

A photograph of Vivienne Westwood standing waist-deep in a river. She has her signature bright red hair tied up and is wearing a dark, sleeveless top. She is smiling at the camera. The background shows a dense, green forest on a hillside under a clear sky. The water in the river is turbulent, with white foam from rapids visible in the distance.

Come on in, the water's lovely
**What's Vivienne Westwood doing
in the Amazon rainforest?**

*Bugs, snakes and a makeshift loo ('Is it working for number twos?')
- does anything faze the 71-year-old fashion designer? By Deborah Ross*

PORTRAIT David Ellis

Vivienne Westwood in
the Rio Mamiri

So, off to Peru to save the rainforest with the iconic fashion designer Dame Vivienne Westwood, who at no point declares it so last season (just so you know), and here are some of the things I believe I will remember for the rest of my life: iridescent butterflies the size of dinner plates; the Ashaninka children playing joyfully in the river; Andreas, Dame Vivienne's husband, who is just so fashion, falling madly in love with the children's hair ("Beautiful! Divine! This is what we try to get on the models, this hair!"); the beauty of the forest and the threat of loggers, who take not just trees when they take trees, but a whole way of life; that deadly coral snake (blimey); and, above all else – way, way above, actually – the sheer magnificence of Dame Vivienne Westwood, 71, who may be the coolest person on Earth, or at least what is left of it. Let's begin at the beginning.

Day one. Fly from London to Madrid and then Madrid to Lima airport, where I first meet Dame Vivienne and Andreas (Kronthaler), plus members of the charity Cool Earth, who have flown in via a different route. Cool Earth, which was co-founded in 2007 by Frank Field MP and businessman Johan Eliasch, protects rainforest at risk from logging and is the environmental charity closest to Dame Vivienne's heart. (She recently donated £1 million, and this is her chance to see how the money is spent, and the difference she has made.)

I can't remember what exactly she is wearing at the airport but in my notebook it says, "Cape, funny knitted socks." Andreas, who is 25 years her junior, and also her business partner and co-designer, is tall and strapping (well over 6ft) with dark, glossy curls. I find I haven't written "Giant, luscious satyr" and "Where are his panpipes?" in my notebook, but I should have. Plus, he's as deliciously funny as he is so fashion. When he was a fashion student in Vienna, he later tells us, in his whimsical way, he once made a shirt from schnitzels, all stitched together with black satin. "You sewed it with a knitting needle, didn't you?" says Dame Vivienne proudly. "But when I come home from clubbing," he adds, "it is rotten and it stinks." This, I feel obliged to tell him, has to be the downside of working with meat as a fabric. Dame Vivienne laughs delightedly. She is commonly assumed to be rather humourless, but she isn't. You just have to get into her groove.

Anyway, the two have come on from Rome, where they attended a conference on luxury goods in Africa. She hated it. "All this material stuff..." she says. "Our world is awful, just really awful, and we try to impose our values, even though our values are s***." One of the things I will have to figure out about Dame



Viv, have you suncreamed yourself? I fret so about her white skin. 'Only my yoga teacher calls me Viv'

Vivienne is this: how she has thrived in a world of vanity and artifice and materialism without being in the least vain or artificial or materialistic herself. I get to see her crossing a river, crouched doggy-style on a canoe, with her skirt hoiked into her pants. I get to see her rebuff gifts and say, "I won't use it so it will only be a waste." It may be the first and last time I ever get to see a Dame of the

British Empire march off to pee behind a bush, and do whatever else Dames of the British Empire must do, behind a bush.

But for the moment, you need only know the two are rather tired and grumpy. Are you pleased to be here, I ask Dame Vivienne. "No," she says. "I wish I were at home, reading a book," although book isn't book because of her Derbyshire roots, so it's "bewk". It's: "I wish I were t'home, reading a bewk."

Meanwhile, Andreas, who is Austrian, and charmingly says "verk" for "work", is worried about all the "verk" they should be doing. It's menswear in Milan in February, then the Red Label collection in London and Paris. "So much verk!" Luckily, I am able to put his mind at rest. I'll sketch out some designs tonight, I say. What are we thinking? Tweed? "I don't like the tweed." Pastels? "I don't like the pastels." You could contribute some ideas

yourself, maybe, if it's not too much trouble? "Jersey," he says. "Let's do jersey." Good choice, I tell him. I'm on it. He could, I must say, look more relieved, but I suppose there is just no pleasing some people.

Day two. A rest day... I wish! After a night in a hotel it's back to Lima airport, a light aircraft over the Andes, a bone-rattling two-hour drive up and down mountains in a "taxi" – old car held together with glue, more like – then six hours down river on a boat. Andreas naps with his head in Vivienne's lap, dark curls spilling, while she presses on with her holiday reading: the second book in the *Shades of Grey* trilogy. I'm messing with you. The book is *Dispatches from the Dark Side: on Torture and the Death of Justice* by Gareth Peirce, a high-profile lawyer who specialises in miscarriage of justice cases.

Dame Vivienne is a quiet, rather stiff



Vivienne Westwood, left, crossing the Mamiri river and in the rainforest

presence at first. She doesn't really do small talk, or make polite conversation. If she isn't reading, she is staring into the middle distance. Are you designing in your head, I ask her. "No," she replies. "It's only when I'm working and have problems to solve that I do that."

Do you like what you do? Not as much as Andreas, she says. "He is much more passionate about fashion than I am. When he was nine years old he was looking through his auntie's magazines and at the stuff Yves Saint Laurent had designed. There's an expression which, translated, means 'bewinged', and he became 'bewinged' with what he saw. He played with Barbies at four years old and did fashion shows when he was seven years old with his mother's clothes."

She is as gorgeously proud of him as he is of her. What's been the secret of her success, I ask him at one point. "Not looking at what is

around, and never, ever compromising." The only thing she follows slavishly, he will say, is her own intellectual curiosity. They both cycle to work, but sometimes she will come home via a different route, because why do it one way when you can do it another?

Finally, we arrive at our remote destination, the village of Cutivireni, in the Rio Ene Valley, where the chug of the boats draws the whole, excited village to the river bank, and Andreas goes mad for the little girls' hair. "Wow!" he says. "So noble, so chic!" He is wearing a Westwood anti-Shell oil T-shirt and combats and vintage boots, although later he'll appear in odd skinny jeans that are sort of plaid. He wears the kind of clothes only he could wear and still look hot. It's a gift.

She, meanwhile, is wearing "Leonard Peltier is innocent" on her T-shirt – Peltier is a Native American activist

who is imprisoned in Florida – and is still a beauty, with skin as pale as a cameo, and startlingly contrasted with the Fanta orange hair, which she bleaches then dyes with henna. Later, through a translator, I ask Anna, daughter of the village chief, what she makes of such hair. “Very pretty,” she giggles. The Ashaninka are a shy people, particularly the children, who run as you approach. (One morning, I frightened 78 children before breakfast, without even trying, which was fun.) There is a makeshift dorm built, I think, in our honour, and a makeshift toilet, the horrors of which I cannot speak about even now. But Dame Vivienne is shamefully unfazed and asks simply, “Is it working for number twos?”

That evening, as our head torches attract every insect there is in the world – buzz; whirr; flap; boing – we look at maps of the area and are talked through the Cool Earth model, which is simple but so intelligent. Now these communities are up against the cash economy, Cool Earth pays them as much as they would get from selling trees to loggers not to sell the trees.

Here’s how it worked in this instance, which I will relate in full, because it’s so interesting. Some of the villagers here, seeing that other communities had sold trees and now had money, wanted to do the same. So Cesar, the village chief, used the satellite phone to call Dilwyn Jenkins, author of *The Rough Guide to Peru* and a friend of the Ashaninka, who is also on this trip. “What should I do?” Cesar asked. Dilwyn immediately contacted Cool Earth, which matched the loggers’ offer within the week. The money is put into a local trust and can be spent on anything, although generally it is spent on schools, medicine, outboard motors, medical evacuations and grants for children to go to university. They are also helped to firm up their land rights and generate their own income – through selling their cocoa, say – so they will never have to turn to loggers in the future.

Dame Vivienne questions the charity workers mercilessly, and shrewdly, with each point having to be dealt with before she will even entertain going onto the next. Some have said Dame Vivienne can be a bore and preachy and schoolmarmy when it comes to climate change. She has even written her own manifesto, *Active Resistance to Propaganda*, but it does not change this fact: every minute, 100 acres of rainforest are destroyed. And it’s not as if she doesn’t put her money where her mouth is. To put it another way, I’ve yet to see Donatella Versace crouched doggy-style on a canoe, with her skirt hoiked into her pants, but then, I must admit, I don’t get out that much.

Finally, we go to our makeshift dorm beds where we sleep under our mosquito nets and dream our Malarone dreams. I dream my jersey collection is a sensation and Giorgio



From top: Andreas and Vivienne at Mazamari airport; Alicia and Rosseli, who live in the

rainforest Cool Earth is helping to protect; Vivienne with Gladys from the Ashaninka tribe

I say this is like a fashion show: if in doubt, rapturously clap, and if not in doubt, rapturously clap, as it goes down well either way. Dame Vivienne says, “I hope when people come to my shows they don’t clap. I want them to be too well into it.” Before we leave, the women of the village offer her a *kushma*, their traditional dress made from cotton they have picked, beaten, spun and weaved themselves. It is rebuffed. “No, thank you,” says Dame Vivienne. “I have enough clothes.” Well, I say, that’s honest. “I sometimes,” she frets, “wonder if I am unkind.” I don’t think she is. Just that she can’t help blurting out the truth. Maybe you should learn to fake it, I suggest. “But I can’t,” she says.

Next, a trek to the even more remote village of Tinkareni, through the forest, which Andreas adores from the off: “It is ravishing, this jungle!” It is, but it’s a hard three-hour walk, in the most sensational heat. It is up, down, down and up, through a mix of high and low canopy, always mindful of bullet ants (not deadly, but the sting is the most painful of all stings) and the orange, black and white-banded coral snake which our boy porters, bless their cotton socks, kill with a machete. (Incredibly deadly; full respiratory failure within hours.)

All the way, it is “I’m hot,” and “I’m hungry,” and “I’m thirsty,” and “Are we nearly there?” and “My bites itch,” and “My ankles are swollen,” and “A CORAL SNAKE! A CORAL SNAKE!” but that is only me, I’m ashamed to say. I don’t think I hear Dame Vivienne and Andreas complain once, even though they must be so used to swanking it up. The two, who met when she did a stint as professor of fashion at Vienna Academy of Fine Arts and he was one of her students, are marvellously interested in unexpected topics – Chinese civilisation; the French Revolution; calligraphy – but have no interest in what any toileting or sleeping or deadly snake arrangements might be. It’s as if they think of things no one else thinks of and don’t think of the things we do.

She loves to hear him talk. “Tell them about your Barbies, Andreas.” Go on then, Andreas. “Ever since I was little boy I make things for my Barbies. I would take the fur collar from my mother’s coat and make a little dress out of it.” I bet your mother was not best pleased, I say. “I destroy her coat, and I was aware of destroying it. Oh, children can be so cruel.” His father was a blacksmith and I wonder whether his interest in Barbies was encouraged. “It was not discouraged,” he says. So it wasn’t beaten out of you? “No. Both my father and my mother were OK with it. And

‘I’m sure Anna Wintour doesn’t like me. She promoted John Galliano; he was like her discovery’

Armani wants me to be his bitch, but I say, “I’m sorry. I’m already spoken for. I’m with Andreas. And Dame Vivienne.” I think I’m a little in love with both of them already. They are just so unerringly themselves.

Day three. At last! A rest... I wish! First, a community meeting in the village during which many men get up, speak, are rapturously applauded, sit down, then get up and speak again. Dame Vivienne also gives a little speech: “The work you do here will save the rainforest and if you don’t save the rainforest, millions of people will die. You are saving the world.” She is rapturously clapped.

I used to do little fashion shows. I put up notices all round our little village and it was in our home but I make people pay entrance." So fashion, like I said.

We arrive at Tinkareni. It is idyllic. It is surrounded by gardens where manioc and maize are grown. The women rise pre-dawn to beat cotton, while the men hunt tapir and monkey and agouti, a sort of massive guinea pig. The fruit trees are dripping with oranges, lemons, coconuts, papaya, mangoes. I see a little boy start a mango then drop it, and I wanted to shake him and say, "Do you know how much one of those costs in Waitrose? Do you?"

We make for the river to cool off, where Dame Vivienne sits in the shade behind a boulder, admiring the iridescent butterflies – "So beautiful! Look at the butterflies, Andreas!" – and continues with her book. It may be, actually, that she prefers ideas, and butterflies, to people. Andreas, meanwhile, is sitting in the sun, on a boulder, wearing teeny-tiny trunks. He is a luscious satyr still, but it's rather as if Che Guevara had been reborn as a Speedo model.

I ask him if Dame Vivienne is really that frugal. He says she is. He says, at home, he does the cleaning – "I loff cleaning!" – and she does the cooking (they are vegetarian, and she makes brilliant salads), although on the odd occasions she washes up, he can't stand it. "She uses so little of the water the plates are still dirty, and I hoff to do all over again." She hates accessories: "She says anyone who wears sunglasses is stupid." He recently, he adds, thought he wanted a house in the country with a big garden, and he found it. "It was by Christopher Wren and I was obsessed with it, obsessed with it. I even got Vivienne to come and haff a look at it." But? "I did not buy it and now I am so glad."

Dame Vivienne strips to her plain, black swimsuit and enters the river, where she doesn't swim, but quietly bathes, as the Victorians used to do. She is quickly joined by a little girl, whom we come to know as Cladys, who splashes her, so Dame Vivienne splashes her back, and soon they are involved in a game with lots of laughter. This is the moment she starts to relax, and I start calling her "Viv", as in, "Viv, have you suncreamed yourself?" (Andreas and I fret so about her white skin.) She says, "Only my yoga teacher calls me Viv." I say, there are two of us now; get over it, love. I ask Andreas if he is still fretting about verk. "Less, but I am still thinking about it." Dame Vivienne teases him gently. "It was Andreas who wanted to come, so he can't blame me. I'm off the 'ook." That night, we sleep in tents, and when I dream Marc Jacobs wants me for his bitch, I just laugh in his face.

Day four. A day of rest. Almost. Today, the two villages have come together for some kind of

celebration. Poems are recited. Dances are danced. Andreas makes everyone laugh by cheating at the archery and moving close to the target. Viv is now getting into her groove, and seems happy. "It's paradise," she says. "It's what you see in paintings of paradise, with all these animals, and the butterflies. I like to see the funny insects. It's the first time I've properly seen a cricket and they have really nice faces." I wonder how she and Andreas design together. She says they start by looking at fabrics, but separately, because she likes to take her time, whereas he is fast. "He's the best person I've ever met for the best use of fabric, but then we always have to do things his way. He's like a child. So he works on his own and I work on my own and when we've got a few things done we come together."

She says she despises her "second lines", but what can you do? "It subsidises our main work. If a suit costs £5,000 it should cost £15,000, and the way you support that is you have all these leather goods and sunglasses

'David Cameron and Barack Obama are totally deluded. They don't understand politics at all'

and stuff. I have far, far too much product, and I hate expanding just because people in China want to open a chain of shops." She has, she says, thought of closing the company. "But it would be difficult and I would feel cut off from the general public if I did that and started being a campaigner. This gives me a voice."

Her duty, she says, is to understand the world. "I've no religious belief, so I feel this incredible gift of being alive is something I should try to pay for by understanding the world we live in." She can, it's true, ramble on a bit. "David Cameron and Barack Obama are totally deluded. They don't understand politics at all. They are totally blinkered about following the status quo and never seeing how it could be otherwise. I don't accept the status quo. If human beings had truly evolved, we wouldn't have war. We are thinking from our old mindset, although I hate that expression. It's quite recently invented. I hate anything recently invented. I've just lost my train of thought..." She has, over the years, been described as "potty", "barking" and "batty", but you know what? Isn't that always the way, with people who can't be easily categorised? And I've yet to see Mrs Prada cross a river, doggy-style, with her skirt hoisted into her pants. But I don't get out much, seriously.

Day five. Having accomplished the canoe trip, to admire the massive trees growing on the opposite bank of the river, we trek back to Cutivireni in the pouring rain. Viv, who is wearing her "I am Julian Assange" T-shirt today, strips to her knickers – blue and white gingham – so she can wring out her skirt. We are chatting easily now. She even passes on her recipe for salad dressing: "A clove of garlic, lemon juice, oil and half a teaspoon of bouillon. I just sort of pour it in. A bit of brown sugar is also nice."

Does she understand how she has thrived? Pure talent, maybe? "The way the fashion world works," she says, "is it wants to discover the new, and after a couple of seasons they stop being interested in you because they are on to the next, but I was too quick for people. I am sure Anna Wintour doesn't like me because she didn't get me in time to see what was happening, and then she went on to promote John Galliano, and then he was like her discovery." So what's been your secret? "Stamina."

Back at the village, Viv is shown how the women make their jewellery, spin cotton and make up their faces with red paste made from crushed fruit seeds. Could you live here, Viv? "As long as I had my bewks." Andreas is looking forward to returning to Lima. "Shops! There will be shops! I loff shops."

"But we don't need anything, Andreas," Viv remonstrates.

"I know," says Andreas. "But I like to hoff a look at what I do not need."

Once we get back to Lima, Viv attends a meeting with the Peruvian environment minister, where she is, apparently, "spectacular" and "brilliant" and, as a result, there should be an application to the World Bank for £5 million to avoid deforestation. Are you glad you came now, Viv? "I didn't want to come, did I? I've changed my mind three or four times about coming, but I'm impressed because I think it [Cool Earth] will work." She is not so happy that the Peruvian Embassy tried to give her a shopping bag made from recycled plastic. "Why couldn't they just give me a brown paper bag, if they want to give me a bag?" Alas, by this time, Andreas has come down with a fever, so when I say goodbye, it is in their hotel room, where he is lying in bed with a cold flannel on his head and she is nursing him. "He's sweated such a lot," she says. I kiss Andreas on the cheek, and give Viv a hug. Magnificent, the both, and there is nothing to figure out. They just are. On my flight home, I'm too zonked to dream anything, but if I'd dreamt, say, that Karl Lagerfeld wanted me as his bitch, I'd have told him where to get off. I'm spoken for. ■

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