Brazil: Into the Interior

Jerry R. Hobbs

1. Into the Interior

My plan was to spend a week making my way from Cuiabá to Manaus in Brazil by road and river. I would take a twenty-three hour bus ride from Cuiabá to Porto Velho, through the state of Rondonia, once a rain forest but now logged and burned and generally devastated into bad pastureland. When people talk about the destruction of the rain forest, Rondonia is what they have in mind. Porto Velho, its capital, is on the Rio Madeira, and there I wanted to find a river boat to take me to Manaus.

The bus was straightforward. It left at 8:30 in the evening. It cost $70, so the people on it were the sort of people who could afford a $70 bus trip. It was quite comfortable, and air-conditioned when it needed to be. Mostly, no one sat next to me, so I could sprawl a bit, and I slept well during the night. The twenty-three hours was not at all bad.

During the night we stopped every couple of hours at country snack bars, mysterious spots of light in the darkness, with men sleeping on random benches on their porches. At seven we were awakened and shepherded off the bus and into a police post. Some people produced documents and they had them stamped and could get on the bus again. The others lined up at the door of an office. I looked in the door. A nurse was giving people malaria shots. With who knows how many people for each hypodermic needle. I waved my yellow health record, and fortunately they let me pass. This was the border of Rondonia.

The map of Rondonia looks like the skeleton of a fish. There is the main highway, BR-364, cut through the middle from one end to the other, like the spine of a fish. When this road was laid down, the settlement began. The population exploded from 70,000 in 1960 to over two million today. The poor from all over Brazil flocked to Rondonia, plunging into the forest on both sides of the highway, building straight and parallel side roads as they went, the ribs of the fish, to carry out all they could extract before the wood was gone and the soil exhausted.

Travelling across the state was like seeing the history of its development in reverse. In the east, the farms looked simply pastoral; one could not tell there had ever been forest there. Toward the middle, stumps of burnt out trees remained, and white cattle grazed among them. In the west, approaching Porto Velho, we passed blackened fields and patches of forest still on fire, and every town had its saw mills.

I spent Monday in Porto Velho trying to find out about boats to Manaus. It is always the case that the closer you get to something, the more that is known about it. For boats on the Rio Madeira, you had to get within 100 meters to find out anything at all. Travel agents in town thought that the trip took about four days, but they didn't know how to arrange it. A man in a government office by the river told me I had to talk to the boat captains. The boats were moored on the bank in a rather bad and very muddy part of town. I went there. Near the river there was a shack advertising boat tickets. It cost \$70, first class, including meals, but I had to provide my own hammock for sleeping outside on the upper deck.

The problem: The next boat left Wednesday afternoon at 5 p.m. My plane out of Manaus left Sunday afternoon at one. If the trip was really four days, I wouldn't make it. But the woman in the shack said the trip was only three and a half days. I would make it on Sunday morning, with hours to spare.

Could I believe her? Should I chance it?

I continued on down to the bank, a slope of mud with slanting stairs chipped into it. A hustler there took me on board the boat to show me what it looked like, and as I was about to leave said there just might be a boat on Tuesday afternoon, but he wouldn't know until the morning.

I didn't know what to do. I went back and forth all day. Risk it. Don't risk it. Risk it.

To hedge my bets, I reserved a seat on the flight from Porto Velho to Manaus on Saturday, just to make sure I could get there somehow.

There was something else I did all day as well. I wanted to visit an Indian village. This is, as all the guidebooks say, impossible. The government agency, FUNAI, in charge of Indian affairs will not let casual tourists go there, for good reason, and permission, even if you can get it, takes months. But when I was at a conference in Pittsburgh in March, I had met a linguist, Dan, and his wife who worked during the summer as missionaries out of Porto Velho. Their tribe was a group north of the city on a tributary of the Rio Madeira. To get there took an hour and a half by a plane that was very expensive to rent or a one-week boat trip. But in any case, Dan told me that since he wouldn't be there when I was, I couldn't visit them.

But then in September I got e-mail from him. He was just back from Brazil and said he had started a joint project with a linguist in a town of 30,000 called Guajará-Mirim, on the Bolivian border, a man by the name of Jean-Pierre Angenot. He gave me the phone number and told me to give Jean-Pierre a call when I got to Rondonia.

So I did. I tried to call him in the morning. I tried again at noon. I tried several times in the afternoon. The best I could do was one time when someone answered that I could leave a message with. That evening I walked up the hill overlooking the river where all the state government buildings are, watched the sunset reflected in the Rio Madeira, and had a large Amazonian fish called tucunaré for dinner. I returned to the hotel at 9 p.m. and tried one last time at the front desk to reach Jean-Pierre. No answer. I went up to my room, wondering what I would do tomorrow, wondering whether I should risk the river boat, hoping I didn't have to spend another day in this town. As I approached the door, I could hear the phone in my room ringing.

It was Jean-Pierre. He had just arrived home from three weeks in the jungle. He said there was a bus at seven the next morning. I should take it.

The bus followed BR-364 beyond Porto Velho to the southwest for two hours, and then turned southeast to follow the Rio Mamoré on a dirt road for three hours to Guajará-Mirim. The passengers were a poorer bunch, with torn clothes, weather-beaten faces, and the grime of the fields and the road on them. The devastation of the forest was more recent and more apparent, the towns were all strings of wooden shacks strung along the highway for a kilometer or so, all with a gold assayer's office to service the gold rush in the neighborhood, and a saw mill and an Assembly of God church.

Jean-Pierre was waiting for me at the bus station in Guajará-Mirim. There was no mistaking him; on the phone he had told me he was "big".

Jean-Pierre reminded me of Luciano Pavarotti. He had the same girth, the same face, and the same sparkle. He was 54 and of Belgian ancestry, born in Zaire when it was Belgian Congo, and had lived in Brazil for twenty years, for the last two years in Guajará-Mirim, teaching in that town's small branch of the University of Rondonia.

He drove me to his house, several blocks from the center of town. His house was, I told him, "alive"; his English wasn't up to the colloquialism, so I said "vivant", and he beamed in agreement. There were he and his wife; Damien, a post-doc from Belgium who had been there for six months;

Ruben, about whom more later; a woman in her fifties from Santa Catarina in the civilized southeast of Brazil, another post-doc who had just started working with Jean-Pierre; her French graduate student, a woman in her thirties; an old man, Manuel, living out in separate quarters in the back yard, who was his principal informant about the language of the Moré tribe that Jean-Pierre was studying; a young teenage girl, who I thought at first was his daughter but wasn't, transcribing tapes of the language on the computer in his office upstairs, staring at spectrograms on the screen; the cook; half a dozen children running around in the back yard; and a German shepherd named Frau.

At one point I asked him how many children he had. He had to count. "Seven," he said, "by five wives. All grown."

His current wife is his sixth. She is a beautiful woman of about 25, the daughter of a Brazilian man from the northeast and a Bolivian Indian woman. She is a graduate student of Jean-Pierre's, studying the language of a tribe of people who had been slaughtered in the 1930s by the family of the current mayor of Guajará-Mirim. Two young girls had survived, ages 10 and 15, and they were sent as servants to separate towns and hadn't known about each other. Jean-Pierre's wife heard about each of them independently and got them together again, now 70 and 75, and for the first time in sixty years, the language was spoken again. They had gotten together half a dozen times so far, and each time they remembered a little more of the language.

We sat around the kitchen table and had lunch. After some identity talk we got into what I was there for. I said I wanted to see an authentic Indian village, for no good reason but curiosity. I was well aware of the ethical issue. I wanted to see the Indians for the same reason I had wanted to see the capybaras. But it is not unproblematic to categorize people and capybaras together. We didn't mention it, but Jean-Pierre was well aware of the issue too, and that kept an edge of irony on the conversation.

He said there were two possibilities. He could lend me his car and I could drive to a village 50 kilometers away. I would need FUNAI permission, but he knew a woman who worked there. I could do it all easily in a day and get back to Porto Velho in time to take the river boat to Manaus. But all I would see when I got there was just another Brazilian small town.

Or I could take a three-day trip. The first day would be by boat, upriver for "five or six hours" to a fazenda, or ranch, and then a two-hour hike into the jungle to a village called Monte Azul, where I would spend the night and the next day and night. Then the third day back to the fazenda and back downriver. It would take more time and be more expensive, but since it was on the Bolivian side, I wouldn't need FUNAI permission, and I would see a real Indian village.

I was all for Option Two.

Jean-Pierre thought about the requirements for a person to accompany me. "She has to be a beautiful virgin, who is fluent in English, Portuguese, and Spanish, knows the Indians, and can drive a boat," he said. Failing that, he settled on a boat driver and two other people.

There was Damien, who sat at the table with us. He spoke French, English and Portuguese and a little bit of Spanish. He was enthusiastic about accompanying me. He had a medical condition that involved having a tube embedded in his wrist so the doctor could quickly perform a medical procedure he only knew the French name for. This meant that he could never go anywhere where he couldn't reach medical help in a day. It was Monte Azul that Jean-Pierre had just returned from, and the reason he had spent three weeks there was that there had been no boats going back. So Damien, in four months in Brazil, had never been into the jungle. He of course wanted to; he said he thought of himself as Indiana Jones as much as I did. Going with me, the rich American, would make it possible for him, because I could afford to pay the boat driver to wait for us for a day.

And there was Ruben. He spoke Portuguese and Spanish, and he knew the Indians, and got along with them quite well. I never really understood who Ruben was, or his relationship to Jean-Pierre. He could have been a post-doc or he could have been the Village Idiot. He certainly viewed me as the Village Idiot since I didn't speak Portuguese. He would double up with laughter at my frequent mistakes, in speech and behavior, but otherwise treated me as though no communication were possible. He was a tall, thin, good-looking young man, a Child of Nature, who went around in shorts and teeshirt and bare feet. When he was hungry, he'd toss a fishing line into the river or cut some fruit down from a tree. When he was thirsty, he'd dip his cup into the river. He had just returned from Monte Azul with Jean-Pierre, and when Jean-Pierre asked him to turn around and go back, he doubled up with laughter. But he was willing, because it didn't matter much to him where he was, and anyway there was a good fishing hole near the village.

Jean-Pierre spent the afternoon arranging the trip for me, going to quite a bit of trouble. So much trouble that I had to think about his motives. I could think of three. First and certainly true, he is the sort who likes to help people, and he especially likes to carry out plans that intrigue him.

Then there was the self-interest. After he had moved to Guajará-Mirim to be closer to the speakers of the languages he was studying, he found that the academics in the more civilized parts of Brazil treated him with less respect, a minor scholar from the backwaters. That is, until through Dan he had secured a joint project with an American university, the University of Pittsburgh, sponsored by the National Science Foundation. Suddenly he was treated with respect again. Since it was through Dan that I learned of him, I benefitted from the reflected gratitude. At one point he asked if Dan and I were colleagues or friends, and we agreed on the formula, "colleagues on the way to becoming friends".

Finally, it gave him a chance to display his mastery of the Brazilian bureaucracy. I had operated in similar situations, and I could appreciate just how good he was, never pushy, always friendly, always respectful, allowing people their say and then making just the right move to get what we wanted. My role in all this was to step forward when he wanted to introduce the eminent American scientist to the important official, and to step back when money was being discussed so the presence of a rich American wouldn't send the price skyrocketing.

We drove all over town that afternoon, Jean-Pierre, Damien and me. We went to the headquarters of IBAMA, the Brazilian Institute for Forest Development. The building was a large, mostly empty warehouse, where Jean-Pierre talked to some boat drivers sitting under a tree outside and learned that a man named Waldimir would be able to take us upriver. They were sure he could do it for $150 for gas and oil and $50 a day for his time, provided we could get the boat. Then he entered the office and flirted with the secretary to get to see the director who was busy, and he introduced me as a scientist who had to go to this village for scientific purposes. The director gave Waldimir the days off, and took us back into the warehouse to pick out a boat and engine.

We went to Waldimir's house. How we drove there is indicative of Jean-Pierre's style. He had been there six months before but didn't remember where it was, so he drove to the neighborhood and up and down the streets searching for a house that looked right. Two tries and we found it. Waldimir was willing to take us, but he wanted a bigger boat. His stated reason was that a longer boat would take the waves better, but I later suspected another reason.

So we went to the Department of Health to borrow their boat for three days. We said we needed it until Friday, and they said, well, okay, but be sure to have it back by then because they had an important trip to make on Saturday; Jean-Pierre doubted that, but didn't say so.

We stopped at a grocery store and stocked up on food—apples and oranges, some freeze-dried camping dinners, some instant coffee for Damien's and my caffeine addiction, and bottles and bottles of bottled water. No need to buy food for Ruben; he would find it along the way.

Jean-Pierre rousted about his closet for an old rifle, in case a jaguar attacked us, but decided it would be too heavy to carry.

In the evening Jean-Pierre and I sat at his kitchen table by candle light, after the power went out in his half of the city, and discussed the origin and spread of Arawakan and proto-Arawakan languages, and its relation to the spread of manioc agriculture.

The next morning I dropped a post card to my family with the details of my plans, in case a search had to be initiate, and I left addresses with Jean-Pierre. Then at ten, we waved good-bye to Jean-Pierre and I shouted thanks to him for everything "in case we don't make it back".

Waldimir's first stop was a little downstream at an IBAMA barge. He gathered together some things he would need for the trip, and then just before he boarded the boat, he took out his knife and cut off two big canvas awnings from the windows of the boat and put them on board.

Then we headed upriver. We were beyond the town in short order, with nothing but the broad expanse of the river and the low jungle on either bank. No other boats in sight. Every few miles there would be a lone thatch-roofed hut or two, with maybe a boat tied up at the bank. This area was a main artery for the flow of cocaine from the Bolivian jungle into the rest of the world, and you could see how hopeless it would have been to try to stop the flow across this river.

About two hours out, there was an Indian village on the Brazilian side, the Pacáas Novas tribe. The women were gathered around a small stream, bathing and laundering, near where it emptied into the river. Waldimir beached the boat and we climbed the steep bank to the village. He greeted some men, a brief conversation, and then he and Ruben went around to all the cherry trees, filling a bucket. I and the children stared and smiled at each other, but I didn't have the nerve to take their pictures. The cherries were sweet and tart, and had an orangish hue. Waldimir said, "They do things for us. We do things for them." When we boarded the boat again, we had acquired two more passengers, an Indian woman and her six-day-old baby.

I was paying, I wasn't asked, but I didn't mind. Yet.

We continued upriver, sharing the cherries back and forth. About half an hour later we saw coming downriver toward us something out of "Waterworld". It was one of the standard sort of two-decker Amazon river boats.

But attached to the front of the boat were two smaller one-decker Amazon river boats, on the side was attached some sort of barge, and several rowboats had been tied up behind it. I got out my telephoto lens to takes its picture. But then Waldimir approached closer, and then when it passed us he turned around and pulled up to it. Ruben tied us on, and Waldimir boarded.

We floated back downstream with the river boat for the next fifteen or twenty minutes at a very slow pace. I boarded myself, and saw both decks thick with hammocks, an arrangement I would have had for four days if I had taken the boat down the Rio Madeira. Then I looked in the kitchen and saw why Waldimir had tied on. The cook was mashing our bucket of cherries into a very thick juice. We boarded our boat again, waved to the cook, and cast off, sharing the juice back and forth.

The day wore on. I had expected to reach the fazenda between three and four, but by then there was no sign that we were getting close. We had a two-hour walk once we reached there, and night came fast at six o'clock. I wondered how safe it would be to walk through the jungle with flashlights, and I wondered how long our batteries could last. I wondered if the weight of the Indian woman we were giving a ride was slowing us down.

Then around four o'clock, we passed a canoe with a motor puttputting upriver, and they waved us over. Both boats stopped midstream, and Waldimir talked with them for a few minutes. Then two more Indian women boarded our boat, and the canoe turned around and headed downriver. Again, I was not asked, and by now I was beginning to mind. We helped each other out on the river, but it was with my money. Now there was no hope to reach the Indian village that night. This was the reason Waldimir wanted the bigger boat—to run a passenger service. I was getting positively pissed. But I knew I had to maintain deniability, so I only sat sullenly and said nothing.

As evening approached, I became more philosophical about it. Things would work out, and I knew one had to remain flexible traveling in these parts. I was getting a lot for free on this expedition. And although I was paying for Waldimir's time, I had not bought his soul. It was part of his ethic to help people out along the river, and that part of him was not for sale.

Sunset came at six, and we continued to chug upriver in the dark for another hour before we reached the fazenda.

We scrambled up the steep muddy bank on the Bolivian side, my 96th country, and at the top I was introduced to the fazenda's owner and his wife.

We were invited to stay. It was too dark for me to get a good picture of the layout of the fazenda. In fact, it was quite mysterious in the dark, with only an occasional candle burning here and there. I was imagining something out of "Out of Africa", with a big house where the owner and his wife lived, a comfortable living room with a stone fireplace, surrounded by screened-in porch.

I needed to take a piss, and I didn't want to offend our hosts by doing it on their lawn, so I asked Ruben where the toilet was. He doubled up in laughter, grabbed Damien, and took me around the corner. He pointed to the cattle stable and doubled up in laughter again. I did it on the lawn.

Waldimir got back into the boat to take the first Indian woman an hour further upriver to her village, where he said he would probably spend the night. Ruben, Damien and I hung up our hammocks on the porch; the ranch hands helped us out by knocking a hole in the wall above the door frame. We ate bits and pieces of the food we had brought. By eight we were in our hammocks, and by 8:30 all the candles on the porch were out. I noted that some of the other ranch men and women were also sleeping on the porch.

The next morning I woke up around two. The roosters began crowing at 3:30. The cowboys woke each other up at 4:30 and were long gone by the time Ruben, Damien and I rose at 5:30. We folded up our hammocks and breakfasted a bit, and I selected what of my food I wanted to pack into the village with me and what to leave here. I packed three liters of bottled water; Damien packed five. I forgot about the coffee. At six, when the sun rose, we were ready to go.

Now I could see the fazenda that was so mysterious the night before. It was not something out of "Out of Africa"; it was something out of Brueghel. What I thought was the porch of the big house—that was all there was. There was no big house. Everyone who worked there, including the owner and his wife had slung their hammocks there. There was a small kitchen attached, with an oval mud brick oven outside behind it, and directly beyond that the stables and corrals began. The buildings were of mud stucco and the roofs were thatch. There was no electricity. There was nothing that was powered by gasoline. The only wheeled vehicle I saw was a wooden oxcart with large solid wooden wheels.

The first hour and a half of our walk was across a long flat cow-eaten grassland. Several times we passed a small group of zebu cattle, and the alpha bull would take up a defensive stance and eye us suspiciously. There was a fence not far away running parallel to the path, a vulture sitting on every third or fourth fence post. An occasional water bird took off at our approach. We could see the treeline we were aiming for in the distance the whole way, but it took an hour and a half to reach it.

It had rained several days before, so it was still muddy. I was wearing old jogging shoes, the mud would cling to them, and my feet got heavier and heavier. Finally, I abandoned the trail and walked on the grass, trying to stay on the high part of the tufts and avoid the puddles between them. Damien wore sandals, and as the mud attached itself to them, it would pull them off, throwing him off balance; he fell twice. Finally, he had to simply pull them off and hike barefoot—for the first time in his life. Ruben, Child of Nature, started off barefoot. Where Damien and I had jeans against thorns of the rainforest and big backpacks as though we were entering the wilderness, Ruben wore shorts and had slung a pink and yellow picnic bag over his shoulder, as though he were carrying a cooler down to the beach. He strode easily out ahead of us. He spotted a snake in the grass—I don't know whether it was poisonous—and he snatched it by the tail and flung it onto the trail so I could get a good photograph of it.

At the edge of the forest, we rested for a bit. It was around there that I realized I had left the coffee back at the fazenda. I told Damien, and he was as distressed as I was. We seriously considered hiking back to get it.

Here also something happened to me for the first and only time in South America. I had the runs and had to run to the bushes. I pulled the toilet paper from my pack and said "Cinco minutas"—Ruben laughed—and I disappeared. All of yesterday's unfamiliar fruits and river water had made their way through my system. I apologize for mentioning this, but it had ramifications once I reached the village.

The trail through the forest was flat and easy, and after we had forded one small creek, not muddy at all.

We reached the village sooner than I expected, and in consequence I still had my camera around my neck. I had not wanted to lead with my camera.

I had not known what to expect of the village. I guess I had hoped for something out of the ethnographies, a large, circular fortress-like compound, with everyone having their hammocks hung in different sections of the same building, and a large area in the center for tribal dances under hallucinogens and alcoholic drinks fermented in old women's saliva. But this is 1995, not 1955. The village was more like a well-ordered Bolivian town. There was a main plaza with dirt paths cut across it on the diagonals. The rectangular, two-room mud wattle houses with thatched roofs were arranged in an orderly, rectilinear fashion around the four sides of the plaza.

People stared at us as we entered the village and walked to the house of one of the leading men, Edgar Leigue, where Ruben and Jean-Pierre had stayed before. We were introduced to him, invited into his house, seated around his table, and served lemonade. In spite of my dehydration, I sipped it sparingly. Ruben guzzled it down. At one point Edgar noticed that Damien had not drunk any at all and asked him about it. Damien pleaded a medical condition, pointing to the tube in his wrist. When I realized he was not drinking, I had second thoughts about it myself. I remembered a story a student of Margaret Mead had told. She and Mead were visiting a native village and some sort of gruel was being prepared. Mead muttered to her student under her breath, “If they serve that to you, you’d better eat every bit of it. I don’t care what’s in it.” But I had just had the runs and I was worried about my intestines. So I stopped drinking. That was noticed. I don’t know whether they took offense. I don’t know what they concluded about what I would ingest.

Edgar was 45. There was an older man, 54, sitting in the room, talking with us and occasionally turning to work on a hammock he was weaving on a loom. Edgar had a daughter, about twelve, who sometimes came in to stare at us. There was a boy about ten. When I asked his name, he said something like “Ilgardo”, but he didn’t subsequently answer to that, so I don’t know. He spotted the canvas raincoat I had for my camera, and immediately adopted it for a hat. A dog would wander in and out of the house, as would the chickens. The pigs stayed outside. In the corner on a perch near the roof were half a dozen small green parakeets that Ruben delighted in feeding cookie crumbs to.

Edgar said he noticed I had a camera. Did I want to take pictures of the village? I said I did, if that was all right. He replied that I could if I would send them copies. He had wanted to document the village. I agreed, and Edgar led me around the village from house to house and called the people out to have their pictures taken. Two teenage girls next door were shy and didn’t want me to photograph them. I told them I would send them the pictures, and they bounded out to pose with big smiles. When Edgar called a married couple out, she ran into her bedroom to change into better clothes. When she came out, she was wearing a teeshirt that said “San Clemente Ocean Festival”. One man wanted to pose with a bow and arrow decorated with multicolored feathers. The man next door wanted to pose, Pele-like, with his foot on a soccer ball. The village had a three-classroom, mud adobe school; the classrooms all had half a dozen desks and benches, and there was a table and a small blackboard at the front. Edgar had me take pictures of the school. He had me take pictures of the clinic—supplies but no medical personnel—and the soccer field.

The day was getting hotter, and I was suffering a lot from dehydration. I tried to sneak back into Edgar's house for a long swig of the bottled water while they weren't watching me; how could I refuse their lemonade and then guzzle my own water. But there was no getting away from Ilgardo and the older man. "Agua minerale" they said to each other knowingly as they watched me empty half a liter down my throat.

The Moré tribe had had about 2000 members in the 1930s when they were "pacified"—that is, when they stopped defending their territory. They were systematically slaughtered and infected with disease, until now the remnant numbers 120, seventy of whom live in the village of Monte Azul and the remainder in the vicinity. The town was formed in 1957 from what was left of a number of villages.

They began to give up their language and switch to Spanish in 1940. The first generation had not spoken it well, but Edgar was proud to say that the younger generation did speak it well. There are eleven old people who still speak the Moré language. About forty middle-aged people still understand it when the old people speak it. The young neither speak nor understand it.

They did not have a money economy. For the most part, they lived off the products of the forest and the animals that roamed freely in the village. They traded fruit with the ranchers at the fazenda for third-hand clothes. But otherwise they were self-sufficient.

I asked Edgar if he was the mayor of the village. He said no, that they were ruled by a council and they were in contact via short-wave radio with an organization of indigenous peoples in La Paz. He was in charge of the short-wave radio.

Ruben was anxious to get to the fishing hole, so after one round of the village, we were off on a trail through the forest beyond the village, to a river an hour away. We stopped at a grove of mango trees in the middle of the forest a few hunderd yards from the village, and Ruben cut open some mangoes for us. It only dawned on me gradually. Trees in rain forests spread out, hiding in space from their predators. It was not by chance that so many mango trees were clustered together, and so close to the village. I had thought I was walking through the jungle. Now I realized I was walking through their garden.

The fishing hole was a wide spot in a river, a tributary of a tributary of the Rio Mamoré, in turn a tributary of the Rio Madeira, a tributary of the Amazon. Ruben had brought a small piece of meat which he used to catch a piranha, which he then cut up as bait for the rest of the fish. He pulled out a passel, which he gave to Edgar later that afternoon. I simply lay down on the bank in a relatively insect-free patch of dirt and stared at the canopy, nursing my upset intestines, my dehydration, and my caffeine withdrawl symptoms which were beginning to hit. Damien did the same. After a couple of hours, I walked back alone, steadily but slowly enough not to break out into a profuse sweat, imagining a jaguar every time a bird rustled the underbrush.

I arrived at Edgar's house exhausted, and guzzled my bottled water. I engaged in a bit of identity talk with Edgar and the older man in my minimal Spanish. How many children, that sort of thing.

Needing a sugar high and hoping for a caffeine substitute, I took out the pack of Oreo cookies I had brought and had a couple. I passed them to the older man and he took a couple. He passed them to Edgar, and he took a couple. Then Edgar folded up the package, handed it to his daughter, and told her to take them out in back and put them away. I found this a bit strange, but of course I didn't protest.

About an hour after I had returned, Ruben and Damien returned as well. Ruben moved the table out of the way and hung our hammocks across the living room. We lay out and rested much of the remainder of the afternoon. I walked about the village a bit, but there was no activity. The adults were dozing, the children inside at tables with books open in front of them, doing their homework.

It was remarkable how clean the village was. Especially since no effort at all seemed to be made to keep it clean. Garbage was just tossed wherever. I was reminded of an ethnography I had read of the Tiwi in Australia. In the age before ceramics, all implements were made out of local materials in their native state, and when they were discarded, they decayed exactly as the natural materials decayed. Moreover, the people moved often enough that the garbage never accumulated. The problem in modern times is that people have retained the same habits but now the garbage does accumulate and does not degrade.

I was also reminded of something my parents had told me. As they approached retirement, they bought a farm in the hills of southern Indiana. Their first weekend there, my mother called her neighbor to ask what she did with her garbage. "What garbage?" the neighbor replied. Everything was made use of.

It was the same in Monte Azul. If it was edible, it was tossed on the ground and the pigs ate it as they scoured the village. What they wouldn't eat the chickens or the dogs would. If it wasn't edible, it probably had other uses. The toilet paper in the outhouse behind Edgar's house was torn-up homework. Edgar and the older man seemed to hover over Damien and me as we neared the bottom of a bottle of water. They wanted the empty plastic bottles. I ate an orange in the middle of the afternoon, and the older man stopped me as I started to throw out the seeds and peel. He wanted to plant them.

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I'm not sure when things turned bad, or even if they did.

It may have been not drinking the lemonade in the morning.

Or it may have been a trivial incident in the late afternoon. Ruben got up out of his hammock and went to bathe. I followed to see how it was done. There was a well two houses down from Edgar's, at the corner of the village. He tossed a bucket on a rope down to the water twenty feet below and let it fill up, pulled it up and emptied it into a basin. He took the basin into a nearby bathhouse made of cane and thatch. Damien bathed next, and then me.

After I finished I asked some women at the well in gestures if the basin stayed there or went back to Edgar's house. They laughed and pointed toward Edgar's house. On the way back I passed the older man, he said a few words, and I smiled and moved on. At Edgar's house, Edgar and Ruben laughed at me and pointed back at the well. It seems I should have given the basin to the older man on my way back.

I had thought I had had a good rapport with the older man—although note that I never learned his name—but after this, he treated me as a complete nonperson. He asked Damien if indeed I spoke no Spanish or Portuguese at all. I understood him and replied that I spoke a little Portuguese and a little Italian. He ignored me and waited for Damien to say the same thing.

After five, the village was active again. Adults sat outside their houses and watched the children play, reminding me of my own early childhood in the days before television, when the parents would sit outside on summer evenings and watch the neighborhood kids play. I mused that if I were to return here five years from now, they would have satellite dishes and all be inside. The women were in the back cooking dinner. Damien had given them one of our camping dinner packages of freeze-dried chicken and rice, and there was a long discussion about how they should prepare it.

The light as sunset approached was beautiful, and I got out my camera again. Edgar seemed anxious for me to take more pictures. Well, "anxious" is not quite the right word. I almost got the feeling that it was an act of hostility, as though he were trying to run up my costs.

I took clusters of children standing in front of the house. I had a picture taken of me and Edgar, where Edgar insisted on having his green pet parakeets sitting on his shoulders. I went around in back and took the women and girls pounding grain in a mortar with a large pestle. I looked in the mortar and asked if the grain was manioc. They laughed and pointed to the empty package of chicken and rice.

I was going to follow Ruben's lead on dinner. I'd get up and go to the table when he did. But when it was all ready, with the three of us lying in our hammocks in the living room, they carried the table out the back door, closed the door, sat down to the meal without us. I lay in my hammock listening to their laughter and loud conversation. Ruben never got up. Finally, after dinner was over, I got out of my hammock, got an apple and a granola bar out of my backpack, and went out in front of the house to eat it. Then Damien got up and ate something as well. Ruben never did.

I walked around the village after dark. Nothing was happening. A group of boys sitting under a tree shouted at me as I passed—"Foto!" and "Gringo!" Horses had been led into the central plaza, and a gate had been closed across the path leading out of the village.

By eight the three of us were again lying in our hammocks in the living room. I should say something about my hammock. The morning of the previous day Jean-Pierre had spread his collection of hammocks before me on the kitchen floor to choose from. The only trouble was, he had just returned from three weeks in the field himself, and the hammocks were all dirty. They took three days to dry, so there was no question of cleaning them. I sorted through them and picked the cleanest-looking one, but Jean-Pierre objected. He said it was too small. I would be uncomfortable. The idea in a hammock is to sleep diagonally, so your body is close to horizontal. The bigger the hammock, the easier that is. He urged me to take the largest, so I did. I bundled it into my backpack, where it was half my load.

That's what I had slept in at the fazenda. It was certainly comfortable enough, and I fell right to sleep. But after two, as I lay awake waiting for the morning, all I could think of was how filthy it was. How greasy. How oily.

It turned out that Ruben had not known I had brought my own hammock, and he brought another one for me—the small, clean one I had rejected. In Edgar's house he put it up before I realized what he was doing, and since it was already there—and cleaner—I decided to use it instead.

But Jean-Pierre was right about uncomfortable. It was like lying on an inclined plank, upside down. But by the time I realized this, it would have been too disruptive to take it down or adjust it.

It was hung right next to the passage from the bedroom to the front door, so to get in and out Edgar and his daughter had to brush past me, and as I lay there, they did often. Not only that, by then the rope had slipped a bit and I was lying no more than a foot off the ground.

There was apparently a generator in the village that ran for an hour or two every evening, and between eight and nine Edgar and his daughter listened to the radio. Let me be more precise. For an hour, they kept the radio blaring raucous music, far louder than needed for mere hearing, not five feet from my ear. All I could think of was the US Army trying to use loud rock music to blast President Noriega out of the Vatican Embassy after he had taken refuge there during the Panama War. It had to be hostility. That was the only interpretation I could imagine.

Finally at nine they turned the radio off and went to bed.

Then the dogs took over.

I had been struck during the day by the routine, random cruelty shown to the dogs. They had been there all day. They wandered in and out of the houses, sometimes lay on the hard dirt floor. But from time to time, completely out of the blue, the men, women, and children, and even toddlers half the size of the dogs, would pick up a stick and whack it with all their might. The dog would yelp and bound outside, and maybe fifteen minutes later, slink quietly back in.

But after the people went to bed, the village was theirs. I have never heard a dog fight like this one. It was apparently two of the neighbor's dogs against Edgar's dog. They yapped and yelped and growled and barked as they chased each other all over the village, setting off all the other dogs in the village howling, and several times even setting off the pigs, who squealed in a weird-sounding, other worldly, almost electronic chorus.

When things got too hot for Edgar's dog, he would push the front door open and come in, panting on my face as he did. From his security inside he would growl back at the two neighbor dogs from behind the back door. Then he would act very agitated, and finally overcoming his fear he would bound outside again.

About the third time he did this, while he was growling at the back door, the two neighbor dogs circled around to the front door and looked in, one behind the other, baring their teeth, not three feet from my face. I reached over and slammed the door shut.

This was apparently a very out-of-the-ordinary thing to do, and it caused a great deal of consternation. When he had gathered his courage once more, Edgar's dog returned to the front door and found it closed. He could push it open from the outside, but he couldn't pull it open from the inside. He looked confused, and sat by the door and whimpered. I felt sorry for him and was tempted to reach over and pull the door open for him, but the dog fight had stopped. All was quiet. Maybe I could get some sleep. So I did nothing.

But for all I know the neighbor dogs were outside happily eating Edgar's chickens. In any case, his daughter in the bedroom stirred, listened, and then woke Edgar up. Her intonation said something terrible had gone wrong. Edgar got up and brushed past me and opened the door for his dog. The dog bounded out and the dog fight began again, and Edgar returned to bed.

Eventually I fell asleep. I don't know if it was because the dog fight ended, or because I just got used to it.

2. Antipodes

I woke up around two in the morning again. The roosters began crowing at 3:30. That started the dogs barking again. Edgar and his daughter were up by five. I got up at 5:30 and Damien and Ruben soon followed. We untied our hammocks, and Ruben stuffed them into his bag. At six, as the sun was first rising, I shook Edgar's hand and thanked him, stiffly perhaps, and we left the village.

We followed the trail through the rain forest for half an hour, as before, the sun lighting up the tops of the trees. We waded the creek, and came out onto the long flat plain of the ranch. It had dried a bit in the last two days, and it was easier to walk. Nevertheless, it is strange to see two trees in the distance and know you will not reach them for half an hour. We saw no cattle this time, but the vultures still sat on every third or fourth fence post in the rising sun. Two huge jabiru birds flapped off before we could get near.

We reached the fazenda, the ranch house, by eight. Waldimir was there, waiting for us with the boat. It was already hot, so we sat inside to cool off. Damien and I retrieved the instant coffee we had forgotten two days before and got the cook to boil water for us. I cupped the warm cup in my hands tenderly as I sipped the coffee straight, waiting for the caffeine to relieve my headache. Damien, Belgian, added sugar, and Ruben, a Brazilian, heaped sugar in. I laughed at him.

At nine we clambered down the steep bank, dumped our backpacks in the boat, and set off. With us were an Indian woman who sat immobile, silent, and expressionless the whole nine-hour trip down the Rio Guaporé and Rio Mamoré, maybe the same woman who was with us on the way up, and a Bolivian mestizo woman whom I believed was the wife of the owner of the fazenda. At least I had thanked her for her hospitality as I left the fazenda and was surprised to see her board the boat with us. She carried herself with some elegance, and when I looked back at her in her stylish straw hat and off-white blouse and a purple scarf around her pale beautiful face, I had the feeling I was looking at a Japanese woodblock print. We made eye contact, and I thought I detected the slightest smile. Her young daughter was with her.

Once on the river, I took my remaining apples out of my backpack and passed them around. I wiped mine clean on my shirt and then ate it, peel and all, and took a swig from my bottle of water. She by contrast took out her knife, very carefully peeled the apple, cut it into quarters, scraped the seeds out, and bit into it. Then she dipped her cup into the brown river for a drink.

Several hours out, we stopped on the Brazilian side of the river at the isolated home of a woman Waldimir knew. He barely said hello and then lifted Ruben to pick mangoes from a tree outside her house, and then with arms full, we boarded again.

We stopped again at the Pacáas Novas village we had visited on the way up, and again Waldimir and Ruben went from tree to tree picking cherries. I was surrounded by the children and teenagers of the village, and this time I took their pictures.

It rained several times during the journey, hard, and we all huddled under the canvas awnings Waldimir had brought on board.

Around 5:30 the river looped around a large plot of burning jungle, and the setting sun shone pale and white throught the smoke.

At six we arrived at Guajará-Mirim.

I paid Waldimir, and Ruben, Damien and I carried our bags the several blocks back to Jean-Pierre's house, where I washed up a bit, changed my shirt, and repacked. I didn't see Jean-Pierre. His wife spoke of fixing dinner. But first I wanted to got with Damien to the rodoviaria, the bus station, to see when the bus for Porto Velho left that night. At the last minute I tossed my bag into the trunk, just in case.

It was 6:45. The bus left at seven, and the next one not til midnight. I told Damien I didn't relish an all-night bus ride, but I felt that I should take the midnight bus so I could spend a bit of time with Jean-Pierre, who had done so much for me. In addition, though I didn't say so, I had a lot of questions that I wanted to ask Jean-Pierre. I didn't want my story of Brazil to be yet another story about not having a clue what was going on around me. But Damien said Jean-Pierre wasn't there anyway; he had himself gone into Porto Velho. So I decided on the spur of the moment to take the seven o'clock bus.

It was supposed to be a five-hour trip. But Guajará-Mirim is a duty-free "port", and people come here to shop. One young woman waiting for the bus had twenty-five large crates she was returning with. After loading what they could into the bus, they decided they needed a larger bus, and everyone's baggage had to be transferred. It was 7:40 before we left.

In addition, Guajará-Mirim is the main gateway for the cocaine traffic from the Bolivian lowlands to the rest of the world. The biggest house in town belonged to the man reputed to be the drug kingpin, and the mayor of the town is mysteriously rich. So the police stopped the bus twice in the middle of the night, and ordered everyone to get off with their baggage, to have it inspected. I was half asleep and completely exhausted from the rigors of the day. Several Indians on board, who claimed they had no baggage, remained on board, so I remained on as well. The policeman leaned over to me and said something in Portuguese. I thought maybe I could escape the hassle by being an ignorant foreigner, so I said, "Não falo portugues." The policeman yelled at me, "Policia!! Bagagem!!" The inspection was perfunctory, but time-consuming.

We didn't arrive in Porto Velho until two. I took a taxi to the Hotel Yara, got a $20 room, and collapsed.

Early the next morning I picked up the laundry I had left four days before. They had not lost it. I had been in some doubt, since I had left unexpectedly early, after paying my bill to the night clerk. It was a relief that I could change into a clean pair of jeans for my return flight.

At noon I took a taxi to the airport. From the plane there were good views of the Rio Madeira and of the trackless jungle.

In Manaus, after the sun went down at six, I walked warily around the waterfront area, and then to the Teatro Amazonas. They were sold out for the night's performance, a group singing the songs of the Amazon, but I was able to buy a ticket from a man who had an extra.

In the morning I walked around all the same areas with my camera, sweating so profusely in the heat and humidity that I thought it was a reaction to my malaria pill. At eleven I taxied to the airport and at one boarded the plane for Brasilia and Rio.

I switched from Varig to United in Rio International. I flew to Miami and on to San Francisco.

At home in Los Altos, I unpacked and did a laundry. I went in to work to read my essential e-mail.

The next morning I packed again and drove to the airport for my flight to Tokyo. I took the train from Narita into the city, and another train around to my hotel. At nine the next morning, a young man from Nippon Electric Company picked me up and we took a taxi to the building where the conference was held. I was the only Westerner there. Except for my talk, the entire conference was in Japanese, even my introduction. I felt the lecture went well, although there was no evidence that anyone understood anything. No one asked questions.

It wasn't until a week later that I figured out what my role there was. A Japanese funding agency was about to fund a program on multimedia and sponsored this conference to help organize it; Japanese researchers in natural language processing wanted their research funded under that program; so they invited an American researcher to give the field stature. I don't know if I fulfilled my role adequately.

I was excused for the rest of the day, and in the late afternoon I went up in the Tokyo Tower to watch the sunset. It set precisely where one would put it if planning a sunset, just behind Mount Fuji, a little off center, turning the wispy clouds around the summit bright orange as if the sky were on fire.

That weekend, one week after leaving Edgar's village in the Bolivian jungle, I took a long train ride to the mountains east of Osaka, to an area called Koya-san, made famous by the tenth century Buddhist monk Kukai. There are no hotels, but I stayed in one of the 160 Buddhist monasteries there. After a vegetarian dinner in which the only food I recognized was rice, the acolyte in charge of my comfort unrolled the futon for my bed, and since it got very cold at night, he propped a low table with a heating element underneath over the foot of the futon. I lay on the floor—there was no chair—and read an English translation of a selection by Kukai. It seemed appropriate. But the piece struck me as self-serving, a kind of plea to the emperor to "fund my sect". By eight, it was cold and dark outside, there was nothing to do, and I was tired of reading, so I stuck my feet under the table, pulled the heavy quilt over me, and went to sleep. I woke later, and, hoping it would be almost morning, I checked my watch. It was 11:30, not yet midnight.