

We flew into Manaus to be 'greeted' at the airport by a very talkative tour operator doing a hard-sell for his business. We went in a taxi with him to our hotel and he outlined a program for the next five days which we accepted. This included a 4 day boat trip (leaving the next day) and one day of sightseeing around Manaus on our return.

I had tried to make bookings for this part of the trip before we left home, but none of my emails were answered. We knew that going with a lone operator at the airport was risky but we decided that we would never get back this way again, so we took a chance.

We had a half a day on our own to soak in the interesting aspects of the city. Manaus is centred around the dock area as it is in the major city on the inner reaches of the Amazon and Rio Negro rivers. It is actually situated on the Rio Negro where it flows into the Amazon a few kilometres downstream. Container ships come here bringing goods for the city and the surrounding villages for miles around and they leave carrying a wide variety of goods made tax free in the area. Many large global companies have set up here because of the tax perks.

In the markets we saw an interesting variety of fish, fruit and vegetables, but we were particularly fascinated by the 'hardware' stores which provide goods for all the outlying villages. Machetes, kerosene hurricane lamps (although many villages now have electricity or a generator) and huge metal dishes (1 and 2 metre diameter). We later found out that these dishes are used to cook the root of the manioc (cassava) tree which is the staple diet of the locals.

On the next morning, we were met in the foyer by our guide (who spoke very good English) and were taken to the boat where we met 'el capitain' and the cook. We were the only passengers, so it was a bit of an extravagance for us but we saw much more than many tourists do. The boat was 18 metres long with two decks, basically the top deck was for us to sleep and watch the world go by and everything else happening on the lower deck. We all slept in hammocks and, despite my concerns, found it very comfortable; the trick is to sleep diagonally in the hammock.



We made two brief stops to get supplies after leaving the main port. We followed Elmo (the guide) over planks joining floating docks and shops into another interesting market and later stopped at the floating fuel station to get gas for cooking. Trivial jobs that is fascinating in such a different culture.

Our first major attraction was the 'meeting of the waters' where the Rio Negro and the Amazon meet. The rivers run parallel, without mixing (they are different colours) for anywhere between 7 to 13km – depending who you ask. The reason is apparently that they have quite different temperatures, different rates of flow and different acidity. The Rio Negro is a very old river and there is little erosion, but the Amazon is muddy from erosion. The Rio Negro is dark brown or almost black like tea from tannins produced by the rotting of the forest debris.

The water level was very high as the rainy season was just finishing. After the middle of June, the water level apparently recedes. There are pros and cons in visiting in each season. Because the water levels were high, we were able to travel down some channels where we saw floating houses – which are moved as the levels rise and fall (or if you get tired of your neighbours). Children as young as 4 and 5 learn to handle a canoe with ease. We saw one man building a new floating house. He was bare foot and worked with an axe, a hacksaw and a hammer.



We later saw many houses on stilts all strategically placed near the high water mark. One I thought was a bit low but Elmo said that if the water came too high they would just put in a false floor and walk around bent over until the water level dropped again. Other villages are built on higher ground, but always close to the water. We watched four men building stairs up a steep embankment; all bare footed – their only tools were a chain saw and a hammer – but the stairs were great. At the foot of the stairs on the end of a small jetty sat a young mum with two toddlers watching the men work. She was washing dishes and then clothes. She used a bucket on a rope to get water from the river to wash and rinse. All of this was done on the timber jetty or in her lap and all the used water just went back into the river. She did, however, have modern bottles of detergent and the pots and pans were gleaming.

I found the villages very interesting. Houses are basic, usually made of timber, although there is a surprising amount of asbestos sheeting. Roofs can be clay tiles, tin, asbestos or straw. Life seems very laid back, but then you hear stories that sound like a movie script about the jaguar that ate all the chickens - they can also apparently kill and eat a cow. The villages have manioc plantations, some vegetables, and chickens and ducks wander everywhere along with dogs and cats and birds that have been hurt or just decided to live nearby. Even so all the houses we saw had a modern stove and fridge.

There is a real mix of the modern and old ways. We watched a family processing their manioc crop. First it is ground (this used to be done by hand but now they use a petrol driven motor) then it is put in bags and pressed to remove all the liquid (which is toxic due to cyanates produced by the plant). This is done with a

hand press the same way as it has been done for years. The next stage was done by a boy of about 14; he used a sieve made from strips of palm leaves to remove any lumps. Finally the 'flour' is toasted to complete the removal of toxins. A circular clay wall about a metre high is built with a narrow opening; a fire is built in the centre and the large metal dish that we saw in the market is placed on the top. The manioc is toasted in here and needs to be stirred constantly. After a while it is removed for storage in a polystyrene container and is served with every meal.



Sometimes it is just sprinkled on the top, or can be used to make other dishes.

The villages have churches (there were an amazing number of little Pentecostal or Seventh day Adventist churches around) and schools. Children from the outlying areas come to school in a school boat. Most go to school for 4 or 5 years; after that they have to go to Manaus to continue their education, but most stay and marry young. The photo below shows the 'school bus'.





On several occasions our guide used a local guide to take us deeper into the jungle to walk, canoe and to sleep for the last night. These local men were interesting characters; one had half an arm missing, his story was that it was bitten by a caiman, but we were told it mostly likely happened when he was putting explosives into the water to kill fish. It's apparently easier than catching them alive. Another guide, Antonio, was a little man with a straw hat who looked like a Mexican out of an old western movie. The local guides were given a nominal amount of money for their time and the villagers we visited were often given food from the boat.

We saw lots of little squirrel monkeys, a sloth hanging around and two young caiman that the guide caught with his bare hands when we went out in the canoe at night. There were not many caiman around; when the water level is high they go deeper into the jungle. We also went fishing for piranhas but 4 were too small and had to be thrown back; I caught the only edible one (don't know how – beginners luck). It was actually very tasty. We saw elegant white herons, parrots, a couple of macaws and lots of other smaller birds. We also saw brazil nut and cashew nut trees and ate brazil nuts straight from the tree.



For three days we lived and slept in the same clothes. After sleeping in the forest on the third night there was a torrential downpour at dawn, so we got very wet getting back to the boat. Our clothes stank and we were soaked to the skin so we were ready for a swim and a change of clothes. The river was warm and great to swim in; but the main reason for the swim was to swim with the pink dolphins. We fed them fish while we swam with them, it was wonderful. It was also great to put on some clothes that didn't smell!

We also saw a huge floating hotel where most tourists stay and just do day trips to specific spots set up for tourists. These affluent day-trippers do not get to see the genuine living conditions all around them.

Arriving back in Manaus was a shock after four days in the jungle. The noise, dirt and smell are awful. Our guide Elmo showed us where he lived – in the favelas (slums). It was down a narrow alley, across a few broken planks into a three roomed timber house on stilts over a putrid, rubbish filled water way which he said has caiman in it in high water. His 'wife' lay in a hammock watching TV. I felt quite uncomfortable being there. I am not sure why he took us there, there was probably an ulterior motive, he had already asked as for a few reals (\$) several times, promising to pay it back but I was sure we would never see much of it again. I think most of it went on beer.



On Sunday afternoon the city changed; apparently this is the time when everyone relaxes. All the shops were shut, the hundreds of street stalls were all closed, the packs of people in bright orange overalls sweeping the streets and cleaning up the endless rubbish seemed to have finished and the main occupation is to sit in an open air café, drink beer and watch the soccer on TV.

Around 1900, Manaus was apparently a wealthy rubber city and it has some amazing buildings from that period, the main one being an opera house. Unfortunately it was closed when we visited so we only saw the outside which is impressive. The streets near the door of the opera house were covered in rubber so that people arriving late in their horse and wagon would not disturb the performance. The markets near the dock date back to that era and are being renovated now. The people who live in the inner city favelas, like Elmo, are gradually being moved to the outskirts of the city where accommodation is being built for them and the water ways are being completely over hauled. We saw areas typical of the before and after and it was quite dramatic. The poor favela dwellers were understandably not happy about being moved out of the city by developers pandering to affluent clients.

This trip was only 5 days and this description only touches the surface of what we experienced. Of all our travels, this ranks among the most moving of our experiences.