

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

FM - 5
Porto de Galinhas I:
The Road from Recife

Recife,
Pernambuco.

1st. May 1966.

Mr. Richard H. Nolte,
Institute of Current World Affairs,
366 Madison Avenue,
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte,

The topography of the road between Recife and Porto de Galinhas, the **coastal** village where we are now living, reflects in a microcosm the general features and strong contrasts of the Zona da Mata. For this reason it is worth describing in some detail the seventy kilometres of scenery that we pass through on our fortnightly visit to the state capital.

Most of the buildings in the centre of Recife are high, but generally drab, ferro-concrete blocks. They are dominated by the fourteen storey skyscraper, occupied, suitably enough, by the headquarters of SUDENE. After passing the recently bombed main post office, the road crosses one of the two rivers that wind through the city, the Capibaribe. The bridge, the **busiest** in Recife, has a constant stream of motor traffic and pedestrians. Rows of comatose and crippled beggars line the parapets, and more enterprising small salesmen press their plastic combs, bunches of fruits, and biros on the passers-by. Beneath, the river flows sluggishly. Much affected by the tides, **it** is usually a wide expanse of stinking mud that **barely** covers the town rubbish and sewage that it is expected to absorb.

The other side of the river the buildings gradually diminish, and the wide street passes through the residential areas. Near the centre, there are a great many nineteenth century houses, almost all of which have now been institutionalised. I was impressed very early on by the extraordinary number of institutes that appear to flourish in the city. These range from philanthropic and charitable institutes to psychiatric clinics, and almost all are housed in former large houses; very few have new buildings.

Slightly further from the centre is the present smarter residential belt. The streets have an abundance of trees shading the modern one or two storey villas. Recife's growth since the War has been extremely rapid, and the majority of the middle class houses have been built in the past thirty years, many designed by the present owners. They are architecturally unexciting, and few show little ambition other than to keep up with the Jones's. With few exceptions, they have a Moorish style verandah, heavy wrought-iron bars across the wide windows, and white or colour washed walls. Furniture is of very heavy dark wood, or of plastic. Good modern design is extremely rare. The houses are detached, and each has a small carefully tended garden. The whole atmosphere is strongly reminiscent of Bournemouth.

Occasionally the monotony is broken by a magnificent sugar baron's house, still in private hands. These lavish, huge houses, set in park-like grounds, are mainly nineteenth century, and range in style from Renaissance castles to high Victoriana. Few now belong to the original landowning families; most are now owned by the extremely rich local industrialists.

The scale of the houses diminishes imperceptibly, until, after passing one of the large retail markets that sells everything from food to car spares, the working class belt is reached. This consists of small rectangular single storey houses, end on to the road, built of wood and mud with tiled roofs. Windows have only wooden shutters, and doors are two piece, like stable doors, to keep out stray dogs and chickens. The shops are only distinguishable from private houses by the soft drink and paraffin signs nailed to the walls outside. They have no shop windows. The whole area is exceedingly dreary, and gives the impression that development sprang up overnight, and lacks any feeling of permanence.

These coloured mud huts gradually thin out until a minor modern industrial zone is reached. The largest factories here are those of domestic gas production, and various refrigeration plants, but more light industry is rapidly filling in all the unoccupied land. International style petrol stations are beginning to spring up on this no man's land in the outskirts of the city. These differ little from their European equivalents apart from the abundance of small boys eager to clean wind-screens, check air-pressures, and open car doors, in the hope of making four cents or less.

The last point of interest in the city is the airport, with its modern well-designed buildings. Recife is a very flat town. The plane is broken only by the meandering rivers and two lowish hills. Of these, one with superb views over the city, is a slum. The other lies on the outskirts very near the airport. This is still wooded, and is dominated by a chapel commemorating victory over the Dutch in the seventeenth century. To accomodate the runway, a large slice of the hillside has had to be cut away. It seems a curious site to choose for the airport when there is so much flat ground available.

As one leaves the urban sprawl, a new land-mark is rapidly springing up. A regional factory for Willys jeeps and cars, the first car factory in the North East, is progressing visibly each time we pass. At present all Volkswagens and Willyses, which together account for the great majority of cars manufactured in Brazil, are brought up from the South which entails delays in delivery dates, as well as the additional transport costs. The regional market is now of a size to buy all the cars from a factory large enough to reap economies of scale.

The end of the city is marked by the reverse side of a series of hoardings advertising tyres, drinks and airlines, which would welcome you on entering. The countryside on either side of the straight concrete road, is desolate and depressing. The road, too wide for two cars, but too narrow for three, passes through as yet unclaimed mangrove swamps. The twisted roots stick out of the black mud, and the trees themselves with their lack of foliage look as though they are dying. Parallel with

the road runs the single track main railway line. Very infrequently long chocolate coloured trains rumble slowly past, on their way to towns in the South of the state. During the Summer small boys stand beside the road with huge umbrella-like bunches of cashew fruit, hoping to sell them to passing cars. During the Winter the only signs of humanity are fishermen standing knee-deep in the swamp catching crabs and small fresh-water fish.

The mangrove swamps gradually give way to rolling country covered in sugar cane. The monoculture is absolute. The road continues between cane fields so high that the only view is of waving sugarcane close at hand. At intervals the monotony is broken by a bright pink cutting through a hill, or a bridge over a khaki coloured river winding sleepily through the cane fields. These rivers are always a scene of activity. There is either a collection of women bent over their washing, spreading it out to dry, perhaps a little cleaner, on the banks. Or there is a group of small naked brown-skinned boys swimming, diving and fishing.

The road passes through two ribbon developments that have sprung up along it. They both consist of long rows of houses similar to the working class houses in Recife. There are a yellow church with bright green stained glass windows, a number of fruit vendors on the pavements and a few shops scattered among the houses, with kerosene barrels or empty beer crates outside.

Passing through them with little reduction in speed, for there are no speed limits imposed in Brazil, one drives through more cane fields, until the recently industrialised town of Cabo looms up on the horizon. Flames flicker from the top of the tall metal chimneys of Coperbo, a recently opened factory producing synthetic rubber as a by-product of sugar cane. A large board in front of it informs all who pass by that it was financed jointly by SUDENE and USAID. To a layman's eye the expanses of gleaming silver metal look like the exposed insides of a transistor radio. The roof and walls appear to be missing. The Brahma Chopp factory, one of the beer companies in this part of Brazil, has a relatively orthodox new brick factory next door.

Cabo itself stands on a hill surmounted by the church. The town has, like lava, spread down the hillsides, and the low ground at the foot is covered in minute brick boxes where the factory workers live. They are laid out in rows, identical, with a maximum of two or three small rooms, judging from their size outside. The town shows signs of prosperity lacking in most comparable provincial towns in the area. Houses are more expensively built, and the older houses, instead of falling into a state of decay, have been carefully preserved. The number of banks is much larger than normal, and, from their furnishings, they seem to be flourishing. People are animated and in touch with the wider world, looking towards Recife, rather than only inwards, for their needs. Economically speaking, Cabo is in the process of taking off, and visible progress is being made. The 'bus station is always crowded, and communications with other towns are good. It also has the advantage of the railway line.

At Cabo one turns off the main road, and takes the one for Ipojuca. This is in the process of being made up, and has been ever since we first made the trip in December. I have yet to understand the Brazilian technique

of roadbuilding: each time we go along this stretch of road it has a different surface, not necessarily an improvement on the last. It has been clay, sand, and dust, and only now is the first patch of concrete being laid. Huge American Caterpillars rush up and down at an alarming speed, obviously giving great enjoyment to their drivers. This example of twentieth century mechanisation is unique, and contrasts strongly with the rest of the scene.

A common sight is a group of three men standing in the middle of the road: one is surveying with a tape, another is writing down his findings, and the third is holding a large black umbrella over the other two, to protect them from the sun. If it is raining they do not work. The labourers on this stretch of road are paid on a time basis. Elsewhere I saw a group of navvies shovelling as if the devil were behind them. This, I was told, was because they were being paid 'por producao'. At whatever time of day we pass, there is never much sign of activity. When it is raining, there are rows of coloured plastic hillocks beside the road, which are in fact tablecloths covering roadworkers. When they are resting they sleep in hammocks slung in every ingenious nook. One man had even slung his hammock through a concrete pipe.

The cane fields continue on either side, although the nuclei of two or three engenhos are passed on this stretch of road which give added interest. These include the Engenho Masangana where Joaquim Nabuco, the Brazilian statesman and ambassador to America, was brought up. Otherwise, the occasional morador's hut is the only sign of habitation. Traffic is sparse, and vehicles are chiefly jeeps and lorries, many with official registration plates. Pedestrians balancing water containers or parcels on their heads trudge along the verge. Horses and mules bearing huge wicker panniers, with their rider perched on top, plod along with their heads to the ground.

Ipojuca, the seat of a município, or minor administrative area, offers a strong contrast to Cabo, and is much more typical of the region. It lies on one flank of a hill, with the commercial centre at the foot, and there are few signs of development. The place cannot have looked very different sixty years ago. It is a sleepy town where everybody still knows everybody else, and life still centres around the magnificent Dutch monastery at the top of the hill. This, with its courtyard and piazza, is more reminiscent of European ecclesiastical architecture than any other building I have seen in Brazil. It is now inhabited by only six monks, most of them German, and piles of sacks of American powdered milk waiting to be distributed. Ipojuca only comes to life on Sunday, market day. The rest of the time it exists, supporting a population of petty government officials, small shopkeepers, and workers from the local usina and engenhos. Of industry there is no sign. There is one garage, and it is used for cars owned by the município.

From Recife to Cabo the road is made up of concrete blocks, over which it is possible to travel fairly fast. Between Cabo and Ipojuca the road deteriorates into sand, earth, and stones. Over this one has to drive in second gear, raising clouds of dust behind the car. Beyond Ipojuca the road is appalling. During the Winter it is at times completely impassable. It is a red clay track full of puddles covering

treacherously deep potholes, over which lorries loaded with cane lurch along at less than fifteen kilometres an hour. The tailboards of these are covered with witticisms, and often bright, crude landscapes are painted on the doors. From time to time the tall smoking chimney of the Usina Salgado is momentarily visible over the forest of cane, before one is again engulfed. This usina with its large, old, white-washed building and corrugated iron roof acts as a landmark for miles around. By day, the site is a centre of activity with droves of cattle, dejected looking men on horseback, and occasional tractors and oxen pulling perilously full carts of cane. A white concrete building labelled escritorio (office), and spiked with television aerials, stands out from the rest of the ramshackle workshops and outbuildings. The house of the owner himself is discreetly hidden behind thick trees. Behind a corral for cattle, in a long row of whitish houses, like model pigsties, live many of the operarios. By night, the usina shines out in the darkness, lit with bare electric light bulbs, and all is quiet except for the barking watch dogs.

Immediately beyond the usina is a morador's hut where last week the owner of the hut was shot to death over a petty matter by a colleague. Looming up in front is the large, dignified, cream-coloured church of Nossa Senhora do O. It is a small, flat town whose church, standing alone in a rough meadow with grazing cattle and donkeys, dominates the low, single storied houses. The streets are earth, and are black or grey depending on the weather.

Houses are of two types only: those of the working class, who for the most part are employed on the usina or in nearby engenhos, and those of the lower middle class, who are small shopkeepers or school teachers teaching in the town's fourteen schools. The poorer houses are built in a curious way, and appear to have been built necessarily at the same time despite the varied dates on the front. The length of the street is taken up with one long barn-like building. Each house and shop has a door on to the street, and one or two, usually dark green, shuttered windows. From the street, one house is distinguishable from the next by a 1930's square pediment on the front, often bearing the date of construction in art nouveau numerals.

Inside, the houses are three or four rooms deep. These are divided by partitions about seven feet high. There are no ceilings, only rafters and the high tiled roof that covers the whole row of houses. At the back is a small garden or yard with a paw-paw tree, banana tree or melon, and piles of rusty tin cans. There is also frequently a well, for Nossa Senhora do O has no running water yet. Electricity from the Paulo Afonso hydro-electric power station has been installed, and all the houses are lit with bare light bulbs hanging on long wires, or occasionally with hideous plastic lamp shades. The town has one telephone, installed last November, which is connected to Ipojuca. The superior houses are detached modern bungalows with glass in the windows, and a small terrace and garden in front.

An atmosphere of boredom and sleepiness is prevalent. Every front room or terrace has two or three rocking chairs occupied by dozing or staring women. There is very little traffic. A few mangy dogs with their tails between their legs, and beasts of burden tied to lamp posts, have the streets to themselves. A lorry with all its wheels removed lies in the main street, rusting and neglected since we first arrived. Each time a car

passes every door and window is miraculously filled with curious women and children. There is little contact with the rest of the world. A 'bus for Recife leaves at dawn, but otherwise escape is on foot or horseback. Conversation is that of small shopkeepers everywhere, and oozes gentility and smugness. To stay in the town would be claustrophobic and stifling.

Shortly after leaving Nossa Senhora do O, the cane fields are eaten into by mangrove swamps. The road is a black mud track, built up slightly above the softer mud and blacker water lying on either side. Hundreds of small holes perforate the ground, with fat yellow crabs sitting near them in the open. However, as soon as a person is within six feet of them they dart irretrievably in to the nearest hole. Nevertheless, this does not discourage men and boys who wade around for hour on end, up to their thighs in the stinking mud, wielding tins on the end of sticks to catch their wily prey. Beside the road lie piles of damp wood, which, dragged from the swamp, lies waiting to be carried to the usina by lorry.

A rickety unprotected plank bridge over a shallow tidal river marks the beginning of the open countryside. Water meadows of bright green but coarse grass are intersected by pale blue irrigation channels. Light coloured zebus, a type of very strong cattle, with humps on their shoulders and long floppy ears, graze peacefully, or lie in the shade of a cashew tree. These are magnificent trees with dark green leaves, similar in size and shape to an oak tree, and flourish in sandy soil. One or two isolated houses of moradores lie near the road, sheltered by an orchard of banana trees. Large brightly coloured birds dart across the road or perch on fences. The only sound is the distant roar of the sea, still hidden behind coconut groves. The track by this stage has become sand, and is deserted except for an occasional pannier-laden mule, or a peasant carrying a black rolled umbrella walking to Nossa Senhora do O.

The coconut groves are finally reached, and the track passes through their midst. Planted ten metres apart, they provide a uniform, dappled shade. The ground is sparsely covered with grass, and has a thick carpet of coconut husks and fallen coconut leaves. Bluish green lizards watch from behind logs, and seguin, like squirrels, leap up and down the trees as the car approaches.

Finally, after pushing the car through the worst sand troughs, the trees thin out on the right and reveal a view of water-logged water meadows and blue wooded hills stretching into the distance. A unique coconut tree with a complete U-bend in its trunk marks the approach to Porto de Galinhas. Just outside the gate there is a group of wells, providing a natural meeting place for the women. From dawn till dusk, there are always five or six of them squatting over their large aluminium basins, soaping and rubbing their clothes. Around them lie acres of faded cloth, spread out to dry. Other women, balancing old paraffin cans on their heads stand around gossiping.

The scenery during the two hours journey illustrates well the varied elements of the Zona da Mata. One sees the urban misery, rapid industrial development, the rural poverty, the natural beauty, and the various types of small town in the interior. There are visible developments every fortnight, and never once has the journey been dull.

Yours sincerely,

Fanny Mitchell.

Fanny Mitchell.