

Lost in the Amazon

By Thomas C. Esakin

First Draft: May 1998 / Second Draft: June 1998 / Third Draft: July 1998

Vacations with adventure! Whether experiencing voodoo ceremonies in Haiti, boating to site-remains of once-thriving Haida communities in Canada's Queen Charlotte Islands, driving around the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico to visit Mayan ruin-sites, hiking the Inca Trail through the Andes to reach Machu Picchu, or having my coconut read by a Santera priestess in Cuba, I prefer trips which help me experience the variety and richness of life. In March 1998, I visited a remote region of the Brazilian Amazon. While I had done all my usual advance research prior to a trip, none of it prepared me for the struggle for survival I would encounter by spending three harrowing days lost in the Amazon.

Upon deplaning at Manaus, Brasil, passengers are immediately hit by the hot, humid air that dominates the Amazon region. I had just collected my luggage and had not yet had time to digest my surroundings when I was accosted by a half dozen women, eager to sell me space on a packaged jungle tour. Unassuming tourists who buy these tours sold at the airport quickly learn that the prices they pay can be 100% higher than prices paid for the same tour purchased from an agent in downtown Manaus. I freed myself from these newly found Brazilian friends and quickly jumped into a taxi headed for the city centre.

I was soon in for the cab-ride of my life. Ignoring all speed limits - which seems to be a requirement for drivers from throughout South America - my driver was swerving around cars and speedily turning corners on the road to downtown Manaus. At the speeds we were going, I was uncertain if I would even live to see downtown. I found myself holding on for dear life. As we neared the city centre, my window provided me with quick flashes of concrete structures along the roadside, most colourfully painted in reds, sky blues, or yellows, and almost all desperately in need of repair. I also caught images of countless people walking along the side of the highway. After one half hour of uncountable near misses by my cab driver, we finally pulled up to my hotel. It was an unforgettable welcome to the largest city in the heart of the Amazon basin.

Manaus, an industrial City of over one million people, is located in northwestern Brasil. The City is situated on the banks of the Rio Negro, near the convergence of the Negro and the Rio Solimoes, and serves as the major inland port on the Amazon. The City prospered during the rubber boom of the mid-1800s to early 1900s. A reminder of the City's once great wealth and international greatness is the Teatro Amazonas, a stunningly beautiful opera house made at the turn of the century with materials and artists from Europe. While I was in Manaus I had the good fortune to attend a concert at the Teatro, where the Choral Amazonas sang Handel's Messiah. It was extremely moving to hear such beautiful music in such a grand setting amid the sweltering jungle.

The infrastructure of Manaus is noticeably in need of repair and the poverty of the people is clearly evidenced by the great number of street kids found almost everywhere the eye looks. The Brazilian Amazon is much like the North American wild west at the turn of the century. Fortune seekers come to this area from throughout Brasil, to search for gold or to stake some land on which they will try to build a new life.

After I settled into my hotel, I went in search of travel agencies which sell packaged jungle tours. I intended to follow the advice of one of my Amazon guide-books and acquire an initial taste of the jungle by booking onto one of these short tours through the local surrounding jungle. On my walk to the downtown business area, I passed the revitalised central town plaza, a meeting place for locals. Within the plaza was a fountain, pieces of public art, and small gardens with many varieties of local flowers. Almost every village, town, or city in Latin America has a town plaza, as the Spanish colonial masters of old required these to be built as the centre of every new community.

My initial plan was to visit a few of the travel agencies in downtown Manaus which specialised in packaged jungle tours, to inquire about the various tours they had to offer. As these agencies often compete with one another to sell space on regularly scheduled tours, I was simply looking for the best price. Instead, what happened is that an agent approached me on the street and took me to his office. He showed me pictures of jungle wildlife, provided me with letters of reference, and showed me newspaper articles on tourists who had gone missing and were presumed dead after booking onto tours with less experienced agents. He gave me such a great sales pitch (and significantly reduced the price of a tour after some extensive haggling between us), that I did what I would recommend no one ever do and that is to buy a tour from the first agent with whom I had spoken. I arranged to join with two tourists from Switzerland, along with two guides, on a four day packaged tour through the local jungle.

This packaged tour provided everything I dislike about organised tours, as it was very similar to a sightseeing bus tour through any large city. We stopped at tourist sites and destinations, such as a small zoo with jacare (crocodiles), parrots, and monkeys, but these sites only happened to be in the jungle. We stayed with Amazon "river dwellers", who were as much traditional river dwellers as Disneyland staff outfitted in Magic Kingdom costumes are the characters they pretend to be. Unlike other river dwellers, ours made a living from the tourist trade and so it was difficult to get a feel of how they would normally be living without tourist-supplied reais (the currency used in Brasil) for food and shelter. The jungle we were shown was so heavily populated that the wildlife seemed to have wisely left for more remote areas. Then there were the two Swiss women with whom I was travelling - they seemed more interested in sunning themselves (and our guides more interested in watching them) than in experiencing the jungle. Clearly better prepared now for the real wilds of the Amazon, upon my return to Manaus I set about making arrangements to take a private, seven day trek into a remote region of Amazonas.

Tourists must be extremely careful in their selection of a remote-jungle guide. There are many guides to choose from in Manaus, but most are amateurs who you would be foolish to entrust your life to. Experienced travel agents, such as the one from whom I purchased my packaged jungle tour, and professional guides, such as the one I was

soon to hire, tell stories of amateurs who return from the jungle, leaving behind the tourists who hired them. While in these situations these amateur guides may say their charges became lost, the professionals I spoke to told me they firmly believe that in particular instances, these guides murdered their charges for their possessions and left their bodies behind, hidden in the jungle. So in selecting a remote-jungle-guide, serious research is required. I referred quite extensively to the guide-books I had purchased in Canada. In addition, I spoke with the concierge at my Hotel, consulted with local travel agents, and talked with other guides I had met during my just completed packaged jungle tour.

It was suggested I speak with Sandro Gamma, one of a select few guides in Manaus who is recommended by the reputable South American Guide. I arranged an interview with Sandro (who local guides had nicknamed "Beard Boy" due to his heavy beard and youthful looks), and his assistant Juan Luis Lobo (whose nickname was "Bad Wolf" as this is the English translation of lobo). When we met, we spoke about the number of years Sandro had guided, the type of expeditions he had headed, and the type of trek he could provide for me. He also talked about his knowledge of Amazon flora and showed me one particular book he had studied on this subject. Sandro then informed me that in his ten years of professional guiding, he had only been lost once for a period of only one hour. He provided me with many letters of reference and showed me pictures of his charges on their trips with him.

During this interview process it became obvious to me that Sandro was a professional who knew the jungle and how to get around in it. And when he told me that he had taken National Geographic photographers on a trek into the jungle in a search for beetles, this sounded like a ringing endorsement of his services. If he was good enough for National Geographic, he was good enough for me! Sandro and Juan were also both very personable and Sandro, who speaks five languages, displayed a wonderful sense of humour. I decided to hire them, and together we made our travel plans and agreed-to-leave the next morning.

On the morning of our departure, we arrived at Manaus' docks on the Rio Negro, where dozens of Amazon fishing boats and small passenger ferries were readying to leave. Everywhere were the sounds of people - selling goods, searching for the right ferry, loading supplies onto boats, or just generally preparing themselves for the start of the day. In the morning air the strong stench of the black river mixed with the smell of fish, gasoline, and the sweat of people. Taking our supplies purchased that morning, which included fresh bananas on the vine, Sandro, Juan, and I loaded our small power boat, bought our supply of gas, and began our journey.

Our trip was in the rainy season, so overhead was a mixture of cloud and patches of blue sky. At the current time of year the temperature range was between 27 to 35 degrees Celsius, with a humidity average of 69% that made the region feel like the inside of a sauna. Throughout each day in the rainy season, the weather fluctuates between blazing sun and tropical downpours. Travellers must be prepared to get soaked to the bone at any time the sky decides to open up, to be burned through the skin whenever the sun reappears, and to always feel hot and sticky from the very high humidity.

Heading northwest from Manaus, we travelled the Rio Negro for almost three hours, eventually catching up to an Amazon passenger boat which, for a short period of time, would be going in our general direction. We tied onto this ferry and watched the lush jungle terrain pass by as the boat made its way up the river, making stops at many small riverside communities along the way. These communities had between 25 and 100 inhabitants, whose homes were generally two- or three- room, faded wooden shacks built on stilts. During the rainy season the river rises up to 18 metres. At the height of the season, many of these homes will be either flooded or have the river waters reaching near their doorsteps. Everywhere we travelled we saw forests rising out of the river; flooded islands or terrain which provided evidence of the rising river waters.

Near where the Rio Negro is joined by the Rio Apuau, we untied our boat from the ferry and began to travel toward the community of Bom Jesus (which in English is translated as "Good Hope"), located at the juncture of the Negro and Apuau. We entered the Rio Apuau and travelled up-river until we came to the Little Rio Apuau, a tributary which we next journeyed up, following its serpentine route through a remote region of the Amazon. Here no people live, there is generally no river traffic, and the wildlife is abundant. Sandro had told me he had never before been to this area and as I had not yet seen him use maps, I asked him where he had put them. He informed me that he did not use maps as the rivers and sun were his guide. For all river tributaries flowed into the Rio Negro, while the Negro itself flowed east, and the directions of east and west are known by the rising and setting of the sun. It struck me that as a safety precaution maps should always be on hand for advisement. But Sandro had an excellent record after ten years of guiding, so who was I to debate this point with him.

Come dusk, after a day of boat travel where the weather had expectedly altered between tropical showers and radiant sunshine, we made camp at a cleared point of land jutting into the river. I felt truly at peace in my surroundings. Soon we found ourselves beneath a star-filled sky, making our dinner of tinned beef, amid the loud sounds of howler monkeys.

Let me assure you that howler monkeys deserve their name. These animals, which move throughout their territory during the evenings, sound like 100 travelling hounds baying at a full-moon. Knowing that this eerie sound came only from monkeys helped me not be afraid of it in the dark. I did have thoughts, however, about what I was doing out here in the remote Amazon, trusting my life to two people who I really had no knowledge of or experience with. My family and many of my friends had not wanted me to go on this trip, as they expressed open concerns about my safety. Yet though I had only just met Sandro and Juan, I had already developed a good rapport with both of them. I could sense we were beginning to feel comfortable with one another. Visiting the Amazon was something I had wanted to do and I was feeling glad I had made this trip.

That evening, however, my fear of anaconda drove me to sleep in the bottom of our small boat instead of in my hammock tied between two trees near the waters edge. These snakes from the boa-constrictor family, which can grow to over 10 metres in

length, live on or near the water's edge and often enjoy resting in the branches of selected river-bank trees. During our travels that day I had asked Sandro about anaconda and if they posed any threat to humans. He told me that while they generally leave humans alone, they have been known to capture unsuspecting Homo-sapiens and have them for a meal. Sandro said he had heard this can happen when an unsuspecting fisherman canoes into a small, tree-covered, tributary or flooded channel off of the main river. In these areas, anaconda have been said to drop from trees and capture their prey. For this reason, I thought the boat would be safer than the hammock. Throughout the night, with Juan snoring loudly nearby, whenever I heard a splash in the river I found myself peering warily around the boat for any sign of anaconda or other unwanted reptiles.

The next morning after a light breakfast, we travelled farther upriver, eventually establishing camp at an abandoned manioc farm we discovered at the riverside. Amazon residents grow an abundance of manioc - a potato-like vegetable which grows high in trees - to make flour. Here we found ourselves among macaws, toucans, many varieties of colourful butterflies, jacare, sweet-water dolphins, a great diversity of flora, and, as always, those attention-seeking howler monkeys.

We soon left camp to go fishing for piranha, a food staple of Amazon river dwellers. To fish for piranha, we used only fishing line onto which we tied hooks and raw beef as our initial bait. We would throw our line into the water, wrap the remaining portion of the line around our hands, and tug at it so that the sunken bait would give the appearance of movement. With piranha having very sharp-clawed teeth, they are good at nibbling, so once a nibble is felt the line is given a good, quick, yank and the piranha is pulled in with your hands. I only caught a catfish type fish, which we then used as additional bait. Sandro and Juan were the piranha fishing experts, catching at least one large piranha each.

Back at our camp later that afternoon, we waited out a three hour tropical rainstorm before having a dinner of the tender, white, meat of the piranha we had caught during the day. We then decided to hop into our boat to go in search of jacare (you can "catch and release" the smaller of these creatures). Jacare are stunned by light flashed in their eyes. To catch one, you travel in your boat at night and shine your flashlight along the river-bank. When your light picks-up some of the smaller of the red shining eyes, you keep your light focused on these as you slowly edge forward toward the jacare and then - "snatch!" - you quickly reach into the water and grab the reptile. After a quick look at the creature, an opportunity to hold the jacare for yourself, and snapping a photograph or two, the reptile is then carefully released back into the water. After an hour of this, we returned to camp for a comfortable evening sleep. At this camp we were not near the water's edge, so I had little fear of anaconda and felt safe sleeping in the hammock.

While laying in my hammock that evening, I was contemplating whether to tell Sandro that I wanted us to return earlier than planned to Manaus. While boating through the jungle was fun, and fishing for piranha and jacare catching were definitely unique experiences, I was not sure I wanted to spend another five days doing only these activities. I was more interested in walking through the jungle to experience its feel and to see some wildlife. If this was not to be the major part of our trip, I thought I would

have to find a nice way of asking that we go back, without suggesting that I was either dissatisfied with Sandro's guiding or afraid of the jungle.

Before going to sleep that night, I saw a small, ancient-looking fishing boat chug slowly past our camp on its way upriver. The boat looked and sounded to me like that in "African Queen", the old movie from the fifties starring Humphrey Bogart and Katherine Hepburn. The modern world seemed so far away.

Early the next morning, on the third day of our trip, Sandro offered to take me on a short walk into the local jungle. We left Juan behind at camp with our boat and supplies. Innocently thinking nothing of the dangers the jungle holds and believing we would only be gone for a couple of hours, I forgot to bring along my emergency supplies of a compass, pocket-knife, and waterproof matches. I only brought with me the clothes on my back and a camera. Sandro brought along only a hunting knife for cutting a path through the dense jungle. It was only after ten minutes into our walk that I realised I had forgotten my emergency supplies. In my mind I toyed with the idea of going back for them, but thinking that our walk was to be short, I chose to do nothing and just enjoy my surroundings.

We had a wonderful, one and one half hour walk through the sweltering, alive, and generally dense jungle, with Sandro clearing a path ahead of us as we walked. Sandro, who studies the medicinal qualities of Amazon flora, showed me a plant for healing pneumonia (a plant called capaiba), along with plants to cure hepatitis and ease sunburn. There was also plenty of fauna or signs of fauna, with our having heard macaws, seen many armadillo ground homes, and coming across a watering-hole used by peccary (wart hogs). And many varieties of insects, particularly colourful butterflies. After we came across a puma, which due to our unexpected presence was startled off into the jungle, I inquisitively asked Sandro "Are puma a threat to us". He told me he had never before seen a puma, but then added "Jungle dwellers say puma have been known to attack the last person in a line of humans trekking through the jungle." Well that was a great thing to know. I was the last person in our human line of two, and so after this comment of Sandro's I found myself occasionally looking over my shoulders, just to make sure I was not being stalked by a puma.

Soon we came to a gently sloping bank covered with mild jungle growth, at the bottom of which was a small sunlit clearing where we saw a jungle ground-chicken. We both wanted to take a closer look at this bird and so we slowly crept at an angle down the bank toward it. As we neared the bird it saw us and quickly disappeared into the jungle growth. A bit disappointed that the bird had taken off, we agreed now would be as good time as any to return to camp.

>From the very beginning of our trek that day, I tried to keep a mental note of the twists and turns in our jungle walk. I suspect this attempt at creating a memory map was a remnant from my cub-scout days. For our return trek to camp, Sandro wanted us to go in a direction which differed from my sense of where we had come from. We stopped to talk about this. I explained my mental picture of the direction in which I thought we should be going. I had a sense that when we went to look at the jungle chicken, we had

walked up the jungle-growth covered bank at a different angle than that which we had walked down it, and this had created some confusion with our sense of direction.

Sandro believed the direction in which we should walk was determined by the placement of the sun. "When we left camp this morning," he said, "based on where the sun was found in the sky then to where it is now, suggests our camp should be to the west." I believed that we should walk back into the jungle, going south from the sun, and when we came upon the peccary paths leading to their watering hole, we would have a better idea of the way to our camp. Sandro reminded me that he had only been lost for a single hour in all his years of guiding. He was confident he would have us back at camp in no time at all.

As Sandro was the professional in whom I had already placed my trust, and as I am an amateur outdoorsman with no credible experience in such matters, I deferred to his expertise. I was by no means certain, however, that we were going in the right direction. It did not take us long to realise that we had indeed lost our bearings. After trekking for another two hours we soon discovered that we had gone in a complete circle, for we appeared to be back at the sloping bank where we had earlier seen the jungle chicken.

Having to acknowledge we were lost, even as it then appeared to us as only temporarily lost, required us to re-examine our situation. I asked Sandro what Juan would do when we did not return back to camp. He informed me he told Juan that if we were not back in two hours, he was to take our boat and begin searching for us along the river-bank. At this point we had been gone approximately four hours. Our immediate goal would now be to find the river on which our camp was located, so when Juan started to search for us we would be able to see him to call for help.

With our recent sighting of a puma and having heard Sandro relay his story about these animals, I asked out of curiosity what would happen if we were attacked by one. Sandro confidently informed me that I should just use my knife against it and this should be enough scare the animal away. "I don't have a knife, Sandro", I said, "you have the knife." "Oh", was his only reply. At that very moment I came to understand the seriousness of our situation.

Getting lost in the Amazon must be put into perspective. It is not like getting lost in the Canadian forest, where wildlife is generally not a threat but tends to be afraid of humans, and where search and rescue teams will look for you if you are reported lost. We were in the middle of a remote, uninhabited, region of the Amazon, near a river that was rarely travelled by boat traffic and over 50 kilometres from the nearest village of Bom Jesus. There was little possibility a search and rescue team would come looking for us as no one but Juan would know we were lost.

In the jungle there is an abundance of jaguar and puma, and the rivers have anaconda and jacare, any of which may attack if threatened or if they view unsuspecting humans as a possible meal. Unlike animals found in more travelled regions of the Amazon, animals in its remoter parts have less experience with humans and guns, and so they have less fear of, and therefore pose an increased threat to, humans. Poisonous snakes abound and while generally the vibrations of footsteps helps to scare these

reptiles away, they will bite if startled. Mosquitoes and other insects carry disease. The rivers carry piranha, which generally do not attack uninjured land animals but pose a potential threat nonetheless. There was also the strong, penetrating, and exhausting heat of the tropical sun near the equator, for which we had no sunscreen protection, and the sweltering, sauna-like humidity of the Amazon. On top of this we had absolutely no gear or supplies, no food, no anti-venom serum should either of us be bitten by a poisonous snake, and only enough purified water for a two-hour trek. All we had with us were the clothes on our backs and Sandro's hunting knife. So here we were, alone amid the elements of nature and knowing after three days of being lost in the Brazilian Amazon, a person is taken for dead.

Finding the main river soon became our immediate goal, but this is not an easy feat in the rainy season. The river had already risen upwards of 12 metres this season, causing extensive flooding of the terrain surrounding the river. During the rainy season, the terrain can be flooded up to 30 kilometres inland from a river. So in our search for the main river, we often came upon bodies of water which at a distance appeared to be the river, but when reached were only areas of flooded land. While searching for the river, we found ourselves walking in or cutting a path through kilometres of dense jungle, walking around channels of flooded terrain, and doing things which my guide books had recommended against, such as walking through chest-high pools of often stagnant water. Throughout all this I was concerned about losing sight of Sandro and becoming lost on my own in the jungle. With his expertise, I felt confident we had the best chance for reaching safety. The thought of losing him made me feel anxious, for I did not believe I would survive should we become separated. For hours we continued our search for the main river, but nowhere was it to be found in our sight.

I soon discovered that, unconsciously, survival mode had set in with me. I am an analytical type and so while in difficult circumstances some people may panic, my natural inclination is to analyse to find possible solutions. I began thinking about different situations we could face in the jungle and how we would have to deal with them should they arise. The thought crossed my mind that Sandro and Juan could possibly be some of those guides who leave their charges to die in the jungle, just so they could take my possessions. Yet under the circumstance I was facing I had no choice but to trust Sandro. Not to do so would certainly mean my death.

With our current goal being to reach the main river, I reasoned that if we did not find it by nightfall we would have to make a blind in the jungle, to hide and shelter us from the jungle wildlife. I determined that if faced with this situation, Sandro and I would probably have to sit upright within the blind, our backs to one another, taking turns sleeping while the other served as lookout. If we did find the main river by nightfall, I knew that if for some reason Juan did not rescue us, we could then use Sandro's knife to make a raft on which we could try to float down-river. There was also the small fishing boat I had seen going up-river the night before. If we could stick to the main river, there was the chance that it could rescue us should it return the same way. For drinking water, while our purified drinking water had quickly run out, both my guide books and guides had told me the jungle provides ample water in water vines, though I was to quickly learn this is not always so. I knew that if we could not find any water vines I could, despite a traveller's general rule of thumb to "never drink the local water", drink water from the flooded

terrain and eventually from the river itself. Drinking any of the black river water could make us sick, but it was better to drink the water and live than to drink no water at all and die from dehydration. I assumed from all I had read on the Amazon that if we were lost for more than one day, the jungle should provide us with at least a minimum amount of fruit, nuts, or other plant life that we could eat for basic nourishment. But on this point it would also turn out that I was wrong.

Throughout the first half of this day, after we had finished our supply of purified water, I fought my urge to drink any other water, waiting for Sandro to spot a water vine. But there were no water vines to be found anywhere. Eventually we came upon a fresh spring, from which I drank only after Sandro assured me he felt it a safe water source. After walking for another period of time, and feeling myself becoming even more dehydrated from the heat of the Amazon sun and the intense humidity, I eventually succumbed and drank water from one of the flooded channels. This was a psychological turning point for me. It was an acknowledgment to myself that we were indeed lost, and now no longer temporarily, and that I had to do whatever was necessary to survive.

I suddenly found myself very concerned about the dangers posed by the jungle wildlife to which we were exposed. Poisonous snakes and our lack of anti-venom serum entered my mind. What if Sandro or I were bitten? I began to once again feel anxious and could sense that I was starting to hyperventilate. But it quickly dawned on me that if either of us were bitten, there would simply be nothing we could do but endure the consequences. With my rational side reappearing, I began to calm down by telling myself that we should be able to survive our plight, even if it took us a few weeks to get out of the jungle to safety. I reasoned that if we used our intelligence and did not panic, we should get ourselves out of this situation.

Come 4:30 that afternoon we had still not reached the main river and we knew we had only two hours left until nightfall. Neither of us wanted to sleep on the jungle floor, in the midst of dense jungle where we would be exposing ourselves to the jungle elements. So now with a real sense of urgency, when we reached two other channels of flooded terrain approximately 30 metres wide, we ignored any possible water dangers and swam across them with our clothes on. We hurried as much as possible through the jungle. It was at 6:15 PM, when we reached what was for me just another channel of water, that Sandro confidently informed me we had

arrived at the main river. This body of water extended from the bottom of a bank covered in dense jungle growth, stretching across for approximately 50 metres, until it reached some treed terrain flooded on the other side. "How can you tell this is the river?" I asked with exhaustion.. "It looks like most of the other flooded channels we have seen today." "Its the direction and swifter speed of the water flow" said Sandro. "I'm telling you we are at the river". We had done it. We had finally reached the main river. What a sense of relief - I felt as if we had just conquered Mount Everest!

Sandro began to hurriedly walk down-river, calling for Juan as he went, for he felt we would soon come across our camp or Juan in our boat looking for us. All the while I was anxiously calling after Sandro, telling him to come back as dusk had fallen and I had lost

sight of him. I did not want to suddenly lose him and be stuck by myself in the jungle for the evening. When I eventually caught up to him, we quickly came across some wood which someone had once cut and discarded. We gathered this up and placed it on the bank next to the river, so that we would have something to lay upon for the night. Then for a mattress, we cut down some palm leaves which we placed on top of this wood. Exhausted, we lay down in our wet clothing and tried to sleep in the cool evening air.

The mosquitoes, which come out at dusk and go on the attack for a couple of hours, made sleep impossible. They were flying into my ears and all around my face. For protection, I tried sleeping on my stomach and placing palm leaves over my head. Soon the jungle came alive with its evening sounds of howler monkeys and the audible sound of creatures walking through the jungle just above the river bank where we lay. I was more worried than could be imagined. With each and every crack of a branch or rustle of jungle foliage, I would hop up and take a look around, just to make sure we were not being eyed as an evening meal by any creature. Being near the river's edge, my fear of anaconda also reappeared, along with a concern about jacare. So with each and every splashing-sound in the water, I also found myself looking at the river beside us.

The very cold of the evening jungle started to settle into my bones. I was not being helped either by the clothes I was wearing, which were drenched from our being submerged in water at various points throughout that day. While wet clothes had helped to cool us off in the hot daytime equatorial sun, during the evening they were causing me to shiver with cold. Soon Sandro and I were huddled close together for warmth.

The next morning we awoke early, having heard no boat the previous evening and hopeful that today, Juan would begin his search for us. We collected the cut wood we had slept on and proceeded to make a raft, using vines and palm shoots for rope. I found myself actually enjoying this particular exercise as I was learning how to do something you generally only read about in novels or see in the movies. It is true: you can make a raft out of wood and vines! Sandro also used his hunting knife to cut us some make-shift wooden paddles. We had not eaten for over 36 hours (having had only river water to drink), so we cut down a palm tree and for breakfast ate limited mouthfuls of dry, tasteless heart of palm, before we set out into the river on our newly-constructed raft.

We pushed our raft into the river and then tried to climb aboard it. The raft was not that sturdy and our weight caused it to float just below the river's surface, rather than skimming on top of it. At a speed just slightly faster than that of the steady river current, we crossed the river and stopped at a tall tree in the flooded terrain. Sandro climbed this to try and get a sense of our direction. He thought he saw an abandoned plantation down-river, but he decided we should go upriver as he thought this the most likely direction of our camp.

Paddling upriver on our raft proved to be a trial, as the raft seemed unable to float with both of us on it. Sandro and I agreed that one of us should go into the water and try to swim behind the raft, pushing it while the other of us paddled at the raft's helm. I was so relieved when Sandro said he was willing to be in the water, as I knew that the submerged trees we were near were an ideal habitat for anaconda. Any frustrations we

were feeling soon subsided when we came upon two freshwater dolphins passing us on their way downstream. The dolphins were beautiful, casually playing near the surface of the water just a few short feet from us, totally unaware that the humans they were passing were fighting for their very survival.

Eventually we abandoned our raft, beaching it at a bend in the river. Sandro and I agreed it would be faster to walk through the jungle in search of our camp than to continue to try paddling upriver. We gave ourselves two hours to walk upriver along the river bank, in the hope that we would locate some recognisable terrain.

The river bank started low and eventually climbed to a cliff-like ledge, with dense, thick jungle hugging its sides. Walking for two hours through this was more than enough for me. The trek was exhausting for two people who were already feeling weak from hunger. The intensity of the equatorial sun and the high humidity were also causing us to sweat most vigorously, contributing to our increasing dehydration. These factors, combined with the fact that we had still not found any recognisable landmark, were making me irritable.

I began to feel that we were wasting our time walking through the jungle looking for our camp; that by doing so we were running the risk of worsening our situation by walking further into the jungle instead of heading downstream toward the nearest village. For me there was also the added factor that unless we found our camp, every step we took forward meant another step we had to retrace to return to our raft. "I want to go back to our raft" I bluntly told Sandro. "We haven't seen any recognisable land and I'm tired. I think we should be heading downstream where we know there is a village." "Let's just go to the next turn in the river" said Sandro. "If we don't see our camp from there, we will turn back and then head downstream on the raft." I followed him and we eventually reached the river-bend, where there was still no sight of our camp. As agreed, we then began the return trek to our raft. While travelling on our raft would be slower, I felt at least we would be going in the direction of a known village. Water travel would also require less energy than walking, and the water would be available for us to either readily drink from or to swim in to cool us from the scorching sun.

We began our return journey to our raft, along the way finding six small nuts that served as our lunch. With heart of palm having been our only meal for almost two whole days, I found myself very excited when Sandro found these nuts. However small, we had found a bit of food with protein. We also spotted two trees whose bark had been scratched off by jaguar sharpening their claws. I can assure you that the thrill of finding the nuts was greater than finding evidence of jaguar. Tired and exhausted, finding something to eat helped improve our spirits. We each ate two nuts and I placed the remaining two nuts in the breast pocket of my shirt. We then moved onward.

It took us approximately three hours to find and reach our raft, hidden as it was amongst the trees along the river's edge. I was getting worried that we had lost our raft and would be stuck in the jungle further upstream from where we were just that morning. When we finally came upon our raft, we decided our water travels would be speedier if we each took one log from it and used these to float down-river with the current. We agreed to head for a distant point of land jutting into the river. At various times while floating down-

river, I lost sight of Sandro and found myself nervously looking to locate him in the water. I was also soon to angrily discover that the two nuts I had placed in my shirt pocket, along with my camera, had at some point fallen into the river and become lost. Losing the camera did not bother me, but I was annoyed that I could be so careless as to lose the nuts, a needed source of food. I decided to keep quiet about this and not tell Sandro. After almost one hour of this type of water travel, with exhaustion so overcoming me that I was concerned about slipping off my log and drowning, I reached the point of land to which we had both been heading. I pulled my log ashore, crawled up the embankment, and then immediately collapsed with exhaustion. A short while later Sandro also arrived at the river's bank.

This hard-clay rest site we had arbitrarily chosen was home to hundreds of small red ants eager to climb on us for a bite, but we were too tired to care. A light tropical shower soon helped disperse them. After a brief rest we opened our eyes and looking into the sky saw what you would expect to find in a bad Hollywood movie: a vulture circling above us, trying to determine if we were yet "fair game". Sandro and I laughed aloud at this, letting the vulture know we had not yet given up! I laughed even further when Sandro seemed quite interested in the fact this particular vulture was a King vulture, a bird he said he rarely saw in the jungle. Vulture-be-damned, we decided it was time to move on and begin to float down-river to the abandoned plantation which Sandro thought he saw earlier in the day.

After a little more than one hour of floating close to the shoreline, we reached the old plantation, an abandoned fruit plantation. Here we found two green, premature, pineapples and some sugar cane. While searching for this fruit I became lost, which only added to my growing frustration. I started to panic and could feel my chest tightening in response. How could I be so stupid as to not just be lost in the jungle, but to top this off by also losing my guide? It seemed to me that if anything could go wrong, it would. I started calling for Sandro. There was no response. I must have shouted for almost fifteen minutes until - thank God! - I heard him reply. It was only through voice calls to one another that I was eventually able to locate Sandro.

For dinner that night, we devoured the pineapple and sugar cane. We then collected some small logs with which we could make a lean-to and cut down a few small palm trees to make a palm-leaf mattress. It was to be our second night on the jungle floor.

That evening, we were at first kept awake by squadrons of mosquitoes aggressively dive-bombing us. I had taken off my shirt and shoes to dry, so my body was ripe for the attack. After a few hours the mosquitoes subsided, but I was awoken by a clearly audible munching sound and the sensation of insects moving around me. I shone the light from my watch in the general direction of the noise, only to discover that we had built our palm-bed near a black anthill. (For a previous trip to Peru, I had bought a "TIMEX Expedition" watch, which is water resistant and has an indiglo light on it. Without a doubt, it is a very helpful companion to have should you ever get lost in the Amazon.). Beneath us, the ants were cutting and carting away our palm mattress, and when our bodies got in their way they would bite us.

Thinking things could get no worse than this, we soon felt a cool breeze and then an approaching wind. Sandro told me that rain was coming. For no reason whatsoever, I just assumed that we would have a short rain shower like those I experienced in Manaus. The sky eventually went black, blocking out all star- and moon- light, and released on us a tropical downpour that lasted for over four hours. Our lean-to was no match for the storm and we were very quickly drenched to the bone and chilled. My body was shivering uncontrollably from the cold. I wanted to scream in sheer frustration. The only thing that held me back was having Sandro next to me, for I did not want to startle him and add to his own worry.

I began to consider the increasing seriousness of our situation. When Sandro and I had first become lost, I felt that a reasoned approach to our circumstance should help us eventually reach safety. Reason over passion, as Socrates is credited with saying and which is a motto I like to believe I can adhere to. But reality was setting in. Yes, we had made a raft to help us with our water travels. Weren't we smart humans! Yet humans need more than intelligence to survive. In two days we had not found one single water vine for fresh water and the jungle did not seem to want to offer us much in the way of food. Sandro and I were both physically exhausted, which was quickly being compounded by our growing hunger. Death in the jungle would be near if we could not find anything substantial to eat.

The realisation also struck that our progress down-river would be slow, as with little nourishment and increasing exhaustion, our daily progress would be reduced commensurable with our diminishing energy levels. I roughly calculated that it could take us approximately three weeks to try to reach the village of Bom Jesus, but only if we could stick to the main river and keep up our strength at its current level. And as we would continue to travel in the river during the day and likely get rained upon during many nights, we would be forced to remain in the same wet clothes day-in and day-out, meaning that we were opening ourselves up to possible colds and other related illnesses. There was the added factor that the longer we remained lost the more we would be exposed to the elements and be susceptible to diseases like malaria and typhoid. The rainstorm led me to see that the river would continue to rise, thereby daily changing the local terrain. It would be easy to steer our way off the main river and become lost in any of the flooded land.

Up until now Sandro and I had not really talked about our plight; we had just silently focussed on doing what was necessary to survive. But in this tropical downpour we began to talk. "I wanted to scream when this storm began" I said. "So did I", he replied. "That would have been a funny sight," I suggested, "the two of us soaked to the bone, screaming in the dark. It probably would have scared away any wildlife." He chuckled, before I asked "What are you thinking about?" "I want to see my son again", he said. I paused for a moment before asking "What do you think will happen to us?" I was hoping for some sort of positive response. "If we are still in the jungle tomorrow evening, I will make a trap to catch a capybara" he stated in a rather matter-of-fact manner. Capybara are the world's largest rodents and can be caught for food. "How would we eat it?" I rhetorically asked, knowing that there was no need for an answer because the only way we could eat it would be raw. Such a thought did not even faze me at this time, as I knew we desperately needed food and I would eat what I had to in order to survive.

My own thoughts then turned to my family and friends, many of whom did not want me to travel to the Amazon in the first place. It bothered me that they were soon likely to hear that I was "dead", even while I was still fighting for survival in the jungle. I began wondering what they would think when I returned alive from the jungle, after they had gone through the whole grieving process, memorial ceremony and all. I felt very helpless and started to think I was too young to die. At 33, there was so much more I wanted to accomplish with my life. I wanted to grow old with loved ones and friends. There were my grandparents who were also best friends. My sister and brother-in-law who had recently had a child, making me an uncle for the first time. I so wanted to be there to watch my new nephew, Christian, as he grew up. I had also developed some very close, meaningful, personal friendships over the years, with individuals who were just like family to me. I wanted to see all of these people again. There was a career and community obligations back home in Canada. My mind also turned to an acquaintance who had recently committed suicide. While he had chosen to end his life at a young age, I wanted to keep on living. My thoughts were interrupted by the intensity of the continuing rainstorm. Eventually hunger and exhaustion overcame Sandro and I, and we fell asleep in the tropical storm.

The next morning we awoke at first-light. My feet were so swollen and sore from mosquito- and ant- bites that I could not put my shoes on. It hurt me even to walk. Sandro and I began making a new raft and while doing so, we thought we heard the sound of a boat motor upriver, but this sound disappeared as quickly as it had arisen.

After sugar cane for breakfast we were soon paddling down-river until - at last! - we came upon familiar terrain. There was a familiar hill and clearing of land at a point in the river. We now knew where we were. Oh, what a sense of jubilation! We had reached the site where Sandro, Juan, and I camped on our first night out of Manaus. I even recognised the trees to which our hammock had been hung. We now knew for certain that our lost camp was upriver.

We beached and hungrily ate some passion fruit which was growing above the river bank. I collected some additional fruit for us, tying it in my shirt. At this point Sandro and I again thought we heard a boat motor. We listened, but the sound went away. I suggested the sound may have been that of the small fishing boat which had gone upriver three nights earlier and that maybe we should wait for a period of time at this location on the main river, in case a boat soon did pass by. If no boat came, I wanted to stay at this site for the evening, before we would begin the long journey down-river toward the village. One of my concerns was that Juan may have already headed back toward Manaus and if we went upriver, we could waste our time and energy paddling to an empty camp. I was also concerned that if a boat was coming, it would be easy for it to miss us - and for us to lose an only opportunity for rescue - if we found ourselves paddling in flooded land away from the main river where the boat would likely pass.

Sandro instead wanted to paddle upriver in an effort to reach our camp by nightfall. He was certain Juan had not left the camp and that our surest bet for rescue would be to return to it. After a lengthy discussion, we agreed to go upriver. First we proceeded to make yet another raft, this time using a large log we found floating nearby. This third raft

was our best yet (it actually skimmed on top of the water!) and we soon were paddling upriver at a good clip. The thought that we may have an opportunity for rescue had helped rejuvenate us.

With the tropical sun burning my bare back, Sandro and I paddled upriver until, later that afternoon, we came to an area of flooded terrain where it was difficult to tell which channel was the river and which were just areas of flooded land. It was here that we entered into our first and only verbal argument. Sandro wanted to take a route which he felt was a shortcut to another arm of the winding main river. I wanted to make sure we hugged the main river just in case the sound we had heard earlier was indeed a boat on its way down-river. For over two days we had been under tremendous stress, but had not put our fears and frustrations into words. Now with a possibility for rescue, my fear of missing what could be our only opportunity caused my anxieties to surface.

I told Sandro that instead of taking shortcuts that may get us lost, missing a boat and our opportunity for rescue, we should return down-river to the site we had just left. There we would have a short-term supply of food and would be easily seen by any passing boat. Sandro disagreed. Speaking in sheer frustration, I reminded him he had been hired by me and that as his charge, he must also consider my safety and comfort in this whole matter. I told him that his course of action would be taking unnecessary risks with our lives. He would not budge. Sandro sincerely apologized for our situation but said that he would not go back down-river - we would continue forward. With a deflated spirit I could do nothing but acquiesce, as we were sharing a raft and without him, I would certainly soon be dead.

After taking his shortcut, Sandro assured me we were again in the main river, but I was not convinced. It was then that we again heard the boat motor and this time the sound remained in the air, getting louder as we listened. The sound was coming nearer. We waited, anxiously. Then suddenly, from around the bend appeared a fishing boat. It was the old fishing boat that had three days earlier passed our camp on the way upriver. We were rescued at last! Sandro had led us to safety. I felt a combined sense of relief and happiness I have never before experienced. To see that boat and know we were going to be safe felt like being pardoned from a death sentence.

The old, wooden, Amazon fishing boat pulled up alongside us. One of the fishermen placed his hands together as if he was going to pray and waved them toward us in this manner. Before climbing aboard the boat, Sandro and I took the make-shift paddles we had been using, which we both wanted as a permanent reminder of our ordeal.

Onboard the boat, who should we find but Juan, who was in a state of shock from his own three-day ordeal. He cried uncontrollably at the sight of us, as he was both surprised and very relieved to find us alive. With the rule of the jungle that after three days of being lost a person is assumed dead, Juan never expected to see us again. He had taken us for dead and was on his way to report our demise to the authorities, to have them contact our families with this news. Juan's voice had become hoarse after spending three days calling for us in the jungle. He told us that he had been unable to search for us by boat as he could not get the boat started. Then on the second night, he

himself had become stranded when, during the rainstorm, the boat sank in shallow water. The fishing boat had not only rescued us, but had rescued Juan as well.

We were taken to the village of Bom Jesus. By the time we had arrived at this village, Juan had taken to calling me "Jungle Man", as a term of affection and respect for all I had endured. At the village, local children came out to see who the strangers were. For some, I was the first Caucasian they had ever seen. The wife of one of our rescuers made us dinner in their humble home. I will never forget their hospitality and kindness. They made me fresh hot cocoa from a cocoa tree on their land - the best cocoa I ever tasted. Sandro spent the evening relaying our story to people from throughout the community who had come to meet us and learn who we were.

Through Sandro I learned locals said anaconda were found in that area. Having never asked this question out of a fear of the response, I inquired "What would happen had I been attacked by an anaconda?". "You would have taken a deep breath of air before it pulled you under the water," Sandro said. "Then you would take your knife and jab it at whatever point the snake had bitten you, and it would let you go". There was no longer a need to again remind him he had our only knife.

Later that evening, we were provided with accommodation in the village's community house. I found myself with difficulty in sleeping, as I experienced severe chills and nausea while my body recovered from shock. But boy did it feel good to be back in a secure environment. Early the next morning we left for Manaus, getting drenched along the way by yet another tropical rainstorm, but not caring because I knew we were safe.

We arrived at Manaus' downtown wharf that evening. I felt relieved to be back in civilisation. I was also a bit proud too when Sandro told me that in all his years of guiding, he had never met a tourist like me who had such inner strength. He credited that strength with helping us get safely out of the jungle. Sandro dropped Juan and I off at the wharf, and we all made arrangements to meet the next morning at my hotel. I thanked Sandro for all he had done, for it was due to his knowledge and professionalism that we were brought to safety.

Juan helped me back to my Hotel, where staff arranged to have a pharmacy deliver medicines and bandages for my cut and swollen feet. I then called Walter Lopez, a close family friend in Canada, to relay my experience. I asked him to tell my grandparents, sister, and close friends that I would soon be home. That evening at my hotel I greedily devoured a dinner of steak and fries, before heading to bed for much needed rest. Throughout that first night back in Manaus, I again suffered through severe chills and added night sweats.

The next morning, I met with Sandro and Juan and we joked about our adventure. We all agreed that this was an experience none of us could or would forget. Sandro said I had provided him with his memorable adventure of the year. We exchanged addresses and telephone numbers, before I went to make arrangements to change my flights home. I was very anxious to return to see my family and my Doctor. My return airline ticket was routed from Manaus to Rio de Janeiro to Sao Paulo. While my Brazilian air carrier went out of their way to change my departure date to accommodate me after

hearing of my experience, my Canadian air carrier took three days before they would offer me a return flight home. While stuck in Rio, my health deteriorated. I experienced severe dysentery, strong fatigue, nausea, headaches, the beginnings of a heavy cough, and continued difficulty in walking. Though a beautiful City, Rio was not where I wanted to be at that time.

When back in Vancouver, Canada, I eventually learned how fortunate I had been. A tropical medicine doctor who examined me said that after such an experience of being exposed to a great number of illness-causing agents, I had somehow pulled through with only minor health nuisances. My feet were healing on their own, as was an ear infection I had developed. The dysentery disappeared and my cough, though it worsened over a two month period, eventually was helped through a prescription inhaler. For all intents and purposes, at the time of writing this I am feeling great.

It is hard to describe what I felt when we were found. A definite sense of relief that the ordeal was finally over and that we were safe. But also a sense of disbelief at what we had gone through and the full realisation that we could have died in the jungle. I owed Sandro many thanks. The jungle can play tricks on even the most seasoned professional. I knew, however, that had I been lost with an amateur guide, I would have died in the jungle. It was through Sandro's professionalism and knowledge of jungle survival techniques that we had reached safety. He could tell the difference between flooded terrain and the actual river. He knew how to construct a raft with vines and how to make a lean-to using jungle foliage. Sandro's knowledge and understanding of the jungle helped save our lives.

While I do not want to repeat this experience, it certainly will not stop me from taking future adventure trips. I find that with each of these trips I take, I learn more about myself and the world of which I am a part. From this particular experience, I found I have an inner strength which I did not know I possessed. I also came to more fully understand the power of nature and its ability to conquer the human animal. And a lesson for future trips is that it is important to be well-prepared for any possible situation which may arise. Travellers should always carry their emergency supplies.

The Amazon is so beautiful I am tempted to go back. But while this experience has tested my own resolve, my family and close friends are not willing to see me return. So be it: I can understand and accept their wishes. Just how do I now tell them that for my next adventure trip, I want to go to Antarctica?!

- END -