

Nobody Rides for Free: A Drifter in the Americas

by John Francis Hughes

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IN THE AMERICAS

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“When your flood surrounds me and the waters burst and come, who knows the things that I have felt, who knows what I have done?”

Nomeansno

MY BICYCLE was all but wrecked. The old frame, cheap parts and my monumental lack of mechanical acumen conspired to ensure the last time I rode it was through the streets of Chiclayo in northern Peru. I didn't know that at the time, so I kept the moribund thing with me for another 800 miles. It rolled well enough to tote my gear and I still had it when I crossed the border into Brazil. But I think I knew the old mount had given up the ghost when I bussed it to the Peruvian port town of Yurimaguas, where the road ended and the river began.

Yurimaguas sat on an Amazon tributary known as the Huallaga. With the jungle hemming the place to the river, parts of it were cosy. But ugly gaps scarred the tree line, stands of ceiba trees cut away to make room on the muddy banks for ship service and repair. At the same time, the jungle threatened to reclaim the town: swaths of cinchona trees and undergrowth encroached upon the neighbourhoods of tin-roofed houses. Chainsaws buzzed continually to keep Yurimaguas' backyards from succumbing to the thickets. The place sweltered in tropical steam, with the humidity

soaking my shirt before I made it halfway from my hotel to the docks. Mini-cabs darted toward the waterfront, and a man pedalled a bike with his mother doubling side-saddle.

Dockside, heavy engine oil made rainbows on the river. The swirling patches of grime lapped against the pier as I set my compass home. I needed to sail to Manaus, about two-thirds of the way down the Amazon. I'd grab a bus from there, north through Brazil to Venezuela, and hope the rumours were true about \$100 flights from Caracas to Miami. I put my search for a boat on hold when I blundered into a bar. Empty beer bottles crowded a table where four men were beginning to get drunk. I ordered a beer and sat down, alone.

I'd taken only a swig when the foursome asked me to belly up to their table. They were a slow-moving crew and I'm not sure what they did other than drink beer. But they had the low-down on the docks, and told me about vessels heading downriver. I groaned at the news one had departed for Iquitos two hours earlier, and that nothing else was leaving for two more days. Anxiety hit: finances were slender and the time for lazing in sunny nowhere was past. I peeled the label off my bottle and stared at the Huallaga.

Worry receded with the second round, and a drinking game I had interrupted resumed. One of the four would pour a dribble of beer into a glass and slam it back like whiskey before passing the bottle. I had to hold back a self-assured smirk when they asked me to join in. It was a waste of beer and an amateur way to get hammered. But I played anyway. I looked around the table listening to the rolling Spanish the party spoke as they got louder and drunker. None of them sported the look of the grizzled river rats I'd

seen flitting about the boatyards. They were pasty, despite the beating sun, and there were no tell-tale signs any of them knew about hard work.

Within an hour, the medium-sized collection of empty bottles on the table became a large one. There had been no clear accounting each time beer was served, but a sinking feeling began to gnaw that a plan was in the works for me to pick up the tab. I gathered my wits and was about to move on when the young woman who had been serving the beer sat down behind me and started to play with my hair. The girl, about 18 with a beautiful smile, ignored the greasy state of my mop and began turning it into braids. She giggled as she stroked the back of my neck, and I was happy to let her continue. The lovely barmaid paused only for a quick trip to the refrigerator to grab a *cerveza* that I didn't ask for. She collected money from me, opened the beer and poured it into the glass used for the drinking game. One of the guys guzzled it, refilled the cup and passed it to his friend.

I knew they were hustling me, but it wasn't until later that I figured out the other drinkers were signalling the waitress as she fiddled with my hair. I'd almost forgotten what the touch of a woman felt like, and being played for a sucker felt pretty good at the time. I might have run a tab all afternoon, but the veteran drunk in me knew better than to let this go any further. I reached behind my neck and squeezed the woman's hand, holding it for longer than was necessary to tell her it was time to stop.

The half-drunk idlers yelled for me to stay when I tried to settle up. Seeing that I insisted on getting out, they argued with me over the bottom line. The barmaid put on her best pout and handed me a bill for nine beers. I had drunk no

more than five, and spirited haggling reduced the tally to seven. The enterprising server pocketed the money and swung her hips back into the tumbledown shack where she kept the *cervezas*. I wondered if her duties ended with sling-
ing beer. A creepy sexual energy had crossed between the four layabouts and the young woman. I hoped she was not forced to do any dirty work other than bamboozling rubes.

A longshoreman confirmed what the bar crowd had said – indeed, a ferry was supposed to head downriver in two days. Nobody in town sold tickets, however. Passengers paid once they boarded. The only trouble with that was that the boat sailed at mysterious hours. If you wanted to travel, you showed up quayside and waited.

There was little to do in Yurimaguas other than sweat and mark time. I took to sitting on a wharf, watching a fisherman. He stood on a bank across the river, heaving his net with two-handed throws. He had no luck for the first three or four casts, but eventually hauled in a small school of flapping fish. The man picked them out and flung the net back into the river. I guessed that he chose the opposite shore because of all the noise on the town side. The whine of power tools used in boat repair and the churn of motors on the skiffs and tugs easing in to port probably chased away the fish.

A whistle finally sounded on my third day in Yurimaguas. Dozens of people rushed all at once to form a jostling queue for the rickety boat limping toward shore. Young men pushed each other to get to the front of the line, tripping one guy face first onto the wharf. Elderly couples looked for a way into the line-up without getting bumped as two shore workers yelled for everyone to clear the way. A hub-

bub of squealing barnyard animals, darting children and scolding mothers worked its way up the gangplank as soon as the vessel moored.

Dodging voyagers going ashore, I bulled my bike through knots of passengers scrambling for position on deck. Most of the chaos died down after everything had been stowed on board. By then, the boat, an aged, 100-foot long rusting shell had become a sea of colourful hammocks. I strung my own red bolt of canvas between two metal posts. Space was at a premium. Moving from one's hammock to, say, the bathroom involved wedging through square inches brimming with neighbours. The smell of pigs and goats from below decks permeated the air, and the terrified animals shrieked unceasingly. Deckhands slipped the ropes from the greased pilings and the whistle blew. An older man made the sign of the cross as the boat began to chug downriver.

Thriving jungle arrests the eye when travelling in that part of the world. The canopy of ceiba trees, vines, flowers and undergrowth blurs into an Impressionist painting of green after a spell of gazing. Two days on murky and dark tributaries led to the Amazon River. Our captain guided us into the docks at Iquitos late in the afternoon. Residents said it was the largest city in the world with no road links.

I had never imagined such a place. People from all over the Amazon jammed the city's bazaars. The shantytown market in the Belén neighbourhood stood out as positively strange. Huts floated on river rafts or sat, mired in mud, ready to ride the next high tide. Kiosks stood beside sludgy pathways, offering up jungle flora and fauna. Vendors shouted, and shop merchants chatted over barbecued monkey and piranha dinner specials. The seared flesh actually

smelled like it would be tasty with a squirt of chipotle sauce. Turtles and still-flopping catfish were on the block, and a row of stalls displayed herbs and medicinal plants picked in the jungle. At the other end of the market, dozens of baby caimans were up for grabs. The refreshing variety was limitless; a guy even tried to sell me a baby sloth for ten bucks.

Iquitos and its Belén district had lots in common with other South American cities: vivacious residents, exhaust-spewing mini-cabs, and the smell of garbage in the streets. But the striking differences continued. Landlocked Quito and Bogotá had massive slum areas, parts of which I visited. The Belén slum was right in the river. A fluid, transient sense linked to its propinquity to the Amazon gave the settlement a feel of even greater destitution than those other shantytowns. The timeless, flowing giant cast all else around it in a light of impermanence and it could wash away everything except poverty.

The trappings of the jungle added another layer to Belén's run-down look. Huts roofed with thatching gathered in the woods were common there. The use of vegetation to complete a home signalled both ingenuity and poverty. A thousand of these broken-down shacks created a low-rise, haystack skyline. Some of the dwellings rested on stilts over reeking open sewers running in ditches ten feet across. Dirty, naked children played next to the foul water. I hurried through that end of the neighbourhood and didn't look back.

The slow drift of the river also carried base desire along with it, washing up human flotsam and jetsam onto the docks. Brothels were popular. A sandwich board outside one 'hotel' featured a cartoon rendering of a smiling, naked woman. Common decency suggested looking elsewhere

for a bed, but I needed someplace cheap. I checked into a depressing little room, where the only separation from the next one was a thin piece of plywood that stopped three feet short of the ceiling. A rubber sheet covered the bed, which canted noticeably downward – perhaps an effective means to prevent any hourly renter from basking overlong in his afterglow.

Two dismal nights passed with lots of indiscreet traffic moving through. On the morning the ship to the Brazilian line was ready to sail, I made sure to leave the rotten cathouse/hotel at first light to get dockside. The *Enith* was slightly bigger and a good number of years older than the boat that made the Iquitos run. I had grave doubts it could navigate such a huge chunk of the Amazon. The rusted hulk was stuffed even fuller than the last ferry, its hull dipping deep into the river.

Starting slowly and never gaining any momentum, the boat put-putted its way through a jerky whistle stop schedule. I grumbled at the dawdling pace, dreading three days of it. The captain meandered the ancient ship into village after village. Supremely bored as the ferry docked yet again, I climbed three decks up. My aim was to plummet into the Amazon. Gripped by vertigo, an audience assembled as I hesitated. Some shouted encouragement and others waved their arms and shook their heads trying to get me to climb off the roof.

The view from the top was brilliant. The sky blazed blue, clashing with the jungle's deep green. The Amazon, now beginning to widen considerably, was the familiar muddy brown I had stared at for hundreds of miles. I trembled at the idea of barrelling into hugest river in the world, and

considered reasons for abandoning the plan. The most compelling was the possibility of being eaten by piranhas. I had seen the fish in aquariums, and their fangs looked dangerous. Electric eels are also supposed to live in the Amazon, along with caimans and who knew how many other deadly river-going beasts. This must have been what the “don’t jump” crowd was fussing about.

I pushed those creatures out of my mind, drew a deep breath and jumped. A second later I splashed into the Amazon, its warm current welling about my body. Sinking fear instantly set in. Were piranhas moving up from the depths to attack me? People on deck shouted as I tried to look unconcerned swimming back.

Sailors had moored The *Enith* to another boat, linking the two with a gangplank. Claustrophobia swarmed as I knifed through the oil-slicked water in the four-foot space between the ships. I grabbed one of the buoys dangling from the *Enith* and heaved on the rope, half expecting someone on board to offer a hand. No one did and the effort nearly made me pass out. Back on the boat, my legs buckled but I steadied myself. Were these the lingering effects of my earlier bout with dysentery? I wasn’t sure – my field of vision blurred and I nearly threw up when a man approached me. He spoke in clear English.

“That was a good jump from the top of the boat. Are you all right?”

“I’m ok.”

“Do you know what people here fear most from the river?”

“Piranhas?”

“No. Piranhas are bad fish and they must be avoided.

But there is something much more dangerous in this water. “Do you know of the candirú fish?”

I did not.

“They are a tiny parasite that can swim into your penis. It is very dangerous to relieve yourself while in the river. That is how the candirú enters your body. Once inside it opens spiky bones to dig into your penis. The only way to remove it is to cut off your manhood.”

A shudder wriggled through my body. A penis destroying fish? Could this be true? It didn't feel like I had a spiked fish in my penis. I attempted an offhand reach toward my bits.

“Don't worry,” said the man, “you would certainly know by now if the candirú was in your penis. I would caution against another swim in this river.”

Wet and feeling sick, I weaved back to my hammock. There was now even less room to move, as a woman and her three small children had boarded at this stop and set up next to me. The woman had skilfully threaded two hammocks through the webs of canvas and cords strung from every post. But the sounds from three feet away told me that my place had gone bad. Deep, hacking coughs tore from the new rider's chest, while her children zipped under and around the maze of hammocks. The woman sprawled listlessly with her limbs flopped over the sides of the makeshift bed. I believe she had tuberculosis.

Lying motionless, she covered her head with a towel. Setting up the space for her children must have cost her great effort. I felt sorry for her but I was more worried for myself – the last thing I needed was T.B. Another ghastly burst of coughing warned of disease all around the woman's

hammock. The beige towel covering her face soon drenched through. At first I thought she was sweating into the towel. A closer look revealed splotches of blood. This woman had to be dying. Yet her kids laughed, in high spirits about the boat ride.

Unable to stand the horrible coughing sounds, and still rocked by thoughts of the candirú, I moped around the decks in a squeamish funk. The ship had resumed its sluggish chug down river. Through the tangle of hammocks, I could see the kids playing together. A man next to them pitched a candy wrapper overboard. Then the little ones gathered some debris to hurl into the water, but I walked over to intervene. The oldest one got his bit of garbage over the side before I could do anything about it. With a smile, I snagged the newspaper the middle child was about to lob, turning it into an impromptu dunce cap. All three laughed.

The kids then roped me into a rowdy game of tag that quickly slid into a fracas with other riders. Halting the sport before someone ratted us out to the captain, I moved over to the starboard side to look at something toward shore. There was movement in the water where a dark tributary emptied into the Amazon. I gasped. Eight or ten pink dolphins were swimming where the rivers met! The sick woman's children ran up behind me, giggling in delight when they saw what I saw.

The dolphins leaped through the air and back into the water. Their bottlenoses and pink flippers were a surreal joy to behold. Other passengers pointed and chattered. Inside of a minute, nearly everyone aboard leaned over the rail to watch them splash and flip. A terrific energy worked through the starboard side as the ship bobbed alongside