

## Amazon Journey: It's a Rainforest Out There – Part 3

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The spotlight went on once in a while for a minute or so at a time. Its beam was focused to a few feet wide and illuminated an area a hundred feet or so in front of the boat. What's more, a blizzard of insects filled the beam, not just mosquitoes but an inconceivable variety of flying bugs. Oh, to be a bat in the Amazon.

The ride back was a parcel of time, so peaceful, so complete, I wished it could have been an all-night journey rather than a few hours.

Mr. Joo and I spoke part of the time about possible newspaper articles that could come out of this trip. We passed the phrase "key issues" back and forth a couple of times, as though it had some meaning and as though we knew what we were talking about. A reminder of "key issues" to look into later, from the handwritten journal...

The Amazon's dilemma; its future; its value for education in medicine, agriculture and race relations (integrating the Indians into the advancing civilization).

Inescapable, unstoppable reality: so called "civilization" is coming to the forest, rivers, people and wildlife of the Amazon. There are those, and you shall know them by their web sites, who preach that the best development is to do nothing at all. Limit traffic, stop slash-and-burn agriculture, farming – leave it pristine. An appealing sentiment, but you might as well try to stop the Pony Express or find a cure for gold fever in mid-nineteenth century America. Has the focus of debate really shifted from the "keep it pristine" argument to a discussion on the management of encroachment?

How to integrate the Indians? What about the "cultural imperialism" argument? Destroy a centuries-old culture, replacing it with urban madness and white man's diseases?

Upon arrival at the hotel I went to the restaurant to buy a bottle of water before going to the room. Our two pilots and Mary the flight attendant, were having a late supper. "Air Mary," some of us affectionately called our private airline. We talked for a while about our respective adventures. The pilots described what they did to prepare for the next morning's flight and Mary recounted the problems of foraging in an alien culture for food to serve us on the plane.

**Sábado, 25 de octubre de 1997** – Macapá lies exactly on the Equator. According to Mr. Joo, it is one of only five cities in the world placed exactly so. I believe Quito, Ecuador is one also.

Sailing across rough water, we arrived at a wide tributary (rivers and parts of rivers crisscross everywhere here at the Amazon's mouth). We sailed a few kilometers up a smaller river. Rough "machete jungle" grew to the water's edge. A man who ran a boat engine repair shop along the

river said he has seen (and killed) anacondas ten meters or more in length. He and his wife offered us coffee, water and hearts of palm. He said, "I don't like cities. People are hungry in the cities. Here we have no hunger." He described the palm tree fruit, fish, hearts of palm, pumpkins, etc. that grew in the jungle around his home.



Our reason for stopping was to buy bait. Their engine repair shop was part of a small community that included a few houses, workshops, a saw mill for local use, an Evangelical Church of God, outdoor toilets and docks sticking out to the water's edge. All the buildings were mounted on stilts and connected one to another by raised boardwalks, also on stilts. This close to the Atlantic, we were in an area affected by tides, and rain-borne floods. The tide was low during our visit so we climbed ten feet of stairs from the river's edge up to the docks. Boats that would be floating elegantly a few hours later, now lay sprawled in the mud, tilted at grotesque angles.

We buy some bait, say goodbye and push off in our dinghy to rendezvous with Father's group on a somewhat larger boat, a smallish cabin cruiser. We hand off some of the bait and head out on our own to take pictures and fish. With me in the boat are Vicki and the two Korean UC video cameramen who are recording our every gesture and utterance. There are also the guide/boat pilot and his friend, another shirtless and hatless local guy who doesn't say much but knows his way around a fishing tackle box like nobody I've ever seen.

The silent river and the jungle around and overhead, surrounds us the way the man's anaconda stories have enfolded themselves around my mind. The afternoon sun brings increasing contrast to the light and begins to work its magic again, separating all the things you would ordinarily just call "green" into countless distinct shades and variations. If the Eskimos have sixteen words to describe different kinds of snow, I wondered if the people here have fifty to tell one kind of green from another. I can appreciate now where Paul Gauguin must have found the colors for his Polynesia paintings.

Trees taller than an 8-story building stand pregnant with coconuts and pods of some kind of fruit. One stand of trees is completely covered by parasitic kudzu-like vines whose broad leaves starve them of sunlight and slowly snuff out their lives. The appearance is of someone having thrown a luxurious blanket over them. Beauty and death work so well together here.

Not only am I looking at a small piece of the largest forest in the world, but this land has always been forest, generally thought to be the oldest permanent vegetation growth on earth.

Half the known species of birds and more kinds of butterflies than anywhere on earth are here. Crawly things, bugs friendly and scary – bugs we've never even met – are everywhere. There are spiders so large they make their living catching and eating birds. We sit in the boat with the motor off, drifting silently. Every creature is putting out a mating call, a warning cry or just a song, as they flitter around their way to eating and being eaten. The rainforest at rush hour is indescribable. Heaven will have to get up pretty early in the morning to top this for beauty. I keep hearing my own voice, filled with awe, whispering quietly, "my God...my God...oh my God."

Our boat turns off our tributary onto a smaller creek about 20 feet wide. Someone decided we needed more bait or better bait or different bait. The light is gorgeous and Vicki is ecstatic as she burns through roll after roll of film. I have been with Vicki on other photo assignments in Brazil, North Korea and other places, and she is always this wired. She works incredibly hard, demanding absolute perfection from herself and her equipment. Rebuking herself for the fifth time for not having brought the other camera body, she whips a hand into her canvas bag as we suddenly come upon a spectacular piece of river that calls for an instantaneous switch from a long lens to a wide. But we're moving. We're on a boat that's moving, on a river that's moving, photographing animals, backlit foliage, ripples, reflections – all of them moving. The light is changing, the angles are changing, leaving forever. We're skimming along, just two seconds away from this whole scene being nothing more than a memory.



"Tell him to stop! Tell him to stop!" Vicki screams at me.

I turn to tell the boat driver to stop. He doesn't speak English but he caught her tone and her look, and is already reversing the engine. Like his scrawny brown assistant, he has come to fear this mad woman and they both watch her like you would watch an unfamiliar Doberman.

She is relentless, projecting her passion onto the shooting environment, demanding cooperation from the sunlight and the alligators. I've learned there is not much I can do to help Vicki other than stay out of her way. Most of the time she declines my offers to carry her equipment. The gear is heavy but she would rather throw her back out than have to endure the extra ten-second delay of me locating and handing her the 50-to-200 zoom. Vicki's photos have won some prestigious awards.

I scribble a few thoughts in my notebook. I haven't the faintest idea where we are. We come upon a grass shack on the edge of the creek.

In a tiny, but navigable tributary we met an old gentleman who lives in a palm frond shack with two barking dogs. He wore a never washed t-shirt in tatters and boxer shorts. It didn't look like he owned anything else.

The old man didn't have any bait for us. He told us the wind is coming. We talked for a while, gave him a Coke and some oranges and left.

We met up with Father's boat just before we headed back as it began to get dark. He told Vicki, the camera crew and me to get into his boat and for all of us to sit on the floor of the lowest part and to stay there. So we did. We found out why when we left the feeder river and entered the main body of the Amazon for the several miles trip across it. The water had grown rough and we could see waves rising above the side of the boat. The wind had indeed come. The dinghy we had been in had too many people for such rough water, and the guide and his assistant would have an easier time with a lighter load. Father wanted us sitting down so as to keep the boat's center of gravity as low as possible.

Macapá is a city at one of the two major mouths of the Amazon. The river is wide and strong here, pouring out so much water that the Atlantic Ocean is fresh water for many miles out to sea. It's still the river, technically a tidal estuary, but there are sometimes waves that compare to those on the ocean, certainly high enough to swamp small fishing boats like ours.

I don't know how much actual danger we were in but it was bumpy and the waves towered over us when we were in the troughs. On the other hand, the stars were enormous.

Again, an opportunity to die dramatically amid great beauty.

