

BRAZIL BRAZIL



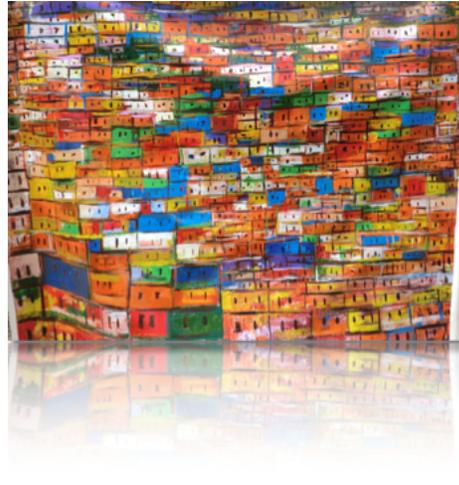
Amazonas & Rio

John Alexander

BRAZIL

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John Alexander

Brazil, Brazil: Amazonas and Rio

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Also by John Alexander

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Introduction

Confessions of a Nervous Traveler...

According to a US travel magazine the top five anxieties relating to travel are:

- fear of flying*
- fear of being away*
- fear of illness*
- fear of a bad flight*
- fear of losing luggage*

To the genuinely nervous traveller these seem abstract, remote, even trivial. The genuinely nervous traveller is gripped by any number of legitimate and tangible anxieties, and traveling to Brazil, the more legitimate and tangible they become. A more realistic list would include:

- fear of amoebic dysentery*
- fear of getting stabbed or shot*
- fear of surviving an airplane crash in the Amazon and being eaten by your fellow passengers*
- fear of being eaten by a crocodile*
- fear of cyanide poisoning from eating twice boiled instead of three times boiled cassava root that makes the tapioca banana cake for breakfast*
- fear of rabid vampire bats*
- fear of being robbed and mutilated by drug-crazed Amazon river pirates*
- fear of being set-up by corrupt Rio cops and thrown into Bangu 1 of Carandiru Penitentiary*
- fear of being crushed into slime and slowly consumed by a two metro long anaconda for the best part of a week*
- fear of being blinded by an Amazon tree viper spitting venom into your eyes, and staggering headlong into a three meter span spiders' web and being bitten to death by several hundred spiders*

[Ten Anxieties Traveling to Brazil]

Brazil Brazil

Additional concerns include botflies, parasites, carajuca tree leaves, Brazilian wandering spiders, surucucu snakes, candidus, anacondas and getting caught in the crossfire of a *favela* drug-war gun-battle. And many more besides. Losing luggage? Nothing. A bad flight? Had four of them in three days – electrical storms, fellow passengers screaming in fear, landing in zero visibility fog, extreme Atlantic air turbulence, suffering severe mid-air psychosis through ineffective sleeping tablets threatening the well-being of fellow passengers – all mere trifles. Imagine a candidu fish burrowing its way upward through the urethra, or catching a stray bullet from *favela* drug-lord, Little Ze, in one of his Copacabana shooting sprees, or being apprehended by corrupt Rio militia and thrown into Bangu 1 penitentiary block, or being hurled from a *favela* cliff top by drug crazed adolescents.

Amoebic dysentery is something to get nervous about... It may well have killed solo aviator, Amelia Earhardt; certainly killed Sir Francis Drake, King Phillip II of France, King John of England, almost killed Hollywood actor, Jason Robards on a film shoot in the Amazon, kills an estimated 1.2 million people a year and is the fourth leading cause of death in developing countries. Once you get it you have it for life. Brazilian emperors and empresses got it, and were forced to drag around their own camode for the rest of their days. The Amazon is one of the best places in the world to contract amoebic dysentery – ask Jason Robards. Lead actor in Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1979) until he came down with amoebic dysentery. Who wouldn't be nervous?

Or getting stabbed or shot by a 14 year old kid from the *favelas*, high on narcotics or desperate with poverty, who has nothing to lose. Which happened. As in the documentary film, *Bus 174* (2005). Imagine you're the passenger in the second front seat. Anxieties don't get much more real than this.

Or wildlife related anxieties like having a six metre long black cayman leap into your canoe and sever a vital artery. If the cayman doesn't make you anxious, consider piranhas, the Amazonian eel, poison dart frogs, cannibals, Bird-eating Tarantulas (yes, they are that big), or... well it's a long list. All things considered, quite reasonable anxieties. As faithfully documented in Hollywood movies such as *Piranha*, *Rogue* (giant rogue crocodile), *Tarantula*, *Anaconda*, *The Emerald Forest* or *Emmanuelle and the Last Cannibals*, where Emmanuelle's girlfriends are eaten alive by lost Amazon cannibal tribes.

Finally, the nervous traveller must address this 'fear of being away', which is a misapprehension of a more deep-rooted fear – the fear of being away from home, removed from the zones of comfort; the bathroom, one's own bed, DVD collection, local TV guide, view from the kitchen window, and pot plants.

So why travel? There is no satisfactory answer other than that travel is the driving force of human enterprise; the combination of curiosity, spirit of adventure, combined with the over-whelming sense of relief to return home, having survived to embrace with renewed fervor the comforts of the home.

Then there is the nature of the journey itself. To travel is a luxury. The luxury of the journey is as much in its undertaking, as in having the time beforehand to anticipate, and the time afterwards to reflect. There is a pleasure in planning a long trip, on par with house hunting without the burden of the long term consequences of a poor judgment call. If Manaus doesn't work out, maybe the riverboat on the Amazon will. If not, there is always Rio. How bad can it be? The beaches of Copacabana and Ipanema, the back drop icons of Corcovado and Acucar – a city that is a backdrop for movies and a playground for hedonists. Maybe this is the place that can cure the nervous traveller's 'immunity to pleasure'?

Brazil Brazil

A journey to the Amazon and a stay in Rio is a journey to two Brazils. Amazon Brazil is one and Rio Brazil is another. One is progress and the other order. One is nature and one is culture. There are many other Brazils of course. Like the multitude of complexions of the Brazilian people. There is not black or white, but skin colours from the very light to the very dark. There are the regional cultures of Brazil – the 26 states represented by the 26 stars scattered on the blue, green and yellow of the national flag. Or maybe it is just two – rich Brazil, poor Brazil. The most socially unequal country in the world. For me it is Rio and the Amazon, for no other reason than these are the two Brazils I have experienced. So similar and so different.

*

Finally, a note on why these travel experiences are interspersed with so many film references and examples. Sometimes the recollections of the films digress from the travels, and for this I make no apology. Watching movies is the last recourse to a nervous disposition. Preferably in one's own cinema. Contemporary cinema going is fraught with the anxieties borne of the modern world; the ear-piercing noise of sweet wrappers and cellophane bags, of slurpy drinks and crunching popcorn, of people talking on mobile phones, and idiots who insist on conversing to the person next to them, bombarding the auditorium with inane comments like; 'I've seen this before; it's the blonde in the red dress,' or, 'I love this bit – you watch – now he'll say "Oh Pancho"', and sure enough, the guy in the white suit says 'Oh Pancho', and you end up being arrested for assault or GBH or assault with a deadly weapon. No; much better to have your own cinema with latest HD Blu-ray and 7:1 sound system, even if it means doing without a few luxuries – food, clothes, transport.

Brazil Brazil

Why are films important? For people with some kind of anxiety syndrome, watching a film is cathartic. Film stories are based on 'worst possible scenarios' or 'best possible scenarios' – Carmen Miranda films in the case of the latter, anything else in the case of the former.

The question is whether to experience life through watching films, or experience life as if being part of a film. For the nervously disposed, the former is the obvious choice, and for the adventure-seeking traveller, the latter. For the nervous traveller it is an uneasy combination of the two. So, in the company of professional psychiatric care and a bag full of prescription drugs, I went to Brazil to experience a country in the way cinema-goers experience a film. Anxiously.



Further Reading

http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/30622091/ns/travel-travel_tips/t/vacation-phobia-top-travel-fears/#.Tw9ox5jXGFI



Amazonia: The Catherine Miles Story, aka Cannibal Holocaust, aka White Slave. Claimed to be based on a true story, but it is pure fiction. A young English girl is kidnapped by Amazonian headhunters. Spawned a sequel; Cannibal Holocaust 2.

Brazil Brazil

PART ONE: THE AMAZON



1. Manaus

Have now been in Manaus for three days. Had some strange tasting juices down at the Skina de Suca, the fruit juice stand in the town centre today. Particularly liked the *acai* juice. Very sweet, like pineapple, passionfruit and mango mixed together. Unfortunately not feeling too well. You have to keep drinking all the time. Two litres of water at least. 38° is warm but not that warm – it's the humidity. A coconut that can take a lunchtime to consume in Tenerife, can disappear in half a minute. And all these juices.

It is the Amazon. One cannot be too careful. I have some medical aids in the luggage; the Lemsips, Imodium, Alka-seltzer, allergy tables, travel sickness tablets and Ipren and Paracetamol at the serious end. Right now nothing seems to help.

The symptoms are tiredness, fever, muscle ache, dizziness... and it's getting worse. I started with the malaria tablets a day late, and these are typical malaria symptoms. Unfortunately, also typical for Dengue Fever. With Dengue Fever you just keep getting more and more tired and feverish, and just sleep yourself to death. Could easily be Dengue Fever.

Or is it cholera? The last cholera outbreak in Manaus was 2010. (Well, outbreak... one person got cholera in Manaus in 2010). Also typhoid, hepatitis, even the plague – are all diseases typical of the region. Unfortunately, cholera, malaria, dengue fever – in their early stages, all start out with tiredness, fever, muscle ache, headache, dizziness. I haven't started coughing blood yet, or bleeding from an orifice, but surely it's only a matter of time.

Little did I know then that I had come down with what transpired to be the deadliest of all tropical ailments...

Meanwhile, summon up the strength to take in the sights of Manaus – jungle city of the Amazon...

Teatro Amazonas

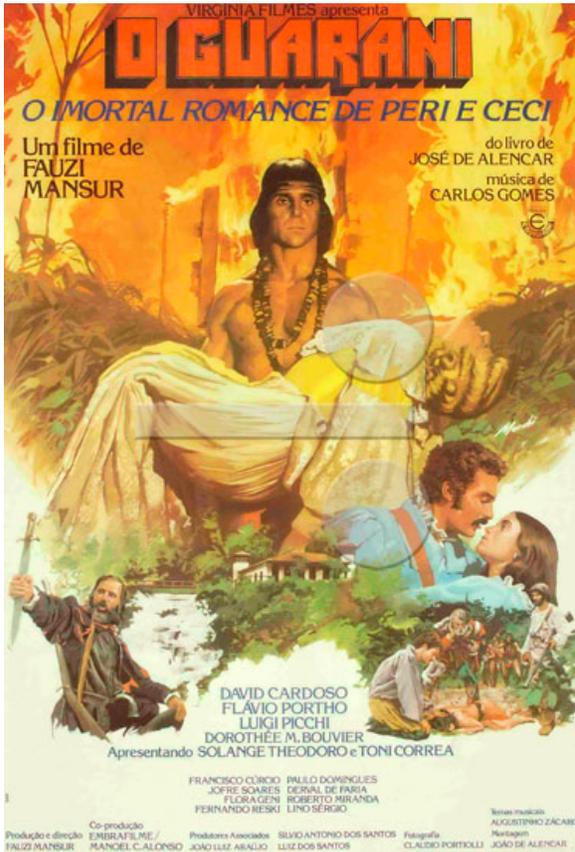
The Teatro Amazonas dominates the skyline – an idiosyncrasy in the jungle city, this glorious opera house where opera is rarely played, a tribute to rubber barons of a century ago, when Manaus was a boom town, and when European aristocrats sent their laundry off to be cleaned in Lisbon or London rather than risk the dubiously tainted waters of the mighty Amazon.



Teatro Amazonas, symbol of Manaus' lucrative rubber baron era

The three o'clock English language tour of the Teatro consists of two of us, then at the last minute, two ladies from Sao Paulo. 'We want to practice our English,' says the older of the two. But they keep interrupting the young guide, Vanessa, with questions first in Portuguese, then repeat themselves in broken English.

Vanessa is struggling with English but the Teatro speaks for itself. The amazing ceiling, the dome, the Eiffel Tower representation and the architectural details all imported from Europe, primarily Paris. The process of placing the Teatro in the middle of the Amazon reads like the script of *Fitzcarraldo*, where it is the Teatro that dominates in the opening scenes of the film – interior and exterior, with Klaus Kinski and Claudia Cardinale dressed up in their turn of the century finest. In the film it was the Teatro Amazonas and a performance by Caruso, that was supposed to have inspired Fitzcarraldo to build an opera house in Iquitos Peru, two thousand kilometres upstream. (A semi-fictitious character and completely fictitious story, that glorified failure both in narrative and production – see below).



O Guarani, the movie of the opera; old version, new version...

Overcome with a new bout of suspected dengue fever, protected from the sweltering 40° outside, I am seated in a plush red chair just

half a metre from where Klaus and Claudia stood in the film listening to Caruso. The Teatro opened in 1896 and the first opera performed here, says Vanessa the guide, is based on a classical Amazonian story called *O Guarani*. Copious illustrations decorate the Teatro walls, but Vanessa is clearly out of her depth in trying to describe the plot. It is now that the two ladies from Sao Paulo, become quite animated. They are pleased to explain: what sounds the local version of the Madame Butterfly story.

First a newspaper serial, then a novel, then the opera, and a feature film in 1997, it's not difficult to understand the appeal of this story in a country where soap-opera *telenovelas* have the cultural sway that prevails throughout Brazil. Set in the 1600s it is the story of an Amazon native, Peri a Guarani indian, who saves the life of Ceci, the beautiful daughter of a Portuguese nobleman. The forbidden love affair that ensues forces them to flee the shackles of civilisation and start a new life in the rain forest, back to nature.

Why this story endures, I guess, (it is still regarded a classic of Brazilian literature) is because the theme is as contemporary in Brazil as ever – love that defies the social boundaries of race and class. Amongst the big international Brazilian *telenovela* successes are those that pursue a similar theme; *The Slave Owner's Daughter* (1990-1993), set in the late 1800s. Beautiful white daughter of plantation owner has illicit affair with handsome black slave. Also *Slave Isaura* (*Escrava Isaura* (2004 - 2005 and previously 1976 - 1977). Also *Nina Moza*, about the abolition of slavery.



The Slave Owner's Daughter the 90s version was a hit even in Sweden

Brazil Brazil

O Guarani was the telenovela of its day - a soap opera - and this combination of opera and its expression of highly exaggerated emotional states (I mean, people singing about taking their own life?), and commerce (the original radio serials of the 1930s were sponsored by Procter and Gamble in order to sell more soap) is a format that has endured to the present and nowhere more profoundly than in Brazil. There is a theory that why the poor people of the *favelas* have not succeeded in creating a political force, is that in the evening everyone stays in to watch the soaps. More of this later... The fascination of Teatros Amazonas is the idea of bringing the world of opera to the middle of the jungle, financed by senselessly wealthy rubber barons who had everything that money could buy, except madcap stories and celebrated vocalists.



In the upstairs showroom the costumes from the original *O Guarani* production are on display in glass cabinets, and from many other productions as well. Colour, glamour, tiny shoes. And weren't these

opera stars of yesteryear tiny? The Tom Cruises (5'7" – 172 cm) and Madonnas (5'3" – 161 cm) of their age.

The showroom opens up into a fabulous ballroom, with elevated balconies for performing musical ensembles and a splendid wooden floor of light and dark wood, supposedly symbolising the merging of the rivers for which Manaus is renowned; the dark and murky Rio Negro joins with the blue coloured Solimoes creating a two-tone river for several kilometres. This room is also immediately recognisable as the film set for the office of the fabulously wealthy rubber baron that intends to finance Fitzcarraldo's mad scheme to raise money to build an opera house in Peru.



Farmas

Brazilian chemist shops – 'farmas' – carry a range of pharmaceuticals for headaches and fevers as well as antibiotics in a range of various strengths. Unfortunately, codeine and other opiates, are only available by prescription, and it was a tough job working out 'beta-blockers' in Portuguese or trying to explain to the gentleman in the white coat the symptoms of a nervous disposition. Valerian for sleeping problems, which as any nervous traveller will tell you, is next to useless.



The point is, no-one speaks English in the *farmas*, or anywhere else. How do you describe the symptoms of suspected dengue fever or possible *hantavirus pulmonary syndrome* contracted from being bitten by an Amazon rodent. (Not sure if I've been bitten; but a lot of creatures down by the river end of town, as well as in the *jardim botanico* and the local CIGS zoo). Successfully described the symptoms of a headache and dizziness, and ended up with surplus packets of paracetamol, aspirin, imodium, ipren and 250 gm antibiotics. Already have most of this stuff, but the antibiotics are a bonus. 'Do not mix with malaria tablets', I read somewhere. Could it be malaria? So weak I can hardly walk. Maybe it is malaria. The alternatives are too dreadful to contemplate.

From a variety of different sites I could list the most possible candidates of life-threatening tropical diseases, at least while my vision was not too blurred and headache not too severe to make out the sentences. If I could find the most likely affliction I would simply point it out to the kind receptionist at the hotel and be directed to the appropriate medical attention. I can start at least by taking a few aspirin to reduce the fever and hopefully contend with this headache. I wouldn't want to miss the *parad natal* December 12th St Lucia Christmas Parade in Largo Sao Sebastio.

Parad Natal

Largo Sao Sebastao – the plaza that surrounds Teatro Amazonas – is where everything happens and toward which a large portion of the 1.8 million people population of Manaus gravitate. Here are restaurants, cafes, a tourist office of kinds (never open), some splendid government buildings from rubber baron days, and the tail-end of the shopping street, which on a Saturday afternoon is a chaotic mix of shoppers, outside stalls, food vendors, street sellers, football fans, crazy people, many of whom are half naked (38° and

rising), and with the little space available being so crowded with human bodies, making it difficult to avoid flesh to flesh contact. Something else to get nervous about.



At six o'clock it seems that all the families of Manaus have gathered in Sao Sebastiao, giant video screens and television cameras covering the cobble-stone enclave surrounding the Teatro, and a procession making their last-minute preparations of snowmen, Santa elves, Rudolf reindeers, brightly lit Christmas trees accompanied to the Christmas songs crackling out of the PA system around the square. Isn't there something wrong here? Jingle Bells? Snowmen? Santa's little helpers? Silent Night?

Manaus is just 3° south of the equator so by six fifteen it's night time and the temperature has dropped to 35°. The parade begins at seven

which means those people stuck in polystyrene snowmen suits and reindeer costumes have a little more discomfort to endure. Not least Santa Claus in the red garb and a lot of padding.

Is this is crazy, or what? Manaus – jungle city of the Amazon, and the entire procession is dressed up in Disney characters stretching over 50 years of TV and movies, and the helium balloons floating over the proceedings are uniformly decorated with ‘Enchanted Princess’ motifs featuring the little blond princess. Dark-haired little girls of Manaus in Disney pink, their ‘Enchanted Princess’ pink satchels and backpacks clasped in hand, and daddies rushing to balloon sellers to get ‘Enchanted Princess’ helium balloons to replace the ones that got away.



In front of us, a little black haired girl with dark Amazon features, shouting at her dad: ‘Nao pappa, nao pappa,’ as he stretches out a red balloon decorated with the figure of Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer. I guess it’s Enchanted Princess, or nothing.

When Santa finally makes his triumphant entrance on the back of a little Disney train, the kids are chanting Papa Noelle, which I suppose speaks for some linguistic purity. Otherwise, interesting to note the Disney-fication of capital cities everywhere, even 3° south of the equator.

Life Threatening Tropical Diseases

Back in the air conditioned room of the Go Inn Hotel, just two minutes walk from Sao Sebastiao, I'm crashed out on the bed mentally running through the list of life-threatening tropical diseases, and wondering if there is a possibility of surviving at least until morning.

These include:

amoebic dysentery

malaria

yellow fever

dengue fever

bubonic plague

oropouche fever

typhoid

hepatitis A + B

diphyllobothriasis

hantavirus pulmonary syndrome

schistosomiasis (especially in the Amazon)

mayaro virus disease

caterpillar plague

angiostrongylus meningitis

Fourteen Life Threatening Tropical Diseases of the Amazon

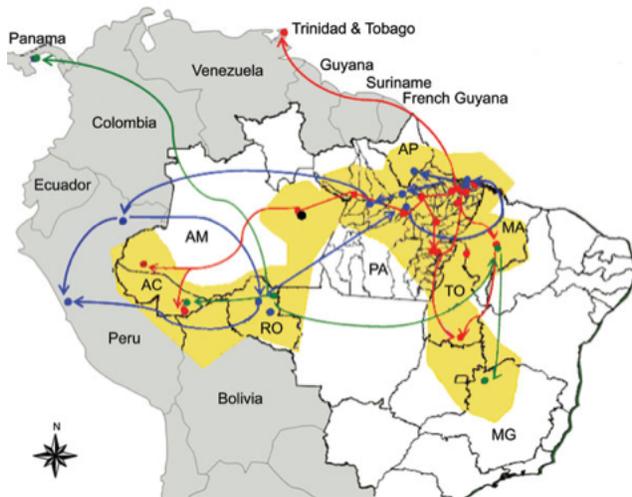
Plague is unlikely – last outbreak in Manaus was ten years ago (which is worrying), but so far no boils on the skin, so should be OK. Already made a mental run-through of dysentery, malaria and dengue fever; have had shots for yellow fever, typhoid and hepatitis. That leaves seven life-threatening diseases.

Oropouche fever appears at first like dengue fever – it's been isolated in the blood of a sloth (I stood directly beneath a sloth in

the *jardim botanico* just two days ago), epidemics are very swift, especially in the Brazilian Amazon – over a million cases reported since 2000!!!. No known cure – avoid aspirin because aspirin clots the blood!! That does it. Almost certainly oropouche fever. And I took an aspirin six hours ago.

What are the other candidates? Diphyllorhynchiasis comes from eating under cooked fish (should be OK), Mayaro Virus disease is a viral infection from mosquitoes especially in Manaus. Life-threatening complications are rare – I suppose that's a comfort. A case reported of a French traveller in the Amazon last year. Non-fatal but complications. What complications?

What about this? Caterpillar plague! From consuming caterpillar larvae! Leads to high fever, bleeding through the nose and ears, then kidney failure, then death. Check my nose and ears. So far, so good. That salad yesterday was a little suspect. Just one caterpillar larva would be enough. They always tell you – never eat the salad. And I ate the salad. Why why why!



Oropouche Fever outbreak, Manaus, 2007 - 2010

It's still oropouche fever that seems the most likely. Sometimes you can just sense these things. This is not like a normal headache, or normal dizziness. And the suddenness of its oncoming – this is typical of oropouche. That damn sloth.

What about Mayaro Virus? Sounds serious. According to Wikipedia, in January 2010, a French tourist developed high-

grade fever and severe joint pain manifestations following a 15 day trip in the Amazon basin, Brazil. Wait a minute. This must be the

same guy. He got Diphyllbothriasis and Mayaro virus? How unlucky can you be. Diagnosed with MAYV infection in France. Mayaro virus disease has also been transported into the US by two visitors infected in Peru and into the Netherlands by a couple infected while vacationing in Surinam.

Or maybe *Angiostrongylus meningitis* – two cases reported in March 2007 from Espirito Santo; both cases probably related to ingestion of slugs(!) Hantavirus pulmonary syndrome comes from being bitten by an Amazonian rodent – OK. I'm ruling out the slugs, caterpillars, rodents, not sure about the mosquitoes, although surprisingly few, both in town, on the river and in the lagoons. Something to do with the Ph level of the Rio Negro – mosquitoes don't like it.

Oropouche still sounds likely. A million cases? 'Low risk' fatality? What is low risk? That it *is* a risk, but chances of 'life-threatening complications' – is what? Less than 50%? 30%? It's like saying getting run over and killed at a pedestrian crossing is 'low risk'. What difference how 'low risk' if you're the one that walks across and gets smacked down by a large truck with poor brakes?



At Manaus airport there's a sign from the Brazilian Ministry of Health with a list of vaccine recommendations. In Portuguese. Too late and too complicated. Anyway, too late for malaria tablets (they make you feel nauseous, and if you miss a day, the chances of immunity are greatly reduced). The fine

print on the package says it won't prevent all strains of malaria, and that this medication can't guarantee immunity anyway. So what is the point? (Later on, the Amazon guide Hugo – originally from Peru – 40 years up and down the Amazon, and personal advisor to Werner Herzog during the production of *Fitzcarraldo*, has never been sick and never taken a malaria tablet in his life. What's the point? he says. If I start taking them, I'd have to take them all the time. Does he know of anyone who has caught malaria? Only this French traveller a few years back... wait a minute – could this be the same guy? What about Oropouche fever? Sure, he says, lots of people get Oropouche fever...

According to the Brazilian Ministry of Health malaria transmission occurs in the states of Acre, Amapa, Amazonas, Mato Grosso, Para, Rondonia, Roraima, Tocantins, and the western part of Maranhã, as well as urban areas, including cities such as Boa Vista, Macapa, Manaus, Maraba, Porto Velho, and Santarem. Which is just about everywhere – only take special note; *Amazonas and Manaus*.

The Ministry also recommends yellow fever vaccine for all travelers 'greater than nine months of age', etc [Then, in fine print: 'For information on risk in specific municipalities, please see the Brazilian Ministry of Health yellow fever risk area search portal (in Portuguese).']



Fishing on the Rio Negro, oblivious to a multitude of deadly health risks

This report: In March 2002, an unvaccinated Texas man died from yellow fever after a 6-day fishing trip on the Rio Negro near Manaus in the state of Amazonas. In 1996, a Tennessee resident died from yellow fever contracted during a nine-day trip along the Rio Negro and Amazon rivers. Where am I? Manaus, by the Rio Negro, in the state of Amazonas.

The Ministry tells us that Oropouche fever was reported in August 2009 ... more than 650 cases were identified... Oropouche fever is a viral infection transmitted by biting midges. (Yes, the text is ambiguous, but we're assuming that the midges do the biting – or is it like ingesting slugs? See above). Symptoms may include fever, headache, rash, and joint and muscle pains, lasting up to seven days. Outbreaks occur chiefly in Amazonian states, including Amazonas. Great.

Outbreaks of dengue fever (described as a flu-like illness sometimes complicated by hemorrhage or shock), occur regularly in Brazil. Regularly. This is something they don't mention at the travel agency. As of January-February 2011, outbreaks were being reported from the states of Amazonas... then follows a list of more states, but



Aedes mosquito (l), ordinary mosquito (r). The Aedes is the one to watch for.

frankly, when you're in the Amazonas, the other 15 states seem redundant. I'll just make a note of not visiting Alagoas, Paraiba, Bahia, Paribo, Piaui, Pernambuco, Acre, Minas Gerais, Mato Grosso

do Sul, Sergipe, and Para, for the time-being at least. As of March-April 2011, outbreaks were being reported from the states of Amazonas, Parana, Ceara, Rio Grande do Norte... As of May-June 2011, outbreaks were being reported from the states of... OK, Amazonas is enough. As of July-August 2011, outbreaks were being reported... they keep reporting these outbreaks – I mean, isn't anyone out there trying to stop them? Useful to know is that Dengue fever is transmitted by *Aedes* mosquitoes (I'll take a closer look next time – oh yes, look, it's the *Aedes* – see; the legs are slightly hairier and its blood-sucking tube just slightly more transparent). Also they bite primarily in the daytime... more useful information, and that they favour populated areas, though they also inhabit rural environments. So why not just write 'anywhere'? No vaccine is available at this time. *Insect protection measures* are strongly advised, as below.

Particularly concerned about that sentence: 'no vaccine is available at this time...'

Also: a major dengue outbreak was reported in 2010, causing more than 900,000 cases and 592 deaths by November.

Here's another one. Multiple outbreaks of Chagas disease. Chagas disease – common in the Amazon region; has two phases – acute and chronic. Acute phase – no symptoms or very mild; chronic phase – life threatening. Spread by triatomine bugs, commonly known as 'kissing bugs.' Chagas disease recently reported (late 2011) from the northern Brazilian states of Para, Amazonas, and Amapa, related to consumption of local fruit juices, mainly those made from the berries of the acai and bacaba palms. And what did I have yesterday at the Skina de Suca? Acai juice. The risk is that it has been contaminated by triatomid bugs, which transmit the disease. 20–40% of chronically infected individuals will still eventually develop life-threatening heart and digestive system

disorders. 20 – 40%? Why not just say 40%? Or half? Or in most cases?

The most recent cases were reported in January 2010 from the municipality of Santa Isabel do Rio Negro in Amazonas and in November 2009 from a district of Belem, Para state, also on the Amazon. Both were probably related to the consumption of acai. Wait a minute. Consumption of acai? Acai juice? Curse the Skina de Suca. Supposedly the best fruit juice bar in Manaus, as recommended in the Lonely Planet guide. And you get Chagas Disease.



Amazon vampire bat — spreads rabies.

It usually occurs unnoticed because it is symptom-free or exhibits only mild symptoms that are not unique to Chagas disease. These can include fever, fatigue, body aches, headache, rash, loss of appetite, diarrhea, and vomiting. I haven't started vomiting yet, but give me five minutes. I'm getting there. 60% of cases usually mean remaining in the acute stage, while the other 40% will develop chronic stage... About two-thirds of people with chronic symptoms have cardiac damage... which causes heart rhythm abnormalities

and may result in sudden death. Details, details. Digestive tract, heart aneurisms, confusion, dementia, sensory impairments... untreated, Chagas disease can be fatal. So it's Chagas then. Damn that I should get Chagas. Unless...

The ministry also warns of rabies outbreaks, but as these are related to attacks from vampire bats, I'll exclude the unpleasant details. Anyway, it's not rabies. With rabies you can't drink liquids and go mad, barking like a dog. In Australia at the turn of the century, the cure for rabies in the country towns was a 12 gauge shotgun. Both barrels. Heard about this first hand from an uncle near Swan Hill. Definitely not rabies. Probably Chagas. Or Oropouche. Unless...

An outbreak of *diphyllobothriasis*, a parasite acquired by eating raw or undercooked fish, was reported from Sao Paulo and Rio in April 2005. One case was identified in a Dutch traveller who had recently visited Brazil. Symptoms of diphyllobothriasis may include abdominal discomfort and diarrhea, sometimes complicated by anemia.

The Ministry of Health seem to be doing a great job reporting stuff, but they don't say much about curing stuff. Cases of hantavirus pulmonary syndrome are reported annually from Brazil, mostly from... wouldn't you know it; the Amazon. In the year 2009, fatal cases ... Amazonas... February... In the first six months of 2008, a total of 34 cases were identified, of which 17 were fatal.

Plague continues to be reported from Brazil, but is uncommon. A total of four cases were recorded in 1998 and six in 1999, all from Bahia state. The plague is usually transmitted by the bite of rodent fleas, and I think we can discount bubonic plague, even though it was a big problem in Manaus a century ago.

Schistosomiasis is another popular affliction in the Amazon region, known as bilharziosis or snail fever. Usually get it from being exposed to contaminated water; the parasitic snail larva easily enter through the human skin. Well, I knew the piranha stories were exaggerated, but nowhere did I read anything about parasitic snails. Until this Brazilian Ministry of Health notification. Ministry of Health? Ministry of Bad News more like. The good news is that snail fever is rarely fatal. The bad news... it can't be cured, and most likely leads to cancer of the bladder. Or infection and erosion of other internal organs. Symptoms include abdominal pains, fever, fatigue, disorientation, skin rash and itching... (yes, yes, yes and yes) from parasites living on snails, so tiny they cannot be seen with the human eye....



Mayaro virus disease - lasts for months. Different kind of mosquito...

Caterpillar plague (also reports from the Amazon region) caused by contact with the larvae (caterpillars) of the butterfly *Lamonia achelous*. Apparently they secrete venom (venom?) through their skins. The illness is characterized by high fever, bleeding from the nose and ears, kidney failure, and death. The caterpillar is found from December through March, and is most dangerous in

December. Maybe the December bit is an overstatement – still probably true.

Mayaro virus disease (mosquito-borne viral infection which occurs in the Amazon region); increased number of cases reported from Manaus in 2011; symptoms include fever, headache, body aches, and joint pains; joint pains may be incapacitating and may last for months, but life-threatening complications are rare; case reported of a French traveller to the Amazon in January 2010.

'Low risk?' what is 'low risk? – yes, it *is* a risk, but chances of 'life-threatening complications' – are what? Less than 50%? 30%? Tell that to the the people with snail fever – well, it was low-risk, but you seem to have got it anyway. It's always low risk till you get it. It's low risk walking across the road and getting hit by a truck until you get hit by a truck. Here's another 'low-risk.'

Angiostrongylus meningitis (two cases reported in March 2007 from Espirito Santo); both cases probably related to ingestion of slugs... ingestion of slugs?!

As it happens I had some stomach trouble today, three days after entering the Amazonian region, as cautious as one can be, yet the Alka-seltzer, Aspirin and Lemsip have proved mildly ineffective against a head fever and stomach ailment of origins unknown. What are the possibilities?

Spoke with Carlos at the hotel desk. Urged the necessity that staff and local medical authorities be on a 24 hour standby and the most highly developed medical facilities made available. Carlos casts a cursory glance at my blotched skin, grazes his fingers across my fevered brow.

'Hm. You don't look too good,' he says.

'I know. I feel terrible.'

'Dizziness? Nausea? Headache?'

'Yes, yes. All of those. Is it *dengue? Chagas? Plague?*'

'Worse.'

'Worse? You mean *oropouche?*'

'In Amazonas there is something more deadly than these.'

'What could be worse?' I grasp the reception counter desk tightly.

The whole room is swaying.

'I have something that might help', he says.

He hands over a glass of water.

'What's in it?'

'Drink.'

I drink it. 'OK. What's in it.'

'Agua. From the fridge.'

'Water?'

'You have been out this afternoon. You are not wearing a hat.'

'How can a hat prevent oropouche fever?'

'It is 40° and 98% humidity. Too much heat and not enough water.'

Here in Manaus you must drink two litres a day.'

'It's not oropouche fever?'

'You have heat stroke. Too much heat.'

'Heat stroke?'

'Lot of people die from heat stroke.'

Went upstairs and drank a bit more. Googled up heat stroke. All the symptoms. Also a life-threatening condition. In the United States alone, more than eight hundred people a year die from heat stroke...

... especially lethal for athletes over exerting themselves in hot weather. The best cure is to lie down in the shade and drink water. A life threatening ailment. I knew it.

Wake up the next morning. Feeling slightly better.

Dizziness
Fatigue
Headache
Nausea
Impaired vision
Pale or blotchy skin
Increased and irregular pulse
Faintness
Muscle cramps
Cold sweat

Ten Recognisable Symptoms of Heat Stroke

Further Reading:

<http://www.mdtravelhealth.com/destinations/samerica/brazil.ph>



2. The River Boat

You could pick out the most likely passengers in the foyer of the Tropical Hotel. The Tropical is where the foreign tourists stay, some ten km from Manaus city centre, inside a heavily guarded gated community hotel complex. It's close to the airport and just up the river bank from the landing pier in the direction of the Amazon river boat. World-weary couples with suitcases making cursory glances to the ceiling, the walls, their watches.

At 2pm our group of twelve are directed to the canoe that transports us from the Tropical's Ponte do Negro to the Amazon Clipper a hundred metres away. To the left, the long span of the bridge joining two sides of Manaus and the convergence of the waters, and to the right, the Rio Negro, winding through the Amazon basin – a full five days away from Belem where the river empties out into the Atlantic Ocean.



Brazil Brazil

Eight cabins on the upper deck – all occupied; couples from Spain, Israel, South African, a very big Australian woman, her even bigger daughter and son-in-law from Queensland, Denise, a 40-something university lecturer from Sao Paolo travelling with her dad (who makes jokes all the time that no-one understands – doesn't speak a word of English), Reiner and Sabine from Hamburg. The dining room – four tables – is on the same level, and upstairs is the bar and a lounge. Rooftop deck with a view – upstream, the port of Manaus, with its boats and barges and floating petrol stations. Downstream, green forest, occasional dead trees and the dreams and fantasies of some kind of Amazon adventure.



Amazon Dreams

Within an hour of departure, toucans and ibis are swooping across the bow and the occasional dolphin or two leap out of the still waters. It is a movie set – *Jurassic Park*, or *The Land that Time Forgot*, or *Prehistoric Planet*, or *Aguirre: Wrath of God* or *Fitzcarraldo* or *The Emerald Forest*.

These last films were filmed in the Amazon – some scenes on the Peru side – but the landscape is as recognisable and as unchanging; 2000 kilometres of winding river and tributaries and river islands. Tree trunks coloured to the record tide levels of 2009; 3 – 4 metres above the present level. After the raining season in April the water level will have dropped several metres.



Klaus Kinski, 'the man who never smiles', in Burden of Dreams

The 'making of' documentary of Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo*, *Burden of Dreams* (1982), begins with the grim warning: 3,000 square miles of rain forest levelled every year. In a generation the rain forest will be gone forever. John Boorman, four years later, in the epilogue of *The Emerald Forest*, made the same gloomy prediction. At the current rate of deforestation (1985), by the turn of the century there would be no forest left. Yet, here we are 25 – 30 years later, and a forest as vast as the Australian inland desert.

Burden of Dreams records Werner Herzog's problems making *Fitzcarraldo* in the late 1970s. A film that begins in the lush red velvet interiors of the Teatro Amazonas and ends with a river boat on the Amazon crushed into flotsam as a local offering to the river gods. 'Problems' is probably an understatement. Over twelve months of set-backs, strikes, illness, appalling weather, machine break-downs, disputes with local indians, attacks, accidents, deaths, plane crashes – as a viewer, you watch as Herzog's mental health deteriorates before the cameras of documentary filmmaker, Les Blank.

In 1979 Herzog has completed half the film with Jason Robards, and Mick Jagger playing his side-kick. Some of these scenes survive in the documentary. They are truly dreadful. Mick Jagger made a credible tormented rock star in *Performance*, (1972) (no acting required), but he was arguably the worst *Ned Kelly* in Australian film history (and there's been a lot of Ned Kellys), and quite possibly, judging by these scenes, the worst film sidekick of all time. Did Jason Robards even need a sidekick? They weren't exactly Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Anyway, all immaterial. Robards comes down with amoebic dysentery (see *life threatening illnesses*), returns to the US for treatment, and is refused permission by the insurance agents to return. Jagger has to pull out of the production because of concert commitments, and saves himself from a file full of embarrassing film reviews. Local Indians, under the guidance of

local political agitators on the Peru – Ecuador border, take on the production team, and eventually drive them out. Herzog relocates a year and a half later at Iquitos, Peru.

Back in Germany, the producers ask him to give up. 'If I gave up,' says Herzog, 'then I would be a man without dreams.' In April 1981, he contracts Klaus Kinski, the man he vowed he would never work with again, and plunges into a nightmare of obsession and lunacy that outscapes the film itself. Who is crazier? Fitzcarraldo, Kinski or Herzog?

Our friend Hugo, an Amazon guide for nearly 40 years, remembers those days. Hugo was Herzog's Amazon 'cultural advisor', and in shots from *Burden of Dreams*, you can see Hugo, some 30 years younger, in the background, watching the river, watching Herzog, looking upwards and watching the birds.

'And was Klaus Kinski as crazy as everyone says?' I ask Hugo.

'We called him *the-man-who-never-smile*,' says Hugo. 'He never smile. Not once.'

When you see the documentary you realise that maybe there wasn't a lot to smile about. Some natives on the film set get injured in a night attack from a neighbouring tribe – injured with arrow-heads. Kinski gets increasingly nervous every day, threatens to leave, threatens to murder Herzog (Herzog places bodyguards outside his hut), and the scene that agitates Kinski the most is when he has to drink *masato*, the traditional Amazonian alcohol. To make genuine *masato* (and Herzog compromises on nothing) all the native women present, must spit into the bowl of fermented grain as part of its preparation. The women spit into the bowl, they hand the bowl to Kinski, Kinski freaks out. Kinski wants another bowl. Herzog says it has to be that bowl. Finally Kinski gets another bowl.

Brazil Brazil

The dreams of oneness with nature, of an escape from the burdens of modern life, also dissipate under the watchful eye of Les Blank's documentary film. A fight between two sisters over an unfaithful husband – tension mounts, threats are made. Some workers discover they are getting lower rates of pay than others. More fighting. Arguments, boredom, jealousies, envy... Same troubles here as any middle class suburb, anywhere in the world. The romance of the return to nature is one thing, but escaping human nature; that's something else.

Herzog and the Amazon are at loggerheads; rains create mud swamps, bulldozers don't work, fuel is scarce, actors are going crazy with boredom – especially Kinski, who is pacing around like a trapped prisoner.



How is the film working out? Herzog shares his thoughts on camera, away from the set, two months into the troubled production, a personal vilification in the middle of the rain forest, after six weeks of inactivity. 'The nature is full of obscenity,' he says. 'Violent, rotting, misery – the birds don't sing, they screech in pain. The trees are in misery – it's prehistoric, a curse over the landscape – we are cursed. If there is a God, this is a land that God has created in anger. There is a harmony... the harmony of collective murder. This overwhelming lack of order...' Herzog's gaze goes upwards above the towering trees, 'even the stars at night are a mess...'

Brazil Brazil

'I love this jungle,' he says as he walks back to the production set overlooking the river, 'but I love it against my better judgement.'

In the final stages of the production, when Fitzcarraldo tries to save the boat from river rapids, there are scenes in which the boat is genuinely in turbulent waters, nothing faked. One cameraman is seriously injured by falling debris, some assistants are thrown overboard and struggle for their lives, and Klaus Kinski, who now realises he is very much in the wrong film, is first paralysed with terror, clutching at a cabin façade, then goes beserk, and once again tries to kill Herzog. All in a day's work.

In November 1981, with a new engineering crew, Herzog finally succeeds getting the shots he needs of the ill-fated river boat being dragged over a hill by hard-pressed natives, thus crossing one tributary into another.



Japanese film director Akira Kurosawa makes a film called *I Live in Fear* (1960), about an elderly factory owner who is obsessed that

nuclear war will destroy Japan and his family will be wiped out. The year was 1955, ten years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The factory owner, played by Toshiro Mifune, becomes obsessed with a single answer to escape nuclear war. 'Brazil,' he says. 'If we don't succeed in emigrating to Brazil, our family is doomed to perish.' His family has the courts declare him insane.

Birds of the Amazon

The River Boat steams silently through the still waters, and later, as the sun is low on the horizon, all trace of human presence has disappeared. A sloth high up in a tree, a monkey shrieking somewhere in the forest, a pair of toucans flying ahead, with beaks the size of their bodies, then a creature swooping from a dead tree branch to the other side of the river. A prehistoric bird. With claws on its long bat like wings, casting a sideways look of contempt that goes back to the age of dinosaurs.

Hugo is on deck with a pair of binoculars. He watches as the creature as it lands on a branch, high up, overlooking the river, overlooking us.

'What is *that*?' I ask.

'Is a...*hoatzin*. Local bird.'

'Bird? It has claws on its wings!'

'Yes. Baby *hoatzin*. They fall off when he gets older.'

In the morning tours and the evening tours, it's the birds that steal the show. They move the most, sound the most, exhibit more variety than anything else and make up most of the spectacle. Poor sloth doesn't stand a chance. It might be ten minutes before the sloth will twitch one of his two toes. Some of them have three. It turns out that

Brazil Brazil

of the more than 10,000 species of birds in the world, more than half can be found in the Amazon Basin.

Hugo, our Peruvian guide who has been pointing out Amazonian wildlife to visitors for 30 years or so, makes a confession on the third day's early morning expedition. 'Birds,' he says. 'Birds are my favourite. I love the birds.'



Hoatzin, aka Stink Bird, aka Canje Pheasant

He has shouted to us above the engine noise, and sometimes whispered with deathly quiet, so many different names – some recognisable (kingfisher, toucan, humming bird, kestrel, vulture), while some names get lost in Hugo's Spanish accent, and other names are so unfamiliar they are nowhere to be found in the Lonely Planet's generous colour supplement of wildlife in the Amazon.

Which birds have we seen so far? I ask him at breakfast, which I realised was a mistake as soon as I'd asked. 'Many, many', he says.

Brazil Brazil

'Many, many, many. Five thousand species birds – this time of year, maybe not so many.'

That evening after dinner, while against better judgement, testing out the speciality of the ship's barman (a capruinho – strewth – why not just knock me off the chair with a telephone book!) Hugo hands over some pages of handwritten notes in lead pencil. So far 41 different species of bird since departing Ponte do Negro in Manaus.



Amazon birds: Macaw, Trogon, Toucan

It turns out that the boat's helmsman, Rodriguez, is also something of an ornithologist, and despite the dexterity and strength required to steer this canoe with 12 people on board, he has a full size Nikon strapped to his neck, together with three lenses of varying length. If you are serious about taking decent pictures of birds you have to be serious about the equipment. I am enormously satisfied with my \$59 digital pocket camera bought on the Internet, but when it comes to taking pictures of birds, its shortcomings become apparent.

The Amazon bird list provides over 200 different species. There are 'fruit-eaters': oropendulas, parrots, parakeets, tanagers, cotingas, manakins; and there are carnivores (it is a jungle, out there): eagles,

Brazil Brazil

hawks, kestrels, kingfishers and especially vultures, either hanging around in groups on branches of dead trees, or circling around in a group either having established a victim, or in search of one.

Toucan

Kingfisher

Macaw

Trogon

Nighthawk

Hoatzin

Blue Parrot

Vulture

Ibis

Kiskadee

Caracara

Top Ten (plus one) Amazon birds sighted



Amazon treetops: Caracara & Vulture

Hugo's List of Amazon Birds December 2011

1. *Cuviers Toucan*
2. *Ringed Kingfisher*
3. *Amazon Kingfisher*
4. *Amazon White Tailed Trogon*
5. *Band Tailed Nighthawk*
6. *Sigana Hoatzin*
7. *Dasky Parrot*
8. *Blue Headed Parrot*
9. *Festive Amazon Parrot*
10. *Red Shouldered Macaw (Flaing)*
11. *Blue and Yellow Macaw*
12. *Sungrebe*
13. *Bat Falcon*
14. *Black Caracara*
15. *Yellow Headed Caracara*
16. *Rod Side Hawk*
17. *Black Vulture*
18. *Turkey Vulture*
19. *Boat Billed Night Heron*
20. *Fagciated Tiger Heron*
21. *Anhinga*
22. *Neotropical Cormorant*
23. *Muscovy Duck*
24. *Green Ibis*
25. *Yellow Rumped Caciquir*
26. *Plum Throated Cotinga*
27. *Great Kiskadee*
28. *Great Egret*
29. *Cattle Egret*
30. *Capped Heron*
31. *Chestnut Arcari*
32. *Black Necked Acari*
33. *Black Collared Hawk*
34. *Osprey-on flight*
35. *Wattled Jacana*
36. *Large Billed Turn*
37. *Yellow Tufted Woodpecker*
38. *Saffrom Finch*
39. *Orange Fronted Yellow Finch*
40. *Green Kingfisher*
41. *Yellow Hooded Bluk Bird*



Hugo - ornithologist
& Amazon Guide

Brazil Brazil

A popular image of the Amazon rainforest is the breakfast cereal image of the large, colourful-billed toucan. Very colourful birds. Yellow, orange, red, blue, and white stripes on the upper parts. They look at you as if they're about to ask a question, so it's hard to tell if they're smart or not smart. The jury is still out.

Toucans are tree dwellers living high up (20-30 m) and feed on fleshy tropical fruits, and infrequently on insects and birds eggs. Their large bill is hollow, and you wonder how can they fly around carrying so prodigious a beak, but they fly in a special way – sort of leaping from one tree to another, beating their wings as if they are about to lose control, checking around for somewhere to land, and if they're lucky it's a tree branch, and if it's the ground, it's more like a flop.

Birds like kingfishers and ibis are familiar enough, and it's a little bit impressive that they splash into the waters of Amazon with the same grace and style of waterways elsewhere in the world.

Vultures are seen virtually everywhere – either feeding off dead creatures, or waiting for dead creatures. Like Werner Herzog infers, their presence transforms the rainforest into a theatre of death and violence. Yet it is these birds of prey that are most threatened by habitat destruction and the hunters who are killing them off as pests.

It is close to sunset and the *hoatzin* are like shadows in the dark sky. Three of them – two adults and child, swooping over the canoe and taking their time following the river. Hugo gets very excited; 'Very rare to see these on the river' he says. 'Almost never.'

Rodriguez uses his foot to steer the engine while his hands are pumping away at the camera, the aperture opening up as wide as his eyes. 'So bad at flying,' says Hugo, 'that's why they stay in jungle, stay on the ground. Look how clumsy they are... now, look

Brazil Brazil

at small one. What do you see? Yes, yes. You see tiny claws. Just like prehistoric bird. One of oldest birds in the world.'



It's at times like this, completely isolated in a canoe with ten passengers keeping absolutely quiet in the middle of some tributary somewhere in the Amazon basin – the only noise from the gently lapping water, the occasional howl of a monkey, and a cacophony of bird sounds, the glimpse of the unmistakably red glowing eyes of a cayman, and a splash as he slips on and off the river bank – that you feel like extras on a movie set, most likely *Jurassic Park*, parts four or five.

Whichever film it is, it's only to hope that it is not that film where a group of tourists out on a canoe expedition, just as darkness is

Brazil Brazil

descending, get swooped by a giant pterodactyl and transported high up somewhere to provide food for newly hatched baby pterodactyls. You look around at the passengers on board. All wearing green life-jackets. As if they are going to help.



And you wonder – just like in a movie – which three people would survive long enough for the third act, and which are the extras that have been marked out for horrible primeval deaths – plunging hundreds of meters from the pterodactyls beak, or being chomped up legs first by a ravenous baby prehistorical bird, or torn apart by the claws on their wings, or dropped into the river's waters to clusters of desperately hungry tiger piranhas, Amazon electric eels, caymans, anacondas, candirus, river sharks... take your pick. All good ways to kill off a few spoiled middle class tourists who were never going to make it to the ending and spoil things for the couple who have been resisting romance since act one.

These reflections inspired by the hoatzin, one of the strangest birds in the world, which jumps and climbs about in the Amazon canopy. Beady red eyes against its bright blue skin crest of long thin feathers along its head. When it comes to flying, it's clumsier than the toucan.

Brazil Brazil

‘Only baby birds have claws on each wing,’ says Hugo. ‘If they are threatened they drop from the tree, then claw their way back up to the nest.’

‘What about the adults? They don’t have claws.’

‘When they get big, they don’t need claws. They have another way to fight off enemies.’

‘Which is?’

‘When attacked it makes horrible stink. You know, like skunk. Then everyone run away, even vulture. That’s why we call it stink bird.’

Further Reading:

http://www.birdlist.org/sam/brasil/brasil_norte/amazonas/amazonas.htm



Amazon Wildlife

Ed and Eileen from South Africa are so far singularly unimpressed.

'First off,' says Ed, 'these animals are tiny. And second off – they're always stuck up a tree.'

Which is true of the sloth. But sloths are as cool as koalas. Sit on a tree branch, or hang from one, chew leaves, sleep, go to the toilet about once a week, and take things easy. We've been



watching one for about half an hour, and he's moved once – I think it was to scratch. Long, hairy arms and huge hooked claws. They eat fruit, leaves, bugs, but wait for the food to come to them. Smart. Spend most of the time hanging upside down.

Hugo is looking through the binoculars and getting very animated. Pointing at the sloth, then whispering in a loud voice; 'Look, look, look. Three-toed. Very rare. Usually you see two-toed, very rare to see three-toed.'

And sure enough, through the binoculars you could clearly make out the three hairy toes.

There are big creatures in the Amazon too, just not so usual to see them. The Giant Anteater, with a tongue nearly a metre long, huge hairy legs; they can get up to be two - three metres in length. The Giant River Otter – endangered, rare and big. Two metres long, and the biggest otter in the world.



At the river's edge: Giant River Otter & Capybara

The world's largest rodent, the Capybara, a metre tall, can swim underwater, and looks like a cross between a huge rat and a chipmunk, like something out of *The Incredible Shrinking Man*. And maybe the weirdest and biggest of all – the Amazonian Manatee. Can reach up to three meters long and weigh 450 kg. Not to mention jaguars, ocelots, giant armadillos, anacondas. Saw all of these in the CIGS zoo Manaus, where conscripted soldiers work as trainee veterinarians, and at the Tropical Hotel private zoo. But in the rain forest? Or standing on river banks and looking at us drift by in a canoe? No.

Amazon Monkeys

There are old world monkeys and new world monkeys. African and Asian chimps, gorillas, baboons, differ from the new world monkeys

of South America; Amazon rainforest monkeys are much smaller, hairier, have long tails and comprise many more species. A new one was added in 2010, hitherto unknown, and so tiny it can hide in the palm of your hand.



Must confess, monkeys make me nervous. Well, everything does – monkeys just a little more so. Monkey perception was not improved by watching the in-flight movie between Sao Paulo and Manaus, *The Rise of Planet of the Apes* – a little too believable, with a clear moral point. Never trust monkeys. There's nothing quite like monkeys to make a nervous traveller nervous. Particularly after some unfortunate run-ins in Indonesia and Malaysia. Wild and untrained monkeys who tourist's sunglasses, hats, jewellery.

In Bali I saw a trio descend upon an unsuspecting tourist woman and take her necklace, hat and glasses, before she had time to turn around and scream. The rapid movements, the chattering, the howling and cute looks that belie bad tempers and aggressive dispositions.

That said, always liked Cheetah in Tarzan movies and Jungle Jim on TV – loved Cheetah's autobiography, *Me Cheetah* (Cheetah died late 2011, 80 years old), and his fond reminiscing of Johnny Weismüller, but otherwise, no, not a big monkey fan.

Brazil Brazil

Lots of monkeys in the Amazon rain forest. From the river you see them leaping in trees, shaking tree branches, howling, laughing, jumping up and down. There are woolly monkeys, spider monkeys, squirrel monkeys, howler monkeys, capuchin monkeys. At the ecological park canopy walk, our guide, Emerildho, introduced us to a solitary and singularly depressed Capuchin, sent there for rehabilitation. Locally they're called English monkeys. They have the red face of an Englishman who's caught too much sun, or a gin and tonic too many, combined with a phlegmatic countenance and indifferent disposition. (That's the story anyway). He followed us around, from tree branch to tree branch, uncharacteristically quiet, with a big red sad face and mournful eyes. One very unhappy monkey.



Fundacao Amazon Canopy Walk & Capuchin Monkey Rehabilitation Centre

'Come from unhappy home,' said Emerildho, as if the capuchin was a suffering teenager. Maybe he is.

Emerildho has been part of the canopy walk project since a Canadian team started it more than ten years ago. It's about a kilometre long, which might not seem that far, but when you're walking along a swaying thin metal cable-like construction some 20 metres above ground, it was far enough. Turns out that Emerildho knows quite a bit about monkeys – he's been running the monkey

Brazil Brazil

sanctuary for many years. 'Many, many different monkeys in the rain forest,' he says. 'There are still species of monkeys in the Amazon rain forest that scientists have not yet discovered. Most recent is Mura's Tamarin, discovered a year or so back, and already an endangered species.'

'What makes them endangered?'

'Logging, burning of the rain forest – no forest, no homes for tamarins.'



Amazon monkeys: Golden Lion, Emperor Tamarin & Squirrel Monkey

One thing that monkeys in the Amazon rain forest have in common is a prehensile tail. Long, powerful tails they use as a fifth arm or leg to wrap around tree branches.

So which monkeys do we see and hear in the rainforest? Many spider monkeys – not so big, about half a metre tall, they like to hang upside down using their tails to hold on to branches. You see them moving around high up in the branches, like fleeting black shadows, always in groups and very quick.

Brazil Brazil

Squirrel monkeys, running and chattering in the top branches of the upper canopy, like little tribes of mischief, eating anything; fruit, berries, insects, and drinking from water gathered in green bowls made by leaves and plants. They never have to touch the ground – a lifetime in the tree-tops. Woolly monkeys are big and cuddly, and pigmy marmosets, so tiny you can hold them in the palm of your hand. Monkeys with noble wise faces, like the Golden Lion and Emperor Tamarin, small creatures with weird faces, big bushy eyebrows and penetrating eyes, like crazy professors. Brown howlers – dignified and intelligent looking, and black howlers that jump around whooping at breakneck speed that jar the most unaffable of nerves. The strangest monkey (if it is a monkey) must be Wieds Marmoset. Looks like he is wearing a Japanese Noh theatre mask; small tufts of hair from the sides of his old and dignified features, with cat-like eyes that glow in the dark.

Further Reading: <http://www.allaboutwildlife.com/amazon-rainforest-monkeys>



Strange creatures: Wieds Marmoset, Owl Monkey, Howler

The Dramaturgy of the Night Cruise

By the third night of cruising in a canoe down tributaries of the Rio Negro, a certain dramaturgy becomes apparent. A beginning, middle and end, of increasing dramatic intensity. From daylight to dusk, to night and darkness. From birds to mammals, to poisonous frogs to caimans. From the sleepy eyes of two-toed sloths in the full light of day, to the glowing red eyes of a distant cayman in the darkness. Glowing red coals, first visible, then flickering, then disappearing. Then the anxiety begins.

From the light conversation of your ten fellow passengers, and the gentle lapping sounds of the river water against the canoe, to the heavy silence, a silence of dread, as darkness descends, heavy like wet canvas, and lightning flashing through the black clouds in the distance, and the river building up into sea-waves as a tropical storm approaches.



The culmination of the dramatic arc on the final cruise... a cayman watching from the bank – just half a meter from the canoe. The nearest passenger, an elderly grey haired academic type, faint of art and of nervous disposition – suitably surprised by the sudden leap of the black beast, from the water and into the boat, and would have landed in his lap, this metre long creature, 30 centimetres of

Brazil Brazil

which comprise of 74 razor sharp teeth. Fortunately, the slightly elevated right hand side of the green wooden canoe thwarted the monster's efforts – pushed his nose in a few centimetres, and he disappeared as suddenly as he attacked, somewhere beneath canoe and into the dark muddy water and a maze of green reeds. All within terrifying proximity, maybe the off-spring of parents, even larger, perhaps circling beneath this rather fragile canoe, straining their reptilian brains into how best tip it over and being dining on the fresh meat of ten tourists, a guide and a boatsman. I mean, isn't that what reptiles do?



Generally speaking it is the collective silence, an unwritten contract between twelve passengers from six different cultural backgrounds, that provide the soundtrack to the drama of the river cruise narrative. A small bonus from the rise of the Chinese yuan, and the affect on world-wide travel trends. On the last day, as we make out

farewells at the merging of the waters, Hugo holds a little thank you speech on the river boat's sun deck, in the blistering heat of the midday sun.

'You've been such nice group,' he says. 'I mean it. To be in boat and look at the birds and the wildlife and have the right respect for nature. Thank you. Thank you.'



Amazon Black Caiman

'Isn't always like that?' asks Etti, the yoga teacher.

'Not always', says Hugo a little despondently. 'There are some people from, let's say, different cultures, who get nervous from silence in the jungle. Then they must comment like - all the time.'

“Different cultures?” Like...'

'Well, most trips are with tourists from one country in particular, but this time – none.'

'You mean...'

Brazil Brazil

'From this particular country when people see a bird, they must say in a loud voice: "Oh look everyone. A bird?" Or if they see a monkey, they must say in a loud voice: "Oh look everyone. A monkey." And if it gets very quiet, there is always someone who will say: "Listen everybody. Isn't it quiiiiieett!!!"

Hm. I can imagine that must be frustrating. Not least for the birds and the monkeys. I wonder how long the dollar course will remain low?

Watching dolphins from the big boat and bird watching from the canoes at sunrise and sunset, well, that is only part of the Amazon experience. Yes, sitting in an old flimsy wooden canoe can make a person anxious. You sit low and close to the water. And close to the water means close to the water snakes, the piranhas, the poison dart frogs, the electric eels, the caimans. The life jacket doesn't do much to help the anxiety. Nevertheless, anxiety, real anxiety, that would come later. For once you step off the canoe and onto land, and from the land into the darkness of the endless rain forest, then, only then, do you realise there is a lot to be anxious about.



3. Poisonous Plants & Trees

Roberto, probably in his early 20s, is part of the river boat crew. The trip includes a visit to his family's place just on the edge of the nature reserve – half a dozen buildings on poles, open windows and in a shaded grove not far from the river. The walk up the hill from the canoe in 40° was a killer, but under the trees – yeh, it's a nice spot. Lots of young kids, Roberto's two attractive sisters making a fire – they're cooking up some tapioca rolls, flavoured with acai fruit. We've been having these at breakfast and they taste good, even at the risk of a tropical disease (See Ch. 1).

So now, Roberto, in his broken English, is explaining how they get tapioca from the green branch cassava plant root – there's a pile of them by the log. They look like turnips. Sister number one is stoking up the fire with the super large pan on top of the stove. With a view of the river and the sound of the toucans, and spider monkeys rustling the trees, this makes for one exotic outdoor kitchen.



Roberto's two sisters prepare a potentially lethal breakfast of tapioca pudding

Anyway, here's the shock. Cassava root extract is deadly. Very, very deadly. Like so much else in the rain forest. Sure, there are the

spiders, the snakes and the spiky plants, but tapioca? From tapioca, you get tapioca pudding. What's deadly about tapioca pudding? From cassava, that's ground up into tapioca grains, comes a bi-product; cyanide, in liquid form, that they women collect in plastic bottles, dark yellow liquid and a teaspoon of it will kill you in less than two minutes.

'What do you do with that stuff?' I ask Roberto.

He shrugs. 'Throw it away.'

Cassava root must be ground three times to eliminate the poison. It is a curious bi-product, that after six days of grinding, flattening, cooking, grinding, flattening, cooking. Who found out how many people it would take before tapioca was not as lethal to the family well-being as a blowgun dart to an assailant of a neighbouring tribe? And did mother choose the second 'taster' and the third, unsure of the outcome? (Taster number two dies a hideous death clutching his stomach for a minutes and half of intolerable pain as the cyanide substance works through the upper intestine and dispenses into the blood capillaries, inducing paralysis, cramps, and an excruciatingly painful death. Taster number three survives. Good stuff, thinks the mum, now I can start doing some PR on the wonders of tapioca pudding.

The cassava plant has either red or green branches with blue spindles on them. Red is OK, green you have to grind up three times. Even then, there is still a risk of contracting Konzo. It also goes by the name of Mantakassa, and was first diagnosed by Swedish biologist/statistician, Hans Rosling, in Africa. Some people get it in the Amazon region as well. A paralytic disease that comes from several weeks of eating nothing but cassava that hasn't been ground up enough or boiled enough.

Cassava is tame compared to other plants of the Amazon rain forest which range from the dangerous to the deadly... Curare, for example.



Caladium, Cassava & Curare - deadly Amazon flora

Curare is a vine plant hanging down from the trees, with rich green leaves. There's a sap in the leaves that local natives use – an alkaloid poison they can dip arrow tips to stun monkeys and tapirs or anything else that's good to eat. In small doses, either injected or ingested, curare can be used to treat bruises and fever; in larger doses it will knock you out, paralyse the nervous system, suffocate you, then kill you.

Caladium – also known as 'Elephant's Ear,' 'Heart of Jesus' or 'Angel Wings.' The entire plant is poisonous. If you eat it you'll get sick, and if you touch it you'll get a rash.

Strychnos has oval leaves, green flowers, red fruit and an unpleasant smell that should you keep you out of harms way. Also used for poisonous arrows that stop the intended victim from breathing. In the old days local Indians coated fingernails so that in a fight a decent scratch would floor their opponent. Muscle spasms, a rapid drop in blood pressure and suffocation. Just like in the movies.

Brazil Brazil

Angel's Trumpet (not the same as Angel Wing – who makes up these names?) is a plant you might find at your local nursery, but it is a native of the Amazon. It's popular with the local shamans who use it as a hallucinogenic. If you take the right amount the flowers are capable of producing lucid dreams (do you eat them? Smoke them? What?) that shamans of the Jivaro tribes of Brazilian Amazon, use to predict disease and misfortune. If you take too much, you die.



From the Amazon to the local garden centre: Strychnos, Angel's Trumpet & Poisonwood.

There are the plants you have to eat to cause you damage, and there are those where touching is enough. Pain, rashes, cuts, blisters, scars – it's like growing up in *Sassafras* all over again.

Plants not to touch include Poisonwood, a medium size tree (about 10 metres) with a short trunk and drooping branches, that form a spreading, rounded crown. The reddish-brown bark is thin and has dark, oily patches from the gummy sap. If you start handling the sap you end up with a rash.

The Blinding Tree, like rubber exudes a milky sap. If it gets in your eyes, guess what – you can go blind. On the skin, the sap causes severe burning, inflammation and blistering, sometimes permanent. All parts of this plant are also poisonous when ingested.

Cashew nut trees have cashew nuts – which are a good thing; the sap from the bark, leaves and particularly the nutshell can cause painful skin lesions that resemble second-degree burns. Fumes from roasting the nuts can either give you skin-rash, or – worst possible scenario – lead to blindness. Harvesting cashews is a risky business, which is probably why they're so expensive in the shops.

Cowhage is a creeper with whitish-greenish to purple or red inflorescences. Blossoms are sometimes hairy. Pods are covered with about 5000 hairs which easily break off. The hairs on the fruit and blossom have barbs and contain itch-producing Mucunain. If only one of the hairs gets on the skin, you start itching straight away. Then the skin starts reddening and small papules or urticaria occur a few minutes after contact with the hairy parts of the plant. The hairs of the Cowhage break off easily and can contaminate clothes or other objects. Dried parts of the plant remain active. There is no serious danger, except when the hairs get into the eye, in which case blindness is very possible. This sounds so much like a berry we had in Sassafras – you'd split open the skin if the berry, put it down some guys back (someone you didn't like too much) and rub these little hairy bits into the skin. Really uncomfortable. We called them 'itch berries.' Could be itching for days, creating nasty sores and lesions that would never heal. Victims amongst the younger kids in the lower grades, they'd be crying and be crying, and create all sorts of strife at school. One kid in our class had been tearing at his back trying to scratch, got some of the small short black hair follicles under his finger nails, started rubbing his eyes, thus intentionally filling your eyes with this stuff that drives you crazy with itching. Once in the eyes it can make you blind (didn't know this at the

time) and young Bobby Wilson spent the rest of his life wearing thick lensed glasses. Never trust plants. Plants can be mean.

The Manchineel tree is a small branching rubber tree with fruit that looks like small green apples. Also has a milky sap. According to the guide book of Amazon trees. On the second line in bold print it reads: *'This may be the most poisonous tree in the world. Avoid it.'*



The Machineel - the deadliest tree in the world

Enough said. The sap causes a violent burning sensation after an hour or so. Even a small drop of the caustic latex or the smoke of the burning tree can cause blindness. Raindrops falling from a Manchineel tree can cause skin damage and severe eye irritation. All parts of the plant are poisonous and carcinogenic when ingested – which means they will give you cancer.

Oleander is a popular flowering shrub everywhere these days – another native of the Amazon region commonly cultivated in parks and gardens, despite the fact that all parts of it are deadly toxic. It contains two toxins that cause vomiting, dizziness, stomach cramps, convulsions, and may cause death. Chewing on any part of this plant can lead to a very bad day. Even the smoke from burning Oleander is highly toxic.

Brazil Brazil

The sandbox tree has woody fruit that looks like small pumpkins and explode with a loud bang when they're ripe. Handle with care.



The popular garden shrub - the Oleander, another toxic Amazonian

Like many members of the Rubber family, this tree contains skin-irritating caustic latex sap. Getting the latex into the eye can cause cornea damages or blindness. It's also poisonous.

Listening to Hector in the jungle walk, picking up plants and leaves ('this one is good – will make you healthy; this one is bad – you will be sick; this one is good and bad – make you have strange dreams for many hours.'

'Can we see?'

He's standing by tall skinny tree, called the Virola; from the inside of the bark you make this snuff, breathe it in as much as you can, and you begin to see strange things.

'We call it *yakawana*, but it has other names: *ebene*, *epna*, *nyaqwana*, *parica*.' He showed how it was inhaled in his own tribe's ceremonies; placing a long pipe in each nostril then inhaling deeply. I recognised the process from *The Emerald Forest* (John Boorman, 1985) where the father and his son need to get in touch with their 'totem spirits.' The son, Charlie (John Boorman's real son), after one short sniff of the virola, transforms into a hawk, and soars over the forest; Dad, played by Powers Boothe, becomes a black jaguar and bounds through the trees with new found power.



The Virola tree - same family as the nutmeg - the Amazonian peyote

During these ceremonies the hallucinogenics are meant to open up the mind to new possibilities. You get a glimpse of your alter-ego, your animal totem, new insights – that's how they tell it in the movies and for the time being I see no reason to disbelieve the process. This is what happens when you breathe in the smoke. The episode begins with excitability, followed by numbness, twitching of facial muscles, uncoordinated motor skills, and nausea accompanied with vomiting. Hallucinations commence, often occurring with *macropsia*; everything looks bigger. As a result, individuals experience visions, which are an integral part of their religious teachings.

The moral point – plants can heal, plants can cure, but there are

Brazil Brazil

many plants you need to avoid. Their only purpose is to do you harm, long-term harm. Watch out for:

Green branched cassava root

Curare

Strychnos

Angels Trumpet

Caladium

Blinding Tree

Black Poison Wood

Cashew Nut Tree

Manchineel Tree

Sand Box Tree

Ten Deadly plants and Trees of the Amazon Rain Forest



Read more:

http://www.ehow.com/info_8430969_poisonous-plants-rainforest.html#ixzz1j4U0MnVY

http://www.ehow.com/list_6698309_poisonous-plants-amazon.html#ixzz1j4UKQowO

4. Deadly Arthropods

Spiders

Day Four... After breakfast – fried tapioca again – we take the canoe into an Amazon glade for a walk into the rain forest. We have our specialist guide on the walk, Hector, whose area of expertise includes medicinal plants, ants and spiders.

An hour or two of exhaustive explanations – bugs, plants, trees, we come to a Strangler Vine Fig Tree, a rodent size burrow at its roots. ‘Watch,’ says Hector. Hector pokes his stick in the hole and pulls out a Tarantula. Big as a fist. Huge. It might have been a Goliath Bird Eater, which is one of the Amazon’s larger Tarantula spiders. (And got its name, remarkably, from the testimony of explorers observing it eat humming birds). And these spiders make their homes in exactly the environment that Hector found it: a large hole in the damp ground beneath the roots of a large tree.



Beauty and the Beast; The Tarantula and the Bird Eating Spider

Having an Amazon guide stick a huge spider right under your nose is usually the kind of thing that can make nervous travelers very nervous, but, you know... it’s just a spider. It is big but not as big as

the Huntsman. And dangerous, but not deadly; not like the Brazilian Wandering Spider.



Phoneutria, The Murderess - the deadliest of them all

Although about half the size of the Tarantula the Brazilian Wandering Spider is considered the deadliest spider in the world (Guinness Book of Records 2012), and most aggressive and territorial to boot. (What is it about the Amazon that makes all these creatures so bad tempered? The humidity?) Brazilian Wandering Spiders – also called the Banana Spider because they hide in bunches of bananas (logical) – don't just wander; they move around very quickly, particularly at night, just looking for prey into which they can inject their deadly venom. Another reason, says Hector, why we do not encourage night walks in the rain forest. Also logical. This particular spider doesn't spin webs or wait to pounce on its victims like the Tarantula; it wanders – 100% pro-active – and they see anything that moves, they bite it. The proper name for the Brazilian Wandering Spider is *Phoneutria* – Greek for 'murderess'. How appropriate.

So what happens if you get bitten by a Brazilian Wandering Spider,

aka Banana Spider, Phoneutria, or Murderess? If you think the *candiru* is bad news (*Ch.6 Swimming with Piranhas*), check this out: a neurotoxin, known as PhTx3, once injected, immediately attacks the neural synapses causing loss of muscle control and breathing problems. The victim is paralysed and can't breathe. Next, the bite causes a severe inflammation that starts out as local pain – intense pain – then goes through the whole system. So you are paralysed, you can't breathe, and you are experiencing searing agonising pain throughout the body. Just when you thought it couldn't get worse, now comes the bad bit (especially if you're a guy).

There is another component of the venom, called Tx2-6, which causes a priapism. What is a priapism? A priapism is a painful and persistent erection. An erection resulting from a BWS bite is agonising and can last for hours. In the unlikely case that you survive this bite at all, you will be impotent for the remainder of your days. The good news is that researchers are now studying the component of this venom for the treatment of erectile dysfunction. Small consolation, lying under a Strangler Vine Fig Tree in the Amazon rain forest in the middle of the night, paralysed, unable to breath, in intense agony, with the most painful erection of your life, and by now, your body heat having attracted the attention of azteca ants, soldier ants, fire ants, warrior ants, scorpions, anacondas... well, it's a long list.

According to 'Deadly Spiders of the Amazon,' supposedly an infallible source of wisdom on the subject: 'The notion that damp forests may contain giant webs accumulated over years is a fallacy.' I read this while standing in front of a giant web in the middle of this damp forest that stretches between six trees. It is about three metres high and made up of dense white strands, and on closer inspection filled with hundreds of living spiders, and an impressive collection of dead creatures; flies, moths, butterflies, large ants –

some of them still in their death throes, struggling vainly, others partially eaten, insect skeletons – a kind of rainforest supermarket for spiders and one more good reason not to go wandering about at night.

Snakes and spiders are common enough in Sassafras – it was the first thing you checked when you opened the door of the outdoor lavatory. All snakes in Australia are poisonous so you push those outside with a stick; funnel web spiders and red back spiders you would also get rid of (small but deadly). Huntsmen spiders were a matter of personal discretion. They're big – bigger than a tarantula, quite ugly, with hairy purple legs and piercing orange eyes and bold red nippers.



Three old pals from the Dandenong Ranges, Victoria Australia: the Huntsman, the Red Back and the Funnel Web.



They could bite but they were not deadly. Having had one unfortunate encounter with a Huntsmen (aged seven) in the school playground: 'Go on, go on, get the ball – it's under the bushes;' 'All right, all right, I'm gettin it... aahh, there's a bloody spider here and it's under my shirt;' 'What sort of spider?' 'It's a bloody Huntsman.'

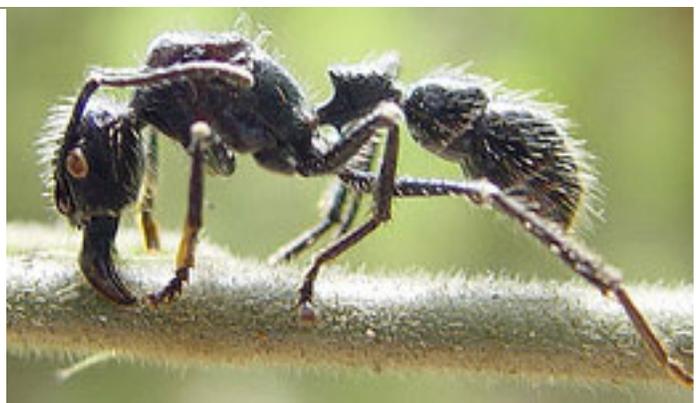
Get it out, get it out;’ ‘Stop making a fuss – Huntsman spiders don’t bite.’ ‘Ow! The bloody thing just bit me!’ My chest swelled up a like a balloon, one of the school teachers called in the doctor, the doctor gave me an injection and said the swelling should go down in a week. I should let him know if I was subject to ‘nausea, fainting, sudden blindness or dizzy spells.’ Sudden blindness? ‘I thought Huntsman spiders were harmless,’ I said. ‘Relatively speaking,’ he said. ‘They won’t kill you.’ ‘Good to know.’ ‘It’s the funnel webs and the red backs you gotta watch for,’ he said. And I always do.

When it came to spiders in the outhouse my policy was discretion as the better part of valour. So Huntsmen were ushered out as well. As any CBT-orientated psychologist will tell you, it’s events like this that can lead to a life-long disposition of anxiety. Add on encounters with snakes, Alsatian dogs gone crazy with the heat (two puncture marks on the right lower leg – and a spurt of blood that covered three metres in a single stream), as well as a collection of scars on the feet, legs, arms, hands, head (split skull) one nasty scar right down the middle finger of the left hand that split the fingernail in half – all acquired during the formative years between the ages of three and ten, from barbed-wire fences, broken glass in swimming holes, nails, knives, tree-falls—resulting from the foolishness of leaving the quiet sanctity of the home, although in fairness, the mad violence of the outside world was as tame as a cuddly blanket compared to the domestic confines ruled by the angriest woman in the world. So when the giant Huntsman crept from a hole in the kitchen ceiling and descended onto mother’s head, causing her to strike herself repeatedly with a cast iron pan in sheer terror, as a six year old observer standing in the sidelines, together with Smokey Joe the cat, we couldn’t help but cast cursory glances at each other and almost, almost dare a chuckle. That would be Smokey-Joe, not me.

Ants

In Sassafras we had some very nasty ants as well; bull ants (huge), jumping jacks (purple and orange, and they don't stop biting), and a range of smaller ants that made huge anthills who could always tell if you wearing sandals without socks, and immediately went for the toes. The bites would keep you itching for a week, with or without calamine lotion.

Hector is showing us the fire ants crawling up the Strangler Vine Fig Tree. I was bitten by some of these just three days ago in Manaus, and Hector shows how to make an antidote to fire ant bites. He puts his arm against the tree and soon dozens of fire ants are crawling up his arm covering the skin from the wrist to the elbow. What madness is this? 'Now watch,' he says. And he rubs the ants into his skin, vigorously and hard. 'Now the bites will not sting,' he says. But alas Hector was not vigorous enough with his vigorous rubbing. A few had survived and they were biting. 'OK,' he said, 'A little bit of stinging.' He walked behind the tree and rubbed off the remaining ants. Vigorously, very vigorously.



Fire Ant & Bullet Ant

But in the Amazon the fire ants are the least of your problems. Consider the Bullet Ant. The Bullet Ant gets its name from the 'unusually severe' sting it inflicts upon its victim. Those in the know

say that it feels like a bullet entering the flesh. Also the Bullet Ant makes a screaming sound – like the shrill sound of a bullet flying through the air – as they attack.

They're about a centimetre long and live in trees, usually large colonies, making their hives either in the base of trees or higher up on the trunk. We saw some. 'Careful,' says Hector, 'that big black swelling up there – ant hive!'

Careful is an understatement. The Bullet Ant will fall or jump on whomever they perceive as a threat to their hive. Which makes them difficult to avoid. Suddenly, however innocent your intentions, or oblivious you may be to their presence, you have Bullet Ants in your hair, down your neck, on your arms, shoulders...

In one guide-book the Bullet Ant is ranked as having the most painful sting in the world – I'm not sure that victims of the box jelly fish would agree, but OK, let's say that even if it is half as painful as Australia's dreaded Irukandji, that's still painful enough to faint with pain, and in an unconscious state, continue screaming. Or – worst-case scenario – die of heart seizure induced by pain. In one description the Bullet Ant bite was described as: 'waves of burning, throbbing, all-consuming pain that continues unabated for up to 24 hours.'

Amazingly there is a tribe in Brazil's Amazonas called the Satere-Mawe that use the ants in an initiation rite of passage. For boys to become men they must wear a glove filled with hundreds of bullet ants and suffer the stings for 10 minutes. In the *youtube* video you can see these poor kids screaming, sweating profusely and shaking in agony (which can last for days), with the affected arm paralyzed from the poison.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGIZ-zUvotM

To be a real man you have to undergo this ritual 20 times. This sounds harsh but compared to the rites of passage of some tribes of Australian aboriginals, it's quite tame. In central Australia 14 year old aboriginal boys have their penises split open, engraved with tribal markings, then bound up with tree bark. So much for manhood.

At least the Mawe use ants on their own tribe, for people they like. If you want to use ants for people you don't like, the best option is the Soldier Ant. There are soldier ants in Asia and Africa, but smaller



and less ferocious compared to the Amazon soldier ant. And this is what they can do: two evil white explorers were tied down over the path of Soldier Ants, the Soldier Ants came, tore them apart with their powerful machete like jaws, and ate them alive. I saw this in a movie – it must be true.

Soldier ants on the warpath

Soldier ants are big like Bullet ants; half their size is their giant jaws. They have no eyes, just waving antennae. They march like a blind army devouring any living thing in their path, regardless of size. They can devour any sized creature the Amazon has to offer, and if you believe the movies, human beings as well. These were the ants that were featured in the 1956 classic, *Them!* They destroyed half of Los Angeles before being blown up by atomic bombs.

An army of soldier ants can number more than a million – they don't make hives or nests or anthills – they're always on the march. They stay in one place long enough for the queen to hatch a

thousands or so eggs, while the soldiers hunt for food (anything that moves). The eggs hatch and they become an army – a swarm moving steadily and swiftly along the jungle floor. Like a solid mass of eating machines, devouring anything in its path.

Soldier ants use their own bodies to build bridges, walls, pathways – in blind obedience to their own survival, anything else is the enemy and must be consumed. Another good reason not to take a nap in the rain forest. You might just be napping on the warpath of the Soldier ants.

There are more ant species in the Amazon than anywhere else; including ants called Amazon ants – warriors of the worst kind. They invade the nests of other ants to capture and enslave workers. The Amazon queen will storm a neighbouring *Formica* ant nest and kill the resident queen. Not knowing any better, the *Formica* workers then do her bidding, even caring for her own Amazon offspring. Once the slaves have reared a new generation of Amazon workers, the Amazons march en masse to another *Formica* nest, steal their pupae, and carry them home to be raised as the next generation of slaves.



The Amazon ant, polyergus, a genus of 14 species more popularly known as slave-raiding ants.

Bees

There's African bees and Africanized bees. The bees that have plagued northern Africa and southern Europe over the past decade, are Africanised bees. Africanised bees come from Brazil. Scientist Warwick Kerr created them in the rain forest environment during the 1950s by crossing a European bee with an African bee. He wanted a bee that could live in the jungle. He got a bee that swarms by the hundreds of millions, is insanely territorial, mindlessly aggressive, has killed anywhere from a few dozen to a few thousand people.



Vigilance in every direction - a tip for walking in the Amazon rainforest

There is no physical way to determine the difference between an Africanized bee and a common European bee. The difference is in behaviour. Africanized bees from Brazil are more aggressive times ten. Whereas European bees need considerable provocation before

attacking, Africanised bees need no provocation at all. European bees can only bite once. Africanised bees keep on biting. European bees defend a territory of ten metres or so, then give up the chase. Africanised bees just keep on chasing, a kilometre, maybe further. If you run into a swarm of Brazilian Africanised bees your chances of survival are limited.

They can live in the jungle, in the desert, anywhere. In the film *Killer Bees* a swarm grows so big, they consume an entire city. Brazilian Africanised bee swarms have already turned up in Mexico, Africa and Southern Europe. They'll probably be in New York and London by the 2016 Olympics.

Bugs and Parasites

I have covered the first three of a top ten list of arthropods to be avoided in the Amazon rain forest. Here follows some brief accounts of the remaining unpleasanteries.

Tarantula (Bird Eating Tarantula especially)

Amazon Wandering Spider

Ants (Aztecia ants, fire ants, warrior ants + 500 more species)

Giardia

Hookworm and Roundworm

Larva migrans

Amoebas

Assassin bugs

Ticks

Botfly

Ten Deadly and Harmful Arthropods of the Amazon

Botfly

The Botfly is a parasite and when they are ready to reproduce, they look for a warm, moist place on a person's body to lay their eggs. Sometimes they attach the eggs to a mosquito. The eggs will either hatch while the mosquito is feeding or use the site of the bite as an entry point. The larvae, commonly referred to as maggots develop inside the subcutaneous layers of the skin. They feed off of human tissue for close to eight weeks before burrowing to the surface and drop to the ground. The pupate stage lasts for about a week before they evolve into the adult form. The adult Human Botfly is once again looking for a suitable host for her eggs. In the Amazon walk, he got botfly under the skin and watched them crawl around. Horrible and disgusting.

Maybe botflies are the worst. Pregnant botfly females catch mosquitos on the wing, then lay their eggs on the mosquito's body. When the mosquito bites you, botfly larvae drop off, tunnel down the hole made by the mosquito's proboscis, and slip



in. Over the next few weeks, larva will create a little cocoon under your skin, feed on your body fluids and grow, all the while breathing from a little tube that it extends up to the surface. It starts out as tiny bottle shaped thing, growing black bristles that hold it in place. As the larva gets bigger, it starts to move around, with the

bristles scraping the nerves under the skin. If you get botflies under your skin you can watch them moving around. Unless they get in your tear ducts. Very painful and hard to get rid of.

Here's the worst bit. The botfly larvae can grow anywhere in your body, it just depends on where the eggs wind up. They could end up in your stomach, in your arms, your face, eating away visibly just beneath the skin. Or your brain. Yep, the brain. It's been documented.

Ed Stafford, a former British army captain who spent two and a half years walking the entire length of the Amazon, describes his experience of discovering botfly larvae growing in his head.

'It was like a little pin prick and it can keep you awake at night,' he says. 'But you can't squeeze them out if they are alive and you have to block off their air hole so I did that, I used a bit of super glue actually and killed it and then squeezed it out.'

'Botflies are flies that lay eggs on the underside of mosquitoes,' he adds. 'The mosquito bites you and the eggs feel the heat of the mammal, or in my case my head, and the eggs drop into the bite and then a small larvae starts growing inside the flesh... it is just eating away at the flesh in order to grow.'

You can cover the breathing hole with a piece of raw meat, eventually the larva will crawl out in order to breathe. Or, cigarette smoke blown over top of the larva's breathing hole, will coax it out. Or, covering the breathing hole with glue or nail varnish to suffocate them, as Ed Stafford did. The dead larva can be sucked out with a snake-venom extractor.

There are chiggers – small mites that burrow in warm, constricted places – like an elastic waistband –and itch like mad. Beetles that can infect a lip, make it swell up, and give you Chagas disease as a

bonus, an illness caused by a trypanosome that most likely Charles Darwin picked up during his travels on the Beagle.

Pussy Moth

Pussy moths are most dangerous in caterpillar form. The body is covered with long, red-brown hairs. It looks soft, but when frightened, its hair rises. Beneath the hair are needle-like spines connected to a poison-filled gland. The poison is injected into anything it touches.

The poison causes a burning pain, swelling and numbness to the site of entry, and in severe cases it can cause high fever, vomiting and paralysis. The caterpillar of the pussy moth can feed on just about anything green, and any kind of flowering plant; in short they could be anywhere, and while death by pussy moth caterpillar is rare, getting stung is less so.



Nice names - horrible creatures; pussy moth & kissing bug

Kissing Bug

Also known as the assassin bug often bite their victims around the mouth and nose while they are sleeping, hence the name, Kissing Bug. There are several species of Kissing Bug, and some have a painless bite, while others are said to be the most painful bite of any

insect. Hence, assassin bug.

The real danger comes after the bite. The Kissing Bug spreads Chagas' disease. Some victims show signs immediately. They suffer rash, fevers and vomiting. Often the skin near the eyes will swell up, and in some cases the victim dies. Other victims are asymptomatic for years. The disease will lurk in their blood only to surface twenty to thirty years after the initial bite. At that point it is difficult to determine the cause of the heart and digestive problems the victim is suffering and is often misdiagnosed.

Mosquito

A good reason for taking insect repellent when walking in the forest: *Mosquitos kill more people every year than any other bug or animal in the world.*

Mosquitos in the Amazon – though thankfully few around the Rio Negro – carry malaria, yellow fever, and encephalitis.

Everyone on the boat is taking malaria tablets and the general consensus is they make you feel nauseous. I haven't taken any. Hugo, who has been travelling up and down the Amazon, from Peru to Belem, says he's never taken a malaria tablet in his life. 'How could I?' he says. 'I'd have to take them all the time.' Nor has he ever had malaria. Unfortunately thousands of people in the Amazon region, and in particular around Manaus, do, every year. The malaria parasite destroys blood cells and clogs the flow of blood. In Africa a child dies from malaria every 30 seconds.

Hookworms

Cutaneous larva migrans (abbreviated CLM) is a skin disease, caused by the larvae of the hookworm and the most common species causing the disease is the *Ancylostoma braziliense* – Brazilian hookworm. The worst bees, the worst hookworms, the

Brazil Brazil

worst snakes and the worst spiders – all from Brazil. Maybe it's nature's payback for all the good looking women.

CLM is also called 'creeping eruption' because it creeps around beneath the skin. The medical term CLM literally means 'wandering larvae in the skin', and you are most likely to pick it up from sandy river banks, much like where we are standing right now.

Further Reading:

<http://scientistatwork.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/02/03/preparing-to-leave-the-amazon-and-telling-tales-of-parasites-past/>



Brazilian hookworm

5. Bloodthirsty Predators

Our friends from South Africa are once again quick to point out that Amazonian wildlife is tame by South African standards, and, as they have said on repeated occasions, also small. There is no Big Five in the Amazon, maybe a middle-sized three, and the chances of seeing a jaguar or anaconda is remote (That would be two of the middle-sized three). Number three is the Black Caiman and we have seen a few of these already.

Caimans are part of the same crocodylian group that includes alligators and crocodiles, and when they leap at you from the river bank and collide their huge nostrils into the side of a flimsy canoe which is all that separates you from a certain death – the taxonomy seems unimportant. They are huge ferocious bastards that grow up to 5 metres long and have 74 long pointed teeth.



Africa's 'Big Five': Lion, Leopard, Elephant, Buffalo, Rhinoceros

After dinner Sethefricka Ed fetches the video camera from his cabin and reels off about 4GB from last year's trip to Krugers safari park.

'This is taken from the car, see?'

'Lions and giraffes – yes, big.'

'Yeh. The Big Five. Nothing like it in the Amazon.'

'Guess not. And over there? Is that a hyena?'

'Hyena?'

Ed takes a closer look.

'That's a hippo. Camera's shaking a bit, that's all. The Hippo, you know – that's the most dangerous of all the Big Five.'

'Is that right?'

'Kills more people than the other four put together.'

'Sounds dangerous.'

'Very dangerous. And what do we see here?' he gestures, looking out the cabin porthole. 'Monkeys and two-toed sloths.'

'Well, jaguars are pretty big.'

'Sure. What are the odds of seeing a jaguar?'

Meanwhile I'm trying to work out the remaining Big Four. Dave from Brisbane Australia interjects. 'A hippo's not a Big Five.'

'Well,' says Ed. 'They're still bloody big.'

It's up to Dave from Brisbane to straighten out Ed. The Big Five are named by their difficulty to hunt, not size. Lion, elephant, black rhino, buffalo and leopard. Giraffes and hippopotami don't make the list. And what about the *white* rhino? Too rare?

Later on Ed suggests that Disneyworld is the best place he and his wife have ever visited, and if they had the chance to go tomorrow they'd be off like a shot. Eileen agrees, and this might account for why they regard the Amazon as a disappointment. The Disneyworld crocodiles maybe made of plastic, but they're big enough to measure up against the Big Five. And there's no Tinkerbell on the Amazon, just poison dart frogs.

Brazil Brazil

The largest predator of the Amazon basin is the jaguar – large and extremely shy. In 20 years of jungle trekking Hugo claims never to have seen one. ‘Ocelots, yes; the jaguar, no. More jaguars in Bahia than Amazon.’

‘Kruger is only a couple of hours drive,’ says Ed, and Eileen nods. ‘Maybe an hour and a half.’



The Amazon ‘big three’: Anaconda, Jaguar, Black Caiman

One could sense Australian Dave preparing some kind of pithy remark, but the entry of the dessert tray propitiously averts any kind of antipodean altercation – in most cases the old colonies vent out

generations of colonial frustration with games of cricket and rugby – clearly not a viable alternative in the Amazon basin. However, at every riverside clearing and community, you couldn't miss how the locals had hacked out a football field (ie soccer), and young kids, barefoot, kicking around a ball.

Israeli David looks from the deck with admiration – he knows every Brazilian league, follows every Brazilian match, and was present for the end of the season game at the Flamengo stadium in Rio two weeks earlier. 'They are still playing matches' he explains, 'but nothing serious.'

After dinner is the night expedition – ten of us in a large canoe, Hugo searching the banks for creatures, which for my part, I feel would be better off left alone.

From the reeds he grabs a huge frog, which starts screaming into the darkness. Who would have thought a reptile could express dread so loud and mammalian manner. 'Put him down! Put him down!' says Etta in the back, wife of Israeli David and yoga instructor. 'I can't stand his screaming.'

'This is a female,' explains Hugo. 'Very poisonous. All frogs are poisonous. And females more poisonous than the males.'

Seems like another good reason to put her back in the reeds.

Some Amazon Predators

Jaguar

Cayman

Anaconda

Ocelot

Electric eels

Piranha (Tiger is big; red belly is small)

Freshwater stingray
Poison dart frog
Vampire bats
Candiru

Ten Predatory & Dangerous Creatures of the Amazon; 'Big Three' Highlighted

So which predators are most likely to concern the nervous traveller treading the trails of the Amazon rain forest?

Jaguars, Caimans and Anacondas

Jaguar (or cougar) – they may be one of the most dangerous animals in the Amazon, but deaths by jaguar per annum total one or two. Sure, they're big – two metres long, and heavy build (we saw a couple in the Manaus CIGS zoo. Big beautiful, ill-tempered). They're also shy, do their hunting by night, so the chances of seeing one in the wild are remote.



Caimans are supposedly comparatively harmless (we're told) next to crocodiles and alligators, but the Black Caiman can be as big as six metres long, has 74 long and razor sharp teeth and can devour piranhas, capybaras and giant river otters. Also, according to the

guide book, humans. So how does that tally with Hugo's contention; 'They're harmless...'?

Because directly in front of us, is one of these so-called harmless 'human-devouring' Black Caiman's, with it's red beady eyes leering from the darkness, watching and waiting.

The canoe drifts up to the riverbank and the distance between the 74 teeth and flaring nostrils, and the very flimsy wood of the green painted canoe, has narrowed down to about half a metre. We look at each other eye to eye. In retrospect not the best strategy. He leaps – unexpectedly, from 0 to 100 in less than a second, his pointed head crashing on the side of the boat, and missing the uncovered open space (to wit my exposed legs) with a centremetre to spare. So close to losing any risk the Brazilian Wandering Spider might pose to inflicting the dreaded priapasm on my part, yet the caiman possibly inconvenienced by, at most, a mild headache, hardly seems fair. After all, he started it.



What about the anacondas. Are they as 'harmless' as the caimans? Of course there are anaconda, says Hector. What do you expect? It's the Amazon. But the risk of being crushed to death and ingested by

an anaconda is fairly small. This from the same guy who says Caimans don't attack people.

A large snake of the boa constrictor type, the anaconda continues to grow throughout its entire life. It can grow up to nine metres, which is as long as a bus. It will squeeze its pray until it cannot breathe, then swallow it, not chewing at all. From capybara to humans, it doesn't eat often, as it will take more than a week to digest, according to the size of the prey.

So sure. Of course there are anacondas. The largest snake on the planet. They can swallow dogs, pigs, turtles and crocodiles. That's right, crocodiles. And jaguars. Yes, they can eat up jaguars, the king of the rain forest, although if its any consolation there is a *youtube* video of a jaguar defeating an anaconda. It's a gruesome fight and a close call for the jaguar – no footage about the jaguar's recovery, or how he was feeling the next day. He sure wasn't running around and cheering when he walked from the twitching, scratched up anaconda. Bruised, more like.

Even small human beings, babies and children are more likely to fall prey to the anaconda; they are crushed to death then swallowed whole. The larger human beings they crush up into a swallowable pulp, breaking up all the bones and the cranium, and digest the remains slowly over several days.

For the nervous traveller the presence of anacondas in the vicinity is not especially calming. They can be on the ground, in a tree or under water – their preferred environment is swamps and rivers and damp rainforest. Which pretty much describes where we are now. They are huge and very quiet. Up to nine metres long – that's as long as a bus – and weighing anything up to around 200 kilos, maybe more. That's the weight of two Sumo wrestlers combined. Once their surprisingly warm and dry reptilian body wraps around

you, you have about a minute of frantic screaming before your bones are crushed and lungs drained of air. Try fighting off two Sumo wrestlers with your hands tied.

'Another thing about the anaconda,' says Hector.

'Whats that?'

'They have very bad tempers.'

'Great.'

'Especially the young ones.'

'The young ones?'

'Yes. If you are very unlucky you come across a nest of baby anacondas. When they are born, they are alive, and even more bad tempered than their mothers.'

'But small, right?'

'Small but very many – maybe twenty in a nest.'

Imagine, falling into a nest of twenty bad tempered anacondas.

They are stealthy and sleek in the water. Their eyes and nasal openings are on top of their heads, allowing them to lay in wait for prey while remaining nearly completely submerged. Like Angelina Jolie in *Beowulf*.



Anacondas in the movies - Anaconda (1997)

Angelina's dad, Jon Voigt, fell prey to a rare giant anaconda in the movie, *Anaconda* (1997) filmed in Brazil's Amazon basin. OK, he was a psychopathic villain who deserved what he got; nevertheless... At least six other B actors met similar fates before Jon Voigt, whereas Ice Cube and Jennifer Lopez, almost crushed to death by the 'animatronic anaconda' (as anacondas go it wasn't the most convincing), survived to see Jon Voigt get his just desserts. (The film went on to receive six Golden Raspberry awards: Worst Picture, Worst Actor (Jon Voigt), Worst Director, Worst Screenplay, Worst New Star ('the animatronic anaconda') and Worst Screen Couple (Voigt and 'the animatronic anaconda'). Amazingly, the production company went on to produce three sequels, and if I was to put in a critical word, I would say of varying artistic quality).

Snakes

Normally snakes don't make me nervous. There are many snakes in Australia, all of them poisonous, not least in the bush around the township of Sassafras where I grew up. Still, apart from the anaconda, there are snakes in the Amazon that should make a person, not just nervous, but petrified.

The Himeralli, for example... This is what happens if you inadvertently tread on Himeralli snake – affectionately known as the *boichumbeguacu* ('the snake with a flat nose') – the most poisonous snake in the Amazon. It will bite you and you will collapse almost immediately unable to breathe. Then your body will go into paralysis as the poison sweeps through your body at a devastating rate. There's a kinder version of this snake – a coral snake – in Guatemala that is known by the locals as the 20 minute snake, because that's about how long you have before it kills you (not true actually – it takes about a day). The Amazon version is faster with the most potent venom to be found in a snake (low yield, high

toxicity). The world's deadliest snakes can be found in Australia (of course); the Belcher sea snake (very rare, found in the sea, and not known to bite) and inland taipan (less rare, does bite, very deadly).



The Himeralli is not so long, with vivid black and red, sometimes orange colouring, and in the rainforest near Tikal one time, I saw three kids in bare feet jabbing at one with a stick, and having a great time. That's when I found out about the 20 minute snake nick-name. Our Guatemalan guide had a few words with the kids, the snake disappeared, the kids stopped laughing and Manuel came back shaking his head in exasperation. High above in the trees the monkeys were howling like lunatics.

Anyway, that's not the worst news. If you get bitten by 'the snake with the flat nose', it's most likely from paddling in the water or getting into or out of your Amazon canoe. The Himeralli is namely, a good swimmer. It spends most of its life in slow-moving bodies of water that have dense vegetation.

Hugo's pal Eduardo, who is leading the jungle walk today, is particularly well-versed in the folklore of poisonous snakes, spiders and scorpions. The Himeralli, more commonly known as the coral

snake, is the least of our worries, he says. Yes, they are deadly, but if you leave them alone they do not bite. What you have to watch out for, he says, is the 'surucucu'.

More widely known as the bushmaster, this is one of the largest and most dangerous snakes in South America. This snake is capable of multiple-bite strikes and the injection of large amounts of venom. Even the bite of a juvenile specimen can be fatal. The good news is this snake mainly comes out at night, so that contact with humans is minimal.



Surucucu (l) & Bushmaster (r)

Which is another good reason for not encouraging night walks in the rainforest. The combined efforts of the *surucucu*, the Brazilian Wandering Spider, rabid vampire bats (not impossible) and a nocturnal hunter called the Jaguar, is sufficient for most Amazonian experts to choose the prudent side of caution.

The night wandering surucucu is a hinged-fanged venomous snake, with exceptionally long fangs that can penetrate deeply yet which can be tucked away in the roof of their mouth when not in use. It is known as the 'cascabela muta' – the silent rattle-snake – in Spanish speaking regions of the Amazon, and Bushmaster in Latin is *lachesis* - the 'silent bringer of death.'

There's more. It is the largest venomous snake in the New World and the second largest in the world after the King Cobra, one specimen measuring in at 4.2 metres. The Bushmaster has the reputation of being extremely aggressive. They lay 10 to 14 eggs, which hatch into young snakes that immediately disappear underground. They start feeding on young rodents, and when they get too big for rodent burrows, they move above ground and look for larger prey. Like tourists and bushwalkers.

The Bushmaster does not do well in captivity, invariably dying in a short time. Therefore it is seldom found in any zoo.



Jararaca - 'fire stick' snake; le fed-de-lance

Another particularly nasty viper is the 'jararaca' (means 'big snake' in the language of local tribes). This thick-bodied lowland rain forest species occurs near waterways and is common in agricultural and urban areas where it often enters houses in search of rodents. This makes it the most lethal snake. It is responsible for many deaths, partly because it tends to live near humans, and partly because – who would have guessed – it has an irritable disposition and strikes without provocation. Also it strikes fast – quicker than the eye, and within a short range of 5 to 10 centimetres.

Also known as the Fer-de-Lance (fire-stick) the *jararaca* has a haemotoxic venom, which causes much painful, massive tissue destruction, and profuse internal bleeding. Once again it's the nests you have to watch out for. The females give birth to some 45 to 70 live youngsters per litter. These newly born are ferociously aggressive and just as dangerous as their parents. Furthermore, because they have a hard time feeding, they are more likely to be active in bushes and grass after sunup, a time when most vipers seek cover.

In a rainforest filled with dangling vines and straggling bark, there is another snake that must be mentioned, possibly the cause of more anxiety than any other. This is a tree snake called the Eyelash Pit Viper which – if you're close enough – is easy to identify by several spiny scales it has over each eye. Unfortunately, if you are that close you run the risk of getting bitten or spat at in the eye, and dying a slow and horrible death.



The nastiest of them all; Eyelash Pit Viper tree-snake

'Also,' says Hector; 'Very very bad temper,' says Hector. 'They attack anything just for the hell of it.'

Check the guide-book once again. (Should never have brought the damn thing – there's enough material in here to give you nightmares for a month):

This arboreal snake has a prehensile tail and seldom comes to the ground. It feels more secure in low-hanging trees and bushes where it looks for tree frogs and birds. Common in palm trees and cacao plantations, it is sometimes encountered in the felling of trees and bushes.

The Eyelash Pit Viper has an irritable disposition and strikes with little provocation. It is a dangerous species because most of its bites occur on the upper extremities.

Its venom is haemotoxic and spells instant death to birds. In humans, it causes severe tissue damage and deaths have occurred - though not frequently - from the bite of this snake.

Not frequently? What does that mean? Once a year? Once a week? Today?

Bats, Frogs and Eels



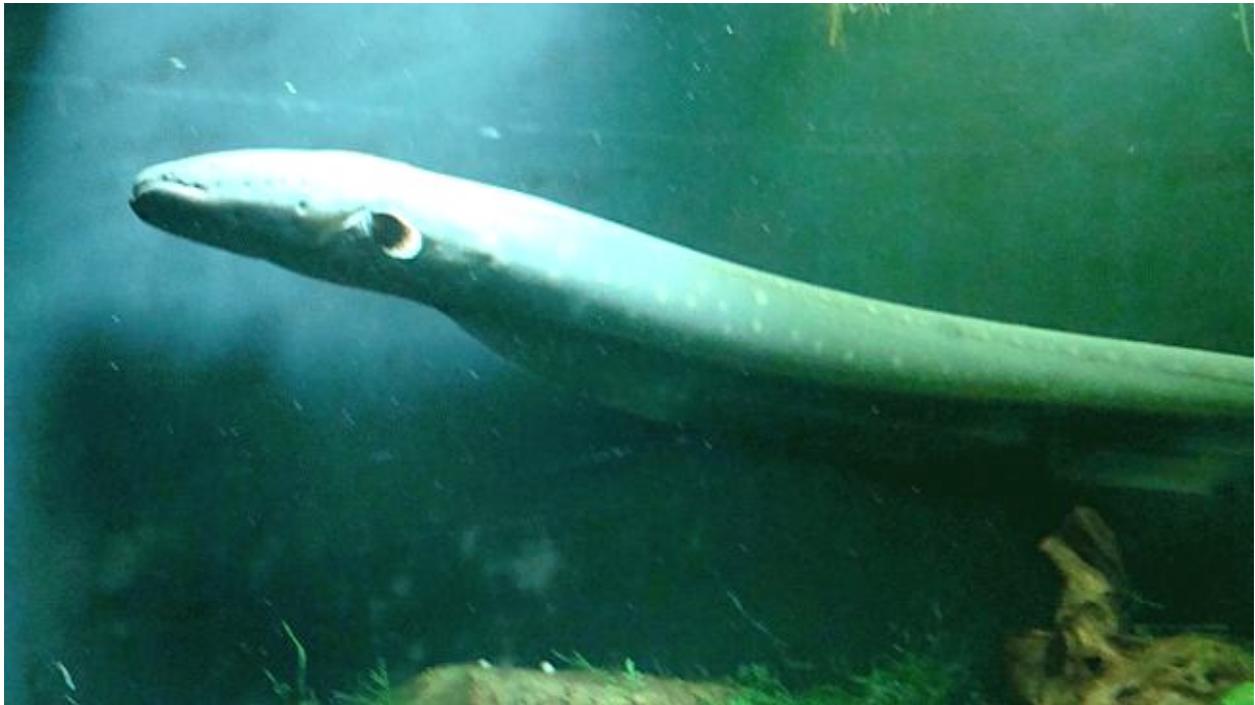
Poison dart frog – a small, colourful little fellow with enough poison to spit out and kill up to 100 people. It has the most powerful poison known by man, but the frog itself is harmless if left alone. At last, a creature of the Amazon that doesn't have a bad temper. Local indians use this poison as well in the tip of their arrows for hunting. The trick is to get the poison from the frog without it killing you first.

And then there's the bats – vampire bats, that come out at sunset, fly around in the rainforest, bite you in the neck with long venom-filled fangs before you have time

to see them, and inject you with rabies. Vampire bats are about the size of a human thumb.

Sounds too fanciful? Too paranoid? This from a report from the Brazilian Ministry of Health:

An outbreak of rabies was reported in October 2005 from rural areas in the northeastern state of Maranhao, causing 23 fatal cases. The outbreak was caused by bites from vampire bats, which proliferated after destruction of local forests.



But it's once you get in the water that things get really nasty. Horrible, vicious creatures like the electric eel, that thrash about in the Amazon waters charged with enough electricity to stun or kill an average size human.

It's called an Amazon Eel, but in fact it is a kind of catfish, with nasty sharp teeth, and guess what – a bad temper. Up to three metres in length of angry, vindictive, razor-toothed, electrically

Brazil Brazil

charged catfish swimming about somewhere not far from here, maybe under this very flimsy low-lying wooden canoe. It was enough to see a couple of them thrashing about for a piece of raw meat at the Amazon marine centre.

Yet as terrible as they are, they are nowhere near as terrible as the most feared predator of the Amazon waters – the piranha.

Further Reading:

<http://www.venomoussnakes.net/>

<http://www.iwokrama.org/forest/snakes.htm>

<http://www.wilderness-survival.net/snakes-5.php>

<http://www.czbrats.com/Facts/snakes.htm>

<http://emedicine.medscape.com/article/771701-overview>
Snake Envenomation, Coral

<http://www.unique-southamerica-travel-experience.com/amazon-rainforest-animals.html>



6. Swimming with Piranhas

The piranha has a powerful jaw and razor-like triangular teeth that can shred flesh from bone in a matter of seconds.

The exploits of piranhas are exaggerated by Hollywood films, but only a little. Yes, they can tear off fingers, or toes, or any other extremities visible beneath the surface of the water, and though it is rare, it does happen. Piranhas are territorial and quite ruthless when



Piranhas in popular culture: the 1978 film, remade in 3D 2010 & sequel 2012
it comes to interlopers – also in times of drought, when they find themselves stuck in waterways with which they are not familiar. It also true that piranhas have a predilection for frenzied attacks on all

Brazil Brazil

sorts of unlikely creatures, either because they're crazy with confusion, or they just want to show their piranha bravado by tearing dogs, and cattle and pigs into screaming slices of raw meat. Who can forget those terrible scenes with Rosa Klebb's colleagues and adversaries are fed to the piranhas, shrieking and kicking and arching the back with agonised strains, as it apparently is the spinal bone the piranha herd are most interested in, then digress to the softer, more palatable parts of human tissue.



From the movie Piranha 3D (2010) - poetic license

Just how many piranha are out there today? How well fed are they? Am I close to their review? And just what are the odds that they go for the spinal cord first or the genitalia? Considering the threat posed by candirus, Brazilian Wandering Spiders and piranhas, one begins to understand the Brazilian men's penchant for holding, scratching, tugging, adjusting, and just checking... what is locally referred to as the Brazilian tug. Consider this scene from the feature

film, *Piranha*...

In the 2010 version of *Piranha* a wholesome group of Americans holidaying on a cabin cruiser is attacked by a school of especially large and aggressive 'tiger' specimens. In the climax 'sleazy guy' is being hauled up out of the water by 'college girl', only not fast enough. His legs get chewed off and when he is finally dragged on deck, with piranhas still gnawing at his leg bones and crotch, he gets the best line in the movie: 'They stole my penis! They stole my penis!' For some reason, with the combination of the candiru (see below), the Brazilian wandering spider and the piranhas, and Amazon warrior women, the Amazon basin is intent on depriving men of their sex organs, which may account for the aforementioned uninhibited Brazilian male's predilection for checking that everything is where it should be...



The reality - Piranha fishing on the Amazon

No doubt, terrible things can happen on the Amazon. You just have to see the films about piranhas, anacondas, tarantulas, soldier ants, cannibals and giant crocodiles.

OK, *Piranha* was set in Florida, but it was about a boat of tourists getting eaten up by Amazonian piranhas. *Rogue* was set in Australia's Northern Territory; also about a boat load of tourists, this time getting eaten up by a mutated giant fresh water crocodile. It could happen here. *Anaconda* was set in the Amazon, and a boat load of tourists ended up being eaten by a giant anaconda. (Almost worth the price of the ticket just to see the giant serpent get his fill of ham and cheese. Yes, we're referring to the acting talents of Angelina's dad.)

Other things can happen too. In *Aguirre: Wrath of God* (1974) a boat load of European tourists (Spanish conquistadors) are wiped out by hostile natives with poison-tipped blowgun darts. In *Lana: Queen of the Amazon* (1964), German explorers with bad intentions, penetrate the Brazilian jungle intent on stealing some kind of legendary Amazon treasure. What fools. As in *Aguirre* they are all slaughtered in a variety of horrible ways; the lucky ones are killed by Amazon warrior women.

What about *Massacre in Dinosaur Valley* (1985)? A plane crashes in the Amazon jungle, and the passengers are ticked off one by one; either eaten by cannibals, killed by white slave traders, eaten by jaguars, swallowed by anacondas, and for the big finale, ravaged by murderous piranha fish. If memory serves correctly I think there were a couple of survivors, but honestly, in films like this, who cares.

More discerning cinema-goers may argue that this kind of Amazon blood-letting is purely the realm of speculative fiction. However, *Walking the Amazon* (Ed Stafford's two and a half year hike) and *Big*

Brazil Brazil

River Man (which follows Martin Strel as he swims 3,375 miles of the Amazon River – the world’s longest swim), 2009 and 2011 respectively, are contemporary documentaries, and both of these lunatic guys and their cohorts fall victim to parasites, bites, bugs, poisonous plants, ants, slimy things in the water, bats – and always close by is the threat of water snakes, piranhas, candiru and amoebic dysentery.

I remember seeing these films, with Ed Stafford, a former British army captain in his early 30s, pulling out botfly lava crawling visibly under the skin of his bald scalp, and Martin Strel shaking off water snakes, and thinking nothing would get me within a million miles of that place. Yet now, on a hot day in December, stripped down to my swimming trunks, I am about to plunge into those same murky waters.

Ed Stafford walked 6,000 kilometres, suffered an estimated 200,000 mosquito and ant bites, 600 wasp stings, almost died of starvation, yet, he recollects, his most terrifying encounter was in the river itself, attacked by a two-metre long Amazon eel capable of producing a potentially lethal 500 watt shock.



In the book of *The Man Who Swam the Amazon*, author Matthew Mohlke writes that the piranha was the least of the Amazon

swimmer's worries. There are far worse creatures to be nervous about. Amongst these is the above-mentioned *candiru*, just a few centimetres long, yet the very name of which fills dread into the heart of any sensible prospective Amazon swimmer. Why? Here is a letter from a web travel forum:



Can the candirú fish swim upstream into your urethra?

May 19th

Dear Cecil:

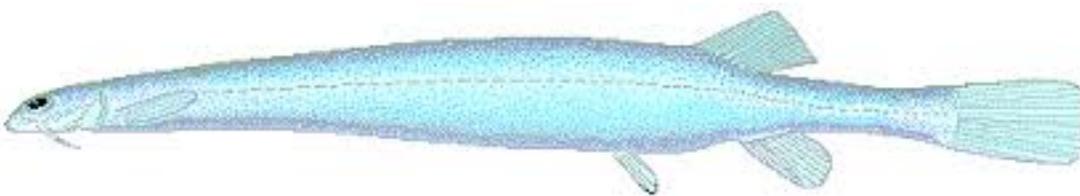
In the past I have heard tell that you should never pee in the Amazon River lest a certain fish swim upstream into your penis and lock its fins in place in your urethra. Of course I always dismissed this as a tall tale spread by the natives to scare tourists. However, I read recently in the newspaper about the candirú fish, which allegedly does just this.

It's not impossible. Here is a description from a 1973 article in Urology by John Herman:

Brazil Brazil

One of the strangest [stories from the Amazon concerned] a fish that was urinophilic and could swim up the urethra or into the vagina of the unwary native who urinated while bathing in the Amazon. It was said that this fish, known as candirú [in Brazil; as carnero in Spanish-speaking countries], was long, thin, and capable of forcing its way into the body's passageways following the trail of urine. Once inside it would eat away the mucous membranes and tissues until hemorrhage would kill it or the host. It was also said that even if one caught the fish by the tail, once in the urethra it could not be pulled out because it would spread itself like an umbrella. Indeed, rumors had it that penectomy was preferred to the misery and pain associated with leaving the fish in the urethra!

A type of catfish, the candirú is known to lodge in the gill cavities of larger fish, where it subsists by sucking the blood of its host. Specimens average three inches in length and a quarter inch in diameter. A fast, powerful swimmer, the fish is smooth and slimy, with sharp teeth and backward-pointing spines on its gill covers that make it virtually impossible to remove. Still, it's difficult to imagine how even the most agile of fishes could squirm into someone's penis during a brief dip in the water. One account suggests that the candiru pose a bigger threat to women due to the greater dimensions of the female aperture.



Still, the mere rumour that there is a creature with an uncanny ability to swim upwards through a stream of urine, and lodge itself in the urinary tract by swelling barbs of its scales thus making removal an impossibility, is enough to fire the imagination and quell any ambition of an afternoon dip. That a young male victim pleads for a surgical penectomy, regardless the consequences, to be simply quit the agony he was unable to endure, is also a consideration.

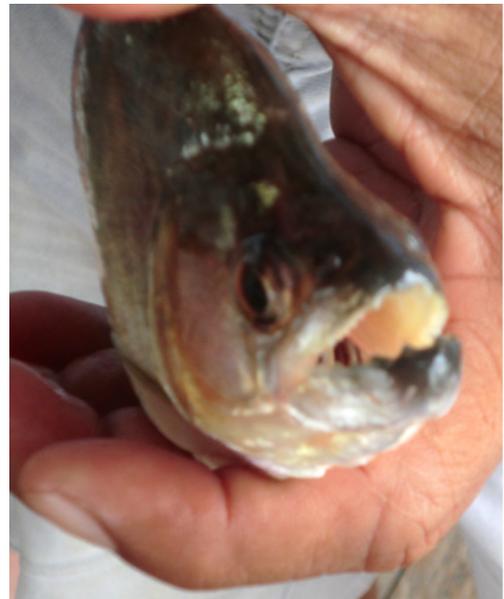
There are other risks. Snail larva for example. Small enough to easily enter through the human skin. Leads to *Schistosmiasis* (see life-threatening tropical diseases) also known as *bilharziosis* or snail fever. Should we go for a swim? I wouldn't, said the smart guy engineer from South Africa.

Some fear the aggressive tiger-piranha. Perhaps with good reason. Well, I knew the piranha stories were exaggerated, but nowhere did I read anything about parasitic snails. Until this notification from the Brazilian Ministry of Health. The good news is that snail fever is rarely fatal. The bad news... it can't be cured, and most likely leads to cancer of the bladder. Or infection and erosion of other internal organs. Symptoms include abdominal pains, fever, fatigue, disorientation, skin rash and itching... Hardly any point going any further. Snail Fever. Just so I get could a picture swimming with the dolphins. Hey. Swimming. In the Amazon! No mention of parasites living on snails, so tiny they cannot be seen with the human eye....

Creatures to avoid in the Amazon:

Candiru
Piranha
Electric Eel
Water snake
Cayman
slugs
Snail larva
Amoeba

*Ten Worst Things to Discover While
Taking a Swim in the Amazon*



So there you are, on the bank of the Amazon, knowing that beneath those dark, murky waters are lurking the vicious eel, sharp toothed and cantankerous piranha, and predatory schools of candiru. Maybe

a five metre long black caiman with its 74 teeth, almost certainly amoebas, as well as anacondas, water snakes, snails, slugs, etc... So why take the plunge, especially considering that once in the dark water you can barely see more than half a metre.



The reason is simple: Amazon pink river dolphins. Playful, smiling creatures that leap out of the water and say things like: 'Come on in, the water's fine,' and, 'Don't forget the fish.' Besides which, if the pink dolphins are making their presence felt with their splashing and playing, the nasty creatures will keep their distance. Won't they?

They are half blind, rubbery feeling and jump about all over the place. Known locally as they are the subject of all kinds of myths and legends. Myths such as young native girls impregnated by them, and

having both seen the dolphins and the young native girls, its not difficult to understand why.



End of Part One