



A Trip up the Orinoco River, 1969

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My family lived in Bogotá, Colombia, a modern city with all conveniences, from 1968 to 1972. During those years I was at college in Dallas, but I spent most summers and winters in Bogotá.

My parents were friends with a German anthropologist who planned a trip up the Orinoco River to observe the Yanomami Indians, a primitive tribe that lived in the upper sections of the Orinoco. He and his wife were looking for persons to share the trip and its costs, and my parents suggested that I invite a friend, and go with them. I invited my friend Gary, the son of a U.S. State Department Officer in Colombia, and Gary was happy to come along.

We drove from Bogotá to the City of Villavicencio, and then flew on a non-pressurized DC-3 airplane to a dirt air strip near the town of Inirida. The airplane primarily carried fresh sides of beef, hanging in front of my seat in the fuselage, and also, many cages of live chickens. There were about 8 passengers in the rear of the aircraft, including the four of us. To my surprise, the windows on the aircraft could be tilted open by passengers. It rained hard during the flight, and the rain leaked through the seam in the craft's roof.



(the DC-3 looked like this, without the U.S. markings)

Upon landing we were driven in the back of a cargo truck, along with about 30 locals to the Venezuelan border near San Juan de Atabapo. We cleared through Venezuelan immigration and a guard station, and were dropped at the bank of the Orinoco River, to meet our guides/boat crew.

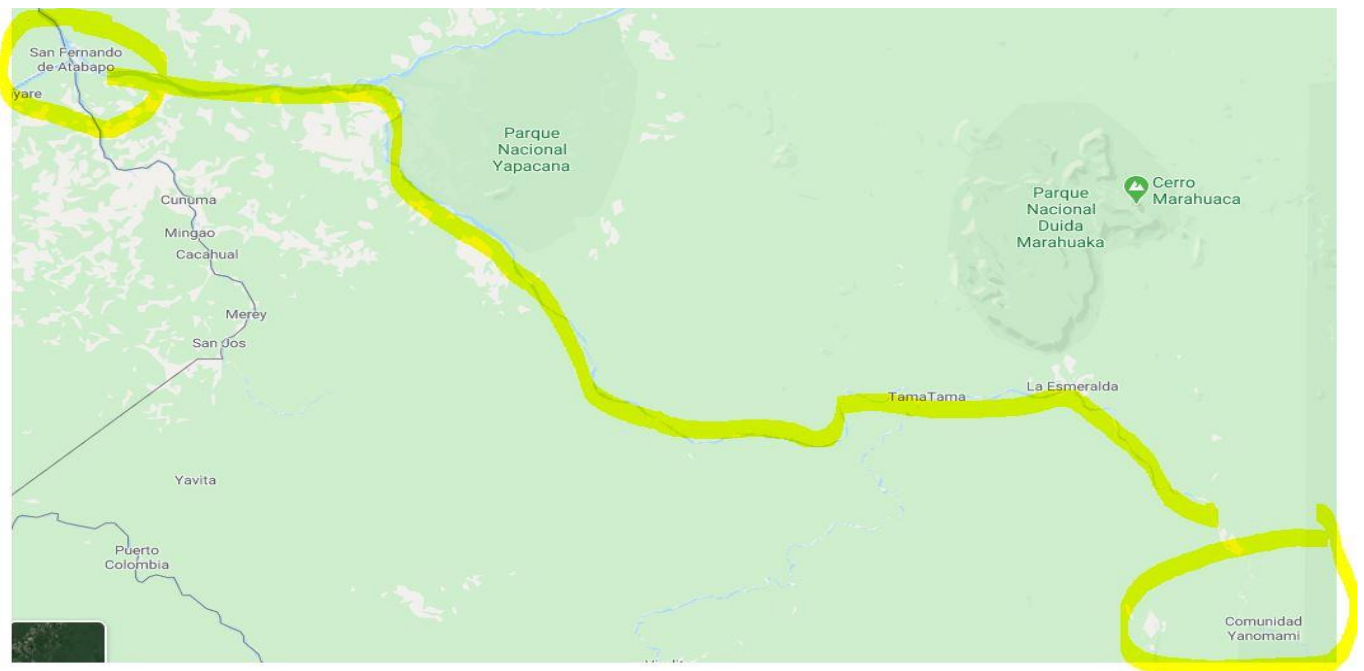


Our boat (at left) was about 32 feet long, with one outboard motor, a partial tin roof, and supports for four hammocks. We took along an oil drum full of gasoline, about 100 gallons of potable water, a lot of rice and a few cans of spam. Our guides planned to find most of our food along the way.

My personal supplies included a few shirts, shorts, hiking boots and tennis shoes, a camera, Band Aids, aspirin, bug spray and a machete. I also took a few items to trade. All my belongings fit in the tan bag is visible in the photo.

We took no firearms, we could not have crossed the border with them in any event.

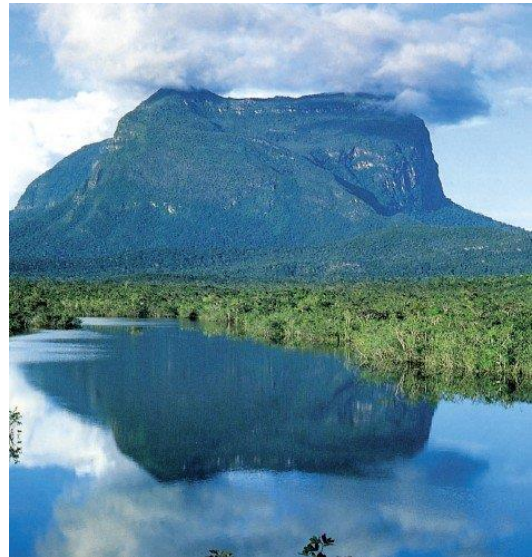
As shown below, our river route started in San Fernando de Atabapo and went upstream and southeasterly, to the area of Comunidad Yanomami. The trip was about 250 miles, each way.



At the start, the river was about a half-mile wide, and the boat shown above was out transportation.

The current was fairly strong, so we would travel near a shoreline for better speed, on average probably about 6 miles per hour. We later borrowed a smaller dugout, to access the more narrow southern section of the river.

We traveled for about 4 days and saw almost no other boats, people or even a hill, until we came upon the mountain shown below, at Parque Nacional Yopacana. I took the photo on the left, below. The photo on the right is from a different angle and is more impressive, from Google!



I had thoughts of finding a “Lost Paradise” at the time, but we did not venture far from the river. We proceeded further upstream, and I began to wonder if we would ever see any people on this trip.

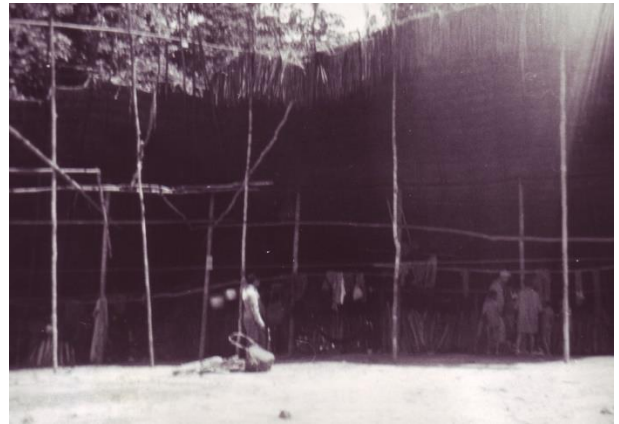
We did see some huge fish and plenty of birds. At night as we prepared to sleep on the boat in our hammocks, I shined a spotlight along the banks and could see and hear alligators or crocodiles jumping from the river bank into the water. There were also plenty of monkeys, sloths, jaguars and other creatures in the jungle along the river, and lots of piranha in the river. We were able to bathe, carefully, the piranha react to the smell of blood.

We spotted our first Indian man standing on a tree trunk that jutted out into the river, and I took the photo on the left below. Our new friend wanted to hitch a ride upriver, and we and gave him one.



As we rode further up river, one of our guides helped us communicate with our new passenger. I had a ball-point pen with me and when I showed him it could draw, he proceeded to draw an intricate pattern all over his chest. Unfortunately it was not visible in the second photo above.

A few hours up river, we arrived at his small village along the river. Perhaps 30 or 40 people lived there in communal areas, but most were out hunting or gathering food at the time.



I traded a small knife and the pen for his bow and arrows, which were lots longer than he was tall.



The people in this village seemed to be concerned about us, and the boy on the right really wanted us to go away. He hit me in the stomach a few times, but I ignored it.

We soon left the village and headed up river.



After some time heading further upstream we came upon about 15 Indian men in dug outs, armed with bows, arrows and blow guns. They were also heading up river. We stopped to talk briefly and our guide determined that they were planning to attack another group of Indians further upstream. They all had painted their faces with a red dye. Unfortunately, I didn't take a photo of those guys, I was probably a little concerned at that point!

After a brief conversation we proceeded up river and arrived at another village about two hours later.

We learned that there were frequent attacks and battles between Indian villages, but the battles were not over territory, food or possessions. The purpose of such attacks was to kidnap women, and to propagate their villages with them.

The next village had apparently been quite successful at propagating, as seen below.



Our guide warned these villagers that a group of warriors was headed their way, and to be prepared. The chief did begin to get prepared (below), as we headed further up river.



We learned that there were also “head-pounding duels” between leading warriors of different villages, to resolve disputes. The warriors would take turns hitting each other directly on the head with long poles about three inches thick. They would do this in public, in orderly fashion, until the weaker man dropped. Several of the stronger men had noticeable scars and dents on their heads.

Surprisingly, we came upon a Catholic mission, where we slept on real beds overnight and had two good meals. The missionary charged us an arm and a leg the next morning for his hospitality. The missionary insisted that the local Indians wear clothing. He cut the boys’ hair in a more conventional style, and taught them Spanish. There were three grave sites with crosses at the mission, presumably earlier missionaries’ graves.



We proceeded up river and arrived at a large village where all the surrounding trees had been cut to provide obstacles to invaders, and an early warning in the event of an attack.



We spent some time in that village, and learned that the some of the Indian men would inhale “yopo” the dust of a dried, hallucinogenic root. The dust was blown up their nose by a second person through a long hollow bamboo tube.



After inhaling yopo, the men got severe headaches and sinus, they then vomited, and cruised into a more mellow spiritual world which had an occasional demon. The main purpose of yopo was to scare away the bad spirits of illness. There was a sick child on the ground near the hallucinating gentleman below, as he circled and chanted, at times yelling. I was offered to try yopo, but after due consideration, I declined.



There was also a sick woman in a dark hut, and the anthropologist took a flash-photo of her. This frightened and angered the people nearby.

The man on the right escorted us out and to the boat, waving his head-pounding pole.

This was the only time during the trip that I truly became a bit concerned for our safety.



In the next village, I traded the chief a short sleeved shirt for the only chicken we saw during the trip. He was so happy with the shirt (seen at left, below) that he lined up three ladies from the village and offered me my pick. I gracefully declined, but I'm not sure about some of the crew.



The chief's apparent wife (at right) wore some old clothes, had two grooming monkeys, and three sticks in her cheeks as seen at right.

This was typical. The center stick was hollow, through which they expelled saliva that accumulated around the wad of leaves most had in their lower lip.



During the trip we saved a drowning sloth from the river, and it gradually recovered its strength. Sadly, when we released it onto a tree in the next village a man shot it with an arrow, and it landed back in the river.



There were many other creatures. I was offered two live baby jaguars for U.S. \$40.00. They were beautiful and still kittens, but they growled like adults! I knew I couldn't take them with me.

One village killed some large monkeys, skinned them and cooked them. The sight of them boiling in a large pot was pretty bad, they looked like humans. I had one nasty bite of monkey and I almost lost it. We also ate ground capybara (left image, below) while at the mission and it was quite good! The creature on the right was a child's pet, we didn't consider eating it!



Our journey back to civilization was downstream with the current and travel was much faster, taking perhaps four of the 19 days we spent on the river to get all the way back. We did stop at the village where we had warned of the approaching warriors, and found two men who had been wounded. Apparently they had fended off the attack, however.

The guy on the left (notice the war paint) was in a lot of pain and his hand had been badly cut. The man on the right had broken his arm and was also in pain. The only help we could provide was aspirin.



The following are a few more scenes from the trip:



When we arrived back in Villavicencio we rented hotel rooms, showered and had a few drinks and dinner. Gary and I went to a local movie theater, and began to return to reality.



We had been fortunate, none of us had been injured and none had gotten sick. For some reason, however, Gary was the only one of us who was savored by chiggers. His legs itched badly the whole trip, and they were not a pretty sight.

Unfortunately I lost contact with the German couple and with Gary after that summer.