

FROM *ON THE AMAZON* BY CLIVE MAGUIRE

The book was written several years after Maguire and his wife Naice gave up their jobs in the UK to emigrate to Brazil. In this passage, he recounts one of their early experiences of exploring the Amazon river system, and reveals some of his thoughts about their new home.



The Amazon River, Brazil. *Image by Deeply, Pixabay*

The obscure jungle town of Iranduba looks out impassively on the 180,000,000 cubic feet of muddy brown water that swirl past it every minute on the way to a meeting a few miles downstream. There, just around the corner, the dark waters of the 1,400-mile-long Rio Negro discharge into the largest river on earth, creating the celebrated phenomenon known as the **Meeting of the Waters**. From this point, the Amazon flows another eight hundred miles east to the Atlantic.

The first time we visited the town, we were living in the UK; this time, we were living just up the road. At least, it would have been just up the road, if there were any sort of road for it to be just up – which was why we were doing what the locals have done for thousands of years, and using the river.

We left early on a quiet Sunday morning from our new home on the outskirts of the city of Manaus. Capital of Brazil's largest state, the city was built substantially with the money from a fleeting **rubber boom** at the turn of the century, and was later regenerated through the creation of various economic incentives, most recently a free-trade zone. Styling itself variously as the 'jungle city', the 'gateway to the Amazon' or the 'rubber city', in fact within Brazil Manaus is apt to be regarded more as a politically

contentious, heavily subsidized, dysfunctional, hot and humid hell. Outside of Brazil it is hardly known at all, except perhaps by Bill Gates, who is wont to while away some holiday time in the area when he can find a crew with all their papers in order¹.

There is little doubt that without Brazil's concerns about national sovereignty over the Amazon, Manaus would hardly exist today. No one in their right mind would otherwise attempt to maintain a city surrounded by jungle, whose nearest neighbour is 650 miles away and which has no viable road links to the west, the east or the south.

The success of the Brazilian economy generally and the Free Trade Zone of Manaus (the 'ZFM') in particular was evident even on our short drive to the marina that morning. Far from being the heart-of-the-Amazon frontier town it had been just thirty years earlier, Manaus was already making its bid for equality in a credit-driven, consumerist world. The rapid expansion of the city to

Meeting of the Waters The biggest river confluence in the Amazon Basin, where the Negro River and the Solimoes River meet to form the Amazon River.

rubber boom A reference to the economic boom in the Amazon following the discovery and development of natural rubber.

accommodate two million people vying for space and a livelihood was clear from the newly-built dual carriageway roads we drove on and the up-market condominiums we passed, while the shiny SUVs that overtook us testified to the new money – or at least new credit – in town. Neither the occasional island of trees, nor the street vendors with cold-boxes full of coconuts, could mask the inexorable rollout of New Manaus, and the naming of the roads and condominiums after the trees they replaced, seemed to us to merely underscore the savagery of the uncontrolled expansion.

We muttered disconsolately to each other about it on the way, but our complaints were half-hearted. Today we would be leaving the cares and concerns of the city far behind us, and going out on 'the river'.

In this context, 'the river' could be any of the thousands of named tributaries and sub-tributaries of the Amazon, or perhaps one of the countless smaller rivers, channels or streams that meander through the three million square miles of the Amazon basin. Or it could be the Amazon itself. To avoid unnecessary complications, people here just say 'the river', although in our case the starting point was our Italian friend Gian-Carlo Cavadini's marina on the river Tarumã Açu, nine miles upstream from the city.

We arrived at the Marina Tauá, parked the car and emerged from our pleasant, air-conditioned cocoon into a hot, sunny, humid day typical of dry-season in the Amazon. We had barely recovered from the thermal shock by the time we stepped onto the floating dock.

'What time do you call this?' cried our friend grumpily from his boat the Sammy III, as we approached.

It was true we were five minutes late, but we could be confident that apart from Gian Carlo ('Charlie' to his **gringo** friends; 'Carló' to his Belgian wife Annick) we would be here before anyone else.

'Sorry Charlie – I didn't realise you were ready to go. Is everybody here already?' I asked in mock

¹ In April 2011, seven crew members of one of Bill Gates' chartered yachts were reportedly deported from Brazil for not having the correct papers.

surprise. Our party was to include Annick, as well as the couple's son and daughter and their respective partners. 'They're very quiet,' I added, peering into the back of the boat.

Charlie shrugged his shoulders and held out his hands palms up to show us his amazement, as if his family were not always at least half an hour late. 'I don't knooow,' he moaned, murdering the final syllable with his Italian-Brazilian English. 'They should be here by now.'

Punctuality is definitely *not* a recognised Brazilian trait, but somehow Charlie, thirty-six years after moving to Brazil from Italy, still stubbornly expected people to arrive on time. It always seemed doubly



The Negro River, Brazil. Image by Jose Sabino, Pixabay

odd to me that an Italian – an *Italian*, for god's sake – should be bothered much by punctuality, although in the tardiness stakes, the Italians are at best gifted amateurs by comparison with most Brazilians.

A predictable forty minutes after the due departure time, everyone had arrived, argued about whether they were really late at all and whether it mattered, and accused their other halves of delaying them. By the time the boat was cast off we were all

chattering away and getting comfortable, although as Charlie eagerly throttled up, it cut a lot of the conversation dead. It cut my conversation dead anyway, since I was the only one whose Portuguese was not up to parsing – or at least understanding – sentences dismembered by the roar of the huge diesel motor reverberating around the sixty-foot aluminium fishing craft.

A few minutes later, we nudged against one of the floating petrol stations in the middle of the river. As Charlie filled up, I was glad to be able to nip into the shop and get some cold beer. The first few cans were handed round, and the remainder carefully stuffed into the boat's freshly iced cold boxes. As soon as we had taken on enough personal and engine fuel we were away again.

The little river Tarumã Açu, only half a mile across, is much too small to be considered a proper river by Amazonian standards, and instead receives the denomination *igarapé*. It is the first igarapé upstream of Manaus, and an ideal spot for the more upmarket marinas. This unfortunately means it can get crowded at the weekend, and positively dangerous on a Saturday or Sunday morning, when incompetent drunks in inadequate craft zip about at high speed with no clear idea of where they are, or where they are going – although they clearly want to get there fast. Fortunately for us, it was still early and the river was at its best, with no drunks and hardly a ripple across its velvety black surface.

We motored sedately to the river mouth, nosed our way out onto the wide expanse of the Negro, and turned downstream. Naice was engaged in the family gossip at the back of the cabin, while I stood at the front with Charlie, beer in hand and the breeze in my face, admiring the views across to the south bank some six miles distant.

‘Look,’ said Charlie suddenly, sweeping his arm dramatically across the landscape. He smiled. ‘You don’t get all thiiiiis in the UK.’

There was no disputing it. In fact, if you dropped all six thousand-odd islands of the British Isles into the Amazon, they would no doubt be quickly washed away by the river’s seven million cubic feet-per-second of water and deposited some time later in the Atlantic as so much sediment.

‘Here,’ he said, handing me a small pair of binoculars. ‘Take a loook.’ His hand swept across the vista once more, and he laughed.

It was his way of offering moral support for our recent decision to swap a predictable, well-ordered, comfortable, quiet European lifestyle for an uncertain future in the middle of a distinctly ill-ordered, largely uncomfortable and prodigiously unquiet Brazilian Amazon.

I first met Charlie and his wife when I visited the Brazilian Amazon in 1993. At the time, he was learning to murder **blues guitar**, and I encountered him together with a few other questionably gifted ex-pats at a mutual friend’s house in downtown Manaus. Then, the city had been a deliciously, dangerously exotic neck of the rainforest where a bunch of gringo misfits crashing and wailing their way through **Black Magic Woman** could still be regarded by the locals as the best thing since the Beatles. In those days, the entire ex-pat community of the Brazilian Amazon probably comprised ‘the band’ plus a few other even more musically challenged acolytes. Inevitably, they all tended to get together to behave badly whenever an opportunity presented itself. I was entirely sucked in by it, and over the years of visiting and sometimes working locally, I spent many an hour drinking and eating with these colourful characters. Occasionally I was even inspired to add my own unique musical talents to the proceedings.

That was all a long time ago, and the original group had drifted apart. When I married Naice, however, we found good friends in Charlie and Annick, and kept in touch even though we were separated for eight years by the Atlantic. When we were eventually caught dithering about whether or not to emigrate from the UK, their good-natured nagging undoubtedly had some bearing if not on our final decision, then at least on the timing of the move. I looked at him witheringly.

He laughed again, but I thought I detected a certain sheepishness about him. Perhaps he was feeling guilty about all the nagging.

I took another swig of beer and laughed with him. ‘I know Charlie. You’re right, of course.’

It seemed like the right thing to say.

gringo A common, pejorative term widely used in Central and South America for foreigners.

Negro The Negro River, which flows from Columbia to join the River Solimoes, flowing east from Peru.

blues guitar A style of guitar playing associated with blues music.

Black Magic Woman A popular 1970’s blues/rock song by Carlos Santana, often associated with voodoo.

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