

Three Rough Blokes on the Amazon **January - February 2015**

By Roger James

Monday 19th January

Arriving in Las Vegas late in the afternoon, I am in time for the night shoot run by Sure Fire. Different suppressors and flash eliminators are demonstrated. We also get to try some of them out.

The next 3 days are spent at the Shot show. Here gun and associated products are on display in the large convention center at the Venetian Hotel. The size and amount of products on display is quite overwhelming.



It is really great to catch up with the many people I met here three years ago and with others I have bumped into in other parts of the world. My friend Mike from Sure Fire is there in fine form, as is Erik from Aimpoint.

Deciding on an early night on the last night I head back to the Treasure Island Hotel. It is a good plan until I get intercepted by Gary and Simon (a couple of friends from Auckland) - we find a quiet bar and have a couple of drinks.

Friday 23 January

Finishing our drinks around 1am it is time to pack and head to the airport. Apart

from the check-in nothing is open so I go through to the gate and lay on the floor for a bit of a nap.

The flight to Panama is only half full. Arriving into Panama 6-hours later there are dozens of ships anchored just off shore - I presume waiting to get through the canal.



With some pointing and sign language I make it through immigration and am met by a driver for the 40-minute trip to the Double Tree by Hilton hotel. I reckon there are nearly more skyscrapers here than Manhattan. They have certainly packed them in.

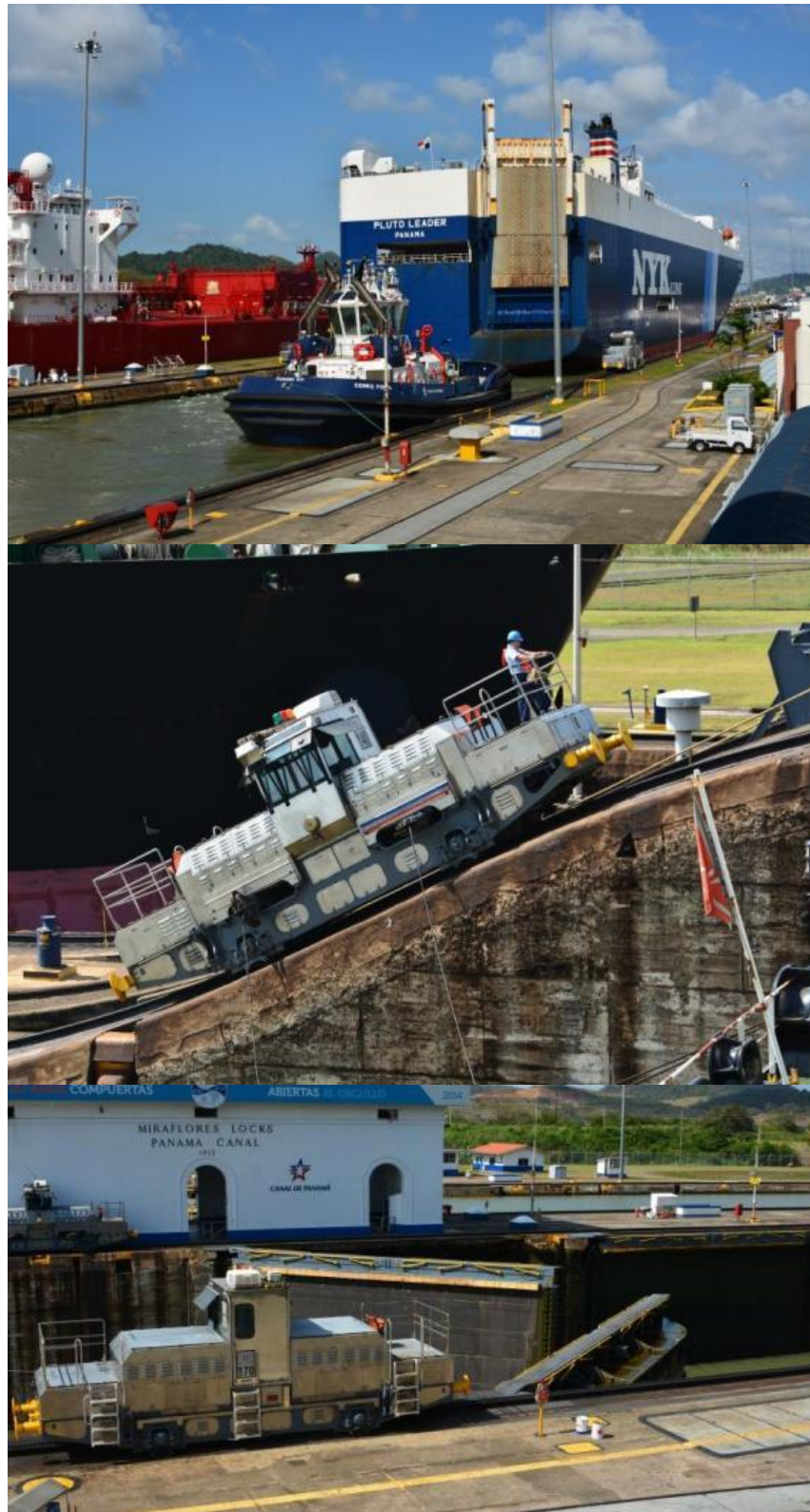
Saturday 24 January

A 5 minute stroll to Parque Urraca (a park) and I catch the hop on hop off sightseeing bus. Turning up 20 minutes late it sort of lurches along. It's 30 minutes or so later we arrive at the Canal - A great engineering feat and somewhat different than I had perceived.



Originally they had looked at digging a trench between the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. That would have taken way too long and cost way too much. Some bright spark came up with the idea of raising the ships up some 80ft at each end and using the rivers and high rainfall to create a lake in the middle. The ships come into the first lock, the water is raised in the lock and lowered at the next lock. Gates open, the ship powers its way to the next lock guided by a series of funiculars with steel cables attached to the bow and stern. The two canals are 110ft wide each. We watch a 106ft wide ship go through. There are 2

tugs with this ship to guide it through the lake. Apparently there are a couple of bigger canals being built to handle the bigger ships.





The next stop is the Causeway. There is a hill there which I am sure has panoramic views. As I approach the path, a guy stands a sign up saying no entry. Apparently all the ship control stuff for the canal is up there. I do find a nice restaurant overlooking the marina for a nice lunch.



On the bus again and we lurch our way to Casco Antigua. This is the old town with a lot of walls but no building inside. It is however being restored and is quite a picturesque place to visit - lots of little shops, stalls and the fish markets at one end.



Heavy rain sets in for the bus ride back to the start point. Later at the hotel I am told the whole city is without power. Lucky the hotel has a generator. Good to see that this doesn't just happen in Auckland!!



Sunday 25 January

At 8am a white van from Barefoot Tours arrives at the hotel. Along with two women from Houston Texas I join a Canadian honeymoon couple already on board. Our guide Jeff, a Canadian had studied South American literature and some other stuff in Mexico.

We drive out of town on the road that heads to the other side of the country. Passing a rather large Chinese owned container port we are informed that ships too big for the canal unload containers here. They are then taken by rail to the other side and loaded onto waiting ships to complete their journey. We also drive past another lock, which is a couple of kms past the first two. The 3 locks on the other side are all together.

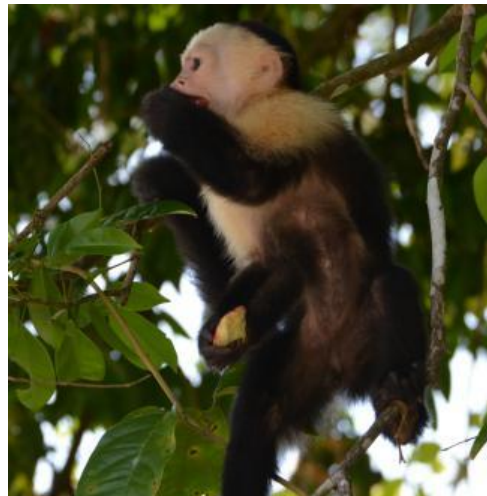
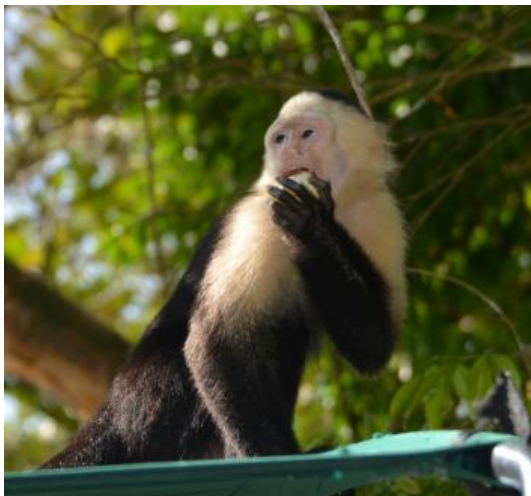


We pass a prison with a house on a hill within it, which apparently houses Noriega. He is awaiting his Panamanian trial having already served time in both the U.S. and France.

We head off the road to a jetty where a boat awaits us. Heading down the Chagres River and under a bridge we are in the canal lake. There is lots happening here. Dredges work to keep the channel clear. There are many barges and a big port area full of machinery. We pass apparently the world's largest floating crane - taken from the Germans after WWII it is used to remove and refit canal gates.



We head out of the main lake and see a croc basking on a beach. A little further down some white-faced monkeys are spotted. We pull up and the family of 6 invades the boat to snatch pieces of banana before scampering back to the trees.





We head back up the lake passing several large ships including a cruise liner on its way to the west, then up the river passing what was a US army Jungle Warfare school. Established in the early 60's it was an ideal environment for training for Vietnam.



Up the river are a number of Indian tribes with great jungle survival skills. Three of these nomadic tribes were relocated close to the school. We head in to visit the San Antonio Wounaan tribe. There are some 45 of these guys including children. They now make their living working in the park and telling people like us about themselves. Bit sad really. Living in huts built well off the ground there are mainly women and children in camp today.



After listening to a talk on how they live and a bit about the thatching on their huts we head into jungle on a well-used track where we see even more well-used tracks. There are leafcutter ants - thousands of the little buggers. All the ones going home have a leaf on their back. Some of their trails are over 100m long. Their nest is an area 10m by 10m - nothing grows there.

The other point of interest is the Indio Desnudo tree or "no hair" tree. When kids reach puberty they rub the bark of this tree over the parts of the body that will grow hair. Staying out of the sun for a week and eating a special diet ensures they never grow unwanted hair. Yep you got it - they don't have to shave. Not sure why some cosmetic company hasn't picked up on that.



We head to the old jungle warfare school, now Gamboa rainforest resort, for a very nice lunch.

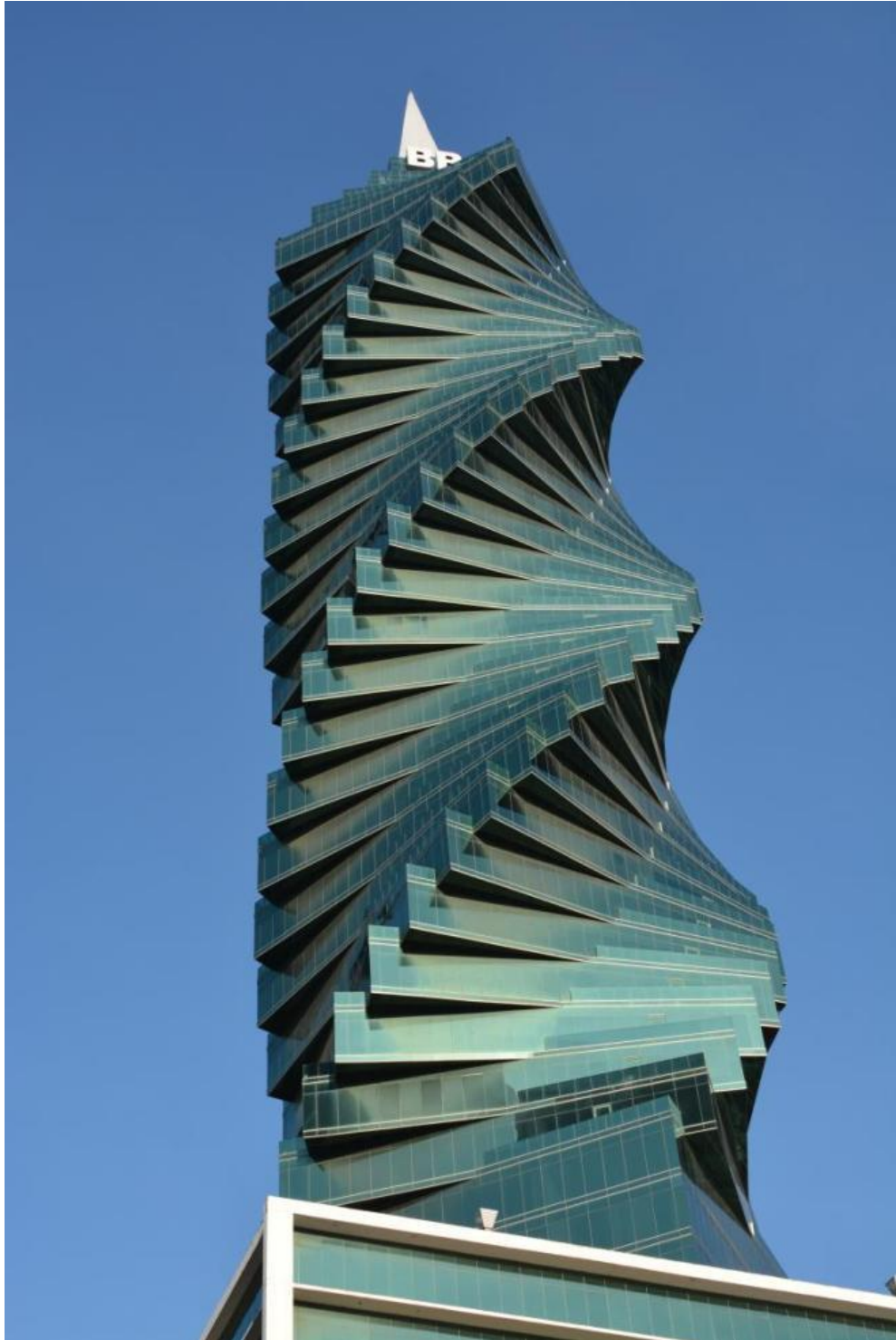


Arriving back at the hotel around 3pm, I head out to the Cathedral de Panama Viejo - the original Panama from 1500 to 1650. Catching a yellow cab and showing him a map he promptly takes me to the wrong place. With zero of each other's language and my distrust of cab drivers, these situations are always a little amusing. I keep orienting the map and with lots of pointing we head off to the old, old Panama.

Apparently built by the Spanish around 1500 they suffered a few fires and were rebuilt several times until in the mid 1600s along came the famous British captain Morgan who really messed the place up. The town was then moved to Casco Antigua, which was easier to defend.

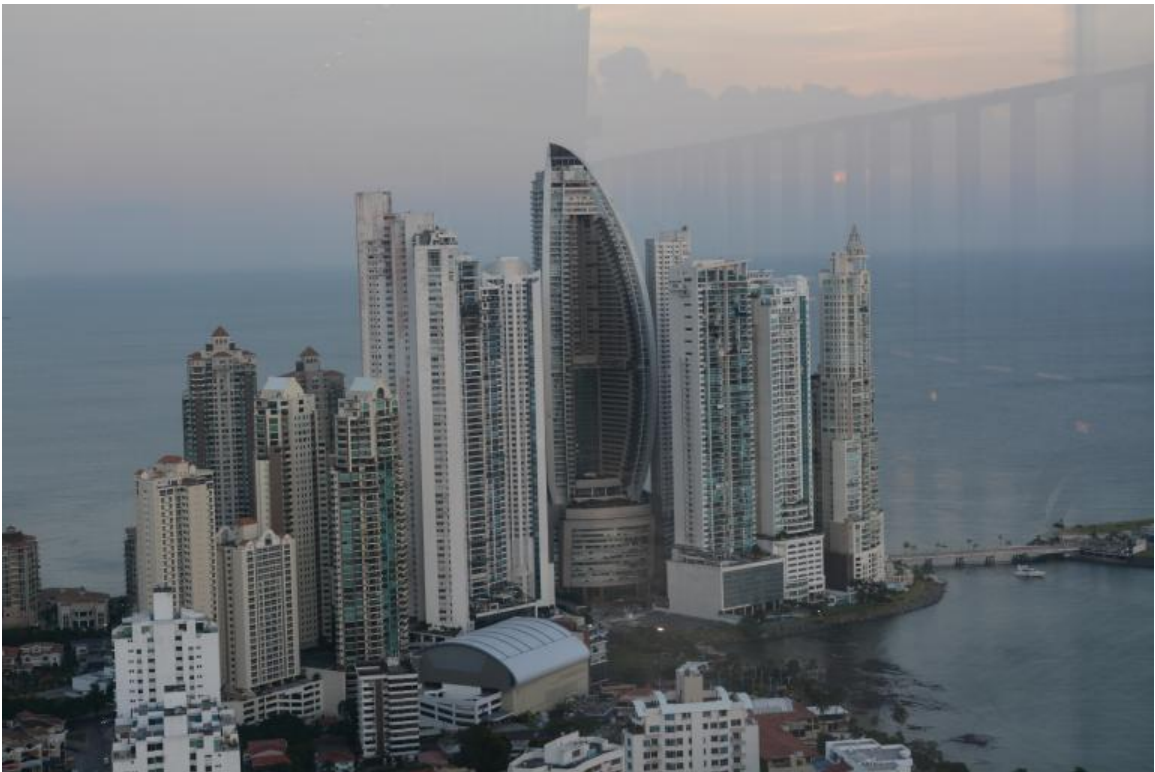


I strolled the 7km back to the hotel passing the many skyscrapers. Apparently this has all been built in the last 15 years. Panama is the number 3 city in the Americas for over-40-storey buildings behind New York and Chicago. They all look pretty flash from a distance but some of the apartment buildings look a bit rough up close.



I decide to head up high for a meal before it gets dark and am directed to the Hard Rock Cafe apparently on the 62nd floor of their hotel. Arriving in the foyer I find that is not the case. There is a bar up there but it is only open after dark. The kind head concierge did however take me up for a look and some pics, plus a rather large tip.







Monday 26 January

A relaxing start to the day is followed by a walk to the water. I have been trying to get one picture that displays the extent of the skyscrapers in this city. Without hiring a chopper I don't think it is possible. A 30min trip to the airport and a 3.5 hour flight and we touch down in Manaus.

I arrive at the Hotel Express Vieiraves to find they have no record of my stay. Hotels.com has stuffed it up. Not unusual for them and too long a story to tell here. After the staff make a phone call to an English-speaking manager I get a room. Smelly, small and none of the promised internet, but I eventually get some sleep.

Tuesday 27 January

I stroll four km to the docks with a plan to find a boat for the river trip to Belem on Thursday. Cam and AJ are arriving Wednesday night. There is no Internet booking system here. There are a whole lot of touts lined up along the fence in front of the wharf. They have canvas posters up with pictures of the boats and where they go. Working my way along the line I eventually establish that none run Thursday. Eventually I find one running Friday with a cabin that will take 3, one in a hammock. 700 locals is the fare - secured (I hope) with a 200 real deposit.



A stroll around the town brings me to the hotel I stayed in last time. The man here lets me use the Internet.

I head to the market area after lunch and see a sign for a 15 real massage and decide to give it a go. As usual I go to sleep while the masseuse is walking on my back. As I leave the premises I check my pockets to find that my camera, phone and the money from my wallet is gone.

I go back in and try to explain but no one speaks English and the masseuse is gone. I find a police car. They call up a guy from the tourist police who is really helpful and goes back to the place with me. "The girl has gone and we don't know where" he is told. A trip to the local police station to fill out some forms and a ride back to the hotel by the police and the day is over.

Wednesday 28 January

I stroll the 4km into town, go back to the massage place and have another crack using the reception guy's Google translate to try and recover goods to no avail.

I then take a wander around the fish markets and the opera house before heading back to the hotel to wait for the arrival of AJ and Cam who are flying in from Panama. They arrive around 9 and we head to a local bar for a meal and a catch up.



Cam and AJ. The monument is to commemorate the opening of the Ports in Manaus.

Thursday 29 January

We take a taxi into town and find a nice place for breakfast. Walking the street we are approached by a guide who offers to show us around town and act as our interpreter. Her English, apparently self-taught is excellent. Josie from Limas Riders Tours turns out to be very helpful.

First we go to check on the ferry. Lucky we did because the ferry I supposedly booked wasn't coming. I am not sure it ever was. Josie lays down the law to the guy and I get the deposit back. She then takes us to see someone else and organises that we go on a ferry leaving on Saturday. We get to look around and inspect the air-conditioned cabin. We book it on the spot, paying a \$200 real deposit.





osie then organises the changing of some US money for Cam at a much better rate than the bank. We take a stroll through the old part of the town near the waterfront before heading up to the Opera House area. The details of that and a lot of the history stuff are in a previous story so I won't go into it here. The heat is now getting to us so we are guided to a bar for some well-earned refreshments and food. We chat away to various locals through our interpreter and have a relaxing, fun afternoon.



Friday 30 January

We roll into the downtown and have breakfast at a place guide Josie had mentioned during yesterday's tour, trying out the tapioca wraps filled with ham egg and some other stuff that she had suggested we try - rather tasty they were.

We spend the day looking around the many streets packed with stalls and people. This town is doing its upmost like many others in the world to support China's economy. It is almost impossible to find anything not made in China. Cam had bought a rather trendy looking hat for 10 locals (real) and is quite disappointed when we get further down the road and he checks the label - "Made in China", and of paper. Will be interesting to see what happens if we get caught in the rain. He is looking rather distinguished though.

These people work really hard to make a living with flyers constantly being stuffed into your hands and stall holders pushing products in front of us as we stroll by. Bearing in mind this city supported by the rubber boom of the late 1800s, used to be one of the world's richest some 100 years ago. Rich woman used to send their clothes to London by ship to be washed. Cobble stones, for what are now broken, uneven, cracked pavements were imported from Europe. It was the first city in Brazil to have trams and one of the first to have electricity. In spite of all that, there are a whole lot of people here working really hard to make a living.

We finish the day with a tour inside the Teatro Amazonas (Opera House). I had toured it 2 years ago and Cam some 30 years ago. Back then the place was almost falling down. Cam was really impressed with how much restoration had been done since then. It is now a pristine building restored to the former glory of its inauguration on the 31 December 1896.



Saturday 31 January

The taxi from the hotel to the port takes the long way. Coming around the port the traffic is jammed with guys constantly knocking on the window wanting to carry our bags to the boat. After being dropped off we run into guide Josie and her friend Claudia who offer to come to the boat with us. Just as well, as after the long walk down the wharf we find the San Marino 3 is not there.

Back we go to security and Josie tries to establish where it is. Eventually we find it a kilometre or so away at a different wharf. We sort out the fare and get our cabin and stow our kit. Josie and Claudia stay and have some lunch with us before our departure.

The San Marino 3 is a fairly new boat - all steel and quite wide. The kitchen is on the bottom deck, which also contains cargo. There are two and a half decks of mainly hammock accommodation with some cabins above that. The top deck is open and a good place to enjoy the views from.



Prior to departing we get some very heavy rain. There are many boats departing Manaus before and as we leave. Manaus is on the Rio Negro but it is not long until we meet the Amazon and see the joining of the black and brown water. The boat chugs along at around 17mph. There are many large ships going up and down river.



The vastness of the river and its surroundings is spectacular. Often we see the horizon of the river in front or behind us.



Sitting on the upper deck enjoying a cold beer, we are joined by three English girls from Sheffield who came to Manaus via Venezuela. Gemma, Georgia and Gabriella are heading to Belem and Salvador also. They are taking the bus from Belem. JT a Venezuelan who speaks English joins us along with a few Brazilians. A guitar appears and we chat and at times sing, or in my case "try to", into the darkness.



Gemma JT Gabriella and Georgia

Some kids hang around smiling and getting their pictures taken. One young girl has a go at playing the guitar. She is really polite and when she departs well after dark she comes and says good night to each of us.



The afternoon has gone quickly, as there is so much going on - in and around the river. On the river bank we see lots of scattered houses, some villages and the odd large town. Farming is prominent in places, running mainly very white cattle. Small boats and barges hug the river bank. There is always something going on.



Sunday 1 February

Through the night it rains and the heavy black plastic sides have been lowered to keep those on hammocks dry. The weather clears and we sail on down river in sunshine.

More large container and other cargo ships pass us going both ways. Long barges are pushed carrying rows of up to 80 semi-trailers, obviously laden with goods to a port where a road begins.



We stop briefly at Juruki tying up alongside another boat. Food sellers jump aboard briefly and some passengers depart clambering with their suitcases through the boat we are alongside to the wharf.



A brief stop at another town, which we can't establish a name for, and we are into the afternoon. There is a rumour that we are stopping overnight at Santarem. Around six we pull into the wharf and tie up alongside another two boats. This is where the Tabajos river joins the Amazon. Looking up river it is just as big as the Amazon.



The Silver Cloud cruise liner is about to depart from a nearby wharf.

With our new English friends we make our way across the other boats to the wharf. The polite young girl is waiting with her bags by the wharf and shakes all our hands to say goodbye. We have sort of established that the boat will be in port overnight.

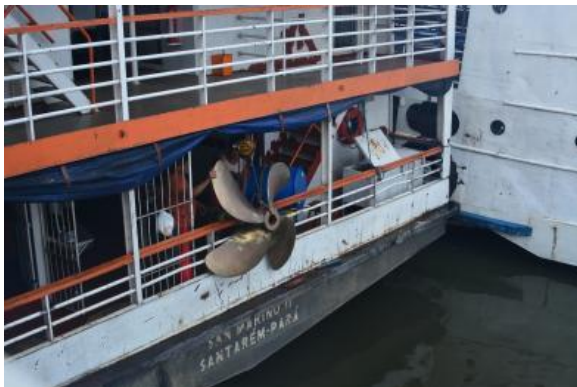
We take a taxi to the town centre on the promenade. There is singing and dancing on the street side which is busy filled with happy looking people. We find a restaurant and enjoy pizza and beer for dinner. Gemma and Gabriella tell us that they are engaged. Georgia is also batting for the same side. We have a great evening together. The girls all have a great sense of humour, constantly making us all laugh.

An after dinner stroll around the promenade reveals lots of people often in big groups enjoying themselves - no aggression or abuse like you get in Auckland at night. A short taxi ride back to the boat where we share a bottle of red wine and another great day on the Amazon is over.



Monday 2 February

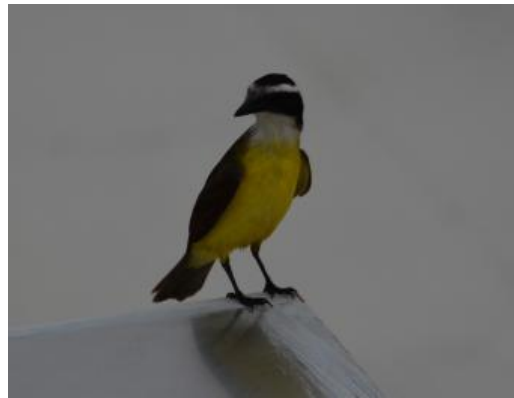
It's raining heavily as I feel the engines start about six. False alarm! At nine the boat moves and pushes front on to the wharf nearby while a car is unloaded. We then pull away and head to a beach, pulling up alongside the San Marino 2 which appears not to be in service. As it turns out we have pulled in to get one of the props straightened.



Some gas bottles are dragged to the back of the San Marino 2. A guy with a regulator attached to a piece of plastic tube and a pair of goggles dives under our boat. The heavy bronze prop is removed a rope attached. The goggle guy gets back on SM2 and with a chain block hauls the prop from under our boat up on to the SM2. This task takes over an hour.

Heat is applied to the prop and a sledge hammer knocks it back into shape. Two 200 litre drums are attached to the prop. It is then lowered to the water and floated under our boat. The same guy does the diving, winching and straightening, with the odd bit of help when needed. In NZ I am sure it would have been a major with all the rules and regulations. An hour or so later we head back to the wharf where we started in the morning.

We finally set off down river at 4 pm. We had tried to establish the day before when the boat would leave but got confusing and inconsistent answers. Our fault for not speaking the lingo!



As we head down river we see the meeting of the waters from the brown Amazon and the Tabajos Rivers join. This runs on for a couple of kilometres. A meal of rice, beef, noodles and manioc from the kitchen, a game or two of cards with our English friends and another relaxing day on the Amazon is over.



Tuesday 3 February

The engines of this 60m boat grind their way through the night. We stop once or twice to offload and load cargo and passengers. I open the cabin door at 7 to find AJ leaning over the rail. He has spent the night in a hammock on the upper deck.

The channel of river we are in is several kilometres wide. We stop at Almeirim, a small town. The aft of the boat catches into the jetty as we leave exciting the locals a little. There are still lots of barges on the river. One has a load of logs, a truck, bulldozer and grader on board.

A French and Belgium girl appear on the upper deck, Zoie and Marie. There are also a couple of Canadian guys Paul and Daniel.



Marie and Zoie



Paper hats team up!

The next stop is Gurupa. The boat can't get right alongside. A plank is laid across to the wharf - no hand rails. Passengers and cargo casually move across.

The river is several km's wide. I take a look at the GPS on the bridge to discover we are in one of four channels. The river is breaking up as we approach the coast.

Two boats with their straight drive Honda motors come out from some houses and tie up to our aft. They have huge baskets of cooked river shrimps which they sell to the passengers in plastic bags. These guys show incredible balancing skills as they walk back and forth on their narrow boats. The shrimp are quite tasty but very salty.



Late in the day we end up in a small channel only 3 to 400m wide. This stretch is the highlight of the day. Young kids paddle out from their houses and people in the boat throw them plastic bags of clothes and other goods. People wave from their windows and jetties.



It's washing day and most houses have it hung on lines. Most of the houses have a TV dish. One group of 3 houses has its own small soccer pitch with a high tennis court fence at the river end.



Rain has earlier driven us from the top deck. We stand talking and laughing on the aft starboard side. It is now dark and suddenly leaves and small branches start crashing aboard on the port side. We race to the top deck as we pull clear of the trees. The channel is quite wide - the driver must have drifted off course.

There are only the Gringos on the top deck as most of the locals seem to stick to their hammocks day and night. We have also met four Slovak guys on the boat but they too seem to be hammock-bound.



Wednesday 4 February

We stop at a couple of places overnight. We cut through some channels then out into what looks like an ocean. The horizon on the river spans for miles to the East, West and South. We come across a huge industrial area.

Timings on this boat don't mean much. Originally we were supposed to get in Wednesday morning early. Yesterday the skipper, with a lot of sign language on my part, told me noon. We are not far from Belem when we stop, a boat comes up and they throw several new boats from the cargo deck over the side. They are tied on behind the little boat and towed off into the distance. We finally dock at 6.30pm.



The next adventure is getting a cab. The guys on the dock want 20 locals per person. After little movement in the price we move to the street and get a beat up VW van for 5 locals per person. The drive to the hostel was amusing as the driver and his minder keep stopping and asking people for directions. He had assured us when we got in that he knew where the hostel was. Several looks of the local streets and we finally arrive at Hostel Belem Amazon, run by a couple of brothers with family photos on the walls. They are friendly and helpful.



Our English friends have a booking, we do not. Fortunately there is room. We all get put in an 8-bed bunk room with air con. A stroll down the road and we find a Churrascaria restaurant with more steak than we can eat at 12 locals per head. Georgia and Gabriella are a bit sick with diarrhoea so stay at the hostel. Gemma takes food back for them.

The only arduous part of travel is organising air fares and accommodation. Wanting to be flexible we had left the next leg to the last minute. Gemma has a

crack at sorting us some flights to Salvador but sky scanner will not work on her phone. I head downstairs to the hostel computer. No luck there either.

Thursday 5 February

An early start on the computer proves successful. AJ is heading off to Bolivia on the 7th; our flight is at 12:30 am on the 6th. We try to get a hostel - no luck they are all booked. Gemma gets on AirBNB and finds us an apartment. At this point they are to arrive a few days after us via a 36-hour bus ride. The bus turns out to be nearly the same as the US\$245 flight. They decide to fly with us. The travel in order we set off for a stroll around town.

A walk to a local (what was a prestigious) park reveals a run-down, graffiti-covered collection of statues and sculptures. There is a tall statue, Monumento aos Herois da Republica which once stood with pride. Next to the park is the Theatro de Paz (opera Theatre). We take the tour with a rather entertaining and charming guide called Max.

Situated on the banks of the Rio Guama River, Belem was once a booming rubber town. The Theatro was completed in the mid-1880s and like the one at Manaus was there to entertain the many rich and famous of the city back then. The theatre holds 900 people and has grand balconies, gold leaf and large paintings on the roof.





We move on from there down towards the wharf. From the water this city looks modern and impressive with many tall buildings. On the ground it is very run down, and by the look of the security a crime ridden place. AJ heads into a number of banks to get some money. For no apparent reason cash cards don't always work in Brazil. To enter the bank there is a revolving door with two security guys on it. Cell phones are taken off you as you enter. The third and last bank we try has a guy with a 357 magnum revolver with a very long barrel protruding out the bottom of his holster. Some shops have their doors locked, only letting in selected customers. There are many street traders and stalls. Arriving at the port we find refurbished buildings containing shops and restaurants in complete contrast to the rest of the city.

Gemma and Gabriella head back to the hostel with some food for Georgie who is still sick. We stroll across the other side of town through more run-down buildings.



The ride to the airport, with the party split across two cabs, is interesting - and probably very scary for the other car and motorbike riders. The two cabbies seem to be racing each other, cutting cars off and almost pushing motorbikes out of the way.

Friday 6 February

Our early morning flight takes us 4-hours southwest to São Paulo. Looking at the lights as we arrive, this city is huge. We change planes then fly back 3-hours northeast to Salvador.

We arrive at the AirBNB place after some confusion. MV Bill, as we name him for the hip-hop music he plays in the taxi, has to ask several people to find the place. Well AirBNB has dropped the ball on this one. This modest 2 bedroom sleep 6 is a dump that stinks of the yapping dogs that live there. Gemma rings them and after a few pics are emailed gets her money back.

Cam and I go down the road to the to the A Casa das Portas Velhas hotel 500 m away. We come back with a price of 6800 locals to stay there for 8 nights. The girls find a deal on the net for a room for 3 for 1400. As we all stroll there we spot a girl with a silver fern tattooed on her calf. We said hi - she speaks English and had lived in NZ. She offers to help is out. At the hotel the price for Cam and I drops from 415 to 195 a night. Well done Ana our new found friend and interpreter.



After we settle in to the hotel we head to the Barra area, driven by Ana and her friend Carol. An early dinner of Seafood Moqueca - mixed fish cooked in a ceramic bowl is one of the tastiest meals I have ever had.

The police walk around here in lines of 6 with a large number displayed front and back followed by a letter. This place is really hotting up in preparation for carnival on Wednesday.



Back at the hotel AJ, Cam and I head up what was the street 20m, now packed with some tables and chairs for some bars. As we are having a few quiet drinks a group of kids with a 20l tin and some plastic buckets turn up drumming out music.



Saturday 7 February

At 6 am MV Bill is waiting on the street with his taxi as planned. AJ departs for the airport enroute to Bolivia. The three of us have had such a great time together over the past couple of weeks.

At breakfast we have a good chat to Miguel and Mariana, here with their 3 children from Argentina. Cam and I take a stroll to nearby tourist attraction the Pelourhino - a church with a few shops and stalls on a ridge with a great view out to sea.



I see an ice cream shop and wave Cam over. I use my normal sign language to order a double headed one. Cam is really sharp at reading, remembering and pronouncing the local lingo. He heads to the till and is receiving his change for the two ice creams. Lots of words on the wall menu are being recited by Cam. I get it straight away, smiling to myself as the linguistic expert and the guy behind the counter negotiate. Cam wants his ice cream. Sometime later there is a realisation. He has paid for the two scoops I had. Lesson!! Get goods, go to counter, point, pay!!

Later in the morning Ana turns up with a car and soon after Lio and Luciana with another car. Little do we know we are in for an experience that few gringos would ever get. After driving for 30 plus minutes we enter the favela (ghettos) in an area called Areal. It wouldn't normally be safe to for us to drive through here but Walter seems to know everyone as he toots and waves to people from the leading vehicle.



I am not sure that I can do justice to describing what we see. Most of the small buildings are crammed in and apparently built without permits. They are mostly rough brick – a lot are 2 or 3 story. One of the many things that impresses me is the little businesses - car repairs, rubbish recycling, small bars, street pedicures, barbers to name a few. Everyone looks well fed, the kids happy and running around. We pass at least 3 dirt-covered soccer fields. People return smiles and waves as they stare at these strange visitors. We stop at a coconut stand and an old man cuts open some coconuts from which we drink the tasty juice.



We drive on coming to a hill on the eastern border with a view of the sea and a restaurant Boteca De Piri where we enjoy a late lunch. This is followed by a visit to a couple of small beaches, one called Barracao frequented by locals, before returning to the hotel.



Lio Luciana Ana

We take a short stroll to the street restaurant next door for dinner and reflect on another great day. Ana a couple of friends turn up to join us.

Sunday 8 February

The plan is to head to the beach. However Ana gets tied up helping a friend. Cam and I wander back over to the Pelourhino. We visit the rather ostentatious Saint Francis church. Claiming to have 800kg of gold leaf, we find it quite disgusting. Pillars have statues of people under them. I am not sure what they represent but it looks like a representation of how much the peasants suffered to pay for all this gold. As we stroll further into the area we discover streets decorated for the Carnival, bands playing and people having a good time.



We have not long returned to the hotel when Gemma knocks on the door saying Gabby has been mugged. They had been coming back from the Pelourhino and were 200m from the hotel. A young guy muscled in between them from behind and grabbed at Gabby's bag, knocking her to the ground. She kicked but the strap broke and he got the bag. Locals sat on a step 3m away and did nothing. Fortunately the bag only contained a phone and 300 locals. The police are rung after we insist the receptionist do so. Surprise, surprise they are not interested. Gabby handles the whole situation really well as do the other girls.



Cam in mugging ally



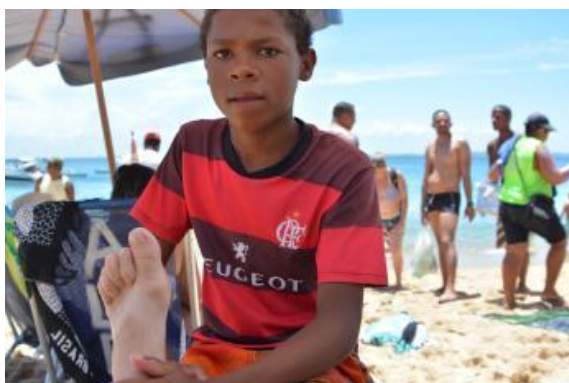
Our hotel

Monday 9 February

Ana turns up for breakfast after which I go with her to pick up another car. Driving in this town is interesting to say the least. Most of the cars are quite small; people just push their way in. Interestingly very few cars have dints in them.

Back at the hotel I am nominated as driver. We arrive at Porto (beach) da Barra to a sea of umbrellas. We are nobbled straight away by several touts wanting to hire us chairs and an umbrella. They try to charge us gringos extra but Ana shuts that down. Positioned a few meters from the clear water we sit looking at the action happening around us.





You could live on this beach as everything is for a sale here. Hats, glasses, ice-cream and extensive menus are shoved under your nose. A 12-year old kid wanders up with a watering can and a stool. He plonks it down in front of me, grabs a foot, washes it and starts massaging - 20 locals for 20 min. Ana intervenes and the price drops to 10.



The water is clear and warm, the beach deepening quite quickly. A small chilly box of drinks or mainly beer arrives. Ana's friend Caroline turns up having knocked off early. We all enjoy an afternoon of relaxation and banter lead by Cam who must be missing parliament!!! We go to pay for the beer the price has jumped from the 3 to 4 locals you would normally pay in a bar to a gringo price of 12. Again Ana intervenes and the price is halved. Someone needs to point out to these rogues, charge realistically and more gringos will visit.

Around 930 in the evening the girls hear what sound like gunshots in the car park outside the hotel. On looking out there third floor window they see people scattering and shortly after the police turn up.

The A Casa Das Portas Velhas or anywhere near it is not a good place to stay. The hotel itself is ok. The area around it is dodgy to say the least. Just for gringos though. It's a pain when you leave the hotel and are told not to take your camera, don't go by yourself - and that's during the day. A couple of nights

ago we were chatting to a local lady who spoke good English. She was really concerned about Cam and I walking the 75 m around the corner to the hotel.

Tuesday 10 February

Ana with Caroline arrive at 830 for breakfast. We head a long way across town to a shopping mall so the English girls can buy a phone battery. Cam is searching for MV Bills CD. We join Ana's uncle and Carolynne for quite a long lunch. Back across town we visit the Mahi Mahi apartments where a friend of Ana lives. A steep cable car ride down a cliff takes us to a private jetty complete with bar and restaurant. Yes we swim and drink beer - Another great day out!





Wednesday 11 February

Mid-morning Cam and I take a stroll to a local shopping centre. Cam's endless search for the MV Bill CD using his ever increasing repertoire of Portuguese, some of which is now being understood, means we stop at every stall and shop that sells anything remotely like CD's. Gemma is feeling poorly so stays in.

Ana and Caroline join us around 6 for dinner, after which we taxi to the carnival arriving on foot at the Bloco Flamboyant. There are about 100 people in matching t-shirts surrounding a cart containing the refreshments. I discover from a Canadian guy called Sean that this bloco has been going for years. Each night during the year a group of locals meet under the Flamboyant tree for a beer - hence the name.

As the crowds build and the bands move through, our supposedly stationary bloco goes on the move. We head south along the waterfront towards Farol da Barra (an old fort with a light house). There the crowd is jammed in. The bloco turns back. Ana makes us hold hands as we are lead into the thick of it. We find a spot at an intersection between two lamp posts. The moving blocos are coming along the water front and a side street. Each contains a band. Some are just drums, others wind instruments or a combination of both. They all play with great rhythm and enjoyment as people dance around them. There are hundreds of thousands of people packed into this area. The blocos seem to flow through effortlessly. At one point a car even manages to drive through against the flow.



Across the road there is a line of a hundred-plus porta loos with a queue 15 to 20 deep at each one. Can collectors rove through the crowd with large sacks. It is incredible to see a crowd consuming an endless supply of very cheap alcohol, yet we never even see any hint of anger. There is not even an angry look as people inevitably bump into each other.



The police patrol through the crowd always in ABCD and sometimes E order. A has a pistol the others empty holsters - all carry batons. We are as instructed by Ana camera and walletless.

Around 1am we begin our hour-long journey home. It has been an incredible night out.

Thursday 12 February

Mid-morning a trek is made back to a CD stand. The guy has assured Cam he will have 2 copies of the MV Bill hip-hop CD. Slightly lost in translation!! He has copied 2 DVDs ones he has downloaded last night!!



Around 8am Ana and Caroline turn up and we head off to the Camarite Oceania.

This is a dance/ party stadium set up on the street side overlooking the carnival route. The parade rolls past with huge moving blocos (larger roped off areas - surrounded by rope held up by security people) with their "trio eletrico" in the middle. This is a large semi-trailer speaker box with a platform on top for the musicians and others. There is a bar in the side. They are designed to turn out very, very loud music. They stop alongside each camarite as they perform. The music stops in the camarite as the truck blasts out its stuff. One is so loud the whole building shakes.



I move to the street and sit on the wall with my back to the sea. Tens of thousands of people move past. A few hundred meters apart the eletricos roll by pounding out continuous music. The interaction between the eletrico and the thousand plus people in the camarite is excitingly intense.

The street is lined on both sides with chilli bins full of refreshments. The can picker-uppers rove the street, most in bare feet. Beers on the street are mostly 3 or 5 locals. Still there is no one falling over drunk, no agro, just happy people.

The last bloco rolls past around 2am. In the camarite the party continues, music rages, people dance and drink. Around 3am we start the journey home. Surprisingly, with apparently over a million people in the peninsular-situated town that night, there is little congestion on the roads. It's like the people just melt away.



Friday 13 February

After a relaxing day we have a bite to eat with Dave and Aram. Staying in our hotel, these young guys are here from New York and Detroit respectively to enjoy Carnival. David and Aram have both studied at Penn State. Aram an Armenian Uzbek, props for the Penn State rugby team and had played against Cambridge Uni. As it turns out we are all going to be in the same bloco called "yes".

Ana and Fernanda turn up to join us on the cab ride to Barra. The 'Yes Bloco' is huge, stretching over 500m with two trio eletricos well spread out. There are thousands of people behind the ropes. We work our way into the thick of it. There is no shoving or pushing - people just seem to move and let us through. There is always a gap just outside the ropes for the A to E patrols and others to move up and down.



At times the crowd surges forward or sideways. We never feel the pressure of people pushing against us. There is no obvious crowd control apart from the ropes surrounding the bloco. It all seems to just work.



After an hour or so I am finding the noise just too loud so head to a quiet spot outside the bloco. All these people are having a fantastic time, some walking others dancing as the bloco moves along.

Around midnight I join back in but can't locate our group. Heading up onto an empty police stand I eventually spot the tall gringo with the bald patch several hundred meters behind the first Trio Eletrico. My stomach still unsettled I head home around 1am.

Around 5am there is a loud bang on the door. Cam needs to get in and get his money from the safe for the cab. I head down to the carport where Ana, Fernanda and Itana are waiting. They are all still standing 'just' as they report on a fantastic night staying with the bloco to the end. Well done guys!



Saturday 14 February

A quiet day is spent packing up to vacate the hotel. They had wanted to hike the rates by 150% for Saturday night – "Demand from carnival goers" they say. Ana won't have a bar of it and insists we stay our last night at her auntie's place. Aunty has left town for the carnival.

We have dinner at a local restaurant. A short stroll takes us to the central carnival which we watch for a little while. There are 3 carnivals in town. The main one, which we attend, is on the peninsular following the coast. The second starts in the Barria Garcia area and runs (I think) south along local streets. The third smaller one is in the Pelourinho area and is mainly attended by tourists.

Sunday 15 February

Ana drops Cam and I at the airport just before 5am. Our flight to LA is over 17 hours of flying to cover the 7053 miles. We stop briefly in Sao Paulo which from the air is a concrete jungle. There are no lawns or gardens visible around houses or apartments - just the odd tree sticking up.



I am writing this as we leave Panama. Looking west into a fiery red sky I can't help to reflect on how lucky we are. Our trip just got better and better: meeting vivacious guide Josie in Manaus, who went out of her way to show us around and ensure we hit the river in a good boat; befriending Gaby, Gemma and Georgia on the river - just the best and most hilarious company we could have ever imagined we would share an amazing experience with - they sent a photo of us to one of their friends in England who described us as "not your usual travellers"; then to cap it off meeting Ana in Salvador, who took us under her wing like we were family, sharing her many friends and relatives with us to ensure everyone will remember carnival 2015 - she kept saying "I am really enjoying having you gringos here". We can only hope that Ana will make it back to NZ one day so we can return her hospitality.

