

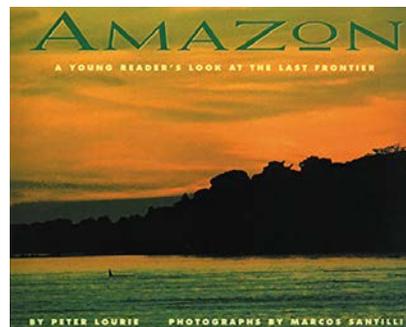
Writing to Explore with Peter Lourie



Amazon River Journal

The Upper Amazon of Brazil during the Burning Season

Years ago I joined Marcos and Marlui, a Brazilian couple who were documenting the destruction of the Brazilian jungle near the Bolivian border. We traveled to the heart of the Amazon, to Rondonia, one of Brazil's 26 states. The jungle was on fire. Tens of thousands of fires were started during the dry season of August and September. Colonists who had cut down the forest on their land had waited until the dry season in order to burn the fallen trees. The fires cleared the land so the colonists could grow cacao and coffee, crops that often deplete the delicate jungle soil in only a few years.



Everywhere there was a wonderful recklessness in Rondonia. I met and interviewed rubber tappers, Indians, cowboys, gold miners, and colonists. I felt I was living in a time and place that in my own country had come and gone a hundred years before. In the following three dispatches, I hope to share a little of what I saw there. I'd like to start with what the place looked like as a whole, then move on to some stories about gold miners, rubber tappers, colonists and Indians.

Dispatch #1: Into the Dust

For two months, Marcos, a photographer, Marlui, a singer, and I traveled roads and rivers together. We drove a Jeep through heavy dust and smoke, but we also took old diesel-powered river boats up uncharted rivers along the Bolivian-Brazil border. We ate piranha and wild pig. We found some jungle untouched where the howler monkeys roared. Always we found human drama. "Darn it, Peter, no one up north really knows what's going on down here. Just look at this. The Amazon is on fire!"

Ahead, the rust-red line of the dirt road moved into smoke. We slowed but didn't stop. Marcos had to lean out the window to see the road, because there was so much dust and smoke everywhere. Our nostrils were clogged with fine purple-red powder. It did little good to close the vents and the windows. This dust entered and spread through the Jeep like a cancer. Our cameras and recording equipment were layered. Our hair was as stiff as frozen grass.

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At six a.m. we were heading toward the Bolivian border from the Rondonian capital of Porto Velho. We'd left the Wild West city of dirt streets and bars and sprawling houses, and now we followed the highway (dirt and not paved yet) northwest along the Madeira River, "Wood" River, so called because of all the wood that floats down its turbulent current. For the past few years, colonists had flooded into the territory, clearing their land with axes, chain saws, tractors and chemicals, but mostly by fire they destroyed the forest, which is called "mata" in Portuguese. One colonist said to us, "The only good forest is no forest." I wondered why he thought this, and then I realized he had come from the poor coast of northeastern Brazil, and now he wanted to get rich by growing cacao. But he could grow nothing on his land until the dense jungle was gone. This was his big opportunity to get out of poverty. And only the forest stood in his way, or so he thought.

I had come to Brazil thinking I'd find jungle stereotypes: rain, emerald green, hot rich flashes of red or blue from the macaw, a beautiful tropical bird. But I found instead a bloated sun rising like a bruised tomato over cut and scraggly and singed and smoldering forest. Like a drunken insect we weaved from one side of the road to the other, to avoid ruts the size of cars. Brightly painted trucks hauling chickens and coffee raced past us, kicking up so much dust, we had to stop until some of it settled and we could see again. Marcos kept his head out the window. His eyes were running with dusty tears. And I wondered if maybe he was crying not from the dust in his eyes but because he hated to see so much destruction to the rain forest of Brazil. It was painful for all of us to see so much jungle going up in smoke.

Dispatch #2: Gold Miners on the Madeira River

A gold mining area in Brazil is called a "garimpo." Marcos, Marlui, and I wanted to see Tamborete, the "city of rafts," the largest of the Rondonian garimpos on the Madeira River. Five thousand gold prospectors, called "garimpeiros," camped at Tamborete. Five hundred rafts were anchored in the middle of the Madeira while the garimpeiros pumped air down to divers who sucked gold off the bottom of the river with big suction hoses.

It was muggy and hazy. We rode an aluminum boat with an outboard motor upriver into the rapids of Hell's Furnace. We passed over strong whirlpools and through narrow channels in the rocks. The boat rocked and kicked back and forth like a bronco in the white water. Our pilot wore a bright orange lifejacket but had none to offer us. Marlui was a little nervous because she did not know how to swim.

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One gold miner in our boat with ragged clothes and sandals had come to the Amazon from the hot, dry coast of Brazil in order to get rich. His name was simply "Diablo," Devil. The only teeth in his mouth were gold, and they gleamed when the sun hit them.

The dangers in garimpos were great. In Tamborete ten men had been murdered last month, and the fever that comes from the sickness called malaria was common.

Before we reached Tamborete, for miles along the high banks of the river we found huts and crude lean-tos and men with spades and shovels poking at the wet gravel. Some wore wide-brimmed hats against the brutal sun; others wore faded green army caps with little visors. Most had beards and serious faces.

We had come at a bad time. Spirits were low, tension high. The river had risen suddenly in the night with the rains that fell last week upriver in Bolivia. So now the men panning for gold might have to wait days or even weeks for the river to drop, so they could get to the best gold-bearing gravel.

A few miles upriver we came finally to Tamborete. Suddenly we were among the crude rafts, called "balsas" in Portuguese. Lashed together with their yellow and blue plastic awnings, they shimmered in the sunlight like one long mirage. The rafts were loud with divers and compressors. Most of the divers had an air hose for their mouth. They had no scuba gear. They dove with a larger hose to suck up the gold-laden gravel from the bottom of the river. One of these rafts could dredge as much as fifty grams of gold in a seven-hour period, fifteen kilos a month. In four months, the partners on a raft could take sixty kilos of gold from the river. Marcos photographed the men onboard the balsas. The muck was sifted through a large sieve called a snake, and the gold flakes were separated from the coarser sand.

A black man from the coast told us he had come to the Amazon to get rich. He had long fingernails, meticulously groomed, clean like pearl. His hair was wild and bushy. He said proudly, "I am a diver." He said he dove fifty feet down, completely in the dark. He said many divers were getting killed out there in the river. Some had no wet suits. Most had little experience. "Down there," he said as he pointed to the water, "you can't see two feet in front of you, it's so dark. With all these balsas above you, the air lines tangle up, but the worst danger of all is when another diver cuts your air hose because he thinks you have found gold, and he wants to get there first."

It is difficult to describe the blast of sunlight on the Madeira River at midday. It was almost volcanic. And the pesky "pium," little black, biting flies devoured any bare skin they could find,

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ankles, neck, arms. The pium left little red welts that itched constantly and left scabs that bled at night.

On shore, from a thousand hammocks strung around hundreds of fires, the men talked and sang songs and slept until it was their turn to join their partners on their raft. We met a one-legged diver named Lazarus. We were told he was the best diver in the whole city of rafts. On land he needed crutches to get around, but in the water he was like a fish. He could stay down longer than any diver in the garimpo. Lazarus had a neatly trimmed black beard and shiny eyes. He was only twenty-six years old, but was perhaps the most dignified man I have ever met. Every movement he made was precise. Even his gold necklace gleamed with precision.

Lazarus' crutches leaned against his chest as he talked about his work. He said, "When you first enter the water, it is yellow. But very quickly the water gets cloudy and cold and then black and blacker as you drop down. And then you can't see anything. You work alone in the pitch blackness. When the lines get tangled, some men panic and even die because they try to surface too fast. Some divers sing to keep themselves company. And the current is strong. Only one line holds you from going down to your death."

Lazarus told us he was a watchmaker back home in the city of Ceara on the coast of Brazil. Unlike most of the garimpeiros we met in Rondonia, Lazarus had all his original teeth. They were good white teeth that shone brightly when he smiled. Lazarus made us feel the excitement and the enchantment of the garimpeiro's life. But while we talked to him, a large group of men came up from the shore carrying the body of a diver. He was cold and white and limp. Someone tried to revive him, but he was already dead.

That's the way it was on a garimpo on the Madeira River. You might get rich, but there was danger in doing so. After the gold buyers flew into the jungle in tiny airplanes to buy gold, most of the garimpeiros would take their big earnings to a city like Manaus or Porto Velho. They'd party for days, and soon their earnings would be spent. Poor again, they headed back to the garimpo and take their chances.

Dispatch #3: The River, the Turtle, and the Snake

The dirt highway that ran west through Rondonia ended in a small town on the Bolivian border. Here we hired a riverboat pilot named Moreno to take us upriver to the untouched jungle.

When we first spotted Moreno, he was dragging a burlap bag full of travel gear--a mosquito net, an old blanket, a change of pants, and a radio. He was short and dark-skinned. He also never

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stopped smiling. Moreno had grown up on the Bolivian side of the river, so his Spanish was better than his Portuguese.

The river was about a half mile wide and very low during the dry season. When we ran close to the shore, the flapping of our diesel engine rapped off the jungle walls like the sound of a furious beaver slapping his tail against the water. The loud engine startled the parakeets which rose into the hazy sky by the hundreds.

The river grew calm at dusk, like brown glass. One evening, Moreno, who had been at the wheel for ten hours, shone his flashlight on shore. He was looking for the little place he had grown up, a place called Barranco Colorado.

Suddenly through mist and a multitude of moths, we saw three slim dug-out canoes on long tethers tied to stakes way above on the bank. (The river could rise fifteen feet in a single night when the rain came down from the foothills of the Bolivian Andes.) Moreno shouted into the mist. Voices shouted back from above. Happy children scampered down to see us. Moreno, smiling broadly of course, said goodnight. He would sleep in his sister's house tonight. With his blanket and his net and his radio, with all the children around him, he disappeared into the mist. We dove for our mosquito nets.

Next morning, a hundred saffron-yellow butterflies convened on a thin sliver of white beach around the boat. We climbed the river banks to find Moreno. At the top, the village was beautiful. Orange and lemon trees had been planted around well-tended yards. Mangos, cacao, too.

Moreno showed us the village school. It was a modest, mud-walled building high above the river, centrally located in the village. The people of Barranco Colorado were proud of it. Moreno said there were three teachers. None of them had any education beyond the high school level.

Moreno now led us into the smoky darkness of one of the huts and introduced us to his sister, brother-in-law, and cousins. We stepped into the back yard. There were many chickens pecking the ground and two proud roosters. We all stood around a cousin who had captured a large turtle he'd found in the jungle the day before. Moreno's sister stood next to me, her sky-blue dress was stained with flecks of blood.

The turtle on its back was the size of a small table. Its legs were kicking, its neck straining as if it wanted to get away from its shell. We watched Moreno's cousin cut off its head. This took a long time. When the head came off, Moreno's sister cupped the blood in a wood bowl. She would use the blood in her cooking later in the day. Her dress was stained even more now.

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The cousin severed the stomach plate of the turtle and cleaned the rest of the animal in a barrel of water. The legs were still kicking. I could hardly watch. The cousin saw me turn my head and said, "Just reflexes." He held the turtle's heart in his hands. It was beating fast.

In the afternoon, we left Barranco Colorado. The diesel engine flapped wildly against the banana trees. Moreno was happy. We carried Moreno's sister's turtle stew in a bucket. Moreno and I gorged ourselves like gluttons on the warm, greasy, but hardly tender chunks of meat.

With mouth full, and a huge smile, Moreno turned to me and said, "Ah, Peter, but you have tasted nothing until you eat the eggs of the turtles!"

After the stew, when we pulled over for the night, from inside his mosquito net, Moreno told us a story about his village. On a small creek nearby, called an igarape, his aunt used to wash her clothes. One day some villagers found her talking to a snake. It was a large male anaconda. Later they found her walking waist-deep straight into the river. Two men tried to grab her. They dove in to get her, but she yelled for them to leave her alone. "I'll be all right," she said. This snake, she told them, was "enchanted." It would not hurt her. They must leave her alone.

Some days later Moreno's aunt disappeared on the igarape, and everyone knew she had turned into a snake, because, after that day, the people of Barranco Colorado would always see not one, but two large anacondas exactly in the place where the aunt had always washed her clothes. The two snakes would swim together along the banks of the igarape. They swam in unison, they were in love.