

An Upper Amazon Adventure

Kirkwood's Gig Gwin back from "grand tour" of the Upper Amazon River. Cruise combined adventure with luxury accommodations.



Gig Gwin of Gwins Travel in Kirkwood is taken a bit off guard by a troupe of curious squirrel monkeys. The monkeys make their home in the tropical rain forest of "Monkey Island" in Colombia, South America.

photo by Bob Hoelscher

by Marty Harris

Gig Gwin, world traveler extraordinaire and owner of Gwins Travel in Kirkwood, refers to his March trip to the green paradise of the Upper Amazon River as a "real treat."

Gwin's travels have taken him to every country in the world and beyond, logging over 3.4 million miles, but his voyage down one of the world's longest rivers was his first.

Traveling the Amazon River on the 5-star Sea Dream II luxury yacht,

Gwin put on his khakis and boots, then hiked through the seemingly impenetrable jungle with experienced guides and naturalists and visited isolated Indian tribes. He and fellow travelers then returned to the 100-passenger cruise ship for soft surroundings and gourmet food.

"Cruising is the only way to see the Amazon," Gwin opined.

Gwin and his traveling companion Bob Hoelscher, a travel journalist, boarded the ship for their eight-day

river excursion in the "pretty safe" port town of Iquitos, Peru. They traveled approximately 500 miles round trip on the river, Gwin said.

At Iquitos, and Laticia, Colombia, both on the edge of the rain forest, Gwin took in the sights and sounds, noting the multi-colored facades, pot-holed streets and never-ending motorcycle traffic.

"Many local restaurants and bars are open alfresco watering holes

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A young girl from a village along the Upper Amazon holds her pet agouti.

photo by Gig Gwin



Gig Gwin

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specializing in river fish dishes and cold South American beers," he said.

In Laticia, he discovered shops whose wares ranged from machetes, fresh local produce to wooden parrots.

Along the muddy Amazon — reminiscent of the Mississippi River — and its clear-water tributaries, Gwin savored the breathtaking scenery, marveled at flora such as water lilies some spanning about six-feet in diameter, and played volleyball with the locals. Some of the isolated villagers adorned their bodies with paint and performed native dances for the visitors.

"We were special to them," Gwin said. "They (the natives) don't get five ships a week, they get five ships a year."

Link To The Garden

Prior to Gwin's trip, he had dinner with Peter Raven, the former head of the Missouri Botanical Garden. Raven informed Gwin that a huge percentage of the world's plants are found in the Amazonian region.

"It is a treasure trove for a botanical research team to go to the Amazon," said Gwin. He added when a new plant is found, part of it is sent to St. Louis and stored at the Garden.

"We are at the center of the world for botanical science and research," Gwin noted.

The five naturalists on the ship "almost" treated Gwin as someone special just because he knew Raven, Gwin said. As part of the cruise, these highly-trained naturalists offered Gwin and his shipmates an up-close and personal botanical adventure.

"The most fun we had was on Monkey Island in Colombia," Gwin said. He said squirrel monkeys, which look like kittens, climbed all over visitors' heads, arms, shoulders.

The only advice they were given before going among the monkeys was "don't scream," because it scares them away and they climb up into the trees, Gwin said.

Light Adventure

Gwin recommends this "light adventure" trip for those baby boomers who like to get dirty, have some adventure, then come back to a five-star ship, eat a wonderful meal, then sleep in a nice comfortable bed.

"For most people, you're going to see things in the Amazon jungle and river that you're never going to see anywhere else," Gwin said.

After the eight-day river excursion, travelers might want stay another three or four days to see the Inca ruins at Machu Picchu in Peru. By adding another week, they could also take a cruise to the Galapagos Islands.

A Grand Tour

The Amazon is truly one of the grand tours of the world, Gwin said.

"I wrote a book three years ago ("Travel Dreams Sold Here: Crafting An Extraordinary Vacation") and it drew me to the conclusion that there are 920 grand tours and landmark trips in the world.

"I have been to 918 of the 920; the Amazon was 919," Gwin said, noting he assigned points for locales based on culture, food and beverage, landmarks for natural wonders, and shopping. He considers a grand tour one with over 20 points.

Gwin is already packing for his next great adventure — to Upper England including Chester, York and the Lake District.

"That will complete all 920 grand tours of the world," he said.



Gig Gwin, left, listens to John Harwood, one of five naturalists on the trip as he talks about some of the native flora.

photo by Bob Hoelscher



Two native youngsters from one of villages along the Upper Amazon.

photo by Gig Gwin



The Upper Amazon River.

photo by Gig Gwin