

Brazil's Amazon Jungle, Part 2

A Rumble With the Jungle

The fall from the bridge was this morning. The day has been a blur of failed mechanics interspersed with lost consciousness. I can't choke back any more drugs, especially as we have so few and no soon opportunity to gain more. As the daylight disappears the thick Amazon foliage takes on a sinister demeanor — much like it had last night.

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Photography: Simon and Lisa Thomas

A Dark Day

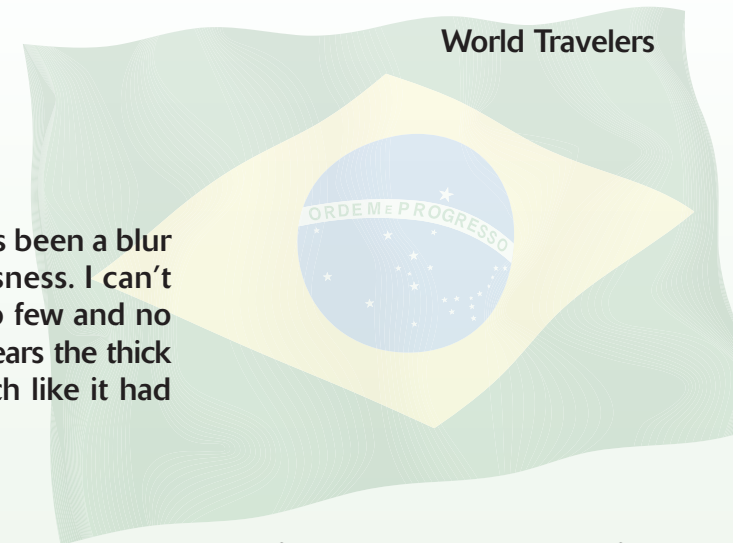
"Sssshhhh, listen," I whisper loudly to Lisa. Sure enough in the distance and getting closer is the sound of a small engine. Raymundo, a slight man of five-feet, with swarthy skin and a gentle manner, dismounts his age-ravaged Honda. His face is a picture of caution and uncertainty. Sandra, his wife, remains with the bike unsure about us or the risk we might pose.

Luckily, Raymundo and Sandra live six miles farther on. But even so, with deep water-logged stretches ahead, both express fears we'll not make it that far. Lisa throws the gear from my 1100 onto her F 650 GS, as I struggle to tighten the ratchet straps that I'm using to brace the sub-frame fractures. "They need to hold" I quietly whisper under my breath. One bad fall could easily have the frame damaged beyond repair. Lisa will have to tow me there — there's no other way! I fumble clumsily to attach the blue rope from Lisa's rear sub-frame to my front fork. Lisa shares her doubts about our likely success, unable to hold back her distress any longer. But she knows, like I do, we have no other choice.

A Tow in the Dark

Fearfully, Lisa eases her clutch lever and the slack of our rope disappears. Just a few feet ahead of me, I watch

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Lisa fight her bike as it slides ass first into another deep water-bogged trough. Her bike violently wrenches my own in the same direction as I try to stay upright. Defiantly she hits the throttle hard, blinding me in a powerful spray of water and mud. She's struggling to find any purchase in this mire. It's hard enough to ride on, let alone to pull half a ton of dead R 1100 GS in the dark.

Raymundo's tiny rear light has been swallowed by the gloom, and the tangle of undergrowth on both sides, now seems closer. I yell to Lisa a warning as I pass out and fall from the bike. "Get up, move your ass, now. Get up, we're almost there," Lisa repeats hauling me to my feet. I've been hearing that for the last two hours.

Startled we both turn, straining to see into the murky shadows. "Minha casa," Raymundo shouts excitedly again, pointing to our left; we'd not seen him walk back. Surrounded by forest, we can barely make out the small structure silhouetted by the moonlight; it's been the longest six miles of our lives. Exhausted, we manhandle the bikes from the track towards the wood and bamboo shelter. Helplessly I'm forced to watch Lisa lug our belongings from the bikes — she's been spectacular. She never gave in, no matter what.

Inside, Sandra lights two small candles, placing one on a fragile looking table and carrying the other to light her way. Its gentle glow illuminates her painfully gaunt face and dark skin as she leads



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us to a small and simple room. Inside only a bed, of sorts: four wooden fruit crates pushed together, covered in leaves and grass, covered in turn by a tired sheet. Tonight her three children will sleep with her, to make room for us. We are 180 miles from the city of Manaus, and yet, this is a totally disconnected world.

Jungle Mechanics

In spite of yesterday, I've rallied, determined that I can fix this. With only my right side operating and with Lisa's help, the work has taken me four hours. I've re-checked and put right all that I can. I nervously press the starter button. My elation as the engine barks to life is short-lived, replaced with despair as the motor falls silent. More white smoke lifts from the bike.

As the last of the daylight fades, I rush to reconnect the fuel lines. The new wiring

is in. Lisa clips the jumper cables from her bike to mine. The GS's engine sparks to life with a press of the starter button. The grin on my face is the size of the Amazon itself. Cautiously we let the engine run; we are bent over the bike sniffing the air for any scent of telltale burning. Twenty minutes later and we're still good as I ride the bike up and down the track. The relief is overwhelming.

Lisa and I consider our frightening reality: we need to reach Rio or Sao Paulo, as much to fix the bike, as to find a hospital for me. Even if we were to somehow call for rescue, a helicopter would have nowhere to land – the jungle is so thick it overtakes everything. I've passed out four times today, and my left side isn't responding. After a dinner of rice and stewed beans, we anxiously begin to re-pack in readiness for our departure tomorrow.

Hope and Despair

The sun is still sleeping as we exchange hugs and kisses, expressing our thanks and appreciation to Raymundo's amazing family. With the bikes fully loaded, the 1100's engine starts without drama, followed quickly by Lisa's 650. As I smile a final goodbye to our new friends and shift into first gear, my engine splutters and stalls.

"NO, NO, NO, NO, NO, NO, NO!" I'm yelling in panic and disbelief. Heavier plumes of plastic smoke lift. I rush to turn off the ignition. But it's too late, as more damage has been done. Lisa's face is aghast and I'm at an all-time low. I simply want to crawl into a deep hole and come out when the bike fairy has dropped by to fix the problem. I begin to fight waves of panic.

An inspection of the wiring reveals more blistered and burnt insulating tape.

All my hard-fought labor yesterday simply took the bike's problems along a new path. Now I'm going to have to lift the complete rear sub-frame to get access to the entire length of the loom, and then cut it open to repair the damage. If I even have enough wire. If I even have enough insulating tape. A search through my spares reveals only one roll of duct tape.

Cutting back the thick sticky tape of the main wiring loom, I allow myself a caustic chuckle, remembering the BMW manual that reads "ABSOLUTELY DO NOT TOUCH UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES." What had once been my bike's intricate nervous system is now just a charred and melded mess of plastic and exposed copper wire. Each wire has melted itself to the next, making them indistinguishable from each other.

Lisa holds the loom as I wield my Leatherman, separating the last few feet of melted wires – six feet in total. My blurred vision grows worse. By 7:00 pm, we're re-checking our work. I've pulled out the worst of the wires and separated, repaired, and consequently reinsulated 34 separate shorts, and finally lowered the rear sub-frame and re-attached everything. Clenched in my hand, a bolt and two thin washers are all that's left over. I hope they aren't important.

"I can do no more," I tell myself in the vain hope of avoiding any self-induced guilt should the bike not start. Anxiously I turn the ignition and hit the starter. The instrument panel looks bright and the engine sparks to life. Tears of relief start to roll down my cheeks. Lisa squeezes my hand reassuringly, but we don't exchange glances. In the dark the engine runs.

Adventure Has Teeth

At dawn I'm up, having slept little. Raymundo grabs my arm excitedly. "Porto Velho, Porto Velho" he yells pointing at the 4x4 that is picking its way along the track toward us. Scrambling to reach the pick-up before it passes, we're soon imploring with the driver, Davildo, to lend a hand. As Lisa throws our bags into the rear, I carefully quiz Davildo. It becomes clear he's on a risky money-maker. Having been paid to transport the 4x4 by boat to Porto Velho, he's attempting to drive it there and pocket the money. We're thankful for his cunning and his help. For a second time, we exchange goodbye hugs and do our best to verbally repay our immense debt of gratitude to Raymundo's family. Porto Velho is still five hard days south and we understand we'll face wall-logged gullies without bridges.

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World Travelers

"If we were ever looking for adventure, we've found it, and it has teeth" I muse, as I swing my machete violently into the stout branch. Lisa and Davildo lash the wood we've already cut to the wrecked bridge. This will be the third we've had to repair today, before we could cross.

As darkness descends, we wearily unload our kit from Davildo's pickup. He arranges permission for us to stay with a local man and his wife for the night. The couple wear the same expression as Sandra and remain silent. As we hang our hammocks, we're filled with concern for our new travel companion



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who explains he plans to drive through the night. After today I can't even begin to get my head around this insanity, but he won't be talked out of it.

Building Bridges

Late the following morning, the GPS confirms we've achieved a paltry three miles in the last four hours. The weight of our gear is taking its toll. As I cut more wood to support another bridge, I watch Lisa: weakness, headache, nausea, sweats, and confusion, she's showing all the early stages of heat exhaustion. My mind escapes momentarily and I reminisce, thinking of all those lazy Sunday mornings at home, when neck deep in duvets and pillows we would imagine all of the adventures that were to come, good and bad. Somehow even the bad ones, then, seemed more romantic. Bracing the bridge, riding both bikes across, loading and unloading has cost us one-and-a-half hours of daylight. As my bike thumps from the bridge to the track, I'm only too aware that one substantial jar could see my sub-frame fractures crack all the way through.

A Scheme Goes Wrong – Or so it Appears

"Simon, stop," Lisa yells. "Down there, look! Oh God." Down in the trench, some 30-feet from the slime layered track, turned over and now resting on its roof is a familiar looking 4x4. Lisa is already knee deep in dull water, pulling back the cracked wind-screen to check inside the cab for our friend. Neither of the doors will open and the cab is half submersed. "Is he in there? Is he alright?" I ask, shaken by the moment.

The jungle seems to have gone quiet, as if asking the same question. There's no sign of our travel companion. And no indication of how he may have gotten out. After calling for 30 minutes without response, we are forced to stop looking.



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It's pitch black as we negotiate a deep-water section, which threatens to consume the bikes. We've lost count of the number of times we've loaded and unloaded today. On the bright side, we're amazed that at night we are now traversing tracks, fully laden, which only a few days ago we'd have thought impossible even without the baggage. On the negative side, we've been going toe-to-toe with the Amazon all day, and the Amazon's winning. I've never hated my GPS so much; it confirms *exactly* how far we haven't come. We've been rewarded with only 12 miles after all of today's efforts.

The wood carcass of an old shelter provides us with hanging space for the hammocks. As Lisa prepares food on the MSR stove, the night suddenly comes alive. The very air spins and whirs around us, as we are swarmed by thousands of bats. I scramble to find wood in the hope that a fire will fend them off. We take turns keeping watch throughout the night all too aware that more deadly species are known to roam close by.

A Ray of Hope – But Not for Long

I'm woken by Lisa tugging furiously on my arm. "Simon, Simon, there's a pick-up coming." "That's not funny," I slur, still half asleep. "Look!" Lisa insists. The Toyota is covered in the same thick, sticky orange mud as us. We convince the driver to help us reach Humaitá, a small town some 230 miles south. The two men and lone female seem genuinely concerned by our plight. Later, we find out they are associates of Davildos, running the same money-making scheme. They have had no contact from Davildo and are worried, having passed his over-turned vehicle earlier.

Clambering into our heavy and muddy riding kit, Lisa and I are both struck with waves of nausea. Within moments, we're both retching violently, bent double, our stomachs in knots. But we've eaten so little in the last few days, that nothing comes up. By the time we've recovered, 45 minutes have disappeared – along with the Toyota.

Our money, gear, tent, hammocks and tools are in the back of the pickup, the only thing we strapped to the bikes were two small pouches of water. We're now in a desperate game of catch-up, realizing our folly. Thirty miles pass and there's no sign of the 4x4. We've no other choice, but to reach Humaitá by nightfall. Have we been naive, stupid, or simply dog-tired and misjudged the situation? With hindsight, probably a bit of all three.

The hours pass, and the struggle continues. With evening drawing in, the rain has let up and the thick mud is seemingly behind us. In dim light, I struggle to operate the small taps on Lisa's auxiliary fuel tanks. My GS is in dire need of a fuel transfusion having run dry three times in the last two hours, and with our plastic containers onboard the Toyota, I use a discarded plastic bottle we've found lying on the track. At least the last few bridges have been sound. At our lowest ebb, we hit asphalt for the first time in what feels like an eternity.



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Conspiracy Theories

With another flat, out comes the pump, and sometime later we ready for the off. Lisa helps me stand and climb aboard my bike. Turning the key in the ignition yields nothing but “click, click, click, click, click.” “This is a conspiracy,” I yell. My concentration has been so shot to hell that I’d left my bike’s lights on to help me see. “What the hell are we going to do, even our jump leads are on-board the Toyota!” I rant savagely.

Lisa urges me to calm down. I need to think. “We can jump start the bike, but all of our rope is on the ...yeah, yeah...” Untying the five-feet of strapping that we’ve used to secure a water bag, we reattach it between both bikes. “Dam that’s short for a tow,” I think to myself.

The Universe’s Cruel Sense of Humor

It’s 2:30 am and both bikes are now completely squeaky-dry of fuel. The GPS

indicates that we are just eight miles from Humaitá, which of course means eight miles from help, a hotel room, a shower, food, ice cold water, and relative safety. Yet there’s nothing else we can do tonight. No ingenious tricks, no clever ploy, nada. With that realization painfully accepted, we push the bikes to the side of the track, put them on side-stand and with only our see-through armour jackets for warmth, lie on the bikes. Exhausted we sleep.

Breaking the Curse

It’s an uncomfortable sensation; the day is getting warmer by the minute, but we are shivering violently from a mixture of sheer exhaustion and the cold from last night. All we need is one person who’s willing to pick me up and drop me off in Humaitá, where I can find some fuel. We flag a small black Honda, which pulls over. Bill flashes us his warm smile, seemingly and instantly

breaking whatever curse we’d been under. The eight miles to town blur by, as I’ve little sight in my right eye. But it doesn’t even matter, since we’ve made it. A little embarrassed I explain to Bill that our money is with a Toyota that we now know to be in town. Bill simply smiles and says warmly “no problem.”

Epilogue

A further two weeks of trials and tribulation passed before we finally reached medical help in Sao Paulo. During that time, my passing-out spells increased in frequency, the mass of insect bites on our arms and legs became infected, Lisa was struck with a high fever, and we both had trench foot.

Mechanically, the rear wheel-bearing on the 1100 GS failed and we were forced to come up with some ingenious mechanics in order to install the spare. Finally under torrential rain, my troubled machine gave up the struggle when the hall sensor died. We were rescued by the head of BMW Motorrad Brazil himself, Andres Fuse, who, after receiving an email, had sent a truck to carry us the last 600-miles to the city.

At the Albert Einstein hospital, surrounded by concerned specialists and after a barrage of expensive tests, we were given “our” diagnosis. We received the news with shock and disbelief. My neck was broken in two places, fractured and dislocated, with the C-6 cervical vertebrae touching my spinal cord. Lisa was suffering full onset Malaria, and both of us were badly dehydrated and medically exhausted.

A fraction of an inch of vertebral movement had been the difference between my life and death. Miraculously, and thankfully, I’m still here. Emergency surgery was carried out to stabilize my neck, and six weeks later we again straddled our newly repaired bikes to begin our ride to Ushuaia, the tip of South America.



Brazil

FACTS AND INFORMATION

Total Mileage

Approximately 2,657 miles.

In General

Humaitá, the first small city outside of Manaus, is 765 km away (or four days by ferry). Sao Paulo is the industrial and business heart of Brazil and not a pretty city; however, it’s very close to top beaches and resorts. The high season in Sao Paulo is summer, December to March. Note that the seasons in Brazil are the reverse of the Northern hemisphere.

How to Get There

US citizens require a valid passport and visa to travel to Brazil. A yellow fever vaccination certificate may also be requested. Most international flights land in the metropolitan cities of either Sao Paulo or Rio de Janeiro.

Food & Lodging

Campsites are available outside Amazonia and wild camping is also possible. Accommodations range from hostels, \$11-\$45 per night, to 3-star hotels for \$90-plus per night, and 5-star hotels for \$200-plus, per night.

Street stalls and the by-the-kilo buffets are the best places to try local food. Sao Paulo has some of the best sushi outside of Japan, and it’s cheap too!

Great ice creams and fruit shakes can be found everywhere and are made with all sorts of fresh fruit such as açai and guaraná. The national drink is Caipirinha. Be careful how many you consume, as this is an alcoholic drink made with Cachaça, distilled from sugar cane.

Roads & Biking

When driving in Brazil, make sure you carry an Inter-American Driving Permit along with your valid US driver’s license. Many roads, indicated as main roads on maps of Brazil are in a bad state of repair or

non-existent. From Humaitá to Sao Paulo, the roads continue to improve but are still considered as some of the most dangerous in the world. Many routes become impassable in the rainy season.

Contact Information

- o Brazil Travel Guide
www.brazil-travel-guide.com /Brazil-Best-Time.htm
- o Ministry of Tourism for Brazil
www.braziltour.com/site/gb/home/index.php
- o Travel Advice
http://travel.state.gov/travel/wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/list.aspx

Books & Maps

- o *Lonely Planet Brazil*, by Regis St. Louis, Kevin Raub, Gregor Clark, and John Noble, ISBN 978-1741042979, \$26.99
- o *Brazil & Amazon map*, Nelles Verlag, ISBN 978-3865740816, \$10.95
- o *Sao Paulo & Southern Brazil*, International Travel maps, ISBN 978-1553416876, \$10.95

Motorcycles & Gear

BMW R 1100 GS, BMW F 650 GS
Jacket and Pants: BMW Rally 1
Helmets: BMW System 4 Carbon Fiber
Boots: Alpine Star Tech 6 and Gaerne SG10
Luggage Systems: Touratech Zega

Always consult more detailed maps for touring purposes.

GPS files are available at www.RoadRUNNER.travel

