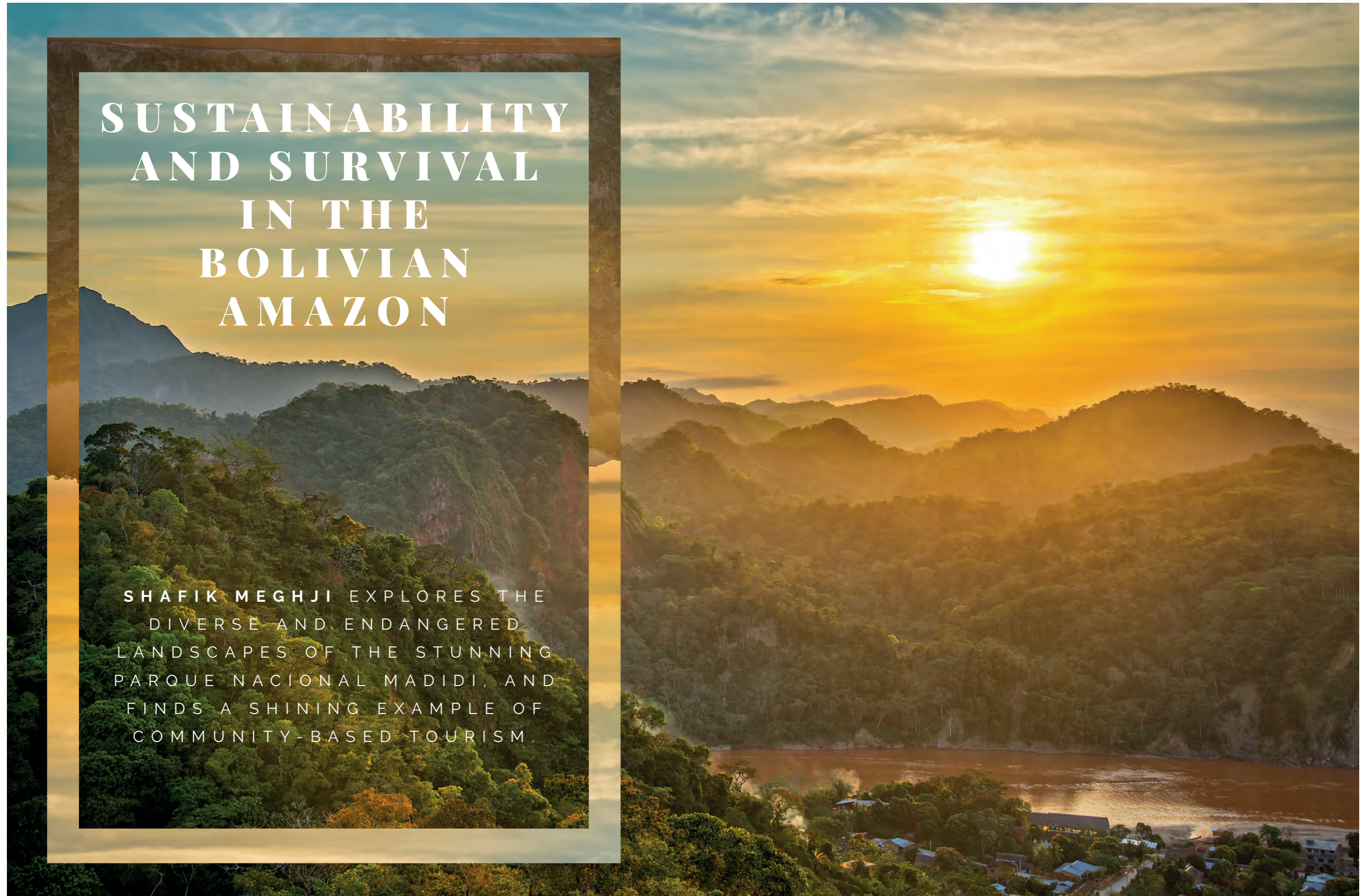


# SUSTAINABILITY AND SURVIVAL IN THE BOLIVIAN AMAZON

SHAFIK MEGHJI EXPLORES THE DIVERSE AND ENDANGERED LANDSCAPES OF THE STUNNING PARQUE NACIONAL MADIDI, AND FINDS A SHINING EXAMPLE OF COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM.



# T

he Yacuma River was the colour and consistency of over-steeped tea. As I peered into the cloudy water, my mind drifted back to the caimans, the shoal of piranhas and the anaconda – 19ft long, coiled like a Cumberland sausage, body as thick as my thigh – I'd seen that morning in Parque Nacional Madidi. The river was perfectly still. Too still, I thought suspiciously, as a giant red-tailed dragonfly – more dragon than fly – buzzed overhead. Pride overcame reticence, just. When I entered the water there was a flash of movement and a pod of pink dolphins – *bufeos* – appeared. Two other travellers swam over and we instinctively clung together, half anticipating a nip on the toes.

**PREVIOUS PAGE:**  
Sunset over the jungle-covered hills beside the Beni River in Rurrenabaque.

**LEFT FROM THE TOP:**  
A blue morpho butterfly,  
A grasshopper, An appropriately named 'Hot Lips' flower.

Suddenly, there was a splash. I spun round to see a dolphin pop up, before diving beneath my feet and then re-emerging behind me. I swung around again, but the dolphin deftly reversed its manoeuvre and appeared behind me once more. As I turned for a third time, it twisted its mottled torso and splashed me in the face with its fluke, an action that felt deliberately mischievous.

Moments later the dolphin reappeared before me, gazing curiously with gimlet eyes. A staring contest ensued. I blinked first. Once again, the dolphin ducked under, before resurfacing with a twig in its mouth, wagging it briskly and then releasing it in front of me, as if offering a gift.

During that first visit to the Bolivian Amazon in 2004, I didn't appreciate the significance of the region or the threats it faced – I was too caught up in the thrill of backpacking across South America. But it soon became clear the area stands on the frontline of touchstone social and environmental issues such as Indigenous rights, renewable energy, sustainable tourism and, above all, the climate emergency. Over a decade later, I returned to Madidi to visit a pioneering ecolodge that crystallises these challenges.

The region's gateway is Rurrenabaque, which overlooks the Beni River, backed by karst-like hills. Some 160 miles northeast of La Paz, the town

was founded in 1844 on the back of the quinine trade, before becoming an outpost of the rubber boom. When that industry crashed in the 1910s, Rurrenabaque rapidly declined. Logging provided some jobs, but the town slumbered for most of the 20th century.

Its awakening was prompted by an Israeli traveller, Yossi Ghinsberg, who set off into the surrounding rainforest in 1981, got lost and – despite little food or equipment – survived for three weeks before being rescued. Ghinsberg wrote a best-selling book about his experience, *Back from Tuichi* (later republished as *Lost in the Jungle*) and turned into the 2017 film, *Jungle*. Israeli backpackers flocked to Rurrenabaque, followed by their European and North American counterparts. When the Bolivian government established Parque Nacional Madidi in 1995, the town developed into an ecotourism hub.

Ghinsberg was rescued by the residents of San José de Uchupiamonas, an Indigenous Quechua-Tacana community in the heart of Madidi. In a bid to escape entrenched poverty, the community built a set of traditional huts at a nearby lagoon, with help from Ghinsberg, the Chalachán Ecolodge opened in 1997 and became a model of community-based tourism and conservation, creating jobs, improving water

supplies, and building clinics and schools. It also inspired neighbouring communities to set up their own ecolodges and travel companies.

Although far from perfect, the situation was more positive than in many other parts of the Amazon. And in a better world, that would be the end of the story.

My guide for the trip to Chalalán was William, a wiry

Josesano in his mid-20s wearing aviators and a money belt. He was assisted by Don Luis, older and quieter, with bushy grey hair sprouting from beneath a baseball cap. He directed me and three other travellers onto a motorboat for the five-hour journey upstream from Rurrenabaque.

On the way, William talked about Madidi. Spanning

around 7,336 square miles, it encompasses Amazonian and Andean ecosystems, including rainforests, cloud forests, grasslands and wetlands. The park has at least 1,028 bird species – almost ten per cent of the world's total – plus 265 mammal species, 204 reptile and amphibian species, 1,544 butterfly species and more than 5,500 plant species, many

“*On the other side of the gorge, the cliffs flattened and the hills beyond disappeared from view.*”

THIS PAGE:  
A canoe on a lake in  
Parque Nacional Madidi.



FROM THE LEFT:  
A golden Squirrel Monkey, A  
green anaconda, A group of  
yellow-spotted river turtles.

“ *As we sank glasses of sugared lime juice, hoots, shrieks, rustling leaves and monkey calls sounded from the forest.* ”

of them endemic. 'There are jaguars, anacondas, stingrays, birds of paradise, spectacled bears, macaws, many others,' said William. In 2018, following a two-and-a-half-year study, the Wildlife Conservation Society declared Madidi 'the world's most biologically diverse protected area.'

Gradually the river narrowed and impenetrable cliffs rose on either side. Trees sprung out of the fissured rock, shrouded by tobacco-coloured clouds. After 45 minutes we reached the Bala Gorge, the proposed site of a hydroelectric megadam that poses an existential threat to Madidi. 'If the dam is built, this journey we're taking today will not be possible,' said

William. 'It would end tourism in Rurrenabaque and Chalalán would close. There is lots of fighting and lots of protests from the community, but...' He trailed off and looked away.

During the 2010s, Evo Morales' government drew up a plan for a pair of dams in Bala and the nearby Chepete canyon to generate thousands of megawatts of electricity, mainly for export. Jointly they would flood almost 310 square miles of rainforest and displace around 4,000 indigenous people, including the San José de Uchupiamonas community. A local NGO, the Coordinator for the Defence of the Amazon, said the dams would devastate the region's 'environment, habitats,

diverse ways of life [and] cultural patrimony'. Graffiti, posters and banners in Rurrenabaque had an even blunter message: 'Dams equal death, debt and pain.'

Although Morales has now left office, the fate of the project remains unclear.

On the other side of the gorge, the cliffs flattened and the hills beyond disappeared from view. The riverbanks were dense walls of green foliage, save for the odd ghostly white tree. Further on, a pair of men sluiced water and mud through a machine on a stony beach. Gold miners, said Don Luis, breaking an hour's silence. Gold mining, dredging and panning are growing problems, thanks to rising demand following the

2007–08 global financial crisis. Most of the activity is illegal yet it persists because of the region's remoteness, insufficient rangers and lack of political will. These miners were small-timers, but big businesses, often linked to organised crime, are involved, with large dredging vessels known as 'dragons' a common sight. The result is rainforest clearance and waterways poisoned with mercury.

We turned onto the narrower Tuichi River. At the front, Don Luis sat in silence, gesturing left or right so William could avoid rapids, debris and sandbars. After five hours we arrived at a dock around 60 miles southwest of Rurrenabaque. From here we followed the Jaguar Trail through the forest to Chalalán, though the only creature we saw was a tapir, a dark grey, cow-sized creature with an elephantine snout.

Jaguars, the biggest cat in the Americas, have been badly hit by poaching, William told us, gently lowering my expectations of a sighting. Only around 4,000 to 7,000 survive in Bolivia and numbers are declining. Logging, cattle ranching, farming and road

building are also intensifying in and around Madidi, leading to deforestation, he warned. Bolivia lost more than 18,500 square miles – an area larger than Denmark – of tree cover between 2001 and 2008, according to Global Forest Watch.

The trail emerged into a clearing where stilted, A-frame huts with thatched roofs were shaded by trees so heavy with fruit their branches arched like bows. Beyond a set of solar panels, a path led to a wooden deck facing a gorgeous lagoon. As we sank glasses of sugared lime juice, hoots, shrieks, rustling leaves and monkey calls sounded from the forest.

After dinner William took us out onto the inky darkness of the lagoon in a canoe. When the Joseanos were building Chalalán, he said, they realised a malign spirit was present – a ghostly white man who paddled across the water late at night. William grinned and said not to worry: the villagers conducted various ceremonies and the apparition has not been seen since. We took it in turns to scan our torches along the shoreline,

occasionally catching a caiman eye, flashing red in the light.

Later we sat in silence, gazing up at countless stars on a perfectly black background. I'd never seen the Southern Cross so clearly.

The next morning William guided us through the rainforest to the Santa Rosa Lagoon, 3½ miles to the east, hacking a route through the undergrowth with his machete. We scrambled across undulating hills, passing jaguar tracks and long lines of leaf-cutter ants. Parrots, toucans, macaws, red-breasted trogons and spiky-crested, blue-faced hoatzins sounded their calls as we approached, like a chorus of car alarms.

William pointed out medicinal plants, and a tree that appeared to have been imagined into existence by Gabriel García Márquez. The cashapona, or walking palm, grows a succession of stilted roots that gradually move it across the forest floor in search of the sunniest spot and the richest soil. Its branches were draped with shaggy epiphytes and alive with lizards, fire ants and a fist-sized tarantula.

Shards of sunlight pierced the canopy, but there was no breeze and sweat matted my clothes. The smell of decomposing vegetation filled the air and the trail grew progressively worse, with streams and rivers blocking our route. One was so wide William was forced to construct a rudimentary pontoon bridge from a floating log and strips of bark wound into a twine.

The trail ascended steeply to a plateau, once the site of a coffee plantation. Interspersed between pomelo, mandarin, banana and lime trees, the neglected coffee bushes were still fruiting. Just beyond was the

the oversized jaws into a macabre cairn.

Overnight it rained solidly, transforming the Tuichi into a different beast for our journey back to Rurrenabaque – higher, faster, churning violently. We travelled with the current, skimming along at pace, sending up clouds of spray. The banks had partially collapsed, plunging dozens of trees into the river. But Don Luis navigated a slaloming route, calling out orders over the wind and fiercely gesturing with his arms. We were back in two and half hours.

In the drizzle, Rurrenabaque had a melancholy feel. A local newspaper reported visitor

where locals decamp for a gentle breeze, a cup of syrupy shaved ice and a spot to watch the sunset. Across the Beni was the settlement of San Buenaventura, which according to Google Maps was connected to Rurrenabaque by a bridge. This was just an aspiration: while the initial sections had been built on either bank, a 1,300ft gap yawned in the middle. Through it chugged a flat-bed barge loaded with tractors, heading upstream.

As the barge slowly disappeared from view, I thought back to my river dolphin encounter in Madidi all those years earlier. *Bufeos*, I later learned, are not quite what

“Just beyond was the lagoon, a glorious pale turquoise mirror, its edges shaded by overhanging trees. ”

lagoon, a glorious pale turquoise mirror, its edges shaded by overhanging trees. After rowing to the centre, William baited lines with strips of beef, cast off, and within 30 seconds snagged his first piranha. He casually removed the hook and tossed the fish into a puddle of water in the bottom of the boat. He quickly caught 14 more; the rest of us were out of luck. As we paddled back, the piranhas thrashed around between my feet until they finally expired.

When we returned to Chalalán, muddy, sweaty and sticky with pomelo juice, we launched ourselves into the neighbouring lagoon to cool off, keeping an eye out for caimans as squirrel, capuchin and howler monkeys crashed through the canopy. For dinner we ate William's piranhas, piling up

numbers had halved in recent years, hitting the tourist-oriented economy hard. It blamed floods, a Madidi entry fee hike, and visa restrictions for Israeli and US citizens. Bolivia's recent political unrest and devastating wildfires, combined with the pandemic, mean tourism in Rurrenabaque is unlikely to recover anytime soon.

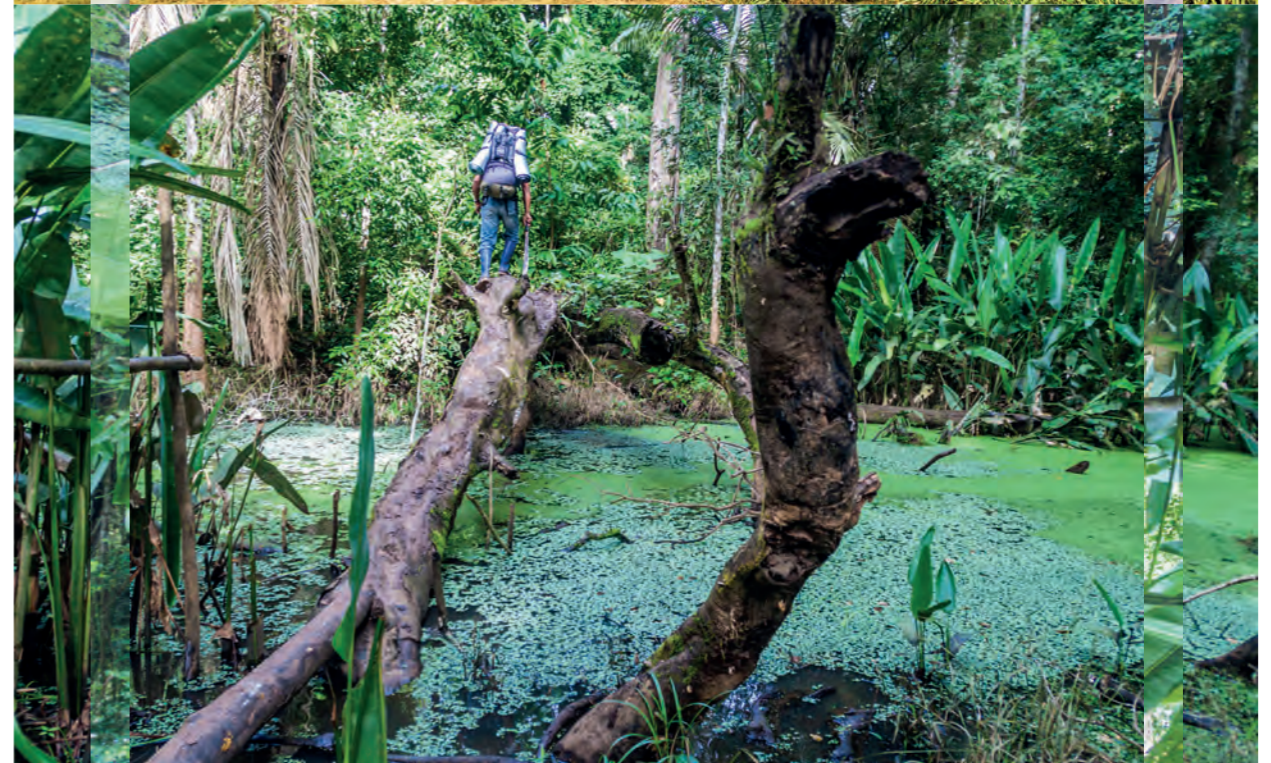
Alongside dams, deforestation, gold mining and poaching, this can seem a trivial issue or even a positive development. Yet residents lack a sustainable alternative and receive little support. When community-based tourism is done right, as at Chalalán, it gives people a financial incentive to conserve the environment: take it away and they have to find other ways to survive.

In the late afternoon I walked along the *costanera*,

they seem: their distinctive pink hue is the result of scar tissue, while Amazonian folklore paints them as shapeshifters with the power to seduce, mesmerise and haunt your dreams. It struck me that in the future Madidi – and the people who live in and around it – will need to exhibit similar qualities of resilience and adaptability to survive.

**OPPOSITE FROM THE TOP:**  
A dirt road in Rurrenabaque;  
Exploring the jungle of  
Parque Nacional Madidi;  
Mushrooms growing  
on the jungle floor.

**NEXT PAGE:**  
A caiman in Parque  
Nacional Madidi.





## NEED TO KNOW

### GETTING THERE

The quickest way to reach Rurrenabaque is on a direct flight from La Paz or the Amazonian city of Trinidad. The town is served by several long, arduous bus routes from La Paz, Trinidad and beyond.

### BEST TIME TO GO

The dry winter season (May to October) is the best time to visit the Bolivian Amazon, as it is slightly cooler and generally less rainy. During the wet summer season, the roads connecting Rurrenabaque with the rest of Bolivia can become impassable.

### CURRENCY

Boliviano

### TIME ZONE

GMT -4

### FOOD

Many of Rurrenabaque's restaurants serve traveller-focused menus – think pancakes, pasta, pizzas and so on. But the highlights are the fresh fish – try the surubí, a type of catfish – and the array of tropical fruit.

### WHERE TO STAY

Chalalán Ecolodge

### HOW TO DO IT

Chalalán Ecolodge offers a range of guided tours inside Madidi.

### MUST-PACK OPTION

Deet-heavy mosquito repellent – the biting insects are ferocious.

### WHY GO

As well as being one of the most biodiverse places on the planet, the Madidi region is also easier to access than comparable areas of the Brazilian or Peruvian Amazon. Moreover, if you choose a responsible, community-based lodge and tour operator, your visit can have a positive impact.

*Shafik Meghji's new book, [Crossed off the Map: Travels in Bolivia](#), is available from all good bookshops.*

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