



Journey to the Amazon By Bryan Brunner, HSPR Member

On 11 March 2007, I received an email from Ray Baker, Heliconia Society International (HSI) membership officer, proposing the Heliconia Lodge in Iquitos, Peru, as a possible location for the 2008 HSI conference. Little did I know at the time that the very next day he would ask me to go!

I arrived in Lima on 10 April at 4:00am. I chose the “redeye” flight to be able to sleep a little and still have the whole day to explore Lima. My friend Mitch Tiger was waiting for me at that early hour, and we immediately set out to see the world famous surfing areas south of Lima, as Mitch is an avid surfer. We visited the beautiful beaches of Playa Caballeros, San Bartolo and Santa María, and had a delicious fish stew with giant corn on the cob (*choclo*) for breakfast. I was very impressed by the enormous mountains of sand surrounding Lima and spilling into the cold waters of the Pacific Ocean. With almost no annual rainfall, not even cacti grow on the slopes, and it gives a very surreal, otherworldly feel. Lima also has an eternal foggy haze coming in off the ocean, which keeps the temperatures cool, even though it is so close to the equator.



The Santa María resort area, south of Lima.

The next day we visited Mercado Surquillo, where there is an abundance of fresh tropical and temperate fruits and vegetables, dried beans, seeds, nuts, and herbs, and fish and meat of all kinds, including the famous Peruvian *cuy* (guinea pig). We had lunch at a fantastic place called Rustica, in the historic Barranco section of Lima, where we feasted on an incredible all you can eat buffet of typical Peruvian dishes and desserts, accompanied by pitchers of purple *chicha* (a spicy sweet drink made with purple corn).



Fruits and vegetables in the Surquillo Market, Lima.

We started out my last day in Lima visiting the La Molina National Agricultural University, where I picked up some coca candy and powdered coca leaves to make coca tea. Coca products are legal and widely used in Peru as a nutritional supplement and medicinal plant. After eating incredible lucuma and granadilla flavored Italian gelato at Gelateria Laritza D, we headed off to the *Museo de Oro* (Gold Museum). This is a most incredible collection of arms, antiques and artifacts from Peru and all over the world, and is definitely worth a visit. For lunch we had Peruvian *cebiche*, lightly cooked seafood bathed in *leche de tigre* (“tiger’s

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Dates to Remember

- HSPR Meeting, 10:00 am, Saturday, June 9, 2007. Dr. Arturo Morales Carrion Theater, Metropolitan University, Hwy. 176, Km. 0.3, Cupey, PR.

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milk”, made of lemon juice and spices) and piled on a bed of lettuce and tomato, then I was off to Iquitos and the Amazon!

Immediately after flying out of the hazy, arid city and heading east, the sandy brown hills of Lima undergo a dramatic transformation into the rugged, green, cloud covered Andes. From the air, mountain roads look like tiny brown lines etched along the contour. Small towns and farm fields are also visible, scattered in the vastness of the mountain peaks. The highest peaks are dusted white with snow, and high altitude lakes look like tiny emeralds. Then comes the seemingly unending sea of green, unbroken except by the chocolate colored winding rivers, looking like giant snakes sprawled out over the landscape: the Amazon!

The steamy heat of Iquitos was quite a contrast to the dusty dryness of Lima. I arrived Thursday afternoon under a continuous light drizzle, and as we started to make our way to downtown Iquitos in the hotel bus, I was amazed at the number of motorcycles and three wheeled *mototaxis*. There are known by the *Iquiteños* as *mosquitos de la ciudad* (“city mosquitos”)! There are an estimated 20,000 motorcycles in Iquitos, which provide an economical means of transportation in a city which can only be reached by air or river. The inaccessibility of Iquitos makes for higher prices, including gasoline prices, but is partially offset by a sales tax exemption (19% in other parts of Peru).

After arriving at the Victoria Regia Hotel (named after the giant Amazon water lily) and settling into my small but comfortable room, I connected to the wireless internet (not bad for a city in the middle of the jungle!) to check my emails while waiting to meet the hotel’s owner and my host, Carlos Acosta. Carlos gave me a walking tour of Iquitos, and that town never sleeps! At 9:00pm, stores were still open, restaurants were packed, and there were several typical music and dance shows



Typical thatched Amazonian home.

on the streets. Carlos took me to a restaurant called The Yellow Rose of Texas, owned by (who else?) a Texan and his Peruvian wife. We enjoyed a delicious meal of shredded *chonta* (palm heart) with fried cassava, plantains and alligator meat.



Exploring the Amazon.

Friday morning, after a breakfast of strong black coffee, papaya and watermelon slices, and an incredibly sweet and flavorful green skinned mango, we were on our way to Puerto Bellavista on the Nanay River. Iquitos is surrounded on all sides by water; on the south by the Itaya River and on the other three sides by the Nanay River. Our destination was the Heliconia Lodge, approximately an hour and a half boat ride down the Amazon, but first we were going to take a detour to the Momon River, where the movie *Anaconda* was filmed.

The dark, humic acid stained waters of the Nanay become muddier in the Momon, and both give up their identities entirely when they merge with the mighty Amazon, whose murky, chocolate colored waters carry sediments from the far away Andes. The giant sea of slowly moving water silently carries clumps of floating aquatic plants, tree trunks and other debris downstream. The current also carries giant log rafts to waiting sawmills, as well as dugout canoes, motorboats and larger passenger boats, which move slowly up and down the river, the only means of transportation for Amazon residents.

The river banks, possibly appearing at first to be wild forest, are planted with an amazing number of useful plants, trees and palms, which are used for construction, food and medicine. Organized crop plantings visible from the river include bananas, sugar cane, cassava and corn. The long, hanging nests of the russet backed oropendolas (*Psarocolius angustifrons*) can be seen grouped in the trees, and you may be able to spot a large green iguana sunning itself or a sloth eating *Cecropia* leaves. The Amazon is also home to freshwater

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dolphins, and both the smaller gray and larger pink dolphins can be seen jumping and playing in the river.

The Heliconia Lodge is on the left bank of the Amazon, in front of the Island of Yamomono. All the buildings are constructed in the traditional thatched style, and they are all connected by raised, covered walkways (so you have something dry to walk on when the river rises!). All the rooms are screened, and I didn't find mosquitos to be a problem, although repellent is nice if you are outside at night or in the jungle. The food in the lodge is very good, and is typically fish or some other meat, rice and beans, palm heart salad and fresh fruit. Fresh fruit juices are also commonly served, and may be papaya, cocona, araza, pineapple, camu camu or orange juice. I have to say that I didn't have a single bad meal in Peru... everything was excellent!

The jungles near Iquitos are home to a large diversity of native Zingiberales, including *Heliconia chartacea*, *H. episcopalis*, *H. marginata*, *H. stricta*, *H. orthotricha*, *H. hirsuta*, *H. rostrata*, *H. standleyi*, *Calthea lutea*, *C. crotalifera*, and several species of *Costus*, *Maranta* and *Renealmia*. Leaves of heliconias (called *citulli*) and calatheas (called *bijao*) are used by Amazonians to line and cover baskets containing food, as packaging for food products in the market, and as a wrapping to cook rice *juanes*, corn *tamales*, fish, and other foods. Other Zingiberales are used as food, ornamentals, dyes, and have numerous medicinal uses.



One of the covered walkways at the Heliconia Lodge.

Heliconia Lodge is generously landscaped with heliconias and other Zingiberales, including *Heliconia psittacorum* x *spathocircinata* 'Guyana' and 'Golden Torch', *H. stricta*, *H. rostrata*, *H. psittacorum* 'Andromeda', *H. bihai* (orange), *H. marginata* (red), *H. chartacea* (pale pink), *H. episcopalis*, *H. standleyi*, *Hedychium coronarium*, and several *Costus* and *Calathea* species. There was also a giant pendent pink heli



Two of Exotica's unusual rostratas. Left, a green tipped rostrata with a hairy rachis; right, a variegated rostrata.

conia that looked like a hybrid of *H. platystachys* and *H. chartacea*.

Saturday morning there was a slow, steady drizzle, but we set off hiking into the jungle anyway, wearing rubber boots and ponchos. Heliconia Lodge has a series of boardwalks in the jungle, to facilitate crossing flooded areas. The jungle is a marvelous place, filled with brightly colored butterflies and beetles, exotic flowers and fruits, spiny palms, vines, epiphytic ferns, bromeliads, and orchids, tiny poison dart frogs, and giant tarantulas. My guide, Ricardo Guerra, a descendent of the Cocama Indian tribe, was very knowledgeable about Amazon plants and their uses, even knowing many scientific names, as well as the indigenous names.

My last day in Iquitos was spent with Margarita Ríos Chiong, owner of Exotica cut flower farm and florist shop. Margarita, together with her sons Halon and Juan Alberto, manage about 3.5 ha of cut flower production, comprised of 80% heliconias and 20% gingers and ornamental bananas. They export flowers by plane to Lima twice a week, and market the remainder from their retail florist shop in downtown Iquitos. The day that I visited, they were busy making flower arrangements for a German cruise ship that was visiting Iquitos.

Margarita showed me some wonderful new heliconias, including a solid yellow rostrata, a variegated rostrata (the inflorescence, not the foliage), a small green-tipped rostrata with a hairy rachis, an orange stricta, and a pale pink chartacea with a pastel yellow rachis. There are about 10 heliconia and ginger growers in Iquitos, but Exotica is the largest and the only one that exports cut flowers.

I had a wonderful time in Peru and thoroughly enjoyed the great people, excellent food, exquisite landscapes and fascinating plants and animals. I hope to be able to share it with all of you at the 2008 HSI Conference!

HELICONIA SOCIETY OF PUERTO RICO, INC.

www.heliconiasocietypr.org

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HSPR

*Promoting Zingiberales in
Puerto Rico since 1996.*



The Heliconia Society of Puerto Rico, Inc. was founded in 1996. The objectives of the society are to stimulate and promote the enjoyment and understanding of Heliconia and related plants of the order Zingiberales through education, research and communication, and to interact with the Heliconia Society International and other institutions which share similar interests, purposes or objectives.

President's Corner

We wish to express our sincere gratitude to José Hiram Flores and Sheila Rivera for their kindness in hosting our March meeting at their lovely farm.

Attendance was less than usual, but everyone enjoyed the fellowship and the raffle.

Our next meeting will be the third in our series of "Meet the Experts" lectures.

This program will also be open to the public as well as to our members.

Our guest speaker for this even will be Bruce Dunstan. Bruce lives in Australia and has traveled extensively on jungle expeditions, photographing heliconias and other plants. I have seen some of his photographs and they are superb. This will be a presentation that you won't want to miss.

The lecture will start at 10:00am sharp, and will last for about an hour. It will be held at the same location as last year on Saturday, June 9, at the Dr. Arturo Morales Carrion Theater, Metropolitan University, Cupey.

After the lecture, everyone will have time to visit with our guest. Due to UMET charging considerably more this year for a room in which to hold a reception meal, I have decided that it will be in the best financial interest of HSPR not to serve food and drinks this year.

Judy and Sergio will be having plant sales in the lobby again this year, just as in the past two years.

Please encourage all flower lovers that you know to attend this event. I'm sure that everyone will enjoy it immensely.

Ray Jerome
President, HSPR



Above: Margarita Ríos (center) of Exotica, with sons Hailon (red shirt) and Juan Alberto (lime green shirt), daughter Karina (red shirt), daughter in law, two employees and grandchildren. Below: Alpinia purpurata in one of Exotica's fields.

