



## Welcome to the Amazon ..

The wheels lightly kissed the tarmac as the Avianca jet landed at the international airport of Belem, Brazil. It was a bright, early afternoon in October, 1983. "Dry season" in this tropical city of one million souls near the mouth of the mightiest river on this planet, the Amazon. Lisa, my traveling companion/girlfriend and I were sailing one thousand miles upriver. We had a few days to explore the city, that lies one degree of latitude south of the equator. Our Brazilian, 100 passenger, steel catamaran would depart for a ten day journey to Manaus (the one-time rubber capital of the world).

The city was quiet as we checked into our hotel. It was "sesta" time. The residents would return home to their families for the main meal of the day and rest before returning to work. This was a culture that believed in strong family ties and family unity.

The following morning found us having coffee at the old port where there is a great market, the Ver-o-Peso, along the Para River. Ocean freighters abound as they load and unload their cargo to either continue upriver to Manaus or to go back to sea. The Para River is part of the Amazon that empties into the Atlantic Ocean sixty miles north. The market is jammed with people. The place is loaded with all kind of tropical produce, meats, strange-looking fish that can only be found in this region. One of these fish has scales so large and strong that they are used as nail files. Young jaguars, monkeys, and tropical birds of every description, are sold in cages.

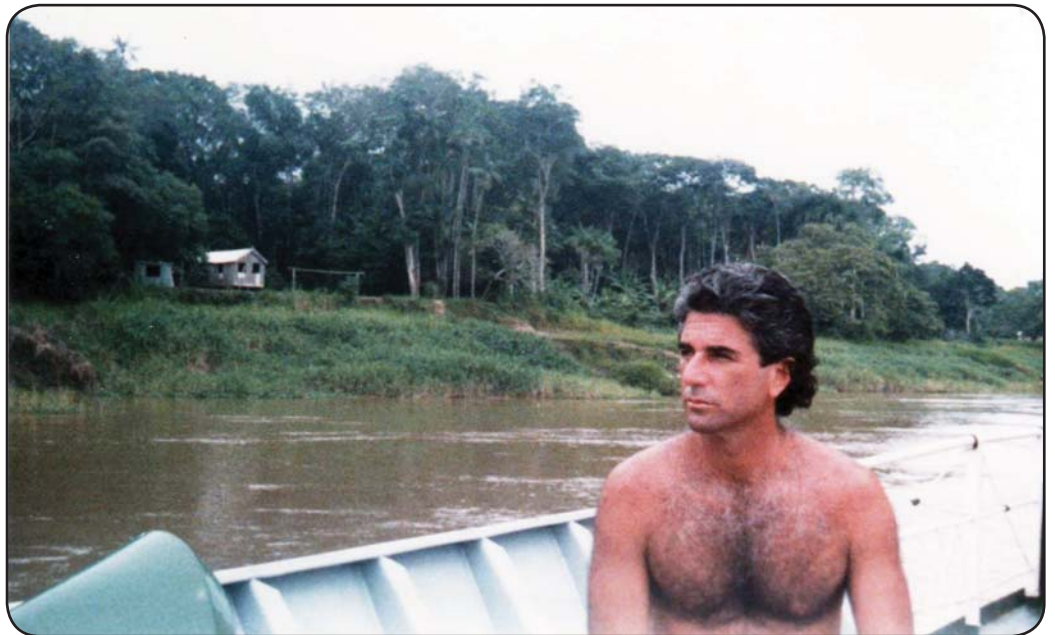
Lisa wanders to peruse the clothes and trinkets. I am fascinated by the medicinal herbs and powders used by the Indians. We spend the whole morning meandering about the market. Lisa and I find a place for lunch away from the maddening crowds. As we sit inside the bamboo restaurant, tropical birds fly in through the open windows. Across the river lies the great island of Marajo, almost as large as Switzerland. It is all jungle. Some tribes of Indians still live there. We order "Pato no tucupi" - boiled duck in fermented wild grasses. That is how the chef explained it to us (the Portuguese to English translation might be a little off). Delicious.





Finally, it was time to depart. All passengers climbed aboard. We were the only Americans. Everyone else were Brazilian except for one French couple. The cabins were spartan with bunk beds. Toilet down the hall. The lines were cast off, horn blaring, the ship slowly churned out into the river. We were on our way to Manaus.

We sailed north up the Para, around the great island of Marajo, to the city of Macapá. It is midday. The sky is clear. This is where the Para and the main body of Amazon River meet. We are outside enjoying the view of this tropical paradise when water falls on us from the cloudless sky. The crew is laughing while they direct the fire hoses up into the air to spray water on all the passengers on deck. It is tradition to wet oneself with the waters of the Amazon as you cross the equator. All enjoy the gaiety of the situation except for the grumbling of the French couple. You “gotta” love the French. Twenty minutes later we were all dry and traveling up the milky, gray-brown waters of the mighty Amazon to our final destination, Manaus.



The days are tranquil. On both sides of the river lay the rainforest. Bamboo or wooden houses appear every now and then, built on pilings or stilts. Where the bank of the river is high, the homes are built three to four feet above the ground. Where the ground is low, the houses are built on fifteen foot stilts. During the rainy season, the Amazon can rise fifteen feet. I have been told that in some parts of the river, it rises thirty feet. At times the river is five miles wide. Jungle, as far as the eye can see, encompasses this part of the world. It’s as if you stepped back in time to the arboreal age of the planet.

The crew is very congenial. The food is Brazilian. Plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables. Fresh fish caught daily as we motor upriver. Plenty of meat as this is the new cattle area of Brazil. The Brazilian government is clearing thousands of acres of rain forest to make way for pasture land and farming. The native Indians are being displaced.



When the Spanish and Portuguese discovered this part of the world in the 1500's, there were approximately 4,000,000 Indians. Now there are less than 200,000 living in the rainforest. This part of the world produces close to 40% of the oxygen on this planet. Yes, the jungle is vast but not limitless. The unbridled growth of the Amazon Basin in the early 1980's has been constrained by the powerful conservation efforts of the governments of all the countries of South America plus the United Nations. What affects the Amazon affects all of us.

About 500 miles from Belem, the river water divides into half deep blue and half milky color. The Tapajós and Amazon rivers meet and run together for many miles side by side without mixing. This phenomenon is called "The Meeting of the Waters" by the locals. We are close to our next stop, Santarem.

As we pull into the port of this tropical city, a pod of pink dolphins cavort about the ship. These animals are indigenous to the river. Many legends abound about these creatures. One is: if a young Indian man or maiden dies, they are transformed into a pink dolphin. These cetaceans are between five and nine feet in length. Many had prominent large black spots on their pink skin. We docked at the quay. Lisa and I had arranged to be transported to an Indian village, about thirty minutes outside of town. I wore a white linen suit that I purchased in Belem and my fedora. Lisa had on a white sun dress with a wide-brimmed straw hat that shaded her green eyes and complimented her cascading shoulder-length red hair. We also brought our bathing suits.



The van traveled along a red dirt road. Impenetrable green rainforest encircled us. We arrived and strode arm-in-arm into the village, my hat cocked to one side. I felt like "bwana" meeting the natives in a Tarzan movie with Jane by my side. The natives were there to greet us, not very tall, brown skin, a mix of Indian and "civilized" clothing. Everyone gathered around to touch us. The chief introduced us to a beautiful young maiden. She was definitely a "weto," (more white than Indian). They were very proud of her. The tour continued to display their crops, logging enterprise, and collecting sap from the rubber trees. We stayed for a couple of hours and our guide offered a translation from Portuguese to English and vice versa for the many questions we and they had.

Then it was off to the river Tapajós for some swimming. Of course, the first question that pops into anyone's mind is "Are there any piranha?" Assured that it was safe, we changed into our bathing attire and jumped into the cool, clear water of the Tapajós. Refreshing.



We traveled back to the boat for a late lunch, to our cabin to rest -- *right*, and then to stroll along the calçadão (promenade) for sunset. Twilight doesn't exist in the tropics. Not like the northern latitudes. As the sun was going down, the sky went black. Bats. They came from everywhere in the forest surrounding Santarem. I stood on a wooden cart used to transport cargo to and from the ships. With my arms outstretched, I watched the bats fly about me, missing me by inches as their echolocation

senses would determine my presence. It was a fantastic experience. Lisa stood by the cart. I just could not believe my eyes. Millions of these creatures were flying. The sun disappeared, so we returned to the ship for supper and a deserved sleep. Tomorrow morning we would continue our journey to Manaus.

## Manaus Opera House



We spent the next few days motoring upriver. The green of the rainforest always surrounding the river. Every once in a while, a swath of cleared land would appear. Either crops or cattle were seen. Finally, the confluence of the Rio Negro and Amazon were evident by the two rivers merging but not co-mingling. One half of the Amazon was the usual milky gray-brown and the other half was the blackness of the Rio Negro. Soon we would be arriving at Manaus, the heart of Amazonia.

Over 500,000 people lived in this city when we arrived. Now it's close to 2,000,000. Its roots go back to the 1600's when it was a fort of the Portuguese.

It boomed in the late 19th century when it had the monopoly on rubber. The “rubber barons” became extravagant to excess. A lavish opera house was built so that the famous tenor, Caruso, would sing for them. That opera house, the Teatro Amazonas, is still there today and it is beautiful. Their clothes were shipped to France to be cleaned and all wore the most stylish outfits that were popular in Europe for that era..

For a time, Manaus, was considered “one of the gaudiest cities of the world.” Finally, some seeds were smuggled out of the Amazon to other tropical locales and the boom was over. The city fell into decay, but revived with economic incentives from the government. While rubber is still exported, the industrial base runs the gamut from shipbuilding to computers. An amazing place in the middle of the largest rainforest left on this planet with over 1/3 of all species of the world living there.

Lisa and I spent a few days exploring this unbelievable city. Finally, it was time to fly out. Rio de Janeiro was the next stop. But that story is for another time.

