



Amazon Journey to the northernmost frontier of the Brazilian rain- and nebular- forest

Who went along two adventurers from Germany, a botanist from the Goeldi Amazon Research Centre, our guide and 3 porters

Belém, the capital of the of Amazonian state of Pará, in the Northeast of Brazil, is strategically located at the 250 km wide delta of the Amazon river. Since its foundations in 1616, it is considered to be the historical gateway to the Amazon region. Religious and other edifications date back to the colonial period and are maintained in good shape. Obviously we had to visit some of the highlights Belém offers to tourist and locals alike. At the famous market, the Mercado Ver-o-Peso (checking the weight market), we marvel at the exotic products displayed there. Enormous quantities of all kinds of sea-and river fishes are being offered and we wonder why there are no flies on them despite of the tropical heat all around us. There are also elixirs made from poisonous snakes

and all imaginable and unimaginable kinds of medicinal herbs and fruits from the Amazon region.

We also visited the internationally renowned Goeldi Amazonian research institute with its botanical-zoological gardens representing exclusively species of that region - a glimpse of the flora and fauna that we were to discover in the weeks to come...

We also took a trip on the Guamá river where we enjoyed typical food in one of the palm thatched restaurants, surrounded by luxurious nature. In the evening we went down to the harbour. The old piers and warehouses have been restored with



shops, fancy bars and restaurants. Cargo cranes moved platforms back and forth under the ceiling, with artists performing excellent music shows. While we sat on the terrace in front of the river, we enjoyed draft beers made in the probably only in-house brewery of the whole Amazon region. A last delight before we should hit wilderness and suffering!

The following morning we took a flight to Manaus, the capital of the federal state of Amazonas. We had made plans to try to observe the South American jaguar *Panthera onca* at a spot some 80kms away from Manaus. To our disappointment we received information that, due to restrictions imposed by IBAMA, we were not permitted to enter the site. So we took the early flight on the next day to São Gabriel de Cachoeira where we arrived after two hours of flying over the "Green Hell" with its great and amazingly intricate river systems.

We checked in our modest hotel, to say the least, and walked over to IBAMA, the Brazilian Institute for the Environment to get permits for our expedition. We repeated the procedure at FUNAI, the Agency for the Protection of the Brazilian Indians, because our route leads across both the 2,200,000 hectares large national park of the Pico da Neblina and the Indian reservation area of the same name.

The village on the upper Rio Negro was founded in the middle of the 19th century as a military settlement and a Salesian mission. Today it consists of not much more than a Portuguese fortress with some dozen houses for soldiers and officers. The centrepiece of the village used to be the thatched church built in 1750, and which, since the beginning of the 20th century is the seat of the Salesian mission. The Brazilian army and air force, supported by the federal police keep their jungle regiment here to safeguard the borders with Venezuela and Columbia and to track down on the intense drug and arms



traffic in the area. The population consist in its majority of indigenous people of several tribes of the upper Amazon region.

The following morning, carrying all equipment, food and fuel supply, we work our way up by jeep along a treacherous jungle track to the mouth of the Rio Ia-Mirim. Final balance of the three-hour trip: stuck in the mud for six times!

After we stuffed our equipment and all our belongings into an aluminium boat and were ready to depart, the engine only whines out of pace and despite of all efforts, refused to do his job. Via satellite phone we ordered an extra engine for replacement, which postponed our departure for the following morning.

We used the time to visit the Indian settlement of the Tukano tribe, only a short walk away. We were shown how the main diet of all Indians in Brazil, the Manioc roots, is

being prepared by using different handcrafted tools. At the conviviality centre, the tribe gathers to discuss important day-to-day issues, as well as questions of social and political importance. The children receive bilingual education in their native and Portuguese language. School activities include both traditional cultural heritage and preparation for a life within a modern society. Apparently the kids had no problems to absorb these contradictions as they all looked happy and were very friendly toward us. In short, we gained a very interesting insight into the social organization of the tribe.

Common to the different tribes in the upper part of the Rio Negro is the language called Inheengatu, also known as General language which is spoken together with Portuguese. The Indians tribes of the upper and middle Rio Negro comprehend 18 ethnical groups with a total of about 35.000 Indians who liv in 772 small villages. The largest and best known tribe is that of the Yanomamis, who alone live in a protected area of over 100.000 km².



We walked back to the la mirim river and prepared camp for the night at the FUNAI support base, right on the river banks. But before we could hit our hammocks we decided to undergo some serious testing of our skills as jungle adventurers. Incited by our hosts we took charge of some of the dugout canoes that lay around, but all our attempts resulted in total disaster. Those canoes are so shallow and small that at the slightest false movement they get filled with water, sinking in no time while the Tukano Indians on the shore shake with derisive laughter. Little wonder, as only they knew that in addition to our lack of awkwardness, the canoes leaked like hell from a couple of tiny holes that were invisible to us! Anyway, one: nil to the Indians! While recovering from our heroic efforts, Yanomami Indians arrived in their motorized canoes busily offloading ornamental fish of exotic colours and forms. Very appreciated by Ichthyologists the fish have been caught on the upper tukano river and are being exported to everywhere in the world.

As we were standing there watching, one of us nearly stepped on a huge and hairy spider, the size of a palm. That nocturnal animal, scientifically named *Theraphosa leblondi* is the biggest spider in the world. Its life span may reach up to 20 years and it lives mainly in caverns of old tree trunks. Provoked it would jump on you and its bite causes terrible pain, but is not fatal.

The next morning greeted us with hundreds of yellow butterflies, that fluttered all around us. Unfortunately we could not identify them. The new engine arrived right after breakfast and we could now get started. With the boat fully loaded, a crew of eight people and all the equipment, we travelled first downstream on the Rio la-Mirim, then on the Rio la and finally upstream on the Rio Cauaburi to the mouth of the Rio Tukano.



We spend two days on this trip through breathtaking nature, on Igapó (submersed jungle), Várzea (temporarily submersed land bordering a stream) and Terre-firme (an elevated portion of the terrain, above the inundation level) forests, surrounded by the ever present sounds of the jungle.

Our first acquaintances are rather unpleasant insects, called Piums, stinging mosquitoes just the size of a pinhead, which reveal themselves as a terrible plague. But we also see countless birds: black-necked araçaris, toucans, yellow breasted, scarlet and green wing macaws, plus several kinds of herons and kingfishers flew across the rivers and become our colourful travelling companions.

One afternoon on the la Mirim a brilliant green water snake blocked our way trying to get across the river. So we carefully got closer to take a picture. The snake swam towards to trees on the river bank and twisted

itself impressively fast up on the lianas mingling with the green leaves and branches and could be seen no more.

We fixed camp at the mouth of the tukano river, hid the boat, gasoline and rations for the return journey and slept, protected by Citronella insect lotion, under clouds of piums. Some dreamed of spiders and snakes others of butterflies and macaws...

Three days of tough and steady uphill trekking lay ahead with difference in altitude from 150 meters to up to 3014m NN. We toiled our way six to seven hours daily along hardly recognizable trails that have been opened by Yanomamis and gold diggers. We stepped on root entanglements covered up with slippery foliage, jumped over crystal clear rapids that supply us with fresh drinking water, and climbed waterfalls that seemed to fall out of an impenetrable green wall before us. To relax muscles and mind, there is nothing better than a refreshing bath under a waterfall or a plunge into some rapids.



The beauty and the power of the jungle was present at every step we took uphill. We felt like gnomes next to well over 30 meters high jungle giants and identified huge rubber hevea brasiliensis and Brazil Nuts trees Bertholletia exelsa. It gets very hot and sunny from early in the morning with well over 90 per cent air humidity until the afternoon, when the accumulated heat breaks out into heavy rainfalls.

At night we sleep in hammocks and in tents; that is the time when the nightly noises of the jungle always make us feel that we are not alone. And actually, as we later are informed, several jaguars roam here about in their hunting domain.

On the second day, one of the participants feels exhausted and gives up. We left him behind with one of the porters in a Yanomami hunting camp and went on. At about 1,600m NN the dense rainforest started to change into the more open but very humid nebular mountain forest.

In the evening of the third day, under heavy rain and the cold temperature of 5 Celsius, enhanced by humidity, we arrive at the gold prospectors camp beneath the mountain peak. To get there we had to face a soft humus morass, that took us 2 hours to traverse as we were sinking knee-deep at every step

Here a natural, paradisaical garden is formed by the different sorts of bromeliads, orchids, mosses and an amazing number of endemic carnivorous plants. On the same plateau at 2100m NN also rare medical plants can be found. Under rather precarious circumstances we prepare our camp. To get some relief against the bitter cold we now surely would appreciate a swig of our precious cachaça booze made of sugar cane that came all the way from Rio de Janeiro. To everybody's surprise and disappointment it had miraculously disappeared. But exhausted as we were, sleep would come fast this night.



The next day a difficult decision was to be made: shall we venture climbing up to the peak under the present weather conditions? It is raining so heavily that the peak of the Pico da Neblina is covered with white cascades of enormous masses of water that are also running down on the paths that we are supposed to take. For safety reasons we unanimously decide not to venture the climbing to the 2994 meters high peak.

It has been decided instead to use the time on the plateau to explore the area together with our botanist, who identified and collected orchids, like *Scuticarias*, also called whip orchids, the rare *Coriantes* with their bizarre flower and the intensely yellow *Cataseto*, all fully blossoming and botanical highlights - a real treat for our specialist in epiphytes.

We also visited the only gold prospector left in an area that used to be one of the most prosperous sites

in Brazil. But since the Pico da Neblina is part of the Indian Reservation, Federal Police and the Military cracked down on the illegal activities that came to an end during the last decade. The lonely man showed us his self-made installations, by which he obtained gold from a particular layer of mud and rock in the slopes, washing them out with powerful jets of water from the rapid that rushed down from the peak. Questioned about the resulting environmental devastation that he is causing, he looked at us as if we had just arrived from mars. His modest accommodation was like that of a caveman and his way of living seemed not far from that too: the only pot he's got for his meals he shared with his chickens.

With the obtained gold he pays for his food and equipment, brought regularly up by Yanomamis Indians from their village in Maturacá. There he also deposits the remaining gold to save for his uncertain future.



On the way back to our camp we were taken by surprise by a violent storm which flooded the river that we had to cross. There was not a chance to do so now and, with a machete we beat a path through the bushes, at times up to our hips deep in the morass. Somehow we finally reached our camp, only to see that the tents, as well as our sleeping bags that we had hung out to dry in the rare sun when we left, are now soaking wet: at almost 0 Celcius, a sure promise for a rather uncomfortable night!

We were still shivering from the frosty night but the morning sun gently warmed up our bodies. After dismantling the camp we start our not less difficult way back, picking up our expedition participant who had been left behind. In the late afternoon of the third day we are again at the mouth of the Rio Tucano, where we had hidden our boat with the rest of the food and fuel supply.

In spite of the constant heavy rain that smashed into our faces, we decided to start our journey back on the rivers right away. After a couple of hours, already on the Rio Cauaburi, we were lucky to meet a Yanomami hunting group just busy smoke-curing their freshly killed wild animals and fish. An excellent opportunity to enhance our food supply mainly consisting of beans, rice, jerked meat and pasta and that was also getting scarce. Real delicacies against real money a pig sized paca, a bare-faced curassow, a nine-banded armadillo and a brown capuchin monkey, besides lots of delicious fragrant fish from the nearby Igarapé waterway, all for R\$ 30!

Happy and satisfied that we were, we tried to reach our camping place that we had chosen for the night. But since surprises is what a real adventurer looks for, the place had disappeared in the masses of water of the flooded river and with no alternative in view, we are forced to move on to the FUNAI post still far away. With flash lights, at a very slow



pace, we feel our way through deep darkness during two hours, until the flashing signals of the Indian protection institute safely usher us through the rapids to the anchorage.

After another day on the rivers Ia and Ia-Mirim we reach our departure point, this time under bright sunshine, but not before undergoing a final physical and nervous fitness test: right after turning into a side arm of the river with strong current against us we run out of fuel. The whole crew immediately grab plates and whatever suitable objects were at hand and start rowing like hell against the current - one metre forward and two backward. It is then that one of the guides miraculously gets some more drops of fuel out of one of the bins making it possible for us to reach the FUNAI anchorage, just 200 meters ahead.

We slept one more night in the hammocks at the FUNAI support base and return the following morning by jeep to São Gabriel de

Cachoeira. This time we got stuck in the mud only 5 times. One of the participants however hasn't had enough yet, and wanted to walk up to the Morro dos Seis Lagos (Mountain of the Six Lakes), a bio reservation and geologically very interesting area for the biggest niob beds in the world lie here underneath the soil.

Three days later we are together again and fly back to the jungle metropolis Manaus where we completed a classical sightseeing program. Very interesting are the old opera house, which flourished during the coutchouc boom and the colourful and bustling harbour with off-and on loading of the typical Amazon cargo and passenger ships canoes and boats in all sizes, that arrive at the harbour and depart in all directions to the most distant destinations in the region.



A short stay in Rio de completed a fascinating journey, replete with adventures in a world so far removed and different from ours. A world where the simple things have remained of great importance. Encounters with the forest, the rivers, the mountains, the animals and last but not least with the local people, our guides and porters, enriched all of us. One of our best trips ever -the German guys commented.

Annette Runge
Peter Rohmer

There is now a promise to be fulfilled, made by the tour operator and which has helped us through the hardships of the trip: a luncheon with non-exotic Kassler and sauerkraut, and a couple of cool German Pils - an attempt to regain some of the of eight kilos in average, that some of the expedition members had lost.