

see

the action in Brazil and have a holiday at the same time. Tickets for a number of matches at the World Cup, which starts on June 12, including some of the group-stage fixtures at the Arena Amazônia in Manaus, are available last-minute. Register at www.fifa.com/tickets



An aerial view of the harbour of Manaus, in northern Brazil, which will rise to global prominence next month as one of the host cities for the Fifa World Cup. The city marries colonial architecture with modern developments. Bruno Kelly / Reuters

Jungle bookings

Ahead of the World Cup, **Kiki Deere** explores Manaus, the Amazonian city that was once a rubber hub

I take a seat within the theatre's elegant interior, featuring intricate frescoes, Louis XV-style furniture and beautiful, marble-mined columns from the Italian city of Carrara. Members of the audience whisper in hushed tones, as they take in their sumptuous surrounds before the lights are dimmed, signalling the beginning of the performance. I could be in Milan's La Scala or Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre, yet I'm in the most unlikely location: in the heart of the Amazon, about 1,300 kilometres from the Atlantic Ocean in a city surrounded by the world's largest rainforest.

Built at the height of the rubber boom in 1896, the Manaus Opera House was constructed entirely with materials shipped from Europe. The wrought-iron framework for the theatre's boxes and balconies were brought from Paris; the roofing tiles – 36,000 enamelled ceramic scales in the colours of the Brazilian flag – came from Alsace in France, while the columns, statues and stairways were imported from Italy. The materials travelled thousands of kilometres by ship across the Atlantic and up the murky waters of the Amazon River, and were painstakingly reassembled in the stifling Amazonian heat.

The city seems largely unchanged since my last visit here a few years ago, yet this time, as I saunter along streets thronged with people, I'm repeatedly forced to duck under rows of scaffolding, a reminder of the scores of new hotels that are rapidly being constructed for the upcoming Fifa World Cup. Around me, there's excited talk of the impending event, although many locals are proud about the World Cup being held here, but I don't think we're ready yet; it may end up being a huge embarrassment to Brazil instead," says a local resident. Her worries are not unjustified. Since its construction, the Arena Amazônia stadium has been beset by problems – not least the adverse publicity arising from the death of three workers.



Anavilhanas Jungle Lodge, north of Manaus. Courtesy Anavilhanas Jungle Lodge

Yet Manauenses hope that this worldwide event will once again place their city on a map and bring back some of the city's former glory, which was prematurely circumscribed when the Englishman Henry Wickham smuggled 70,000 rubber tree seeds out of the Amazon in 1876, which eventually led to rubber trees being planted in Malaya. This caused the price of Brazilian rubber to collapse, thereby propelling Manaus into a spiral of economic decline.

In the mid-19th century the Amazon experienced an economic changeover, as the region's much-prized native rubber tree *Hevea brasiliensis* became an invaluable commodity on international markets. European merchants settled in the Amazon to make their fortunes, constructing cities that mimicked Europe's grandest. Manaus was nicknamed the "Paris of the tropics", and attracted European adventurers who lived in much the same way as their counterparts across the Atlantic. Such fortunes were made in this part of the world, that it's said that rubber barons lit cigars with dollar bills, while their wives sent their laundry all the way back to Europe to be washed.

Today, Manaus retains a handful of elaborate rubber-boom build-

ings dwarfed by a sprawling mass of concrete blocks. The government declared the city a free-trade zone in the mid-20th century, in an attempt to revive the area and encourage the growth of the private sector by providing fiscal incentives. Unlike a century ago, when the city appealed to Europe's wealthiest merchants, Manaus is now a magnet for un- and underemployed labourers, searching for a new beginning.

As per my other visits here, I'm drawn to the waterfront, a hubbub of activity where dozens of colourful boats load and unload cargo, from exotic foodstuffs to farm animals. Swarms of passengers come to and fro, seeking out the boat that will travel down the Amazon River, or upstream along one of its tributaries. Along the river, to the east and west of town is a jumble of wooden stilt dwellings, housing part of the city's ever-growing population of about two million.

Nearby is the art nouveau Mercado Municipal Adolpho Lisboa, another reminder of the city's bygone days. Completed in 1882, the market was modelled on Les Halles marketplace in Paris and, similar to most other rubber-boom buildings in the city, its building materials were imported from Europe. Today, the market is still functioning, and dis-

plays include medicinal Amazonian herbs, vegetables, meats and crafts woven from plant fibres, including beautiful basketry. Curiously, the design of the 40,000-plus-seater arena that will host the World Cup was inspired by the region's age-old arts and crafts tradition – the stadium's metal structure is designed to resemble a handcrafted wicker basket.

Men stoop as they load heavy crates onto their backs, scurrying back and forth from the harbour to unload goods from rickety vessels. The eastern waterfront is home to the Feira do Peixe (Fish Market), where hundreds of colourful freshwater fish are on display. About 5,000 species of fish live in the Amazon's network of waterways and river basins, and the tributaries of the Rio Negro harbour some of the region's most exotic species, including piranha (red belly piranha is much-prized to make piranha stew), pirarucu (one of the largest freshwater fish in the world at more than 200 kilograms) and tucunaré (a prized game fish).

Lying along one of the world's richest river systems means that fish form the basis of most Amazonian dishes, whether poached, stewed, fried, grilled, breaded, marinated, roasted or even stuffed. Fish is often accompanied by farinha de mandioca, an essential condiment that is made of ground cassava roots. Tucupi is a sauce made from manioc root juice, and is used as the base ingredient in many soups, as well as being served as a sauce over fish and duck. One of northern Brazil's most popular dishes is tacacá, a tucupi-based soup containing shrimp, hot pepper and jambu, a native anaesthetic plant that is quite a novelty to try. All of these dishes would be incomplete without the region's tantalising range of nutritious juices, made from exotic-sounding fruits such as guarana, acerola, cupuaçu and açaí (none readily translatable into English), the latter traditionally enjoyed ice-cold as a refreshing and energising snack.

Despite its apparent exotic appeal, Manaus, with its mushrooming

high-rises and its urban sprawl, is now a daunting metropolis for most visitors, who tend to use it as a base to explore the surrounding area. Yet, the impending World Cup may change that as the city tries to reinvent itself as a destination in its own right, with an ever-growing number of museums, restaurants and attractions. Eco-tourism is currently one of the city's major economic alternatives.

Being surrounded by the world's largest rainforest does mean that there's plenty on offer for nature enthusiasts. Less than 15km outside Manaus is the meeting of the waters, where the Rio Negro and the Rio Solimões form the mighty Amazon. The black waters of the Rio Negro, which flows through Manaus, converge with the murky waters of the Rio Solimões, yet do not immediately mix because of differences in temperature, density and speed, their waters flowing side by side for more than 10km.

I escape the city's clutches in favour of a few nights at a jungle lodge 180km north of Manaus in the Archipelago of Anavilhanas, one of the world's largest river archipelagos, home to over 400 islands, hundreds of lakes, snaking rivers and igarapé (natural waterways), harbouring some of the area's most diverse species of flora and fauna, including more than 350 species of fish. Here, I'm gently awoken by a soothing orchestra of jungle sounds, which makes for a welcome respite from Manaus's loud, traffic-choked streets. As I glide along verdant creeks in a wooden canoe, I quietly listen to the sounds of the forest, taking in the wilderness around me. I head on a jungle trek and learn about the rainforest's numerous medicinal plants; my guide points out the famed *Hevea brasiliensis* rubber tree, and he gently makes a gash in its bark with the blade of his machete, leading the tree's milky sap to ooze down the trunk – the substance that, for a brief time, brought great wealth to the rapacious rubber barons, whose opera house attempted to mimic its European counterparts.

if you go



Source: Google

The flight A return flight on Emirates from Dubai to São Paulo costs from US\$2,270 (Dh8,338), including taxes. TAM Airlines (www.tam.com.br) has flights from São Paulo to Manaus from \$351 (Dh1,289), including taxes.

The hotels Located in the fashionable Ponta Negra district, Park Suites (www.atlanticahotels.com.br; 0055 92 3306 4500) offers well-appointed rooms with modern amenities and an infinity pool looking onto the Rio Negro. Doubles cost from \$157 (Dh577) per night, including taxes and breakfast.

The stylish Anavilhanas Jungle Lodge (www.anavilhanaslodge.com; 0055 92 3622 8996) offers comfortable air-conditioned bungalows or cottages. Doubles cost from 1,840 Brazilian reals (Dh3,055) per person for three days/two nights, including taxes, three daily meals, jungle activities and transfers to and from Manaus.