

## Manaus, Brazil\*

Bret Wallach

A thousand miles from its mouth, the Amazon splits. Bear left, on the white-water side of the river, and you're heading for Peru. Bear right, on the dark waters of the Rio Negro, and you're on the way to Venezuela. This is the site of Manaus, population an astonishing one and a half million. Stay on the right, hugging the right bank of the Negro, and you pass a few radio towers, a ferry terminal, an oil depot, and within a mile the city's high rises. Brazilian cities are thick with highrises, but here in Manaus they come as a shock, rising in the middle of the world's greatest rain forest.

The Amazon at Manaus is deep enough for ocean-going vessels, and the city has a new port busily handling containerized shipments and bulk freight. The adjoining turn-of-the-century customs house, an immaculately restored granite castle, overlooks a stream of trucks squeezing into downtown traffic. A hundred yards downstream -- an awkward term here, for the Negro is too huge and sluggish to have a visible current -- there is another and far more primitive dock for domestic traffic. The best view of it is from the top of the massive granite wall, 30 feet high, that is the river's bank at high water. When the river is low, a 50-foot skirt of river bottom extends, filthy with paper and tires, cobbles and sewage, from the wall to a low embankment, just wide enough to walk on and stay out of the muck.

Day and night, trucks edge out to this embankment. Some are loaded with beer and soft drinks; others carry empty five-gallon tins, watertight canisters for use somewhere in the forest. A third is stacked with bulging sacks of *farinha*, the white meal from the manioc tuber, very coarsely ground but a staple here. Porters hoist a sack of the flour or maybe three cases of a popular soft drink called *guaraná* onto their backs. They step onto the embankment and take two or three bouncing steps on a plank that stretches over the water's edge to a floating barge. Two or three barges are tied up in a line, and to them are tied a dozen riverboats. The centers of the barges have cabins that force the porters to walk only a step from the water. Despite the awkwardness, the porters slowly fill the lower or freight decks of the boats. Overhead, the passenger decks provide open seating as well as cabins, little more than closets barely large enough to turn around in while undressing. From atop the masonry wall back of the scene, the boats tied up at the barge docks look like pigs at a sow. Often there is a boat unable to reach the barges: it jams itself in like a runt between two others.

The juxtaposition of new and old is equally striking in the city. Manaus is a free-trade zone, and on the east side of town there is a large industrial park with companies like Honda, Gillette, Sharp, and Philco. Back in the unplanned part of the city, Phillips has a big plant: rent a car from the local Hertz agent and you pass it on the road that leads past the local Chevrolet and Mercedes dealerships and the Coca-Cola bottling plant. The road continues to the city's spanking new airport. Varig brings a DC-10 here weekly, nonstop from Miami; Air France has a flight stopping on the way from Lima to Paris.

Like their counterparts in so many parts of the developing world, the architects of the new Manaus favor concrete, and though the lines of their buildings are as clean as modern can be, the architects use the material as though mass is beauty. Perhaps the architects are vainly struggling against the decay that reaches up every post, every leg in the lowland tropics. But within a couple of years, the concrete starts flaking. Then the paint fades and weeds sprout from cracks.

Often, the sewage backs up in these buildings so that the smell of urine carries down hallways. Still, nobody seems much deterred. The factory parking lots are filled with company buses. At shift end, they join the flood of public buses that are everywhere in Manaus. Many of the workers live along the banks of the creeks that cross the city on their way to the Negro. The shallow creeks are black with sewage, and their banks are lined with chaotically clustered shacks reached by wooden walkways bridging the marshy creek edges. It is a strange sight: a woman wearing a tailored business suit and carrying an attaché case walks a few minutes after five o'clock down some rickety steps, along a plank sidewalk, and into an oversized crate.

Closer to the city center, the buildings of the older Manaus are straight out of nineteenth century Paris. Immediately behind the granite wall overlooking the riverboat docks, for example, the public market occupies a set of wrought-iron buildings with vaults of stained glass, mostly blues and golds. One of the market buildings is for meat -- great chunks of beef sitting in pools of blood. Another is for fish: perhaps 50 vendors stand amid piles of 20-pound fish pulled from the great river. The floor is wet enough and the knives at each stall sharp enough that you don't spend a lot of time looking at the ceiling. But once outside you do look: the curves and detailing are astonishing.

The imported flavor is not just architectural, either. A few blocks from the market is Manaus' main shopping street, Av. Eduardo Rebeiro. You can walk into the shop of S. Monteiro and buy a new German piano, or a Braun coffee grinder, or a Japanese color television. Step outside and you can buy a monograph on Bergson at the newsstand. Kodak's bathing-suit girl winks at you from 20 shops. Pretty soon it seems reasonable to hear American popular songs on Manaus radio and to find Manaus teenagers playing Donkey Kong.

This cosmopolitan bubble in the jungle ends almost at the city limits. Ten miles from downtown you are in the forest you expect in this part of the world. You pass schools so plain--such simple wood-frame buildings--that it's like the American South 50 years ago. You pass churches cut out of the bush and set back a couple of hundred yards from the road. You pass stores of a sort, huts where you can buy sodas; the stores crowd along the highway, at least 20 of them within a 10-mile stretch. There are farmsteads, some of them estates behind walls topped with broken glass. Most are only simple frame buildings set in fenced yards. Drying clothes hang from the barbed-wire fences fronting the highway, and behind the houses there is a cleared, blackened patch of ground. Burning is still going on in many places -- new clearances of 20 or 40 acres, with a few trees left standing on the blackened ground. The soil, exposed in road cuts, is extraordinarily deep, light-colored, and with layers of pebbly concretions that lie between thick fine-textured layers. Except for an inch or two of dark humus, the profile looks like a textbook case of nutrient stripping. Few of the clearings are actually cultivated: some of the cleared land is in sugar cane, but most of it is pastured or apparently abandoned to secondary forest.

Eventually you turn back to Manaus, for the probable alternative is to follow the road 500 miles north to Boa Vista. Back at the docks at dusk, the porters are still at work, threading past hundreds of passengers crowding the barges and finding the boats they want. The destinations are marked: Tabatinga, Leticia, Benjamin Constant. Judging from the highway to Boa Vista, most of the homes to which these people are returning are desperately poor. Yet the dock is full of laughter; the anger that belongs to deprivation has, for the moment, been pushed overboard. The river is utterly dark: there is not a light to be seen, upstream or down. One by one the boats pull away, brightly lit by bulbs strung fore and aft from their masts.

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