

# Venturing up the Amazon: a Vanishing World

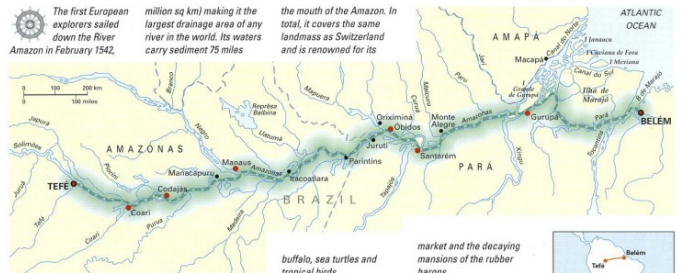
BEN DAVIES



ABOVE, daily working life on the river

BELOW, the Ver-o-Peso market in Belém, selling produce of all kinds, was originally a slave market

To travel from Belém at the mouth of the Amazon (Amazonas) River to Tefé in the heart of the Brazilian jungle, a distance of some 1,000 miles (1,600km), is to experience the mightiest river in the world and view a myriad of flora and fauna – not all of it welcome! Most of all, though, it is to witness the fate of the last great rain forest on earth, and not even unprecedented discomforts such as rickety boats, malarial mosquitoes and snapping piranhas can undermine this great adventure.



The first European explorers sailed down the River Amazon in February 1542.

million sq km) making it the largest drainage area of any river in the world. Its waters carry sediment 75 miles

the mouth of the Amazon. In total, it covers the same landmass as Switzerland and is renowned for its

reaching the mouth of the river some five months later. In total the Amazon (Amazonas) is fed by 1,100 rivers. Its major tributaries include the Japura, the Madeira, the Negro, the Purus and the Xingu, all of which extend more than 1,000 miles (1,600km). The Amazon Basin itself covers 2.7 million square miles (7

(120km) out to sea. In 1616, the Portuguese built the Forte do Castelo near the entrance to the river at Belém. Other sights to see include the colourful Ver-o-Peso market, the 17th-century church of Nossa Senhora das Mercês and the splendid Teatro da Paz. Near the city, a huge island called Marajó blocks

buffalo, sea turtles and tropical birds.

At Santarém, three days upriver from Belém, there is a small museum in the old city hall and fine beaches at nearby Alter do Chão. Manaus, capital of Brazil's vast Amazonas State, is best known as the former hub of the rubber empire. Sights not to miss include the opera house (Teatro Amazonas), the Jesus-built cathedral, the municipal

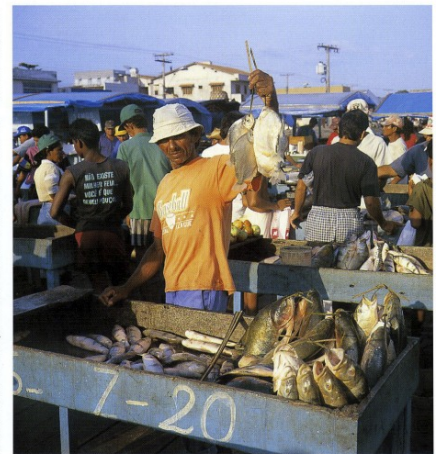
market and the decaying mansions of the rubber barons. From Tefé, a town 40 hours upriver from Manaus, the Amazon now known as the Solimões continues on to Iquitos in Peru, from where it is a further 1,700 miles (2,720km) to the source high up in the Andes.

BELOW, buying and selling the day's catch on the waterfront at Santarém

Somewhere upriver, a giant fish leapt out of the brownish waters, then disappeared from sight beneath the surface. A flock of birds wheeled overhead jabbering with the shrill screech of a locomotive. The early morning light danced on the distant banks, lined with interminable green.

We had left the port of Belém the previous night on a riverboat christened the *Clivia*. Painted blue and white, it was laden with 200 passengers, several tons of the local grain known as *manioc* and a giant music system blaring out Simon and Garfunkel hits. Hammocks made of coloured cloth hung on either side of the decks, lending the boat the air of a brilliant fairground. Below in the toilets, which doubled up as showers, giant cockroaches congregated with un concealed audacity.

Of course, travelling the Amazon (Amazonas) is not like taking a river trip on most other rivers. First of all there is the searing heat and humidity. Then there are the insects – up to 10,000 of them – as well as jumping spiders, fat and hairy tarantulas and half-starved piranhas. If you survive all that, you will be attacked by some of the most potent malaria-carrying mosquitoes in the world, which cluster around the boat at night as if drawn by the promise of a Sunday roast. It is little wonder that the great 19th-century



RIGHT, the port at Manaus, capital of the Amazon, on the Rio Negro

INSET RIGHT, typical sleeping quarters for many travelling on the Amazon's riverboats

naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace, who travelled along the Rio Negro in 1851 in a dugout canoe, was driven to such distraction that bitter crystalline substances became his saving grace: 'I began taking doses of quinine and drinking plentifully cream of tartar water, though I was so weak and apathetic that at times I could hardly muster resolution to move myself to prepare them', he wrote.

My journey, I suspected, was to be of a less onerous nature. Firstly I had a cabin, situated above the rows of swinging hammocks, then I had a temperamental, but adequate, fan. Finally, if all else failed, I had a return air ticket to London dated just three weeks hence.

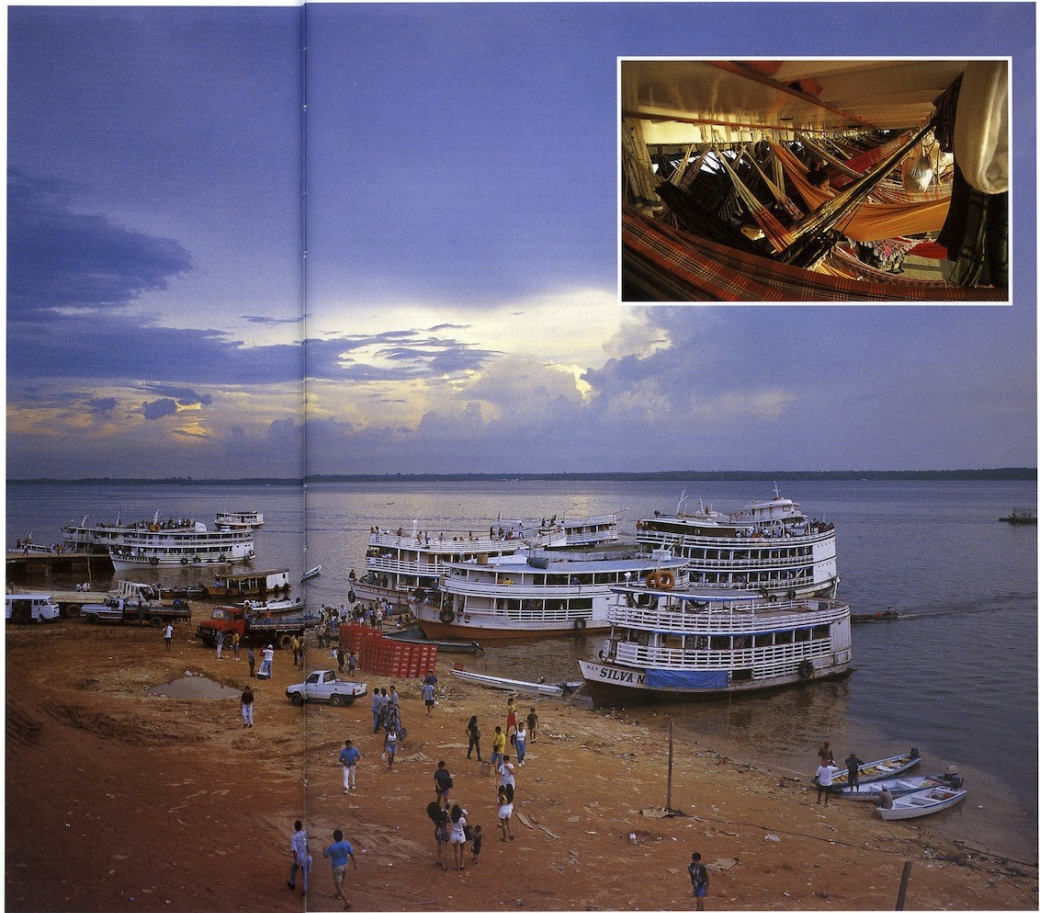
LEAVING THE DELTA

After leaving the old port at Belém we sailed west through the Amazon Basin, a gigantic delta made up of countless channels, each one bigger than the next. Working our way around Marajó, an island the size of Switzerland, we passed narrow strips of forest and swampy marshlands. Soon channels like the tentacles of an octopus opened up, vast streams that tugged us gently towards the heart of the Amazon.

Many legends surround this river, including the story that its name derives from a race of strong female warriors known as the Amazons who were believed by the Greeks to live near the Black Sea. The women are said to have cut off their right breast so they could use a bow and arrow more easily. Today the world's greatest waterway bears other legends. Locals claim that its twisting waters form the great serpent mother and villagers believe that at certain times of year the dolphins, or *botó*, turn into men in white suits and are responsible for pregnancies before marriage.

It was late afternoon and the light was softening when we reached the village of Gurupá.

BELOW, the Opera House in Manaus, part of the rebuilding programme carried out in the late 19th century as a result of the rubber boom



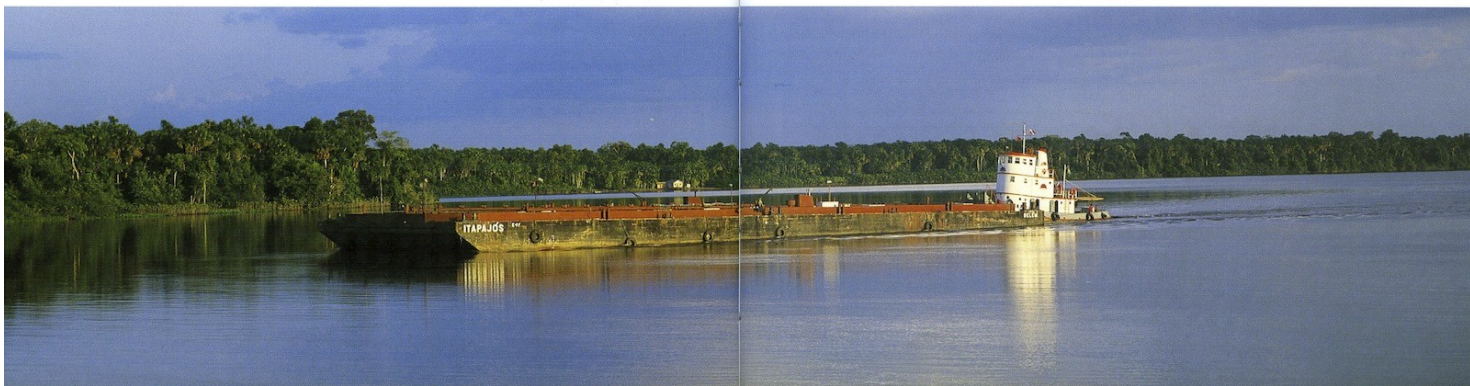


ABOVE, the sublime to the ridiculous ... there is no limit to the size of craft on the Amazon - at either end of the scale

From a cluster of palm-thatched huts on the river bank, a flotilla of canoes sped towards us. Propelled with energy bred from desperation, the paddlers waited in mid-river and as our vessel passed by they sprang forward, gripping the moorings of the boat with their bare hands. The diminutive Indians then clung on whilst passengers threw food or bundles of clothes down to them, finally letting go and drifting back downriver until they were little more than dots on a distant horizon.

Downstairs in the galley, next to the engine room, dinner comprised of beans, rice, spaghetti and fried legs of chicken was being served. The air stank of diesel fumes and the table vibrated gently to the pounding of the

BELOW, even the huge cargo ships are dwarfed by the great river



motor. We held our breath and piled our plates up high before escaping back on deck, back where the air was fresh and the *Clivia* hugged the outline of the shore.

A MIGHTY WATERWAY

To imagine the Amazon is to conjure up an immense new world. In total, this mighty river extends over an area equivalent to 7 per cent of the earth's surface. At times, it stretches out on all sides; it disappears into distant horizons; it literally swallows up the land. Around 1,100 tributaries feed into the Amazon, including the giant Rio Negro, the Rio Japurá, the Rio Purus and the Rio Madeira, and together they account for one-fifth of all river water.

Sailors claim that westbound ships still 75 miles (120km) out to sea run into the Amazon's vast muddy waters.

The mighty Amazon is a river of subtle moods, dictated by the seasons. Every year, when the torrential rains come in December, the river bursts its banks and water spreads over thousands of square miles of flood plain. These plains support countless species of plants and animals and it is estimated that the Amazon contains more than 1,800 species of butterfly alone, as well as swimming snakes and fish with two sets of eyes.

Awed by the scale, exhausted by the humidity, chased by mosquitoes, there is little with which to compare it. Only the steady chug of the boat breaks into my reveries; it punctuates the minutes which turn into hours, and the hours which turn into days.

The first Europeans discovered the Amazon more than four centuries ago. On 11 February 1542, the Spanish conquistador Francisco

DAY AFTER DAY ...

de Orellana and his contingent of 60 men rowed out of the Napo River into the vast reaches of the Rio Negro. Sailing downstream, they crossed the Japurá River then continued towards the Amazon Estuary, reaching Marajó Island in mid-July.

Friar Gaspar Carvajal, who accompanied the expedition, kept a detailed diary of his journey. 'The Amazons go about naked,' he wrote 'but with their privy parts covered, with their bows and arrows in their hands, doing as much fighting as ten Indian men.'

For centuries the Amazon basin remained shrouded in all sorts of make-believe. It was a place thought to be inhabited by headless people, and some men even claimed to have come across a race who had their feet turned backwards, so that pursuers would track them in the wrong direction.

Eventually, however, the region took on a different character. First the Spanish and later the Portuguese and Brazilians plundered the forest; vast areas of land were cleared for rubber and for sugar plantations. The pitiful story of merciless development and exploitation continues even today. Each year an area the size of Great Britain is logged to make way for cattle ranches which are largely funded by government subsidies. In parts of Amazonia, mines have sprung up to extract gold, uranium and other mineral resources. The mines have brought untold wealth for the few big landowners, but they also cause untold pollution. Every year, 13,000 tons of mercury from gold mining finds its way into the Amazon River. The future is not a bright one: at this speed, without large-scale reforestation, the last tree in the Amazon forest will be cut down little more than 60 years from now.

The light of dawn brings the first awakenings from the torpor. We had sailed through the night past a dull outline of land, the smell of cattle manure mixing with the fresh river breezes. Now the river has widened. We stare out on to grazing pastures and small Indian villages with neat white churches.

Down in the galley, my fellow passengers are queuing for breakfast. They stretch their legs painfully after hours in their hammocks and clutch at diminutive children, some little more than a few months old. They literally fight for biscuits spread with acrid butter and for cups of sweetened coffee drunk out of plastic cups - then discarded into the river.

Upstairs, the few Europeans have had a no less eventful journey. An American named Mark was awoken by a bat which flew into his

BELOW, local people waiting for the boats to arrive at Almeirim quay



FAR RIGHT, a typical Indian village on the river bank; the water is essential for washing and cooking

INSET, the banana-laden canoe of a lone trader on his way to market

cabin. It got caught up in the fan and was shredded all over the floor. Others complain of blocked-up toilets or the sound of techno music blaring out over the ship's speakers.

At Santarém, a busy little port at the junction of the Tapajós River, we spend the day sightseeing and eating delicious Tambaqui fish, freshly grilled on red-hot coals. In the evening, a Brazilian anarchist, who sleeps rough in the square, joins us at our table near the port. He decries the corrupt government, the lack of support for the poor people of Brazil and the greed of the rich landowners. Finishing his beer, he asks for money. Then, empty handed, he wanders unsteadily off into the night.

We escape aboard our new vessel, the *Moreira Da Silva III*. It has a car on the bottom deck and half a cow hanging outside the bathroom – our food for the next leg of the journey. In every corner of the vessel passengers in hammocks are stacked up like tins of cut-price tuna on a supermarket shelf.

From Santarém we continue upstream, up past the two-coloured confluence of the Tapajós River and towards the town of Obidos. Once again the monotony takes over, measured only by the draining heat and the number of squashed cockroaches.

One night, an anaconda snake is found on board our vessel. About 6ft (2m) long with beautiful colourful patterns, it slithered along the deck under the hammocks and disappeared into the hold to the sound of frantic screaming. Only later did we learn that it belonged to the captain and was kept along with two other snakes to keep the rats in check.

On another night, a drunk claiming to be a federal policeman came on board. He demanded our passports and said that all foreigners must leave the country, at which point we retreated into our cabins and locked the door. After knocking for five minutes he eventually lost interest, descending at the next port where he was swallowed up in the darkness.

Hugging the bank to avoid the full force of the current we continue slowly upstream, passing the towns of Oriximiná and Juruti. Now and again we come across motorised canoes or giant cargo boats carrying trucks downriver. Once we drew alongside a vast oil tanker on its return voyage from Manaus. All throughout,

the landscape rarely changes, the soft grassy meadows and sparse treeline broken only by small towns and villages, short stops on our seemingly endless journey.

#### JUNGLE BOOM TOWN

On the sixth night we see lights in the distance. The river traffic increases and ahead there are concrete houses and the distant outline of high-rises seems to sprout up out of the jungle. After almost a week on the river, we have reached our first major centre of civilisation.

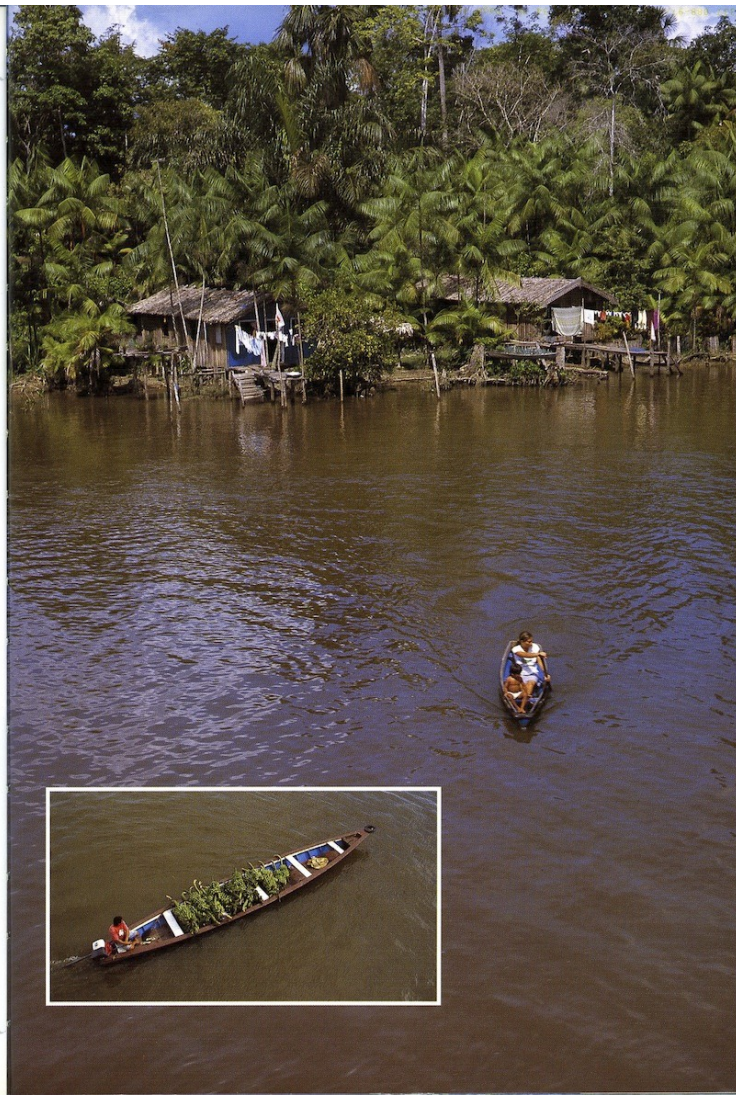
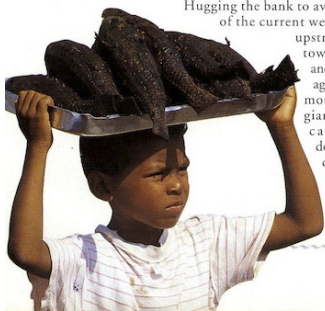
There is an opera house in Manaus. It has Italian porches, baroque-style colonnades and a dome covered in green-blue and gold tiles. Opened in 1896, it is the most bizarre symbol of the unprecedented economic boom that transformed this isolated riverine city into one of the world's wealthiest metropolises. During the mid-19th and early 20th century, demand for rubber to make motor car tyres sent prices spiralling in Amazonia. Up to 80,000 tons of rubber a year were shipped from Manaus to ports as far afield as New York and Liverpool and overnight this town at the confluence of the Amazon and Rio Negro grew into a city of 50,000 inhabitants. Electric trams were built, so too the opera house where ballet troupes came from Europe to perform to diamond-bedecked audiences. At one stage it was even fashionable for rubber magnates to send their laundry to Europe to be cleaned.

But the wily British smuggled out seeds which were planted elsewhere in South-east Asia and soon rival rubber plantations sprang up in Malaysia and in Ceylon. In 1912, as suddenly as it had begun, the rubber boom ended. Landowners committed suicide, the electricity was closed off and the opera house temporarily closed down. Now, however, a new wave of prosperity has gripped parts of Manaus. Since the government declared the area a free-trade zone back in 1967, multi-nationals using cheap labour have created a new source of income. In the midst of the world's largest rain forest, more than 40,000 workers make television sets, watches and motorbikes which are distributed throughout Brazil and Latin America. But the incongruity is striking. In the shadow of high-rises are some of the worst shanty towns in Brazil. It is a frightening picture: a picture of the world gone badly wrong.

#### ALL CHANGE

In the busy riverside docks at Manaus, where the waters can rise by as much as 90ft (27m) during the annual floods, we change ship. Our

BELOW, working life starts early on in this part of the world





ABOVE, the market at Tefé, a busy town in the heart of the jungle

new home is a crowded three-decker vessel called the *Fernandes*. It has brown and white awnings, a satellite dish on the owner's cabin – and a bar piled high with Antarctica beer and toasted sandwiches. In the hold below, passengers busily load up timber, bags of cement and a chicken on a lead. The crowded dirty decks are filled with traders, workers looking for a new start in life, a pregnant girl fleeing her parents. The cast is different but the faces are the same:

faces that show resilience and strength, the strength to continue against the hardships of life on the river.

Leaving Manaus, the *Fernandes* manoeuvres into the main stream and the distant *favelas* (shacks, shanty towns) give way to factories and then to farmland. Soon the river changes, the black waters of the Rio Negro merging with the brown waters of the Amazon, at this point measuring up to 6 miles (10km) wide and now known as the Solimões.

Slaves were once brought to the confluence of these two great rivers from as far afield as Africa to work the sugar plantations. Many died on the journey, but others survived to intermarry with the local people, the Indians and the Portuguese, producing that rich mix of ethnic races that is the true hallmark of the Brazilian people.

Here and there, sandbanks rise out of the murky waters of the river, gargantuan islands which for six months of the year are cultivated by the local people and for six months are flooded. If experiments carried out by the Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas da Amazonia (INPA) are anything to go by, these fertile soils could provide sustenance for villagers not only in the Amazon, but in other parts of Brazil.

At Codajás, when the boat draws alongside the quay, a handful of passengers leap ashore clutching hammocks and cheap polyester bags.

Further on the rain forest once again muscles in on all sides. Occasionally we glimpse flocks of birds or parrots swooping down from the lush vegetation along the river banks. Once we even saw dolphins as they leapt, their beautiful arch-like movements breaking the surface of the slow-moving water.

THE MARCH OF PROGRESS

Nights on the Amazon are beautiful and tranquil. A fresh breeze blows and the distant shores are silhouetted by the light of the moon. Dusk is also a time of reflection. More than 2 million Indians once lived along these river banks in harmony with their environment and their story is a tragic one. Murdered by the conquistadors, ravaged by smallpox, tuberculosis, flu and measles and driven from their land by ranchers and politically connected businessmen, they have become fodder for the giant animal known as progress. Today, fewer than 200,000 Indians live in the Amazon and many of these are dependent on handouts from illegal gold miners. Others are being driven even further from their homelands by new roads, by the relentless advance of logging companies and by the pollution of their rivers.

By the time our boat leaves the port of Coari, the sun is already arching behind the horizon. Once again we contemplate the monotony of

the land, a land that has been ravaged by man in the name of progress.

Soon, however, the clearings dissipate. Along the river banks the trees grow to heights of more than 100ft (30m), their trunks occasionally as large as houses. The further we go, the fewer villages we see and the jungle envelops us.

On the last night a storm blows up. The sky turns black and a tropical downpour ensues. Canoes and primitive wooden dugouts scurry along the water in search of shelter, while a few Indians squat outside their houses, staring out over the angry waters.

Nearing the end of my journey, the mood changes. Passengers smile after their long days in the hammocks, the television blares out news of Brazil's latest football conquests. Here too the river takes on a different guise, a certain wildness and untamed grandeur as it continues on its long route through Iquitos to its source high up in the Peruvian Andes.

On the last morning the sun is gentle, the river banks lush and full of promise. A few dolphins leap out of the water. The boat manoeuvres against the pier at Tefé, a lively riverine town with a raw frontier feel about it, the feel of being in the midst of the Amazon. It is a fitting end to my 10-day voyage, a journey that will always carry poignant memories of the power and fertility of the river – and the destructive forces of civilisation ranged against it.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

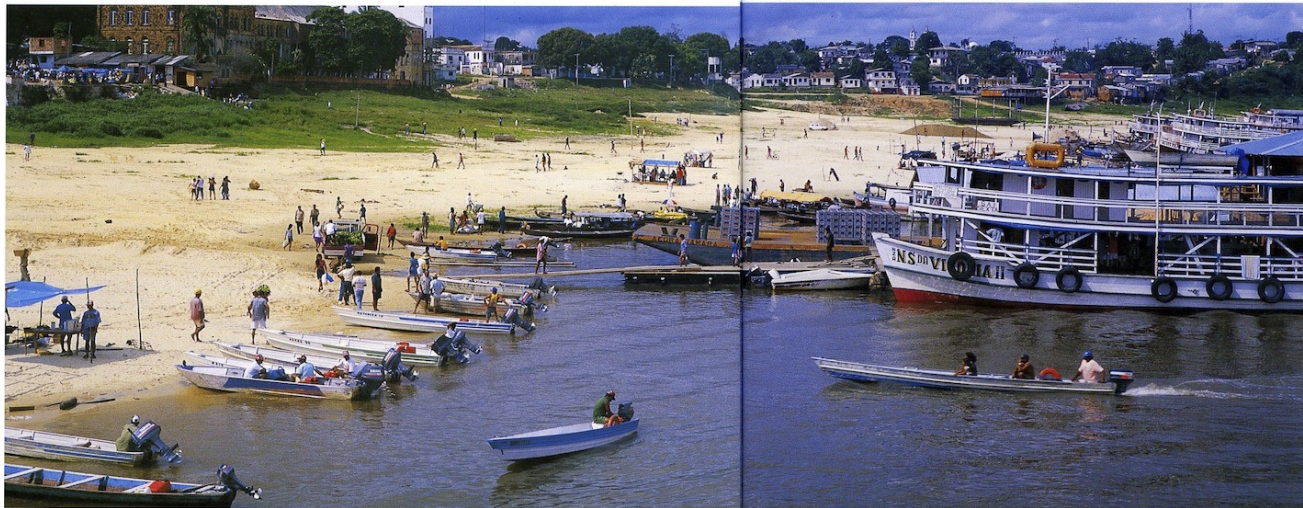
Boats between Belém and Manaus depart daily. Generally, the 1,000-mile (1,600km) journey takes about five or six days. From Manaus another boat runs to Tefé, 400 miles (640km) further upstream, taking about 40 hours. It is also possible to continue to Iquitos in Peru, although you will need a visa and the constitution of an ox.

The best time to travel is between July and November, when rains average just 20in (50mm) a month. From December to May rains can be as high as 118in (300mm) per month. At all times the climate remains extremely humid.

Most boats are overcrowded, ancient and uncomfortable. Accommodation is in hammocks or cabins. Meals are included.

Visitors to Brazil from EC countries do not require visas. You will, however, need injections including yellow fever and will require anti-malaria tablets. Ask your doctor for details in good time before leaving.

For information about trips contact Last Frontiers, Swan House, Long Crendon, Bucks, HP18 9AF. Tel: 01844 228405; Fax: 01844 228405; or Trailfinders, 194 Kensington High Street, London W8 7RG; Tel: 0171 538 3839; Fax: 0171 538 3305. In Australia Trailfinders, 91 Elizabeth Street, Brisbane 4000, Queensland. Tel: 07 3229 0887.



LEFT, the port at Tefé, journey's end