



"Trekking with tarantulas in Brazil helped my arachnophobia"

By Elizabeth Sulis Kim



"Who'd like to hold him?" says our guide, scooping something from the rainforest floor. Given his cupped hands, I know he isn't referring to anything I'd like to hold.

I'm a lifelong arachnophobe and the mere thought of spiders – their long spindly legs and rapid movement – has always made my skin crawl. And of course, he's holding a tarantula. Sweat drips from my forehead; it's 31°C and there's high humidity. I back away from the group, but the cicada song reminds me I'm in the Amazon; here you can't escape the forest life and I'm told there are spiders waiting to scurry across my feet or climb up my legs at any time.

I had wanted to visit the Amazon and get lost in the river's tributaries since reading Eva Ibbotson's *Journey To The River Sea* as a child. But I knew it came with a caveat. I wasn't intimidated by the malaria-ridden mosquitos, piranhas or jaguars – my biggest fear was encountering spiders way more sinister than the house ones that terrified me at home. Still, making this trip was my biggest dream, so I flew 16 hours to Manaus in Brazil for a two-week Amazon group tour, which included sleeping in the open forest, above a carpet of spiders.

After staying in a jungle lodge for a week, trekking the forest and swimming in the river, while looking out for sloths, pink river dolphins, caimans and exotic birds, the final leg of our trip involved heading to a more remote part of the rainforest to set up camp. AKA, the part I'd been dreading. Our camp, reached by canoe and a two-hour hike, looked like every other place under the canopy: dark, humid and

"There was no going back"

inhospitable to humans. And 100% the sort of place where spiders like to hang out. I wasn't mentally prepared, but by that point there was no going back.

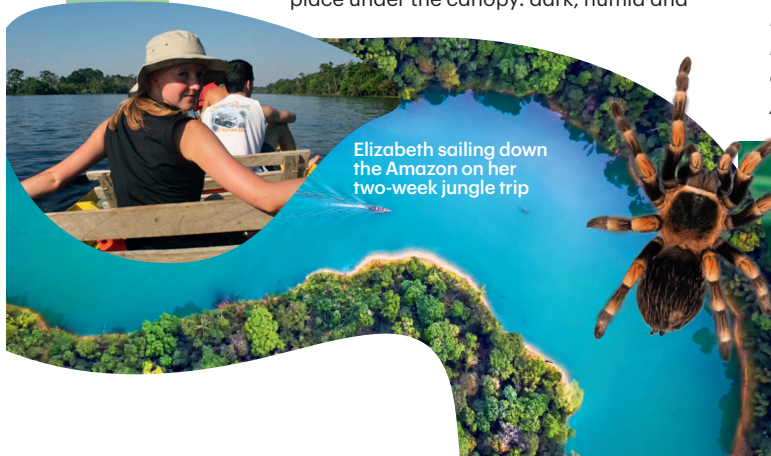
At dusk, we tied our hammocks between trees and three of us left camp in search of plants to use as plates at dinner. But five minutes in, my torch hit the forest floor and three tarantulas scuttled past my feet into the darkness. "They're everywhere," laughed one of the guys. Feeling freaked out, I went back to camp, but I couldn't help but wonder what I'd missed out on.

That night, I got into my hammock and mosquito net cocoon and imagined the world's largest spider, a Goliath bird-eating spider, jumping from a tree, landing on the net. I'd been told I wouldn't see it, I'd just hear it. I listened for sounds of life, but the cacophony of the forest calmed me and eventually I fell asleep. The next morning, I was proud of myself for surviving the night – and on the way back to the lodge, our guide picked up another tarantula. I didn't hold it but, to my surprise, I didn't retreat either. Instead, I stepped forward and watched it, albeit warily. 'This is its forest, not mine, and I hope I've been a good guest,' I thought.

Today, am I completely cured of my fear? No. But that form of exposure therapy helped me more than I could have hoped. I still have days when spiders cause me to leave the room, but I've realised it's not the spiders – it's my anxieties honing in on something to be anxious about. I've learnt adventure means pushing yourself outside of your comfort zone. On my last night in the jungle, it was hard to distinguish the fireflies from the stars reflecting on the river, but spiders didn't even cross my mind. The unknown can be a terrifying but beautiful place.

Fly to Manaus via Miami or São Paulo. Five nights at The Ararinha Jungle Lodge, plus one night in the jungle, from £210 with Amazon Gero Tours.

Elizabeth sailing down the Amazon on her two-week jungle trip



"I faced my fear of heights – by hurling myself out of a plane above Switzerland"

By Radhika Sanghani



I'm 13,000ft above land and can see the snowy Swiss Alps surrounding the glassy surface of Lake Thun. In other circumstances, I'd be struck by the breathtaking view. But right now, I'm holding my breath, sitting on the edge of a plane, my legs dangling. I'm attached to a skydiving instructor and he's yelling at me to "JUMP!" But I can't. My entire body is frozen by fear, the wind is deafening and all I can think is: 'I'm going to die.'

I never thought I'd say yes to a skydive. I hate heights – usually, just the thought of being on a tiny plane is enough for me to break out in a sweat. This is all heightened by my anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder, both of which I was diagnosed with after surviving a fatal coach crash several years ago. My fear can be irrational, which is why I wouldn't just be terrified about the parachute not opening. For me, the real threat is surrendering to a situation where I have to completely rely on someone else, or worse, the elements. It's put me off everything from skiing (what if I lose control?) to taking risks in my career (what will happen if I change industries?). But after years of this holding me back, I decided to face it once and for all.

So, last November, I booked a solo trip to Switzerland's Interlaken region renowned for its paragliding, rafting and, of course, skydiving. The plane ride up was overwhelmingly tense, I couldn't even smile at the instructor's jokes – I was too busy trembling with nerves. When he

told me to sit on the edge, I've never *not* wanted to do something more, but when he threatened to push me, I knew it was time for me to 'lose control' and surrender to the sky. I shut my eyes, took the biggest breath of my life – and let myself fall forward. The sensation was more brutal than I'd imagined. We free-fell at 200mph and the wind tore through my hair. I saw bits of mountain, grass, sky, and realised I was tumbling. I screamed non-stop, but after about 40 seconds, I was forced to take a deep breath. As I took that life-saving gasp of air, I can't remember a time I'd felt so alive. The moment was interrupted by my instructor shouting: "I'm going to open the parachute." I thought I'd be relieved, but to my amazement, I was almost enjoying it. As we glided back down to the ground, I felt giddy with adrenaline.

By the time I got back to the Salzano Hotel, the exhilaration had worn off, but I couldn't stop smiling. I had no idea I was capable of facing my fears head on like that; it made me realise that perhaps I'm braver than I thought. My anxiety hasn't magically disappeared, but now I recognise that it doesn't have to stop me from taking risks. Things that used to trigger my anxiety, like pitching an idea in a meeting or turning up to an event where I don't know anyone, don't feel as scary. Once you've had the courage to throw yourself out of a plane, a work rejection pales in comparison. Who knows what else I'm capable of? For the first time in years, I'm ready to find out.

Skydives from £300 with Skydive Switzerland. Stay at the Salzano Hotel from £79. ●

Lake Thun in the Swiss Alps, where Radhika (above left) did her 13,000ft skydive

