

# The perfect host

NICK DALL HAD PLANNED ONLY TO TAKE PHOTOS, BUT LEFT THE AMAZON WITH AN UNEXPECTED AND UNWELCOME PASSENGER INSTEAD

**F**orget jaguars, piranhas, tarantulas and alligators – it seems the Amazon's most dangerous foes are its mosquitoes and sandflies. I spent a few months in the region broadly known as Amazonia, and a couple of weeks trekking through the jungle proper. In that time, I was bitten hundreds of thousands of times on every inch of my body. The mosquitoes barely affected me, but the sandflies were another story. Their bites itched something fierce and formed tiny black points that remained on my skin for months after.

The first time I noticed anything was amiss, I was lolling in a hammock strung up on the deck of the cargo boat, which would take me from Bolivia, through Brazil and into Paraguay. One bite on my forearm was a bit harder and pointier than the rest. I just slathered it with antiseptic ointment and forgot about it. When I finally reached Argentina about a month later, it was much bigger and angrier and had started to pong.

I took the hint and went to a hospital. Instead of trying to find the underlying cause of my problem, the surgeon did what surgeons do best, and decided to attack the wound with a scary-looking scalpel and forceps before cleaning the gunk out with copious amounts of hydrogen peroxide and prescribing a course of antibiotics.

I then had the ingenious idea to hit the beach in Uruguay. I'm not sure if it was the saltwater or the rough sand that caused it, but before I knew it, the skin around the wound had become hot and bubbly. Cracks formed like crazy paving, and serum oozed from between the 'tiles'. For the first time, it hurt. I went to another doctor who told me I was 'one step away from getting gangrene'.

She changed the antibiotics I was on and sent me on my way. I still had no idea what was wrong with me, and I was starting to wonder whether I would ever find out.

Gradually, more lesions started to appear – on my scalp, my baby toe, my back – and I took as many as 11 courses of antibiotics over a four-month period. Nearly a year after the initial sandfly bite, I was finally diagnosed with leishmaniasis, a disease which is caused by a microscopic flesh-eating parasite carried by female sandflies. But, by then, it was too late to treat the disease, and I just had to wait for my body to naturally expel the invaders. One by one.

Almost two years later, I finally bid farewell to the last of my intruders: the Peruvian lady in six-inch heels who accidentally stamped on my baby toe was shocked by the damage she caused me. But in fact, she'd unknowingly done me a huge favour.

Now, thankfully, all that I have to show for my life-threatening ordeal are just a few scars and a story to serve as a warning to anyone eager to tackle the Amazonian jungle. 📷