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OPINION

## The Amazon

### Into the wild

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#### Travels among the Ticuna

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### Monday

MANAUS—with its rubber-barons' mansions, tax-free factories, tomato-soup opera house and thousands of umbrella sellers—becomes smaller as the plane banks and heads west. Manaus, the capital of Brazil's Amazonas state, is in the country's north-west; it is the jumping-off point for travelling into Brazil's Amazon rainforest.

The view from the airplane window for the next four hours, when the clouds allow it, is of dark green stretching to the horizon. In places the forest is scored by bits of river. They look big enough to be the great Amazon, but are probably only obscure tributaries.

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After a few stops at one-room airports we come to Tabatinga, a border town that sits half in Brazil and half in Colombia. It is frontier-land in another sense: the receptionist at my hotel in Manaus says he knows someone who went there to do some research a couple of weeks ago and was murdered.

A resident of Tabatinga who works for the Brazilian government tells me that the FARC cross into Brazil here to do their shopping. I picture men in jungle camouflage crawling on their bellies down the aisle of a Brazilian supermarket, marvelling at the superior range of products on offer. What do they buy? Nobody knows.

Most people travel by motorbike or scooter. On the Brazilian side of the border a relaxed approach to safety prevails. In the Colombian half, which is called Leticia, riders must wear helmets. The only real marker of the border are the stalls one metre inside Brazil that rent out helmets for one real, allowing riders to cross; a testament to the inventiveness of the country's mighty informal economy (in which 60% of the labour force works).

Tomorrow we start early and head by boat to an area of land reserved for the Ticuna people, the largest of Brazil's remaining indigenous tribes. They too have little respect for borders, and are spread through Brazil, Colombia and Peru.

## Tuesday

DAWN on the river is marked by a dusty pink shade rarely found outside an actress's makeup bag. When morning fully breaks everything is grey and brown and washed-out green. A few canoes pass, powered either by men with diamond-shaped paddles or by small outboard engines. A Colombian gunboat sails by, dispelling any idea that our 200-horsepower engine makes us the king of the river. Small fish jump near the river bank. They look like piranhas. Surely only carnivores expend so much energy so pointlessly. After three or four hours the boat approaches Novo Paraíso obliquely, to avoid submerged sand banks.

Novo Paraíso has a population of about 55. Each family unit has two clapboard huts that sit on stilts to lift them clear of rising water. One hut is for living and sleeping, the other for cooking and eating. These houses are arranged in a line facing the river, with a fair amount of space between them in a kind of tropical suburbia. The marketing department of the Workers' Party can congratulate itself—even here, posters advertise their candidates for the recent municipal elections. There is an evangelical church, a football pitch with calf-high grass and a volleyball court, all reminders that we are still in Brazil.

AFP



**A day out in Novo Paraíso**

Families seem economically self-contained. There is some barter but not much of a market for it. Men fish when they need to. Women harvest beans, roast and grind manioc flour and prepare one big meal a day. Chickens scratch around under the huts. One barbecue boasts a turtle cooked on its back, in its shell. Families with young children receive *bolsa familia*, an allowance paid by the government, which explains the crisp packets and other bits of rubbish strewn around. But there is no money here and nothing to buy.

There is little traditional Ticuna culture on show. Some people have their front teeth pulled out (traditionally, some Ticuna have their front teeth removed and their canines filed, so they more closely resemble jaguars). An elaborate ceremony marking a girl's first menstruation is still performed in this area, though there is not one while we are there. There is disappointingly little body paint or jewellery; most people dress as they would in any other poor neighbourhood in Brazil.

The forest here is less exuberant than in other parts of the Amazon. It sits respectfully back from the river bank, not dangling its tentacles into the water as it does elsewhere. But it is still intimidatingly big. Walk in any direction away from the river on either bank and there is nothing but forest for hundreds of miles. To the south-west there is an area home to Brazil's remaining uncontacted tribes.

We will sleep in the school house. But before bed there is time to sit by the river bank and be entertained by

competing lights. Along with the moon and the stars, which are as bright as could be expected, there are fireflies and, in the distance, an electrical storm that is too far away to hear but flickers intermittently like an early experiment in cinema.

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## Wednesday

THE cocks have not yet learned that they are meant to hold off on crowing until dawn: they begin instead at three in the morning. When it gets light I go for a tour of the village with Ricardo Affonso Ferreira: adventurer, orthopaedic surgeon and *Economist* subscriber. Ricardo is my reason for coming to Novo Paraíso. Outsiders generally need permission to visit Indian reservations and this can be hard to get. Ricardo has a good reason for coming, though, and I have come to observe him in action.

Ricardo is a fourth-generation medic. His great-grandfather was the doctor on a boat that carried British soldiers to the Boer War. He has a private clinic in Campinas, in São Paulo state. But he has also a restless streak. Ricardo once spent four years travelling overland from Paris to Bangladesh and now spends most of his holidays in the Amazon.

Expedicionários da Saúde



Together with a group of doctors he founded Expedicionários da Saúde, which translates literally as Expeditionaries of Health (it sounds much better in Portuguese). A couple of times a year they set up mobile hospitals in remote corners of the forest and perform elective surgery. Most of the demand is for cataract and hernia operations, but people also appear with mysterious lumps to be removed or misshapen limbs that need straightening.

Unusually for Brazil, where many NGOs receive money from the government or state-controlled companies, Expedicionários is privately funded. The doctors give their time for free, as do all the support staff: nurses, technicians, logistics people. Some equipment is donated by medical-supply companies, which explains why somewhere in the forest lives a child called Bertoni, born in the safety of a tent made by a company of the same name. Ricardo's aim is for the equipment to be put to work all year round, with different doctors travelling to the forest throughout the year and a paid support staff.

We are part of an advance party charged with getting things ready for the arrival of the doctors tomorrow. I am undoubtedly the least useful member of the group, so I do my best impersonation of a Victorian imperialist and organise the younger children into a litter patrol. They are quite close to the ground, I reason, and so the work is less uncomfortable. I think was one of the arguments used by opponents of the Factory Acts in nineteenth-century Britain.

Anyway, they appear to enjoy themselves, whooping when a particularly good piece of rubbish is found and bringing it to me for my approval. We sit around and drink some fruit juice afterwards and I get a lesson in Ticuna, which does not get far beyond "hello." A few of the adults speak a little Portuguese. None of the children do.

In the evening there is a game of volleyball. The players are as athletic as any on the beach in Rio. The older

children, who have haircuts that have taken some thought and wear T-shirts with slogans ("Be a pop star!" reads one), smack the ball hard. This could be out of exuberance or frustration. They play this game every evening.

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## Thursday

THE rest of the doctors will get here today and there is still much to do. The surgical tents need power, which will come from a large generator that has just arrived by boat. It is very heavy. The village chief protests. The men have been working hard for no pay. They will carry the generator, but only if they can hang on to it.

Ricardo negotiates. Nobody here is being paid, he points out. The hard work will be worth it tomorrow, when boatloads of patients arrive sick and go away better. The brief mutiny is over. The generator is attached to long poles and carried by some twenty men, and the chief works in a very visible way for the rest of the day, including through the mid-day sun.

Expedicionários da Saúde



**Expeditionaries of health**

The only way to cool off is to go for a swim. We enter the water sliding our feet across the riverbed to warn any rays that might be sitting there of our arrival. The water is so muddy that submerged bodies are invisible. The current is strong enough that it is possible to maintain a gentle breaststroke in the opposite direction without going anywhere.

Our schoolhouse needs more timber to complete an extension. A tree has been selected and is felled with a chainsaw. It falls just where it is meant to, but rips a bow from a neighbouring tree. This falls to the ground just missing Yudo, a local councillor charged with the sawing. Actually it has not missed him; he is bleeding from the top of his ear, which is torn. Ricardo repairs it. For the rest of the afternoon Yudo is surrounded by other men who listen and nod at his narrow escape.

At dusk the other doctors arrive. There is not enough room in the schoolhouse, so some pitch tents on a concrete floor outside. Several of these people run well-regarded private hospitals back home. They go swimming in the river. A fish spine embedded in a foot provides the second minor test of the medical equipment.

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## Friday

AT SEVEN in the morning the chief is at a microphone, issuing instructions in Ticuna for more than an hour. Outside their homes people are frantically gardening with machetes, flattening mud-lawns and straightening verges. Arriving invalids will take away an impression of order, along with their medication.

They start to arrive, having been pre-selected by people trained by Expedicionários on an exploratory trip

earlier. They are met with three consulting rooms made of reeds; a pharmacy; a hut where equipment is sterilised; three air-conditioned surgical tents; and a post-operative ward, housed in the evangelical church. Hammocks and drips hang from the rafters there, and stripes of sunlight slip through gaps in the walls.

Each consulting room has an interpreter. Even then the patients, some of whom have travelled for days, are not forthcoming about their conditions. On this first day, many of them need cataracts removed. The operation is performed in the dark, apart from a light shone on the clouded eye. A machine emitting high-frequency sound waves scrambles the cataract before the surgeon removes it. In some cases, people who have not seen for years have sight straight away. Others can see light but must wait for a couple of days before shapes and colours appear.

Towards the end of the day a mother arrives with a complicated pregnancy. She is losing blood, and the gynaecologists reckon that she, her baby or both of them might die without an emergency caesarean. They cut open her womb, and mother and baby are then put in a fast boat with an oxygen cylinder and taken to the nearest supply of blood.

The doctors will stay for another ten days. They have already performed over a thousand operations since founding Expedicionários, and this is their biggest expedition so far.

I, on the other hand, must take my ant-bitten legs back to São Paulo and continue working out how the financial crisis will affect Brazil. The Ticuna do not seem too bothered by it. Indeed this country is so big and varied that some parts of it are barely aware of the existence of others. Perhaps that is a sign of the nation's success. After centuries spent wiping out indigenous Brazilians, the country is self-confident enough not to view places like Novo Paraíso as a challenge to Order and Progress. It is now up to the teenagers of the village whether they stay for another game of volleyball, or try their luck further downriver.

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Expedicionários da Saúde



**And the blind shall see**