



Up the river

(BUT WITH A PADDLE)

This month, a report from the field as **Ed Stafford** describes the contents of his rucksack as he attempts to become the first person to walk the entire length of the Amazon River

As Luke and I dipped our toes in the Pacific Ocean to start the transcontinental walk that would take us over the Andes and down the length of the Amazon River, we could hardly stand up. 'Your pack is ridiculous!' I mocked. It looked like Luke had an overflowing garden shed strapped to his back.

'You can talk,' he retorted. 'Look at your shoulder straps, they're torn already.' It was true: the first day of a two-year expedition and I'd ripped the top shoulder adjuster clean off the harness.

We had more than 45 kilograms in each of our packs: a sign of our lack of any notion of what lay ahead and what we would need to tackle it. At the end of the first day, the woman who owned the village shop invited us to put up our single-skin, one-person tents in her back garden. She must have thought we were very appreciative, because she received binoculars, phrase books, spare hats, spare trousers and fishing hooks and line in return... the list went on and on as we desperately tried to find more things to ditch.

This is the fifth expedition to attempt to navigate the Amazon River from its farthest source in Peru to its mouth in Brazil. Only one of

these expeditions started, as we did, from the Pacific coast. That was Mike Horn's inspirational hydrospeed expedition in 1997–98. We wanted to do the whole thing on foot, which has never been attempted before. We got so annoyed by everybody telling us that it was impossible that, in true British fashion, we had to go and prove them wrong.

TRAVELLING LIGHT

Seven months on, I'm tucked up in the sweaty jungle town of Contamana in the northern Peruvian Amazon. With well over 1,600 kilometres under my belt, the arid coast and the snow-capped Andes are now just distant memories – as, too, is Luke, who left the expedition after three months. My pack is still functional only because many hours of crude sewing have made it so. It now weighs a more sensible 31 kilograms without food. When I'm walking, I no longer notice it.

This is now an out-and-out jungle expedition. My Gucci salopettes and Bavarian goose-down jacket were parcelled up and sent home a long time ago. So what makes up the 31 kilograms of weight?

First, there's the rucksack. No, it doesn't need wheels. No, it doesn't need to double as an over-the-shoulder ➤

— ED STAFFORD —
is attempting to become the first person to walk the length of the Amazon (www.edstafford.co.uk). To find out how Ed stays in touch with the outside world, and what gear he deploys to guarantee fresh fish for supper, visit www.geographical.co.uk/magazine/kit

One thing that's surprisingly unnecessary is waterproof clothing – I'm usually drenched in sweat all day long

suitcase. It does need to be top-loading, have an adjustable harness, and be able to accommodate at least 75 litres of kit. In the mountains, mine was a whopping 95-litre workhorse; for the jungle, I'm switching to an 80-litre climbing pack. Its lower profile allows me to get under vines and branches much more easily. I don't need as much kit in the jungle anyway.

I've customised my pack to hold two water bottles and two pouches on the belt. One bottle is for drinking; the other contains water being purified with iodine. It's a rotation system that ensures I have water on hand at all times, which is absolutely essential in the jungle, where dehydration is a constant threat.

The other two pouches are for my GPS unit, compass, suntan lotion, waterproof head torch and DEET-based mosquito repellent. These are all the things that I need to have to hand. I'm not sure if I should admit this, but I also always have my toothbrush and toothpaste in these pouches. I hate having unbrushed teeth.

Everything inside the pack is stored inside a 100-litre waterproof rucksack liner. Within that rubber liner, each item is compartmentalised and has its place. It may seem rather regimented, but it's essential for me to know exactly where everything is at all times. I don't want to be searching for the medical kit or the satellite phone when an emergency arises. It also means that I'm on autopilot each morning and, from sleeping, can be up and walking in about five minutes, unless I want to eat breakfast.

HANGING ABOUT

I'm now using a hammock sleeping system rather than a tent. Hennessy Hammocks is a Canadian company that makes an ingenious all-in-one hammock and mosquito net that you enter through a flap in the bottom. Having used the old military hammocks in the past, I love the Hennessy concept. Its hammocks are lighter, quicker to erect and pack up in seconds. You can sprawl around and turn over as much as you like.

The one drawback with the version I'm using is that it isn't completely mosquito-proof if you sleep with your bare skin against the hammock. That's because your body weight stretches open the fabric just enough to allow the



TOP RIGHT: Ed makes good progress through the flooded forest. Small wonder that he chose boots that drain and dry quickly; **TOP RIGHT:** crossing a stream on a fallen log with one of his guides, Cho

little blighters access to your blood. To its credit, Hennessy has acknowledged this and has made me a bespoke double-skin version. I sleep with a lightweight single-season sleeping bag and use a silk liner – both to stop the bag getting too stinky and on its own as a cooler option on hot nights.

All of Hennessy's hammocks come with the option of the superb Hex Fly, which is an enormous hexagonal waterproof fly-sheet. It covers the hammock with room to spare, allowing you to cook, administrate and even have meetings with four or five people out of the rain.

On the subject of rain,

the one thing that's surprisingly unnecessary is waterproof clothing. The humidity and temperature are so high that I'm normally drenched with sweat all day long. Days when it rains are actually more comfortable, as I find the air is fresher and less sticky. The one concession to this is that if you're going to move around in an open vehicle or boat, you may want a lightweight waterproof jacket or poncho, as the resulting windchill can make life rather nippy if you're wearing a wet cotton T-shirt. Personally, I prefer to save the weight. I could theoretically use the Hex Fly as an improvised jacket should the need arise.

JUNGLE WARDROBE

Clothing is very simple and doesn't need to cost much. I carry two sets: one for the day (often wet) and one for the night (always dry). Long trousers and long-sleeved shirts are the rule, but I just wear a cheap, locally bought T-shirt during the day as this garment has less material to get soaked. A quick-drying fabric is great, but make sure the trousers are tough enough to resist rips from thorns and spiky plants. I impregnated my clothing and mosquito net with the

insect repellent permethrin before I left home as it definitely helps prevent bites, but I'm well overdue a re-dipping now.

After years of smirking at walking poles, I now love using them in the hills. But they have no place in the jungle. I need to use my hands as stabilisers on branches and for wielding my machete.

A young boy's dream and a tool with a fantastic diversity of uses, the machete is invaluable in the rainforest. My preference has always been for a slightly longer machete rather than a shorter Borneo-style *parang*. I think it probably comes down to where you were

first introduced to jungle living. For me, a 40-centimetre blade cuts through most things. The key is to use the weight of the blade and to keep it scrupulously sharp, as it then requires much less effort to cut through vines and branches.

There are probably more than 1,000 river crossings over the course of this expedition. At the river's mouth, some of these crossings will be more than 16 kilometres wide. My

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE FOOTWEAR

Footwear is a contentious subject. Wellies are fine if you're not walking far, and my guides all use them. If, like me, you want more support and protection from spikes and spines, then jungle boots are made specifically for the job. They have holes in the instep to allow water to drain out. They don't attempt to be waterproof, as more often than not, you are wading in deep water. The key is that they drain and dry quickly.



The US-military-issue jungle boot is usually recommended, but I opted for the more substantial and comfortable Altberg version. My pair is a bespoke model with a chunky tread, eyelets rather than complicated valves for letting water drain away faster, and uppers made from Lorica rather than leather. To order these boots, you need to specify these requirements, as the standard boot has drainage issues. The boots they made for me are the best I've ever worn in the trees. In the past month, they have been under water for at least a third of the walking day.

I also have a pair of Crocs for walking around camp in the evening. These let my feet dry out and breathe. I wash in them in the river too.

Because Crocs are 100 per cent rubber, they don't absorb water and are always dry, unlike the leather straps on other brands.

personal solution has been inflatable pack-rafts with travel paddles. They are the size of a roll mat when deflated. Without them, this expedition would not be possible. It means that when we reach water, we inflate them in less than two minutes, attach our packs to the front, and paddle across.

I've been walking with three guides recently. Two are indigenous Asháninkas and one is mixed-race Peruvian. It was taking us forever to cross the rivers because we had to shuttle the two one-man craft back and forth to get everyone across. The bold answer was simply to try fitting two people and two full rucksacks in each boat. It worked – beautifully – and this has now become our standard practice. The total weight in each boat is around 195 kilograms.

Finally, I have an MP3 player, which I'm using to help me learn Portuguese as I approach Brazil, as well as getting my daily dose of Kate Nash's music. Life would be unbearable without her.



ABOVE: Ed and Raul, another of his guides, set off across a lake in his one-man Alpacka raft. Ed estimates that over the course of the expedition, he will have to undertake more than 1,000 river and lake crossings, making the raft, which inflates in just two minutes, an indispensable piece of kit



1

HAMMOCK

**Hennessey Explorer Ultralight
(with Hex Fly option)**

US\$220/1.15 KILOGRAMS

The best hammock system available. The hammock sits high and close to the fly so that even in torrential downpours, you don't get wet from rain splashing off the ground or other trees



2

BOAT

Alpacka Yukon Yak

US\$790/2.1 KILOGRAMS

This inflatable pack-raft allows you to reach places you couldn't otherwise go. It's tough, simple and light. If you like a comfy night's sleep and are on a rocky beach, you can flip it over and use it as a luxury bed. Genius



3

PADDLE

Splat carbon fibre

US\$210/935 GRAMS

Light and unbelievably strong. This carbon-fibre paddle breaks into four parts and sits on the side of your rucksack so snugly that you'll forget it's there. Order it with the raft from Alpacka



4

VIDEO CAMERA

Sony HVR-A1E

£1,705/670 GRAMS

If you want to film your expedition in high definition, this little unit is hard to beat. The mini DV tapes are bombproof and can be chucked in a bag with silicone for complete peace of mind. The camera also takes still images. It uses Sony's Memory Stick Duo Pro

**TEN
OF THE BEST**

Walking the length of the Amazon means becoming well acquainted with water. Whether it's keeping the rain at bay or crossing the river's abundant tributaries, this environment offers many an aquatic challenge. Here's a selection of the items with which Ed has armed himself

Don't forget...

...deodorant. Essential for maintaining your self-respect as a human being.

Tell people who say that it's okay to smell to go and sit somewhere else. And it doesn't attract insects – that's a complete myth

NEXT MONTH:

WHEELS ACROSS VICTORIA ISLAND

For stockists and information, visit www.geographical.co.uk/features/kit



5

SEWING KIT

Speedy Stitcher Sewing Kit

£11/130 GRAMS

This inconspicuous little item will repair anything from your rucksack belt to your boots with very strong, rot-resistant, waxed thread – in a matter of seconds. Supplied with thread. Think you don't need one? Just try it

6

MACHETE

Ralph Martindale machete

POA/550 GRAMS

Where do the best machetes in the world come from? Birmingham. Martindale sells to markets worldwide and the steel they use is pure quality. Its files are amazing too: use one next to a file bought in Latin America and you will laugh out loud at the difference. Beware of fakes that bear the crocodile logo



7

**RUCKSACK
Macpac Ascent XPD**

£190/2.6 KILOGRAMS

For the jungle, this pack is the bee's knees. It sports a single compartment so doesn't have any unnecessary zips or flaps. It also has a surprisingly low profile for an 80-litre capacity, enabling you to slip through the trees like a snake. It's heavy but it's tough and will last



8

WATERPROOFING AGENT

Seam Grip

£6/28 GRAMS

Sliced bread was a rubbish invention in comparison. Apply to seams in items such as jackets and flysheets, and around the edges of a duct-tape patch to repair items that need to be 100 per cent airtight, such as Therm-a-Rests, rucksack liners and rafts



9

REPAIR TAPE

Advance Tapes AT160

£6/500 GRAMS

This stuff mends anything, including pack-rafts and Therm-a-Rest mattresses (with a little help from Seam Grip). Also brilliant for hot spots on my feet: it's better than zinc oxide tape as the outer is shiny and so the sock slips over it, which reduces friction



10

TORCH

Petzl Zipka Plus

£26/64 GRAMS

Small and beautiful, and a must for countries where it's dark at 6pm and you still need to cook, read and go to the loo. It uses LEDs: there's no need for halogen lights because in the jungle, you can't see further than about 20 metres anyway