



Rio Negro expedition report (April 9th bis 17th, 2004)

Expedition party	Peter Rohmer (SCTE/Brazil), Tristan Wolfe (SCTE/UK), Corinne Gut and Tobias Rothenfluh
The Guides	Aldair, Jermias and Alberto

Day one Into the forest

An early start to this tour (0630h). The clients and expedition leader enjoy a hearty breakfast at the Hotel Waupés in São Gabriel da Cachoeira before loading all the equipment into the canoe fitted with a 40hp outboard motor, that is waiting for us on the sandy beach on the Rio Negro. When all the kit is accounted for, we set off at 0800h. Even at this hour the sun is beating down on Amazônia, creating a beautiful setting in which to begin the expedition. After 15 minutes we reach the quaint port of Camanaus where the guides stop the canoe in order to load fuel drums and pick up

some fresh bananas while Peter, Tristan and the clients visit one of the ships that has recently arrived from Manaus. This three-day trip departs every Friday, and provides an alternative to the Rico flight that we arrived on a few days previously.

Back on board and we continue downstream on the Rio Negro - fresh, very small but sweet bananas fuelling our bodies. One can feel the sense of anticipation and excitement about the impending trip as we continue to Sitio Jeremias (Jeremias' smallholding on the river) where we literally get our first taste of what is in store! Here we sample some of the delicious jungle fruits that can be found in the area for



example: fresh coconut water, Cayenne lime (which tastes like a gooseberry) and Guava. It is here that our guides pick up some extra hammocks for the clients and essential tools in case of emergencies with the outboard motor on the canoe.

After 45 minutes, everyone re-boards the canoe and we continue to the mouth of the Rio Curicuriari. We moor the boat at a tukano Indian village, as we have to impart sad news that the chief's son had died in the city. Despite the morbid nature of our visit, the locals (especially the children) are intrigued and pleased by our visit that provides excellent photographic opportunities of Peter with the local children. It is getting towards the hottest part of the day now and so Peter, Tristan and Jeremais take advantage of the refreshing waters and take a quick swim before continuing our voyage on the Rio Curicuriari to a beautiful waterfall, the location of which is also the start point of the on foot expedition on day two.

The waterfall provides another excellent bathing opportunity, although one has to be wary of the strong currents of the river to avoid being swept away. After this relaxation, Aldair leads us on a brief discovery tour in the jungle (giving our clients a taster before beginning outright on day two). On our return, Jeremias and Alberto have prepared a picnic of tuna, bread and a type of hot local spicy sausage (like chorizo) cooked on a fire, all washed down by ice cold Coca-Cola from the ice box.

After lunch we get back on the canoe and a short trip (10 minutes) back upstream leads us to our destination for day one. We arrive at 1500h.at another small village of the tukano Indian tribe called São Jorge, where we receive a warm welcome from the chief (here called capitão) and villagers alike. An association called Acibrn organizes this community, together with three others of the lower Rio Negro basin. The association has the purpose of maintaining traditions, values and customs combined with promoting awareness of the civil rights to which all Indians



are entitled. As in the old days, before they were "civilised" by catholic missionaries in the late 18th century, they still use hand made tools in their everyday lives, e.g. Manioc grinders and shakers. Manioc and fish in a great variety of forms provides the vast majority of the diet of the tukano people, although they also plant bananas to trade for beans and medical supplies. The traditional buildings here are made from sticks and clay with wild açai palm leaf thatched roofs, held together with *cipó* vines. They look very strong and in all, the place looks neat, very organised and well structured.

We are shown to the community hut where we participate in an enlightening church service (the main religion here is Catholicism) that coincides with our first rains before stringing our hammocks in the same building. Not long after this experience we are called for supper that has been prepared by the guides on a fire and includes steak skewers, rice, and pasta dishes, all tastes and dietary requirements are catered for

on Southern Cross tours (including vegetarian dishes for Corinne, our vegetarian client). Not long after dinner we all retire to our hammocks for our first night in the bush, and for our clients, their first night sleeping in a hammock.

Day two

The first trail

Another early start (0600h) as we are awoken by the village priest banging on a tin, calling the villagers to morning prayers and their breakfast of porridge made from manioc. The Southern Cross party enjoys a nutritious breakfast of muesli, toast and jam, coffee and English tea for Tristan (nicknamed "The Jungle Boy" by Peter and the guides, and new addition to the Southern Cross team). After breakfast we return to the canoe, watching the villagers removing a tree stump from deep in the sandy ground in order to create space for a new school, and we set off at 0845h for the waterfall we visited on the previous day. En route we deposit equipment (tents, roll mats



and the 70 litre ice box) and supplies that we will not need at an abandoned manioc plantation ready to collect after our trail in the jungle. At the waterfall the guides secure the boat on the riverside and hide the engine and fuel drums in thick bush to collect on our return. On the completion of these essential tasks we begin on our trail through the bush.

Within minutes we begin to see evidence of wildlife. The first sight we encounter is the swinging trees high in the forest canopy, a tell-tale sign of the presence of monkeys, but despite our best efforts they were already gone before we could catch a glimpse of them, as if toying with the wishes of the clients to see them! However, our spirits are not dampened too much and our patience is rewarded as we continue on the trail when we see a forest chicken (Inhambú) fly off a branch for five metres before disappearing in the thick cover of the forest floor. A whole group of wild pigs took off with lots of noise when we approached them unexpectedly. Also on the trail we see (and feel!) leaf-

cutting soldier ants in their thousands carrying away the forest with regimented order, as well as the nest of the flying ants (Saiuva, that grow to three centimetres long). Peter tells us the story of how they use these biting insects as a test of bravery for boys in the tribes - they put the Saiuva in analgesic jelly in a glove and the youngster then puts the glove on his hand. As the anaesthetic wears off the ants bite the boy and the elders watch his face for signs showing pain (perceived as weakness), and depending on how much pain he shows, he is accepted (or not) into adulthood and a valued member of the tribe.

We are walking through pristine *Terra firme* forest (one of three basic types of the Amazonian rainforest), which remains unflooded throughout the year and therefore allows easy access. The two other main types: the *Igapó* forests, which are permanently flooded and allow only canoe access where you navigate on a level with the tree canopy. The other type of forest, the *várzea* forest, grows in the region of white



water Rivers, which is partly and seasonally flooded (between May and the end of September). It is the Terre Firma forest where you find the largest trees and we see huge trees up to 60 metres tall and needing at least 10 people to span the circumference while holding hands!

After two hours trail - taking time to admire the dense forest all round us, wading through leaves, mud, stepping over huge roots, and safely negotiating river crossings we arrive at some rapids (*Igarapé*) on the fast flowing stream called Arabu (which flows all the way from Bela Adormecida to feed the Rio Curicuriari). The rapids provide an excellent bathing opportunity for all except the guides, who, reading the darks skies, hastily set about restructuring an existing shelter in order to accommodate everybody comfortably. In the middle of the construction process, the heavens opened with torrential rain and a cover was hurriedly put over the shelter in order to protect the equipment and food we had with us. As the rains subside, the hammocks are

strung whilst the guides begin preparing a fire to cook the dinner (chicken, rice, bean stew, sausage). A second heavy rainfall prevents any afternoon discoveries for the clients and so Peter fixes an exotic Batida with schnapps and fruit juice whilst he and Tristan build another fire at the other end of the camp to generate some smoke to keep the mosquitoes at bay (at the same time making the team's eyes water!). Darkness descends on the jungle by 1900h and the clients retire to hammocks after dinner around 2000h, whilst Peter and Tristan keep the fire going, at the same time enjoying the luxury of a nice cup of Yorkshire tea, brought along all the way from England by Tristan!

Day three

Back on the trail

Awake at 0600h with yet more rainfall, making our guides jump out of their hammocks to find cover under our shelter! We set off on the trail at 0845h after the usual delicious jungle breakfast, beginning



with a river crossing over the Igarapé. Once more the trail reveals numerous flora and fauna, all of which seem to have a purpose. Aldair imparts much of his indigenous knowledge, which has taken thousands of years to accumulate, to the party (excellently translated by Peter to ensure everyone gains this benefit). For example, we come across a fallen Açaí Brava palm - the roots of which are mixed with water and used to treat malaria. We also come across the buds of orchids not yet in flower (yet still beautiful) and numerous fruits and nuts lying on the forest floor.

After a three-hour hike through dense forest we arrive at the base of Bela Adormecida (literally means 'Sleeping Beauty', the name given due to its unusual horizontal feminine shape!). Here we come across the Arabu River once more, providing delightful pools for bathing surrounded by huge boulders covered in rich green liche and mosses. Peter and the clients take advantage of this fairytale setting (Peter even finds a flake of gold in one of the pools), whilst Tristan helps the guides

build another shelter, collecting Cipó (tough, string-like vines that are used to bind the struts of the construction together). In the afternoon the clients set off with Alberto on a jungle discovery walk that provides them with excellent photographic opportunities of the varied flora and fauna of the Northern Amazon region. Peter and Tristan remain at the base camp, where Peter briefs Tristan in preparation for tomorrow's ascent on Sleeping Beauty, as he will be remaining at base camp.

The camp looks great, very professional indeed - there is even a mug tree! The guides have put covers over their hammocks after last night's rains and everything is very ordered ready for the return of our clients. Peter and Tristan have constructed an excellent fire (to rival that of the guides!) by which we attempt to smoke our clothes dry!

As darkness descends on the jungle at 1830h the cacophony of noise is ever present. The call of the *Inhambú* is most prevalent however we hear other calls as well, for



example armies of frogs and Toucans (Toucana). The guides strategically place candles around the camp as dinner time approaches and the whole place gives off an eerie sense of seclusion, the perfect place for quiet contemplation away from the stresses and strains of hectic western lives. Everyone enjoys a large dinner of steaks, stews and pasta dishes, then an early night ready for the climb on day four.

Day four **Conquering 'Sleeping Beauty'**

Reveille at 0600h after the coolest night we have experienced so far (relatively), all the party had put on their lightweight fleeces during the night to stave off the chill of the night air. After a quick breakfast Tristan, Alberto, Jeremias and the clients begin their ascent at 0715h. The uphill battle is unrelenting with very few flat areas however, we make excellent progress - Alberto all the while marking our route with his machete on trees to ensure a safe descent with minimal forest distur-

bance. After two hours of steep uphill we arrive at a small canyon where we take a break and collect fresh, cool water from a spring coming out of the mountainside. After ten minutes we begin our ascent again, scrambling over moss covered boulders (some of which were bigger than Tristan standing at 175 cm!). As we gain altitude the wind begins to pick up and the clouds descend around us as we continue to climb. We soon reach a near vertical 13 m section with no tree roots or Cipó to use as grabs, and so we have to rope up to ascend further. As we reach the top of this section we catch a glimpse of our target, unfortunately the group lacks the necessary climbing expertise to ascend the rock face with orchids springing from it - as if from nowhere - so we wind our way around it as we continue still higher. Once more we reach another near vertical section (more difficult than the last both in terms of gradient and length - 20m) as the summit is within our grasp. At this difficult obstacle we marvel as Alberto (in his 50 s) scrambles up a decaying rope (that looks as if it has been there for over



30 years) in order to throw down a new line. Tristan ascends the rope first and establishes its stability before Jeremias harnesses the clients in and they are aided up the section. Once everyone has safely negotiated the rope we continue the final 30m of thick bush, as if no one has been here for 20 years - to the summit of Bela Adormecida. (Arrive 1115h.)

The views from the top are breathtaking, with the Amazonian rainforest stretched out like blanket below us. At 1125 m above sea level (900 m climb from base camp) we can see many of the places we have visited so far including São Gabriel da Cachoeira, the port of Camanaus, the Rio Negro and the Curicuriari as well as the São Jorge community. Tristan even strives to see the waterfall where we moored the canoe, but from this vast distance it is wishful thinking! We stay on the summit for one hour, enjoying the beautiful vistas that provide spectacular photo opportunities and a delightful lunch spot among the delicate crystal white orchids and the singing birds, not to

mention our first sight of the sun since entering the jungle!

After lunch Tristan erects a jungle flag (a stick and a leaf) to mark the party's conquering presence, before beginning our descent at 1215h. The descent is much tougher on the knees than ascending and that makeshift abseiling is definitely for the more strong hearted and adventurous people. We safely negotiate the obstacles in our way (e.g. the vertical sections, hornets nests and snakes - *cobra cipó*) before arriving at camp at 1515h where we are greeted by Peter and Aldair who have been busying themselves preparing sardine salads and making drying racks for clothes (Peter has also been keeping the fire alive). Here we take the opportunity to relax in the bathing pools before returning to camp to enjoy Peter's delicious meal; after which the clients hit their hammocks to rest up after a full day of exertion. The 'Sleeping Beauty' of the Amazon is (in my opinion) one of the best daylong ascents/descents to be found anywhere in the world and is a must see for non-technical and more advanced mountaineers alike.



Day five

In search of precious aquamarine

Awake at 0600h to find the fire still going! After a leisurely morning, taking breakfast at 0745h, we set off without packs with Alberto and Jeremias for an abandoned blue aquamarine mine. On the way we see (once more) flora and fauna that usually one only reads about including grape-like vines on the forest floor, the giant Brazil nut trees (*Sp. Bertholletia exelsa*) and the famous rubber trees (*Sp. Hevea brasiliensis*). The history of the rubber tree in Brazil is rich and is worth mentioning here.

The *omagua* Indians discovered the properties of rubber in the 18th century. However, it was Charles Goodyear's 1844 discovery of vulcanisation and the development of the pneumatic tyre in 1888 that caused a commercial explosion. The price of rubber soared and, in 1897, rubber tappers (*seringueiros*) in Brazil produced 21.000 metric tonnes of 'black gold' and sold 88 per cent of all exported rubber in the world, thus

creating an extravagant monopoly and turning the port city of Manaus into one of the richest cities in the world by the turn of the 20th century thanks to the 'Rubber Barons'. The story however is not all sweetness and light as English botanist Henry Wickham (1876) loaded 70 000 *Hevea brasiliensis* seeds onto a steamer and smuggled them out of Brazil (under the pretence that they were rare plant samples for Queen Victoria) and planted them in British controlled plantations in Malaysia where they were flourishing by 1912. This allowed Brazilian prices to be undercut just before World War One, and within a decade Manaus was once more a jungle backwater city. The American industrialist Henry Ford (inventor of mass production) attempted to compete with the British by setting up his own Amazon plantations (at Fordlandia and Belterra and can still be seen 500 miles from Belém on the Amazon river) to produce his tyres for the Model-T, however, these were unsuccessful. The development of synthetic rubbers in the 1940s and 50s put an end to almost all rubber production worldwide.



Anyway, back on the trail to the aquamarine mine, and we also catch sight of a wild pig running amidst towering rock formations containing far-reaching caves that would make ideal Jaguar hides. Although we do not actually see one of these magnificent beasts we see chilling evidence of their presence where they have been sharpening their claws on nearby trees.

As we continue we pass the site where the miners (*garimpeiros*) used to stay in the forest. Some of their shelters are still standing although the forest has long since regenerated after the departure of *garimpeiros* in 1994 when the military shut the mine down. We are deep in the jungle here, cut off from real civilisation and it is difficult to imagine how they managed to get all the heavy equipment and supplies necessary for long mining operations here in the first place. Our guide Alberto also relays to us the story of a *gaucho* from the south that was mining here who took 20 kg of precious blue aquamarine to Manaus

to sell, promising to return with essential supplies and equipment, but was never seen again! This left his fellow *garimpeiros* in terrible strife and they were forced to leave. However, like everywhere in the Amazon one finds precious stones and minerals, others followed and the place was operational until 1994.

Five minutes walk further on and we reach the mine itself. It is now a site of shimmering pools, full of frogs and spawn, and glistening perfect quartz beaches. We stay a while and contemplate what once went here in terms of mans continued insistency to exploit and dominate 'Mother Nature'. These sobering thoughts give everyone something to ponder as we return to base camp (carefully avoiding the chameleon bull frogs as they jump from leaf to leaf, changing colour immediately as they land on different coloured surroundings!) arriving at 1230h.



To our horror, our camp has been invaded by mosquitoes (it appears they have hunted us down!) and it is quite unpleasant. As a result we take a quick lunch and then the decision is made to take the trail back to the igarapé on the Arabu River. Retracing our steps of two days ago, the journey takes only two hours and 15 minutes - perhaps spurred on by the knowledge that (as always on these tours) a perfectly refreshing bathing opportunity awaits us. On arrival there is little to do (as the shelter is already erected), except relax in the idyllic surroundings and sooth our bodies and minds after an excellent days walking in the bush. As usual the guides prepare a filling evening meal (I called it 'Jungle Bolognaise') which is enjoyed by all before Aldair and Jeremias undertake a spot of night fishing with machetes and torches to add some extra protein to the diet!

Day six

A day of rest

After yesterday's early departure from base camp Bela Adormecida the day presents itself as an opportune rest day and a good length of time to undertake some clothes washing as there is sufficient time to dry things over yet another roaring fire built and maintained by Tristan and Peter - everything begins to smell a little smoky but at least it is clean! Peter and Tristan remain at the camp all day - revelling in the peace and tranquillity which provides a great surrounding to discuss the finer points of future Southern Cross Tours operations, interspersed with occasional dips into the rapids to reduce the effects of the humidity.

A lunch of bean stew, pasta and rice (as well as grilled fish from last nights haul) fills a little hole, despite last night's excellent 'Jungle Bolognaise' and a large breakfast, sets the clients up well for their discovery tour with Alberto. Providing them with yet more opportunities to spot and snap the varied plant and



animal life on offer. They return after just over an hour, with Alberto carrying some Saracura roots from which he concocts a health drink that he says cleanses all the organs in the body. This is a quite a lengthy process which begins with scraping the shavings of roots into a pan, he then adds water and whisks it vigorously with a split root until it foams. After this he scrapes off the foam before repeating the method another four times and then drinking the mixture which has a bitter taste, but improves the more you drink! Yet another excellent evening meal of steak, sausage, fish, pasta and rice fuels our now rested limbs ready for returning to the trail on day seven. A refreshing cup of tea sets us up for the night and everyone has retired to their hammocks by 2130h.

Day seven

Returning to the canoe

It has not rained for three days now, which seems unusual bearing in mind we are deep in the rainforest, but one shouldn't com-

plain as it means that no-one has to suffer the strains of wearing wet kit! The group awake around 0700h for breakfast (crackers and jam, tea and coffee as well as muesli and chocolate milk) before setting off, retracing our steps back to the waterfall and the canoe, at 0830h. We reach the canoe (yes, it is still there - as is the fuel and the engine!) at 1030h. We refresh ourselves in the soothing waters whilst Jeremias and Alberto go in search of tropical fruits to consume on the one hour 30minute boat ride back to Sitio Jeremias. This site was once an American plantation with a school and more amenities than we find there today, but it was left to Jeremias' father who could not maintain it (a combination of *cachaça* and lack of funds!), and so we find it as Jeremias inherited it. We string our hammocks in the manioc grinding hut before Tristan, Aldair and Alberto take the boat to Camanaus to pick up some beer (*cerveja*) and booze made from sugarcane juice (*cachaça*) to enjoy as the hard part of the expedition is over and we can relax somewhat! On our return, Jeremias has prepared a large feast



of pasta, tuna in tomato sauce as well as bean stew with potatoes and rice.

After lunch, and a couple of well-earned beers, Tristan and the guides undertake a spot of fishing. No rods here, just a line and a hook baited with worms dug up from the Sitio after lunch using a hoe-like tool provided by Jeremias. The Indian guides have a real knack for this skill, however I manage a haul of only one fish in two hours - but I guess its all a matter of practice! We fish of the gently sloping granite beach into the Rio Negro - the same spot from which Tristan writes his day's notes that form the basis of this report.

This is one of the most picturesque places we have visited on the whole expedition, especially as the inky blackness of night descends; the setting sun silhouetting the cumulo-stratus clouds against the dense jungle on the far side of the Rio Negro (at least 1,5 km away), as the river laps gently around my feet. The appearance of the Southern Cross, shining a brilliant bright white

adds to the mystery and magic of the scene, as day drifts seamlessly into night.

On return from fishing we place the fish on spikes and cook them gently over the fire whilst enjoying cold beers, fresh fruit juices made from the fruits we find growing all around the Sitio, and cachaça. The clients are already asleep and so there is no need to cook dinner (especially after the large lunch) and instead Peter, Tristan and the guides talk about experiences past and present of the jungle in the haunting glow of candlelight, soothed by the now reassuring jungle soundtrack. Alberto seems to have a never-ending stock of tales, each one as fascinating and enlightening as the last. It is not long before Aldair and Jeremias feel the need to catch more fish and so they disappear into the darkness with hand made harpoons to see what the river yields. Everyone else now retires to their hammocks to get a good nights rest.



Day eight

The last leg

Reveille at 0630h, Tristan gets the fire going ready for the hot water for tea and coffee, as well as a treat of baked beans and bacon that he brought from England and everyone enjoys breakfast at 0800h. Aldair then sets about preparing the fish caught in last night's fishing, these are large (trout sized) fish called Tucunaré - a very beautiful fish, delicately patterned with large yellow circles along both sides - as the clients go off for their last discoveries in the jungle with Alberto and Jeremias.

On their return, we take lunch of the grilled Tucunaré (absolutely delicious) with cold rice salad and bean stew, before breaking camp and loading up the canoe ready for the return journey to São Gabriel da Cachoeira. We depart at 1330h, the outboard propelling us against the current of the Rio Negro. On the voyage we catch a rare glimpse of the pink dolphin as Alberto uses all his skill and knowledge of the river to safely negotiate the many rapids and rocky

outcrops that form natural barriers to progress. Tobias and Corinne, however, do not seem phased by the dangers that the river presents as they gaze in awe at the spectacular views of Bela Adormecida so pleased that they got to the summit.

We arrive at São Gabriel by 1600h and check into the Hotel Waupés once more before heading off to the Indian crafts shop, where the clients purchase a map and a hand made pot as souvenirs of their Amazon adventure. Besides, beautifully handcrafted *cipó* baskets in all colours and sizes, small boxes made from coconuts and local woods, delicately carved and patterned, where among the many wares on display; and they were cheap, too! We head back to the hotel for a much needed shower and to pack up the kit, before meeting the guides for a last beer or two and then heading off for a delicious last supper with the clients at the best restaurant in town. When we're fully replete we head back to the hotel by 2300h and hit the sack in one of the most comfortable beds ever - compared to a hammock under the stars!



Day nine

The return flight

Breakfast at the hotel after a 0630h start before catching the Rico bus to the airport ready to board our flight back to Manaus at 0950h. The flight itself is an adventure with spectacular views of the Rio Negro and the seemingly endless forest, not to mention the unforeseen stops and the appalling flying conditions in the 40-year-old plane. However, despite landing at Manaus airport 20 minutes before our connecting flights we manage to get on the plane and still have time to say our goodbyes (largely thanks to Peter's mastery of the language to get us fast-tracked through check in) to Tobias and Corinne, before going our separate ways, Peter and Tristan to Rio HQ and the clients to Switzerland.

Concluding thoughts

In all, this tour in the Northern Amazon region was a roaring success. The flexibility of the itinerary enabling greater enjoyment for all concerned. The guides were friendly, knowledgeable and very helpful. The food was first rate throughout the trip and the clients seemed to have experienced the holiday of a lifetime and I believe we fulfilled their ambitions for the trip, as when they set out their aim was simply to "be in the jungle"! Our tour accommodated this wish and gave them more besides. All in all, this Southern Cross expedition delivers Five Stars for excitement - as do all the others, check them out!!!!

Hope to see you in the near future on one of our tours,

All the best,

Tristan Wolfe
(Southern Cross Tours UK)