

Palms of the Amazon Ecotours

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1. The "Harpy Eagle"

For the last three years, small groups of International Palm Society members and others have been participating in the "Palms of the Amazon" ecotours. These tours are organized by the New York Botanical Garden and originate in Miami. Our groups, consisting of 15-20 people, are very mixed; we have had participants from Australia, Brazil, England, New Caledonia, Spain, Switzerland, and, of course, the United States. They all have one thing in common, a desire to see the Amazon and its palms.

We fly from Miami to Manaus, in the heart of the Brazilian Amazon. From the airport we are taken directly to the "Harpy Eagle" (Fig. 1), a small but comfortable Amazon river boat. The boat is owned and operated by Moacir Fortes, a legendary guide who has been introducing tourists to the Amazon region for more than 25 years. Our tours are planned for the dry season, when the river is at its highest, so we can take motorized canoe trips through the flooded forests.

Our schedule is very informal, and we often make it up as we go along. A typical day might start early

in the morning with a cup of Brazilian coffee and then off in the two small motorized canoes to listen to the forest awakening. We find a small channel and drift past the forest, listening to the incredible early morning sounds. Everyone is very impressed with the howler monkeys and various birds. Back to the boat for breakfast, and then we may continue along the river. If we see a promising place we may stop and hike in the forest. We will usually ask a local person what palms grow in the area, and we always get some interesting leads. One of the great pleasures of the



2. *Bactris elegans* in western Amazon forests.



3. *Geonoma stricta* in western Amazon forests.

trips is interacting with the unfailingly friendly local people along the river. Often we are off on a wild goose chase, looking for some rare palm or other that grows "not too far away." Back to the boat for a swim before lunch, and then we relax on the upper deck during the hottest part of the day while continuing along the river. We may go for another hike in the afternoon, and another small boat trip in the evening to look for night life. On our trips we have seen birds, river dolphins, sloths, monkeys, and the first year we even saw an anaconda. Moacir has also been known to do a spot of fishing, and usually he has a few volunteers to join him. We often travel during the night, and it's a real pleasure to go up on deck the next day and watch the sun rise over some new early morning landscape. Our trips end with a day in Manaus. We visit the markets, especially the fish market, and then go on and see the famed opera house and various other local attractions.

On our first trip, in 1997, we traveled from Manaus up the Rio Negro to the small town of Barcelos and a little way beyond. The Rio Negro is an extremely beautiful river, with very low human population levels and a very distinctive flora and fauna. It is

also free of biting insects. Moacir tells a funny story about a party of German tourists he took up the Rio Negro some time ago, and the leader of the group complained that they had not been bitten by any mosquitoes! We saw about 55 species of palm on this trip. Highlights were all three species of *Leopoldinia*, *L. pulchra*, *L. major* and *L. piassaba*, and also the unusual *Barcella odora*. In the forests we saw a great variety of *Geonoma* and *Bactris*, including *G. baculifera*. We also found *Bactris campestris* on sandy soils not far from Manaus, much further south than previously recorded. There were many plants of *Lepidocaryum tenue* and *Iriartella setigera* in the Rio Negro forests. The banks of the river are lined for hundreds of miles with stands of *Astrocaryum jauari*, *Leopoldinia major* and *Mauritiella aculeata*.

The next year, 1998, we flew on from Manaus to Tabatinga, in the extreme western part of the Brazilian Amazon. We joined Moacir and the crew of the "Harpy Eagle" there, and traveled downstream to Manaus. We saw lots of different species of palms on this trip, about 58 in total. I remember the great diversity of understory palms in those western Amazon forests, *Bactris* (Fig. 2), *Chamaedorea*,



4. *Oenocarpus simplex* in the western Amazon.



5. *Bactris simplicifrons* in lower Amazon forest.

Geonoma (Fig. 3) and *Hyospathe*, as well as a good number of species of *Astrocaryum*. Also memorable were the huge plants of *Iriartea deltoidea* with their distinctive swollen stems and stilt roots, and the beautiful stands of *Euterpe precatorea* lining the river. Our most exciting discovery on this trip was *Oenocarpus simplex* (Fig. 4). This small but very attractive relative of the large and common *O. bacaba* and *O. bataua*, had not been recorded before from Brazil, and was known only from a site in Colombia several hundred kilometers to the north. Growing with *O. simplex* was another unusual plant of *Oenocarpus* that I did not recognize. I wondered if it was a hybrid between *O. simplex* and *O. bacaba*. The wonderful stands of the Amazon water lily, *Victoria amazonica*, in full bloom were also one of the high points of this trip.

In 1999 we traveled from Manaus downstream, to explore some of the eastern tributaries of the Amazon. We spent most of our time on the Rio Nhamundá. Like the Rio Negro, the Nhamundá is a black water river (which means no biting insects!). Like the Rio Negro it is also a very beautiful, with many interesting palms. I especially liked the contrast between the "forests"

of *Leopoldinia pulchra* growing in the river and the large stands of *Attalea spectabilis* (see page 3) growing in full sun on pure sand along the banks. In nearby forests we saw a number of *Syagrus*, and we all admired two small species of *Bactris* growing side by side, *B. simplicifrons* (Fig. 5) and *B. cuspidata*. Our local guide showed us stands of the rare *Manicaria saccifera* and *Mauritia carana*. Also memorable was a daylong "short cut" we took through a flooded landscape dotted with *Bactris riparia* and *B. bidentula*. We saw about 55 species of palm on this trip. In fact, we liked the Rio Nhamundá so much we plan to return there this year. The local people talk of different palms further up the river. On our return trip to Manaus we traveled close to the shore, to avoid the currents of the middle of the river. An advantage of this was that we could admire close up the palms along the banks, *Attalea speciosa* (the babassu palm), *Elaeis oleifera* (the American oil palm), *Oenocarpus mapora* and *Euterpe oleracea*. I suspect that many of these palms were planted by local people, since all are useful species.

For me these trips have been especially rewarding. Apart from good company, good food and the beautiful Amazon landscape, there are the palms.

The Amazon is full of surprises, and there is always something new.

For more information on this year's tour, 31 July–11 August 2000, please contact Myrna

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The Post Biennial Tour will be hosted by the IPS Affiliated Society, Far North Queensland Palm and Cycad Association. As you will notice, the itinerary is full of exciting visits to gardens and palm habitats. Our Australian friends guarantee that the Post Biennial Tour will be one of the best ever. Included will be a visit to Mt. Lewis, which is the habitat of *Archontophoenix purpurea*. Attendees will also visit many fabulous gardens, other natural habitats, and exotic palm nurseries. Who knows, perhaps an authentic Australian BBQ might await us?

Don't be another member who ends up saying "I should have gone"! The registration fees are quite affordable for what attendees will receive. Airfare can be obtained at a discount from our designated travel agency. Also, remember that the 2000 Olympics precede us by two weeks in Australia. Last minute registration may be difficult. **Register now and book your airline tickets.** See your there!

PHIL BERGMAN, IPS PRESIDENT

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