

FMF-3

Amazônia: The Pace of Life

Manáus, Amazonas

Brazil

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Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
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New York, New York 10017

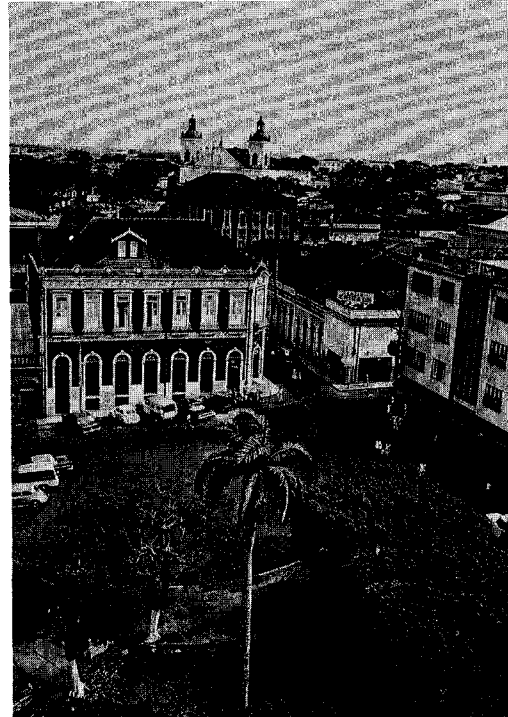
Dear Mr. Nolte:

Rondônia: Tolerance for boredom. I come from New York where boredom can only be something imposed upon oneself. If you live there and are alive to the world, there is always something to do, too much too often, if anything---a play, Lincoln Center, film, party, art gallery, dinner, etc. If the mood strikes, you can do just about anything you want in an evening---unless, possibly, tickets are necessary.

In Amazônia it is different. I have written of the daytime life at the mining camp of Santa Barbara. Now I will comment on the nightlife, and then on the existence at the rash of huts along the fords one must cross to reach Santa Barbara from Porto Velho, and about Manáus---boom city of the early 20th century and still an Amazonian metropolis of nearly 150,000 population.

At Santa Barbara, the day is full---breakfast call is at 6:00, and work begins at 7:00. The heat builds up through the morning, and the break comes at 11:30---a quick nap in a hammock and then lunch at 12 noon. Men arrive at the table heavy-lidded. Always there are black beans ladled generously over rice. Pork, fried mandioca and macaroni heap the plate. Eight men surround a slab table covered with oilcloth, and sit on slab benches. They talk, make jokes, complain, repeat the same stories. Then, a sweet dessert, usually a syrupy canned fruit topped with canned cream---another siesta and back to work at 1:30 in the heat of the day.

At 6:00 the dinner bell rings. No liquor is allowed in the camp, so everyone is ready. Dusk is short-lived near the equator. There is



ABOVE. View over Manáus. The building in the foreground, of green tile, is typical of the architectural style of the rubber boom, this one built in 1913.

no electricity, and in the thatch-roof "dining room"---its sides open to the air---kerosene lamps cast their dim glow. The same oilcloth, the same rice and beans. The pork has come from a hog that has been butchered that day at the camp. Its carcass hangs exposed under the eaves of the kitchen-refectory. It must be eaten before it goes bad, so there will be pork for six meals in a row. Likewise, a case of canned fruits is opened, and whatever its content---prunes, guava, or pineapple---that is the dessert until the supply is exhausted.

Conversation is neither lengthy nor profound--- the same men sit at the same table for every meal. Except for a radio communication at 4:00 each afternoon, there is no contact with Porto Velho. There are no newspapers. By 6:30 the last saccharine cafezinho has been downed, and the men disperse. It is dark. No electricity, but there is a battery-operated radio which is monopolized by the carioca (Rio) geologist who finds the station with the best samba and bossa nova, and turns it up full-blast. He falls asleep in his hammock with it blaring in his ears. After four months in Santa Barbara, he is leaving the job to return to Copacabana and a government desk job at the Ministry of Mines. Having escaped the plague so far, each time he settles at the luncheon table, hot and groggy, he holds his hand to his forehead and predicts "malária".

A couple of the technicians, who are among the few elite of the camp, come down to the main house and, by kerosene lamp, play a Brazilian form of double solitaire. There are no women. There are no bars. There is no light to read by. The other eighty men in and around the camp do...I can't imagine what. The sky is superb---a full moon could not be in more regal glory than at this black-encircled clearing in the Amazon jungle. But one suspects its presence does not much interest the inhabitants. By 10:00 the camp is silent. The next day's work comes early.

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After ten miles through virgin forest, over grass-centered, rutted lane from Santa Barbara, the jeep reaches BR 364, the red dirt and gravel highway which miraculously cuts through Brazil's interior from Porto Velho to Cuiabá in Mato Grosso and connects with the highway to Belo Horizonte and the coast. As a joke over the oilcloth had it, the highway's number---which bears no relation to anything---was taken from the street address of the chief engineer's mistress in Porto Velho.

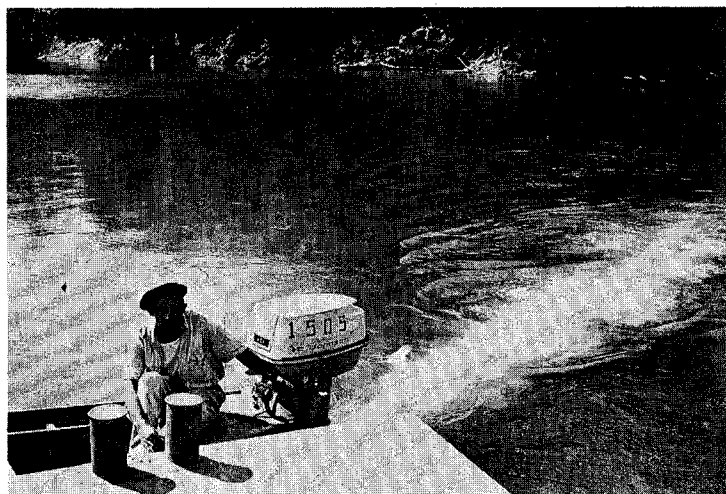
It used to take 10 to 15 days from Porto Velho to Rio, depending on weather. Now it is five. But the trick is to hit the ferries in the daytime hours. In the whole length of the road, there are five, and they are all in Rondônia. Between Santa Barbara and Porto Velho, about eighty miles, there are two. The rivers, Jamarí and Candeis, are narrow but deep. If it is lunch and siesta time or after 6:00, there is no alternative but to relax and have a beer at one of the thatch bar e restaurante. In fact, if it is after 6:00 p.m. and before 6:00 a.m., just curl up in the jeep and survive the night. When they operate, the balsas shuttle back and forth between the banks, nudged along by a caboclo (native) and his wooden boat and Johnson outboard. One vehicle is carried on the raft per crossing.



Bar e restaurante,  
Jamarí River.



Our jeep in mainstream  
on the balsa.



Caboclo locomotion  
for the balsa.

It really doesn't matter what your time of arrival, you still stop for a cold beer to alleviate the dust and the heat. As you sip it, you look at the people who live in this scattering of five or six mud shacks. They see you come in. They are interested. They serve you and watch you, especially if you are "gringo". Then, the thrill wears off, they settle into themselves, elbows heavy on the table and stare out through the doorless doors to nothing. The same thing every day, alongside the same people every day. No place to go, and nothing to do.

We leave, the heat presses in, another truck or jeep passes in a half hour or so, and then again the same.

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Manáus: Rear window.

In Manáus the restaurant of the best hotel, the Amazonas, is on the second floor---open to a pleasant breeze and view over the Rio Negro. Across the street is an apartment building, half finished. I first came to Manáus two years ago; the building has not progressed in this time.

The upper five floors are but an open grid of brick and mortar supports, roosting place for the vultures when they are not circling overhead. On the ground floor is a bakery which opens at 4:00 a.m., and above are three floors of apartments. Each has its own open balcony, reached through shutter doors which are seldom closed. Since the building is narrow, the apartments are small, and on the upper floor is a large family who seem always to be on top of each other. A mother but no father can be seen. After work hours, the oldest boy, perhaps 18 or 19, is always pressing a shirt---the ironing board in permanent position alongside the refrigerator. A sister, near the same age, comes often to get her cigarettes which she keeps atop the refrigerator along with a clutter of other containers. She is almost always garbed in curlers and stretch slacks, too tight and too bright. The younger members, in their early teens, appear and disappear behind a portière which seems to cloak the bedroom---she in short shorts, he in bathing trunks. A dog reclines or twists among the over-crowded vinyl furnishings.

One floor below is a young couple with a baby, one to two years old. The husband comes home from work about 6:30, and after an early supper, the two sit closely on the balcony. During the day, she often has a girl friend, and they lean on the balustrade chatting, sometimes placing the baby with his legs dangling over the outer edge, four stories above the street.

On the lower occupied floor are three young women who perambulate throughout the day, combing their hair, gossiping among themselves, peering down to the street. Among other attractions is the favorite form of publicity in Manáus: a loudspeaker on a moving car. In New York the message would be ignored or drowned out; in Manáus people scurry to the window or balcony to look and listen.



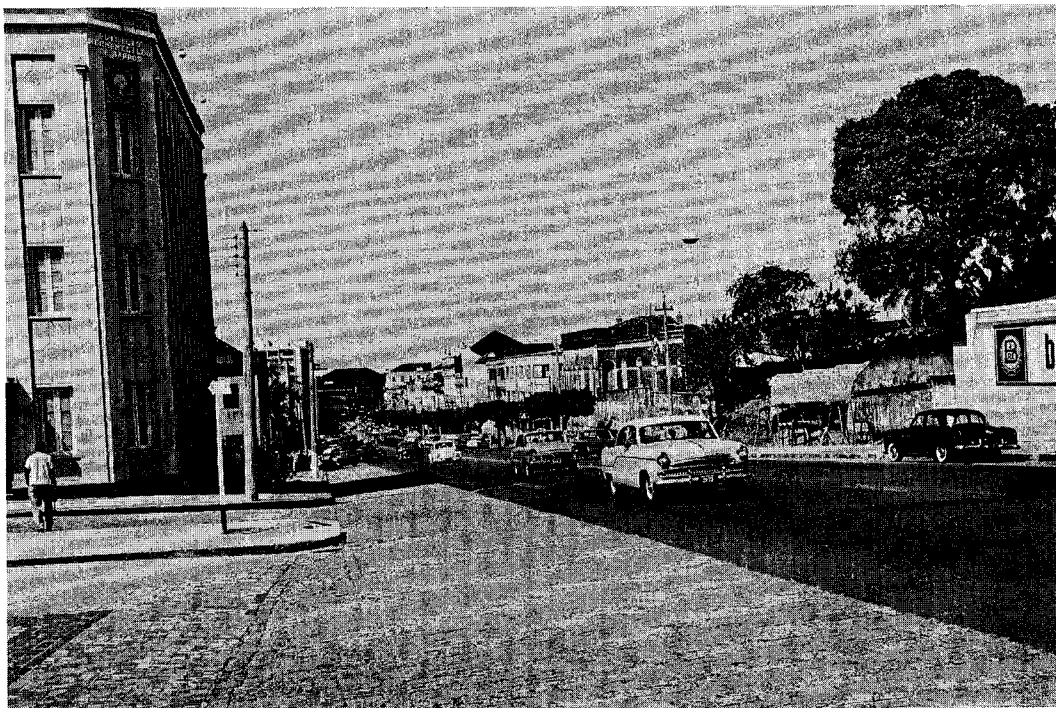
ABOVE. Unloading sugar at the bakery across the street from the Hotel Amazonas. An ocean-going freighter brought it from Recife, on Brazil's northeast coast, via 1000 miles of Amazon River.

By evening, the girls have their hair piled high in elegant coiffures. They linger on the balcony, laughing, promenading, attentive to the Amazonas restaurant directly across the street, where many stag tables are intently discussing the day's business. Ignored, the girls resort to that special Latin call, the hiss. It is a bad night—the false blonde and the brunette retire behind the shutters; the third persists a while longer.

It is a reciprocal floor show. They watch as as we eat, and we watch them in turn. After all, there is no television in Manaus, and the few movie houses are little frequented during the week. Even the bar of the hotel closes by 10:30.

Doldrums also prevail in mid-day. The stores begin to close in late morning, at 11:00 or 11:30 or 12:00, to reopen sometime between 1:00 and 3:00. The wind lags and a pungent smell of roasting coffee permeates the air, from the wholesale processor around the corner. Those people walking on the street search out the shady side; those waiting for buses on the sunny side stand, as though by military command, in a straight line dictated by the shadow of the electric light pole.

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Main Street, Manaus



View over center of Manaus, with domed opera house on horizon

All in all, in Amazônia there is a sameness imposed by nature which gradually takes its toll. The length of day and night is equal, throughout the year. Daybreak near the equator is a la Kipling---"and the sun comes up like thunder..." At 5:00 it is dense black. Then dawn burgeons so rapidly the eye can easily perceive the change in light. Within ten minutes the sky goes from deep shade to the red of a rosé wine which spreads from horizon to horizon. In the streets dusky shadow evaporates before broad daylight, as human activity builds from 5:00 stirrings to full tumult by 6:00. The day ends with similar rapidity. Biologists, psychologists and related scientists are now studying the effects of the day's rhythm upon life; they are sure it is significant.

The persistence of the heat also begins to wear upon the human system. In fact, the temperature is not out of range; Belém at a latitude of 1°28'03" registered a maximum of 95° in its hottest month of August, but its average is 78.8°. However, the humidity never abates, always at 85% or more. Even in the summer, early mornings and evenings are cool, but mid-day drives all life to shelter. And every day is the same; there is no relief of cold front from the Canadian plains or high pressure center from the ocean. Keeping self and wardrobe fresh becomes a monotonous routine, and the wisdom of the siesta gradually reveals itself.

There is no doubt that, in Amazônia, nature dominates the pace of life.

Sincerely yours,



Frances M. Foland

Photos: FMMF

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