

Brazil's Amazon Jungle

The Dark Side of Adventure Riding



It's been said that what we do defines us. Yet perhaps it's as much about what we do, as it is what we endure and what we learn from? We find out who we really are only when we're pushed past what we thought were our limits, when, during those wretched times, we discover we have greater personal reserves than we'd ever imagined.

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In those pivotal moments the haze of life lifts, and we can see and feel who we are, what's truly important to each of us, and what we'll fight to hold on to. Such was the case for me and for Lisa, and the trip to Brazil's Amazon Jungle, which defined a very large part of who we are today. Make no mistake – if you're hoping for a warm and fuzzy touring article, you probably want to flip the page right now.

A New Continent

After 40 countries and 30-months of ride-eat-sleep, repeat, Lisa and I swap Africa's arid east coast for the lush steamy tropics of South America's northeast coast. We ride the smooth fast tar north of Argentina's metropolitan capital, Buenos Aires. I'm on my BMW R1100GS. Ahead of me, Lisa's BMW F 650 GS exhaust barks healthily as she applies a handful of throttle, leaning deep in the fast corner, her bike seemingly none the worse for our two-week-sea-crossing from South Africa. We explore Uruguay for only a week, pit-stopping in Montevideo for just a night.

Brazil now demands our full attention; this vast country occupies almost half of South America and is bordered by none

less than ten neighboring countries. North of Sao Paulo, we wind our way around the dizzying coastline of the world's fifth largest country. Brazil's curvaceous switchbacks have us leaning our bikes at outlandish angles, before we shift our weight in anticipation of the next. To our right, the tar stops at the cliff's edge only to plummet hundreds of feet to the warm blue waters of the Atlantic Ocean. Our senses are buzzing. Wild coffee grows by the side, pruned only by the speeding traffic. The broad leaves of banana trees skim our helmets on the tighter turns, their branches heavy with the chandelier style fruit.

Redemption in Sin City

We stand at the feet of the *Christ the Redeemer* statue, almost touching the clouds, perched high over Rio de Janeiro. Our eyes strain to take in the incredible view, as the milky horizon blurs the line between sky and sea. The Redeemer's iconic outstretched arms cast a protective shadow across what is one of the most outrageous, vibrant, and notorious cities in the world. A pulsating playground of carnival, football, and unashamed erotica. Below us, a patchwork favela of tin and brick clings impossibly to the steep mountainside, thousands of shanty homes each built precariously atop of the next. Downtown Rio teems with life

and in the distance, the beaches of Copacabana and Ipanema glisten as thousands of oiled and bronzed bodies bask in the day's building heat. The conical shape of Sugar Loaf Mountain looms like a Brazilian exclamation mark, emphasizing Rio, as if it needed it!

Weeks pass and we're in Belem city, near the northern tip of Brazil. We wander between the ticket kiosks, negotiating the cost of a boat and the week-long journey, up the mighty Amazon, to the jungle city of Manaus.

Two days later we anxiously roll our bikes from the dock side and onto thin wooden planks that straddle the 40-foot drop between the safety of the dock and the rusting boat deck. Four crew members help with our bags and the bikes for a pre-arranged fee. As night descends, we lash the bikes down, our beloved machines barely visible among hundreds of bags of onions, the ships main cargo. Climbing the steep rusting metal steps, we head for the passenger deck above and wearily hang our hammocks among the others. We're soaked in salty perspiration from both our efforts and the humidity, which hovers at 95%. As we pull away from the port, we're treated to a spectacle of golden shafts of light penetrating the dark skies. Five miles offshore, a thunderstorm crackles to life, extinguishing the day.

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Meeting of the Waters

Once we're settled in with the bikes safe, we lean back and pull hats over our eyes. The low-in-the-morning-sky Equatorial sun peeps in from beneath the low metal ceiling and sets forth through the channels of the Amazon.

Low hanging branches are brushed aside as we sweep through the narrower passages, while macaws and parrots scatter at our approach. On exposed branches we can see huge iguana sunning themselves, their long

tails touching the water.

The next morning we wake early, the boat's diesel engine churning the water ceaselessly. Pushing into the wider channels, we are bound by thick jungle on each side. Small wooden and tin homes litter the banks, all held high over the water on precarious stilts. Wooden docks jut into the channel. Teenage boys in narrow wood-carved canoes paddle furiously after our fast moving boat to sell their wares. Ropes and grappling irons are thrown,

catching on the middle deck, and we watch as they pull their already half submerged canoes up close and scramble aboard in an attempt to sell their bottled palm hearts. We buy a bottle for 50c.

It's late afternoon and we're but a few hours east of Manaus. The sun is already beginning to set behind a fleecy thicket of clouds, tingeing them with hues of purple, pink, and gold. Leaning over the side, we witness the "meeting of the waters," an almost biblical sight, where the Rio Negro's dark tannic waters converge with those of the Amazon's other major tributary, the Solimões. Two separate rivers, markedly different in color and temperature collide in one channel with neither mixing.

North to South Through the Amazon Rain Forest

After days of preparation and deliberation in Manaus city, the time has come. We've triple-checked the bikes and researched our route south through the Amazon Rain Forest. As far as we can tell, the route from Manaus to Porto Velho hasn't been attempted on large capacity bikes – perhaps for good reason. The Brazilian government closed the notorious BR319 back in the late 80s after conceding to the impossibly high cost of maintaining such a route. Additionally, regular deaths due to drivers sliding from the track into ravines and gullies didn't help matters. Ahead of us 700-miles of mud track, rotten bridges, and an estimated more-than one-third of the world's animal species deep in the rain forests. One of the world's largest snakes, the Anaconda, inhabits the shallow pools and waterways, and jaguars are known to roam the length of the 319. We're only too aware that this trip will test us both – but, then again, that's what we're after.

To the South Bank

Its 4:30 a.m. The quiet streets seem eerie as we ride the 6.6 miles out to the easterly dock. At the end of a steep and rough dirt track, the bare metal cargo ferry that will deliver us to the southerly bank is already loading beaten 4x4s and tired-looking trucks. Deep ruts cut into the mud by the heavy vehicles need to be carefully negotiated if we're to avoid ending up on our sides. We make our way onto the treacherous metal deck carefully, slippery from the early morning dew.

By late morning we've made better progress than we'd expected and are descending the steep and broken surface of what was once tar down to a tributary, where another small metal raft is moored. The ancient vessel chugs into life belching plumes of black smoke high into the still air as it clears its throat.

Without shade and exposed to the raw power of the sun, the heat hits us full force and the humidity is debilitating. Our heavy riding suits are already sweat-stained.

Claustrophobia in the Jungle

Ahead our path shimmers. The line between track, jungle, and sky are distorted by the unyielding sun. Our route seems endless. We stand on the footpegs, cautiously weaving around large holes in what is left of the tarmac laid some 25 years earlier. Our walking-pace speed means we're literally roasting, as boiling air lifts from our dangerously hot engines and cooks us alive. The primordial Amazon is aggressively reclaiming the track, tearing up the tar and repossessing what is hers. The tropical landscape is as stifling as it is stunning; almost claus-

trophobic, the jungle now hems us in, funnelling us deeper into the Amazon. Branches brush and snag and snatch our handlebars. The furnace-like heat of mid-day hasn't abated and makes concentration tough. Our mental lapses meet with bone jarring thumps as wheels dive into holes and suspension bottoms out.

By early nightfall we've covered almost 180 miles of narrow mud trail, our crimson route criss-crossed by countless deep ravines and minor tributaries. We survived nine bridge crossings, the last six seemingly impassable as they required that we walk the rotting carcass first, and then unload each bike before crossing, step-by-small step, and to return finally for our heavy bags. Two of these rotting bridges required us to chop fresh wood to stabilize sections before we could risk crossing.

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Big Cat's and Machetes

The largest and most decomposed of the bridges we've seen today is before us. Tired and dehydrated, we've chosen to face this obstacle in the morning. We have fallen several times in the last hour. Off the bikes we start to hastily stretch our tarpaulin over the bamboo frame of an abandoned shelter close by, in the hope of fending off the worst of the impending rain. A crack of undergrowth splinters the still air close by and snatches our attention, our eyes darting in the direction of the disturbance. Three hundred feet from us, the heavily padded paws of a large black jaguar nonchalantly step out onto the track. Halfway across he stiffens, every sinew now taught and alert. Semi crouched, the jaguar stares directly at us. "Where's my machete?"

I anxiously whisper to Lisa. In a flash the big cat is gone, diving effortlessly to be absorbed by the jungle on the opposite side.

Lisa looks at me in disbelief. Our priorities have drastically shifted. The shelter will wait – we need to build a fire. Forty-minutes later with no further sightings of our scary neighbor, the fire crackles and smokes from wet timber. Our tired blue tarp hangs above our heads, straining against the bungee cords we've used to tie it down. Tonight we'll sleep in our hammocks. Deep in the Amazon, the monkeys howl an unsettling call across the canopies. The light fades fast, and fuelled by our imagination and fear, the once harmless shapes of jungle foliage take on a more menacing demeanor. Laid back in our hammocks, our feelings of vul-

nerability finally give way to tired eyes and we sleep fitfully, waking every few hours to tend the fire.

A Dark Day Looms

A chorus of exotic bird wakes us at daybreak and by 5:30 a.m., we've walked the rotting bridge. The parallel beams have crumbled making walking alongside the bikes impossible. We have no choice but to ride them both the 100-feet across. A daunting prospect.

As I sit on my GS 1100, I battle to get the rear wheel up. The combination of water on rotting wood has the wheel spinning furiously. With a substantial drop from "first plank" to earth, there's no way of getting the bike onto the bridge without the assistance of the engine. Suddenly the rear wheel snags something solid, catches and eases its



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way up. Then the unthinkable: the wood splinters and breaks under the weight. Adrenalin pulses through my body as my left leg shoots down, desperate to find something solid. There's nothing. I throw my weight to the right and know instantly it's useless. The GS is going over and taking me with it. My outstretched hands wait for the impact of earth and I anticipate the crush of the bike. I feel my head crash and my helmet compress hard on my shoulders. I wonder why my hands haven't hit first. Thump! Crack! Darkness envelopes me.

Lisa's Words

I watch horrified as Simon and his bike start to go over, and I'm powerless to help. Scrambling to the bank, I see Simon about eight feet below me, lying motionless in a tangle of jungle

scrub and vines. His face is an ashen white. I don't see him breathing. Miraculously the large GS has snagged a beam and teeters, threatening to fall, the rear wheel spinning furiously in the air.

Before I can reach Simon, I need to hit the kill-switch on his bike, before the momentum from the spinning wheel tips it over the edge. The muddy bank, foliage, and rock tumble and slip underfoot as I rush to get to him. The fall has been head-first into a tree-stump and rocks. He's out cold, but as I grasp his hand, I can see the rise and fall of his chest. I thank God that Simon's still breathing. I check his pulse, careful not to disturb his head. There's little I can do but wait for him to come round, as trying to move him now could do more harm than good.

While waiting, I keep my mind occupied knowing there will be time for panic

later. I remove as much as possible from the crippled bike, battling to release the bags from his suspended machine. I crawl under the wooden structure. Above my head the bike still teeters. As the bike straps release, the heavy bags drop earthwards with a weighty thump. I manage to grab a handle and stop the momentum, halting a long slide into the river below and saving myself from sliding even further under the bridge.

Twenty minutes later, my prayers are answered. Simon slowly regains consciousness. I'd been forced to contemplate the unthinkable if he'd not come around: leaving him here, unconscious, defenceless, while I sought help in Manaus. In reality, there'd be little chance his body would be here on the return. But right now, I need to find out what state he is in and if he can move.



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Simon's Words: The Dark Side of Adventure

My eyes open slowly, wet foliage brushes my face, and the sweet smell of damp soil fills my nostrils. The pain in my neck and back hits like a sledge hammer, a searing hot stabbing torture that... I pass out. When I come to Lisa is close by, talking to me, but I can't hear her words. I can't hear anything. My eyesight is blurred and I'm filled with fear. My left side is numb, and my arm and leg feel alien. I take a deep breath and slowly think about my toes and fingers moving. They respond with life. The relief is as overwhelming as the pain. I need to try and stand. "OK, think. Act. Move. Get up. Get up!" I tell myself. My attempts to stand fail miserably for the next five hours. "This could be serious," I whisper to Lisa, with a faint laugh in my voice.

It's another two hours until I can stand unassisted. The pain in my neck is almost

unbearable, but I remind myself that it could be worse. I have no idea how we're going to lift the bike. I can't even turn my head. With the medical pack open we find the strongest pink anti-inflammatory tablets we have, along with an elephant-sized white painkiller. I swallow them all. Pain or no, we have to get the bike upright. The nylon rope and metal pulleys we'd bought in Manaus are put to use. It takes us 20 minutes to route the rope and lash the bike. Lisa braces the rope around her waist and anchors the bike as we lift it up. The bridge and elevation make it impossible to lift in one go. Amazingly, the GS is upright 10 minutes later. Lisa looks exhausted, and under her riding jacket, thick welts mark her skin from where the rope has cut into her waist.

The drugs start to take effect. An hour later and I've ridden both bikes across the bridge. The experience is a blur. I need to sit, as I'm close to passing out again.

Bike Troubles

On the south side of the bridge, I inspect the 1100GS, as Lisa treads her way back and forth across the bridge, bringing our gear to the bikes. From under my fuel tank, I can see a thick stream of oil leaking, but not from where. Fractures on both sides of the sub-frame will need bracing before we can move. As I turn the key in the big GS, she sputters and dies. I return Lisa's horrified glance. Several more frantic turns of the key yield the same response, and now the instrument lights look dull. The afternoon heat is punishing, and to make matters worse, on this side of the bridge we have no shade.

With the bikes unloaded, we hook up the jump leads. The GS sparks to life, and our relief is palpable. A few minutes later with the engine still running, we've loaded the bikes and are preparing to move forward. The clunk into first gear is reassuring but then... the engine cruelly dies! By 5 p.m., I've swallowed a dangerous amount of drugs, which have allowed me to move, kind of, and check all I can on the bike. We're alone. Now with each turn of the ignition, thin white wispy plumes of smoke rise from under the gas tank. Lisa's face has given up hiding her concern. By 6 p.m., it's almost dark and we're exhausted. We've already started to ration our clean water. On this side of the bridge we have no means of erecting any shelter and no way of hanging the hammocks.

As dusk gives way to night, Lisa and I take stock. Have we bitten off more than we can chew? As a husband, I've never been so glad to have my wife by my side, and yet, at the same time, never wished her further away...somewhere safe...somewhere easy...anywhere but here.

...To be continued in the March/
April '11 issue.



Brazil

FACTS AND INFORMATION

Total Mileage

Approximately 10,668 miles.

In General

Nine times the size of Texas, the Amazon basin is home to one third of the animal species on earth, including jaguars, anacondas, vampire bats, and piranhas! The rainy season begins mid-October (in the south) and December (central zone, Manaus). It lasts until March and to June, respectively, causing a 30- to 45-foot upsurge in water levels. The best time to travel here is Sept to October. The official language of Brazil is Portuguese. English is only spoken in the larger cities. The currency of Brazil is the Real (BRL) and it's advised to take good quality dollars to exchange. Prophylactics (anti-malarial drugs) are essential. Other risks are dengue fever and a parasitic disease called chagas, widespread in rural areas.

How to Get There

A passport and visa are required. It's also recommended to obtain an Inter-American Driving Permit. A yellow fever vaccination certificate may also be requested. Most international flights land in Sao Paulo or Rio de Janeiro.

Food & Lodging

It's almost impossible to erect a tent in the jungle, so you'll need a hammock with mosquito netting. Major hotel chains are available in the larger cities. The cuisine of Brazil varies greatly by region. The national dishes are whole feijoada, a meat and bean stew, and feijão com arroz, rice and beans. Street stalls are the best places for local food.

Roads & Biking

Brazil's inter-city roads are among the most dangerous in the world and main roads are typically in bad disrepair. The occasional stretches of modern divided

highway have many potholes. Small coastal roads are poor quality, but offer some of the best riding. Watch out for horse-drawn vehicles, even on the major routes. The BR319, shown as cutting through the Amazon north-south, and the Transamazonica, which runs east-west from the Atlantic Ocean to the Bolivian and Peruvian borders, are both in dangerous states and our advice is not to attempt riding these roads solo, if at all.

Contact Information

- Vaccinations
wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/list.aspx
- Visa requirements and travel advice
www.travel.state.gov/travel

Books & Maps

- Brazil (International Travel Country Maps: Brazil), ITMB Publishing, ISBN 978-1553411444, \$8.65
- Brazil & Amazon map Nelles Verlag, ISBN 978-3865740816, \$10.95
- The Amazon, 3rd: The Bradt Travel Guide, ISBN 1841621730, \$25.99
- The Lonely Planet Guide to Brazil, ISBN 978-1741042979, \$26.99

Motorcycles & Gear

BMW R1100GS, BMW F650GS
Luggage Systems: Touratech Zega
Jacket and Pants: BMW Rally 1
Helmets: BMW System 4 Carbon Fiber
Boots: Alpine Star Tech 6 and Gaerne SG10

