studded with wispy clouds, one fall warm from underground thermal energy, the other icy cold.

This sensual relaxation came to an abrupt end shortly afterwards when I slipped and a vine broke in my hand, leaving me more than halfway over the edge of a cliff, with a drop of several hundred feet onto jagged boulders below.



(left) the author braves the



broken bridge, while (above) Perkins chats with his friends the

Three seconds felt like several lifetimes as, inch by inch, I felt myself heading off the edge. The next thing I knew, someone had slammed me back onto the rock ledge – bruising perhaps, but a lifesaver.

It took a few hours for my legs to stop shaking – I slithered, rather than hiked, back to the relative safety of the Shuar lodge. It seemed like we'd stepped into an Indiana

Jones movie, and I couldn't help wondering what each obstacle was bringing us closer to.

As we trekked through boiling mud the next day (that's right – mud with steaming, glugging bubbles), Waiti, a shaman, did his best to teach me to identify medicinal plants. God knows, a rub with a sprig of exotic Ecuadorian jungle geranium might have helped. Still tired from the day before, I was struggling to lift my feet, a prerequisite for making it through pools of gunge. Bogged down in quicksand, my efforts only sucked me deeper. Waiti and another Shuar guide desperately yanked me to safety, leaving my gumboots in the slime.

It was crucial to keep a vigilant eye on where I put my feet and my hands – a one-second mistake could be fatal. Sure enough, as I grabbed a tree stump to balance, Waiti knocked it away, pointing at a crawling mass of thousands of large, red insects. 'Killer ants,' he said, 'Very dangerous. One sting and you're dead.' It was a sobering moment. This man, who might just as easily have lopped off my head and used it as an ashtray, had saved me from death.

The combination of two narrow misses, intense heat, filth, and stinging insects was taking its toll. I began to hallucinate. Ice cubes in large glasses of Coca-Cola floated by, along with



### 'As I grabbed a tree stump, Waiti knocked it away, pointing at a mass of insects. "Killer ants," he said'

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grinning Eskimos, refrigerators, air-conditioned cinemas – all fantasies, as unreal as that holographic apparition in the car.

At twilight, after a brief but dangerous wade through whitewater rapids, we arrived at a hut. Sore and infested with mud and insect bites, I headed for the river to bathe. Sitting in the shallow water, a long, black caiman, a sort of crocodile, cruised yards away. Thankfully, the beast swam away without tasting so much as a toe. I tried to relax for a while, but couldn't help wondering what was going to pop up next to eat me, sting me, drown me, drop me, or use my head as a Christmas decoration.

Just when I thought the surprises must be over for the day, I returned to the hut and stopped dead in my tracks. There, seated on a tree stump, was the old man – the very one who'd appeared at my windscreen.

I'd like to report that he gave me some sign of instant recognition, but no, he just smiled gently at everyone. I explained to Waiti that Kitari, this shaman, had appeared to

me several weeks earlier. It seemed perfectly normal to both men (although the old man had trouble understanding 'driving' – he'd never seen a road, let alone a car). 'I have helped lots of friends from America,' he grinned. 'Sometimes my

spirit goes out travelling. It must have found you.'

Well, it made as much sense as any other explanation – at least meeting Kitari confirmed I'd not been psychotic. The jungle had stretched my physical and emotional boundaries beyond previous limits, putting my sense of reality through mindbending shifts. And now they were inviting me to take part in a ritual that could bend it even further.

There was one problem – the ritual of drinking a liquid known as ayahuasca, 'the vine of death', could kill me (ah, poisoning – I think I missed that one off my list of Amazonian deathtraps). If it worked, Waiti explained, I'd feel spiritually reborn. If not, the news was less rosy. There was no antidote, no turning back. Perkins was against it, but having survived this far, and experienced a glimpse of Kitari's mysterious



Neatly packaged crocodile snacks

power, I was curious about what the plant might do.

At nightfall, when the jungle sounded like a Tarzan soundtrack, Kitiar started his chanting to call in the spirits. He and Waiti poured a concoction that looked, smelled and tasted a lot like tar into a tin cup. They gave

me a shot of trago, strong Ecuadorian booze, to wash it down before instructing me to go and lie down until it was time to vomit. It was all a bit like that unique Friday feeling after a night on the Carling Black Label.

As I lay on the hut floor, sounds began to merge with texture. Fireflies changed colours, lights danced across the roof and my stomach heaved. I crashed outside, where I was sure someone was watching me. But when I turned to see who, I was face-to-face with a dead tree – and, wait for it, it was laughing at me. It pulled faces, winked, and stuck out its tongue.

‘Señora, are you all right?’ asked one of the Shuar guards.

‘Look, Manuelo,’ I replied. ‘The tree is a person.’

‘Of course it is,’ he smiled, proud that I’d eventually figured out what, to him, was obvious. Not bad for a gringa.

I understood why people said that if you spend enough time in the Amazon (and take enough ayahuasca), the trees start talking to you. And I knew why Perkins was so committed to preserving them. As if in acknowledgement, the trees outside the clearing started to smile and bend. Perkins came over to me, totally sober, and when I pointed at the tree he burst out laughing: ‘Yes, this one’s got a great sense of humour,’ he chuckled.



Be just our luck if it crashes

But that was then. Now, in broad daylight, with the Shuar blocking the lodge’s exits, nothing was funny. Shaking a gourd rattle, a sweating Gino was kneeling over the shaman. He’d chanted frantically for about half an hour, but Kitiar was still in a coma.

Perkins suggested that we all lay hands on him to see if we could bring him back. Nothing happened, but a physiotherapist in our group was able to make a diagnosis – he had suffered a stroke and needed medical attention urgently.

Perkins spoke to the Shuar guards, offering to fly Kitiar to the nearest military hospital for treatment. After some negotiation, they eventually accepted our modern solution.

We hurled ourselves into dugout canoes and lifted Kitiar’s unconscious body in after us. After nearly turning over in rapids, we arrived at the airstrip at lightning speed. The rest of the Shuar tribe, though, were there waiting for us, even though they’d started out on foot after we’d left.

Gino was shoved onto the plane first. Six men carried Kitiar aboard, and Waiti, Perkins, and Elena travelled with him to hospital. The Shuar disappeared into the forest, while the rest of us sat on a log, trading insect repellent. Being stranded on a grass airstrip, where tribesmen could reappear at any minute with machetes, is not a comfortable experience. I shared round my last pack of Polos. And prayed.

PS A few months later I was offered the chance to be an interpreter on another trip. I’d just heard that Perkins and another expedition had been captured by the Shuar for several days and threatened with decapitation. I decided I’d holiday at home this year. **M**

For more info on John Perkins’ expeditions, contact Dream Change Coalition, PO Box 31357, Palm Beach Gdns, FL 33420-1357, USA. (Best not take the wife, though.)

## MIND THAT BLOWPIPE, DORIS

For budding Indiana Joneses, here’s how to get to the Amazon:

◆ Prices for flights to Quito in the high season fall somewhere between the £557 (try Travel Bug on (0171) 835 2000) and £700 mark. Don’t wait around too long, though – Ecuador seems particularly popular this year. But if you don’t really know where to start, or would prefer a tailor-made trip, there are a few travel companies that specialise in accompanied trips to Ecuador and the Amazon:

◆ Gap Adventures c/o Travel Bug (tel: see above). Offers several types of programme. Their cheapest starts at £295 for ‘Amazon Discovery’ (not including flight) for seven days, including cruises up and down the river and visits to jungle villages, but no real trekking or roughing it. The more adventurous you get, the higher the price. Most expensive is £1,475 for ‘Full Ecuador’, which takes in the inland and the Amazon (flight not included). The more intrepid traveller could do the ‘South America Overland’ trek – prices start at £795 for a hefty 33 days.

◆ Exodus (0181) 675 5550 or STA Travel (0171) 361 6262 offer several overland expeditions throughout South America, from six to 22 weeks. Most include a week or so in the Ecuadorean jungle. The most ‘jungle’ type of trip is Exodus’s ‘Galapagos and Amazon’ 21-day tour, which will set you back £2,295 (flight included). You’ll visit the beautiful Galapagos Islands (well, Charles Darwin thought so) and mainland jungle, with lots of camping, trekking, tribe-visiting and exotic wildlife.

