

CLUEING IN TO MANAUS

by Abigail Rome

March 2001

As I strolled through the city of Manaus in the heart of Brazil, I felt I had stumbled into a treasure hunt. I found myself searching for the clues of nineteenth century life which peek out from behind the more obvious and palpable signs of the oncoming twenty-first century. Walking through downtown, I looked up at second and third story windows to discover intricate wrought iron grates and carved stone cornices. At eye level I was bombarded by boom boxes and basketballs being peddled from every direction. In the parks and squares, if I averted my eyes from the mobile newspaper stands and soda hawkers, I could imagine Victorian ladies in their white dresses and wooden-handled umbrellas posing in the gazebos, gazing at monuments to Spanish and Portuguese conquerors. With these contrasting images, the Amazon basin's most populous city was spiked with evidence for discovering its past and present.

I gathered clues as I wandered, and supplemented them with what I had read in my guidebook and a history of Brazil. I was reminded of a movie I had seen years ago, Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo*, depicting the high European society residing in Manaus at the turn of the century. It is a city with a turbulent history of boom and bust. At the end of the 1800s, exploitation of Amazonian rubber trees, the discovery of vulcanization by Charles Goodyear, and John Dunlop's invention of the pneumatic rubber tire all coincided. Europeans and Brazilians rushed to Manaus, creating a city as technologically and culturally rich as any in Europe during the Victorian era.

What had been a small fortress village located just above the meeting of two large rivers quickly became a prosperous and modern metropolis with 50,000 people by 1920. Its residents talked to each other on telephones, walked on lighted streets at night, and rode downtown on electric trams to buy pastries and lace imported from Europe. In the evenings, they indulged in the arts and culture of their homelands by frequenting the famous *Teatro Amazona* Opera House. But this prosperity was not to last. By the end of the first decade of the 1900s, rubber production in Asian plantations began to surpass that of Brazil's forest-based industry, and the local economy soon went bust. Along with it, the luxuriant cultural life spawned by the rubber industry quickly collapsed.

Now, there are signs of renewal. I explored these by visiting the recently renovated Opera House, as well as by examining daily life in downtown Manaus. On my way towards the city's waterfront, crammed with vessels of all sizes and shapes, I found it difficult to be just a pedestrian on the city's sidewalks. Instead, I became a reluctant shopper forced to weave through the racks of merchandise covering the crowded sidewalks. Peddlers donning the latest American university t-shirt imitations tried to lure me in with their scant phrases of English slang, but I continued resolutely on my way.

For many years, genuine consumers, unlike myself, flocked to Manaus. They snapped up shoes,

bikinis, clothing of all sorts, kitchenware, computers, hardware, cameras and electronics. The influx began in 1967, when shoppers from throughout the continent verged upon the city as a result of the Brazilian government's declaring it a Free Trade Zone. Although the 1970s purchasing frenzy subsequently subsided, the emporium-like quality of the downtown remains, and newer versions of the same products spill into the street from the storefronts behind them.

On reaching the city market near the docks, I encountered a more earnest buying and selling clientele, distinct from the haphazardness of the city streets. The 19th century market building designed by Gustave Eiffel, of Paris tower fame, is the site of a diverse array of agricultural, aquatic and forest products, neatly displayed, each in its own designated stall or corridor. In the fish pavilion, I chatted and joked with red-shirted fishermen who wielded sharp knives on a variety of grotesque, whiskered and scaly aquatic creatures. They scale, gut, hack and peddle examples of at least 40 of the 2500 species of Amazonian fish.

Next door I ogled an array of colorful masks, dolls, baskets and woodcarvings. They were made by present-day Indians out of the same forest-based materials that their ancestors had been using for over 1,000 years: feathers, fish scales and tongues, porcupine spines, bones, seeds, fruits, palm leaves, vines, bark and wood. In contrast, outside the market building I found the convenience store, young merchants selling variety packets of vegetables, wrapped together in mesh netting, all ready for a traditional *soccolau* soup. Just add water!

Unable to resist the market's prepared food specialties, I enjoyed a bowl of *tucunare* fish soup, accompanied by a transparent, slimy but tasty manioc goo. Well nourished, I set off again to explore a microscopic portion of the Amazon jungle, the source of natural wealth for Manaus. After laboriously negotiating my fare with a local boatman surprised at my ability to speak Portuguese, I boarded a 20-seat motorized canoe to travel downstream to the "Meeting of the Waters," a timeless two-colored ribbon of water where the clear, black *Rio Negro* meets the muddy *Rio Solimoes*.

Egrets, cormorants and other water birds flew between treetops and onto floating vegetation mats in the middle of the open water. The rural poor live as their ancestors did in wooden shacks, elevated to keep them dry during the wet season when the river rises up to 12 meters. Although there is less forest and more sign of human habitation, life seemed much the same as it has been for thousands of years. I found that the Amazon river people, called *caboclos*, are like much of the population of Manaus. They have not cashed in on rubber, foreign merchandise brought to the free trade zone, or the wave of tourism that is Manaus' current moneymaker. They live meekly, fishing and eating *tucunare*, as I did, but do not dare to step into the elegant opera house, several blocks back from the river.

I, in contrast, ambled up the street to this famous symbol of enlightenment in the so-called jungle primeval. In resuming my search for clues of the cultural past, I was eager to see what was behind the imposing pink facade and under the gold-tiled dome roof. I joined the sprinkling of other tourists on a tour of what was clearly as extravagant and opulent as any building one could find in Europe. With marble pillars from Italy, bronze from France, carved stone from Scotland, and ornate frescoes and paintings representing both the Amazon and historic European arts and

culture, the interior was a monument for the world. Not only a sign of the past, the great hall is once again a popular venue for appreciating the arts. In fact, the spring season of shows was to commence that evening, and my visit coincided with the dress rehearsal for a new opera.

As I sat on a red velvet cushion, surrounded by late nineteenth century splendor, I reflected upon how the performance on stage epitomized the city of Manaus and the Amazonian forest surrounding it. In the foreground, were sophisticated ladies in bright red-robos and white-wigged gentlemen clad in black and gold, singing so forcefully that their words surely penetrated the dense jungle beyond. Behind them, the chorus, a diverse mix of African, European, Indian, and Asian, typical of Brazil's current population, danced and clapped to the music. In contrast to the protagonists, they were dressed in t-shirts, tank tops and cut-offs.

This scene, along with other clues, helped me comprehend the essence of the Amazon. On stage as well as outside, the past and present are jumbled together, with the rich and the romantics overshadowing the harmonizing populace. In today's Manaus, where tourism reigns, the voices of merchants and money-spending visitors now reverberate throughout the world, just as the presence of rubber barons and other industrialists did in the past.