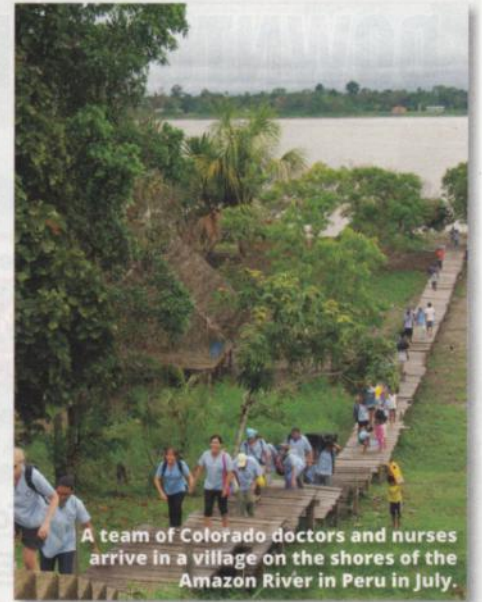
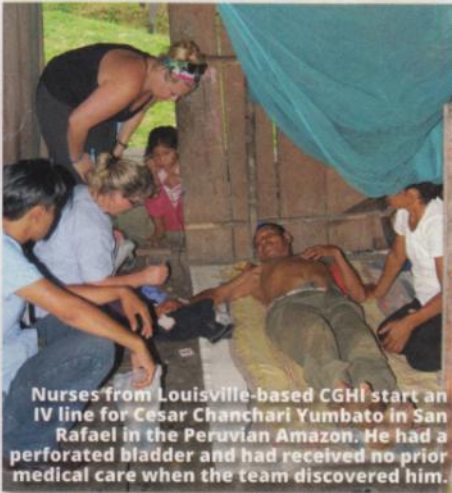




Life in Belen, Peru. The village on the banks of the Amazon was buried under 20 feet of water by record floods last spring.



A team of Colorado doctors and nurses arrive in a village on the shores of the Amazon River in Peru in July.



Nurses from Louisville-based CGHI start an IV line for Cesar Chanchari Yumbato in San Rafael in the Peruvian Amazon. He had a perforated bladder and had received no prior medical care when the team discovered him.

Amazon Reflections

ESSAY & PHOTOS BY LISA MARSHALL



Children in San Rafael line up to have Adriana Soltero wash their hands.



Village children make the best of an afternoon rainstorm in San Rafael, Peru.



A teenage resident of Belen washes her clothes in the Amazon, just inches from a floating outhouse.

NEAR IQUITOS, PERU—In the Amazon jungle, the wind sounds like a freight train.

I can hear it roaring toward me through the canopy top, rattling leaves from the towering ficus trees, and sending the two colorful macaws I am trying to photograph scrambling for shelter. As the torrent arrives, I take cover in a grass hut near the remote lodge where I've been staying solo for three days. My clothes are soaked. My mosquito bites burn. My stomach gurgles. And I feel more lonely and homesick than I have at any time in my life.

It wasn't supposed to feel this way.

I'd come to Peru for two reasons. I would spend a week with my journalist's hat on, traveling with a volunteer medical team from Louisville-based Centura Global Health Initiatives, but first I'd indulge in a few weeks of "much-deserved me time"—a reprieve from the unpaid medical bills, kid carpool duty, dirty dishes and deadlines that lately had put me in a perpetual state of self-pity.

I'd done this sort of thing before. As a classic overachiever who never quite grasped the concept of "living in the moment," I saw these periodic solo getaways as a time to escape my self-inflicted pressure to be a better writer/mom/athlete/wife/daughter, and to flee the Crisis of the Day at home. I'd gone to Rwanda in 2008 in hopes of "rediscovering myself" after years of raising children. I traveled to Nepal in 2010 to flee a temporary rough patch in my marriage and tune out the pain of discovering my father had Alzheimer's.

What better place to escape to this time than the wild and untamed Amazon jungle? But as I shivered, bored and itchy, through yet another afternoon rainstorm, all I could think was: "What the hell am I doing here?" I'd soon find out.

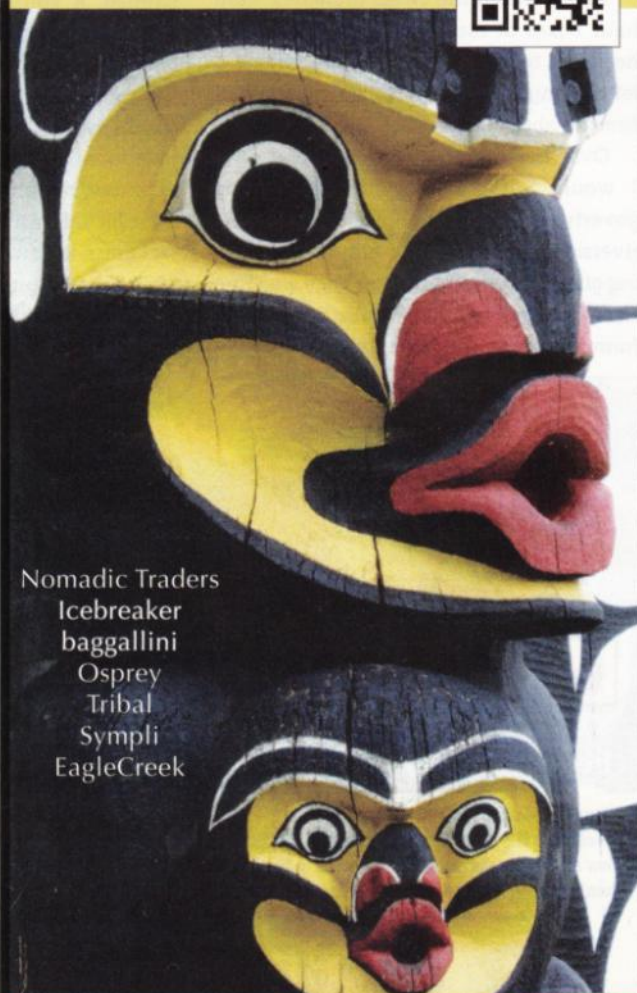
I MET THE CENTURA TEAM THE NEXT DAY in Iquitos, a gritty, smog-choked outpost known best as "the largest city in the world with no roads leading to it." Once a lively tourist hub, the city and surrounding riverside villages have been hit hard by a sagging world economy and a shifting climate. In the wake of the worst flooding in a quarter-century this spring—which raised water levels 20 feet along the Amazon River—the region teemed with waterborne illnesses. Dengue fever, malaria and tuberculosis were on the upswing. Parasites were endemic. And when it wasn't raining, the hot, humid air smothered the skin like a blanket.

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It was the most physically uncomfortable place I'd traveled to. Yet this all-female team of nurses, doctors and volunteers from Colorado's Front Range had sacrificed their vacation time and paid their own way (in some cases bringing their husbands and children along) to come here and help.

As I watched the sweat-drenched team haul boxes of medicine onto a boat and head out to visit patients in the village, I felt a twinge of shame. Thus far, my trip had been all about me.

Over the course of the next few days I would witness both heart-wrenching poverty and inspiring resilience. In the riverside slum of Belén I glimpsed a smiling girl my teenage daughter's age washing her dishes in the muddy Amazon—just feet from a floating outhouse. In the village of

San Rafael I met a 70-year-old woman who had been lying, back and joints wracked with pain, on her hut's bare wooden floor for *two months*. (As the doctors would discover, all she needed was some antibiotics for a kidney infection.) Then there was the man who'd spilled hot tar on his legs while building a boat, and the one who had broken his femur after falling from his rooftop. None had received medical care yet, because where they live, there is none.

Ironically, I would also sense a feeling of contentment that's hard to find at home in the States. In the village of San Juan de Munich, children patiently waited in long lines, their faces beaming at the chance to get their very own toothbrush, or wash their hands with soap, or have their face painted. A young mother of three teared up with gratitude when a volunteer offered her a pair of cheap plastic flip-flops for her mud-caked feet. When the drenching storms settled in for hours, no one seemed to notice. Instead the adults went about their day, hauling fruit and charcoal to the river for sale, and the kids frolicked in the wet grass, kicking the new soccer ball their visitors had brought.

I looked on, my notebook wilting. Somehow the rain didn't feel so bad anymore.

ON MY 14-HOUR JOURNEY HOME, I had plenty of time to reflect on a trip that was far more test of will and emotional roller coaster than relaxing getaway. It had changed me like no other had.

As I embraced my husband, bearing flowers at the airport, I summed it up for him in one sentence.

"I am exactly where I want to be, and I am so so grateful."

Sometimes the most worthwhile travel of all is the kind that makes you long for home. ♦

Lisa Marshall is a freelance journalist and mother of four who lives in the mountains west of Lyons. Contact her at lisamarshall08@gmail.com.

Founded by Niwot resident Greg Hodgson in 2004, **Centura Global Health Initiatives** sends Front Range healthcare workers to Peru four to five times per year to provide community health care in villages along the Amazon River, and perform surgeries at its sister hospital, Clinica Ana Stahl, in Iquitos. It also sends teams to Rwanda, Nepal and Haiti. In 2012, CGHI clinicians saw more than 6,600 patients and performed more than 244 surgeries. To volunteer or make a donation, visit centuraglobalhealth.org. —L.M.



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