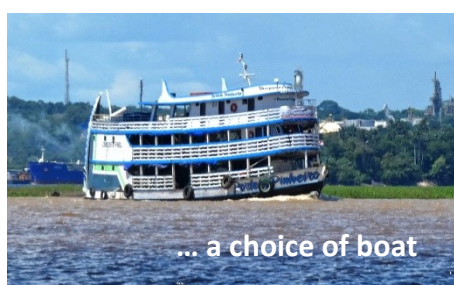




Recently I had the opportunity of making a visit into the heart of the Amazon, to region known as the “three Frontiers” where Brazil, Colombia and Peru meet. I left behind the hot, dry, semi-arid region of the Sertão of Bahia to plunge into the hot, humid and steamy jungle that is the Amazon rainforest.

My destination was Tabatinga on the Brazilian side of the border on the banks of one of the mighty arms of the Amazon River, known as the Rio Solimões. (For Brazilians the Amazon River officially begins at the famous meeting of the waters between the Rio Negro and the Rio Solimões close to the Amazonian capital of Manaus, however for geographers the Amazon extends upriver as the “Rio Solimões” where it is born in springs high up in the Andes Mountains.)

In order to get to Tabatinga I had to fly up to Manaus from São Paulo and then I had a choice of a boat (6 days on the river) or a plane (1 hour and 35 minutes) to cover the 1,200 km. As much as I would have liked to experience swinging in a



hammock for all those days the time constraints meant that I had to take an EMB 195 of Azul Airlines that makes one return flight daily.

In the region of the Three Frontiers there are a number of key towns. Tabatinga, Brazil, with a population estimated at 70,000 although it is much higher due to the large number of undocumented Peruvians and Colombians living in this fluid border region and Letícia, Colombia, the sister city of Tabatinga which is of a similar size. The border is marked by a painted stripe on the main road or small white pillars in the outlying areas.

The original inhabitants of this stretch of the Rio Solimões are the Ticuna (Tikuna) and their associated subservient peoples. They have a reputation of being fierce warriors.

Their first extended contact with Europeans was in the early 1700’s with the presence of Jesuit missionaries from Peru lead by a Czech Jesuit, Father Samuel Fritz who during 40 years worked with the peoples of the Amazon.

The Portuguese set up a small fort to control the movement on the Rio Solimões, directly across from the mouth of the Rio Javari, at Tabatinga in the 1770’s although the border wasn’t formally recognized until 1866.



On a large island in the middle of the Rio Solimões is the small town of Santa Rosa de Yavari (pop. 3,000) which is Peruvian. Other towns close by on the Rio Javari which enters the Rio Solimões at this point include Benjamin Constant (pop 45,000) and Atalaia do Norte (pop. 21,000) both in Brazil and Islândia (pop. 3000) in Peru.

By this time the world was discovering the diverse uses of latex and from the 1880’s until the end of the First World War there was a veritable invasion of the Amazon by rubber-tappers from the northeast of Brazil, principally from the State of Ceara. These migrants form the basis of a group of peoples known as “ribeirinhos”, the river people.



Marist Educational Centre,
Tabatinga



Marcio, Lara and Br Luke

The Ticuna are still the predominant indigenous group in the region, although their numbers are now down to 50,000 (36,000 in Brazil, 10,000 in Colombia and 4,000 in Peru). Arriving in Tabatinga one late afternoon I was warmly welcomed by members of the International Community of the Marist Brothers, which at the moment consists of Brother Luke Fong FMS from Fiji and three lay volunteers: a married couple (Marcio from Brazil and Laura from Mexico) and Alessandra from Guatemala. They run the Marist Educational Centre that offers courses in a number of languages (English, Spanish, French, Italian) and also other activities such as ballet, guitar playing and drama to children and young people of the small city of Tabatinga.

In general, in Brazil, formal schooling is done either in the

morning, afternoon or evening and this means that parents want to occupy their children with other activities when they are not at school.

The Marist Centre also offers literacy classes for adults. As well as this educational work, assisted by volunteers, the Community is also at the forefront of a number of pastoral initiatives, such as building local Christian communities in the poorest areas of the city, prison ministry and ministering to those who earn a living scavenging in the large city rubbish dump. The poverty encountered in these pastoral works is truly overwhelming.

Islândia

The first part of my journey was to visit some of the towns around Tabatinga beginning with Islândia in Peru.

To get there we were up at the crack of dawn in order to guarantee a place on the first “rapid Launch” that makes the 30 km, 40-minute journey across the Rio Solimões and up the mouth of the Rio Javari to Benjamim Constant. These boats seat 20 people on wooden benches and are driven by two very powerful outboard motors. The journeys are made on a first come first serve basis. I counted a total of about 15 boats offering this service.

Once in Benjamim Constant we had to walk to another landing wharf for the 20-minute service upriver to Islândia. The boat was smaller and notably slower, but at least it had an awning to keep off the blazing sun.

Islândia, although it has a small population, is interesting in that almost a third of the inhabitants are members of a sect known as the Israelites. It was founded in 1968 by Ezequial Gamonal.

At first, he announced himself as a Prophet who had received again the Ten Commandments. He was later to tell his followers that he was the reincarnation of the Son of God.

He insisted that they were to migrate from the cities of Peru to the Amazon in order to prepare for the Second Coming.

The women wear long dresses and veils like the Virgin Mary and the men, on formal religious occasions wear garments that remember Jesus. They are not allowed to cut their hair or their beards.

Islândia is also an important outpost on the border between Peru and Brazil and so has a lot of health and educational services. The entire town is built on pillars of at least 5 metres high in order to take account of the rise and fall of the Rio Javari.

Previously it was all wood but the government of Peru has built walkways of concrete to link much of the town together. Only



Islândia

on the outskirts do the original wooden walkways still exist.

Our interest in Islândia was to visit an inter-congregational community of Brazilian religious women who work in the town and minister to distant riverside communities.

Their lifestyle is very simple and it was with genuine delight that they ate the fresh bread that we had brought with us from Tabatinga. Normally breakfast is the local couscous or else tapioca.

In order to visit the riverside communities which are a mixture of Indian villages and “Ribeirinho” communities they have a small open boat with an awning to keep off the sun. It has the very suggestive name of “Laudato Si”.



They can spend up to a week visiting these communities of the Peruvian side of the Rio Javari that serves as the border between Peru and Brazil.

In order to establish a presence both with the indigenous peoples and with the ribeirinhos, many of whom are evangelicals, they concentrate of education on issues of health and well-being.

In some places they do have celebrations and offer a bit of catechism. The bishop of the Prelature of Iquitos, Peru has also given them permission to officiate at Baptisms and Weddings.



Unfortunately, the main challenge of this mission, apart from the heat, humidity and the isolation of the Amazon, is getting enough funding for the missionary journeys upriver.

Although they have a small boat they need to pay for fuel and a pilot to navigate for them, as well as supplies for the journey. Each trip costs about US\$ 500 and requires up to 6 months of strict budgeting to reach that much.

Atalaia do Norte

After leaving Islândia we headed for our next town – Atalaia do Norte. To get there we had to return by boat to Benjamin Constant and then in the heat of the midday sun wait until the taxi, that would take us to Atalaia do Norte, filled up with passengers for the 39 km journey.

The taxi driver wasn't leaving until he had at least four people to cover his costs and with gasoline twice the price as anywhere else in Brazil I couldn't blame him.

Our problem was that we had arrived at the time when everyone was having their long lunch and businesses don't pick up until about 3pm.

The road itself is one of the longest in this part of the world and cuts through the rainforest in order to shorten the time taken to travel between the two towns.

In this region the Rio Javari makes a huge looping curve and by boat the journey would take around 6 hours.

Surprisingly the road was paved but there were super-sized potholes and even parts where the asphalt had disappeared completely.

However after 50 minutes of being thrown around in a small car as the driver avoided potholes and other traffic it was worth the time saved.

Atalaia do Norte is the gateway into one of the most pristine areas of the Amazon. It was made famous (infamous) by the murders of Bruno Pereira, a Brazilian indigenist and Dom Philips, a British journalist in June 2022.

They had been monitoring the advance of illegal fishing and cocaine production up into the indigenous reserves of the Rio Javari.

They were murdered as they returned to Atalaia do Norte and their bodies were only found days later by local Indians who helped search for them.



At Atalaia do Norte we stayed with a community of Xaverians missionaries and also had an opportunity to spend time with a Jesuit, Fr Urbano Muller SJ and his team from CIMI (Conselho Indigenista Missionário – Missionary Council for Indigenous Peoples).

CIMI is an organization of the Brazilian Bishops' Conference and works to defend the culture and the rights of Indigenous Peoples throughout Brazil. The Jesuits have a significant presence in the organization, especially in the Amazon.

They spoke of their work with the six different tribes spread out along the Rio Javari and also of their desire to protect those “free tribes”, that is those without contact with the outside world, in the vast Indigenous Reserve that covers 75,000 km² between the Rio Javari and the Rio Juruá.

The major challenge of this mission is the steady movement of the indigenous people down the river to Atalaia do Norte, Benjamin Constant and even to Manaus in search for education, health and work.

Rarely do they return to their villages. There is also a steady movement in the other direction of people interested in exploiting the resources of the region, principally illegal fishing and gold prospecting.

On the Peruvian side of the Javari River the biggest concern is with cocaine production.

Unfortunately, many of the Indians end up in the poorest areas of Atalaia do Norte and spend their government pensions on alcohol and drugs, losing their culture and their dignity as human beings.

Benjamin Constant

After spending the night in Atalaia do Norte we returned to the larger town of Benjamin Constant and were welcomed by an international Capuchin community.

Benjamin Constant has a long history. Close by the present site, the Jesuits in 1750 created a village to evangelize the Ticuna and in 1770 the Portuguese established a small fort there.

It formally became a recognized city in 1898, but obviously it was already a thriving town before that given its strategic location on the mouth of the Javari River and as an advanced base for rubber tappers moving further into the Amazon region.

After the expulsion of the Jesuits from Brazil, Capuchin missionaries progressively expand their mission

from Tefé, about 1,000 km down river, until they set up a permanent mission in Benjamin Constant in 1927.

This mission became a vital centre for evangelization in the area. Apart from looking after the Parish and the large number of riverside communities, they also built a large school and formation centre.

During the 1970s and 1980s there was plenty of collaboration between them and the Marist Brothers of the Province of Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul State.

The Marist Brothers through their university (PUCRS) developed large programmes in the areas of education, health and agriculture.

With the changing times the school and the Capuchin Formation Centre have become an international mission which accepts candidates and their formators from all over the world-wide Franciscan Family for a six-month inculturation and missionary experience in the heart of the Amazon with the hope that lessons learnt by living in one of the poorer and most remote areas of the world will rekindle the original Franciscan spirit.

Tabatinga

After four days visiting the towns along the Javari River it was time to return to Tabatinga, which is now the centre of the Diocese of the Alto Solimões.

It covers 136,000 km², which is just a little bigger than Greece, and has just eight parishes. The catholic population is 185,000.

The bishop is a Spanish missionary with many years of experience in the lower Amazon region, Dom Adolfo Zon Pereira, SX. There are currently 5 priests incardinated in the Diocese.

They are assisted by 15 others belonging to the Capuchins, the Xaverians, and a Mexican congregation, the Fathers of Guadalupe.



Apart from the presence of the Marists there is also an international community of the De La Salle Brothers.

In the Diocese there are also five Congregations of religious women.

I had a long friendly and fruitful talk with Dom Adolfo about the Diocese and the challenges living in the region. He was very concerned with the way the narco-traffickers cynically used the poor and the vulnerable as drug mules, but with no money and very little opportunity the young people especially find it difficult to resist the temptation.

With the increase in trafficking the violence has also increased. The area is dominated by criminal factions based in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo who are constantly at war among themselves.

In the week I was in Tabatinga there were five killings. I heard the shots from two of the late at night and the other three were announced by a display of fireworks, the longer the duration the bigger the kill.

Dom Adolfo was also concerned with two other problems. There is a large military presence in the area because it is on the frontier and the Brazilian military are very keen that no remnants of the Columbian FARC guerilla movement set up base in the country.

When the military rotate out of the region there is inevitably a large number of pregnant women and solo mothers, many under-aged, left behind.

Brazilians study in Letícia, Columbia because it offers better academic opportunities and Columbians study in Tabatinga because it is more flexible and



... in the municipal rubbish dump.

The second challenge is the fluidity of the borders in this area. It means that there are a lot of unregistered Peruvians and Columbians who can be easily exploited living on unregistered plots of land on the outskirts of Tabatinga.

There is an urgent need to develop Basic Christian Communities so that they can organize themselves not only to pray together but to resolve questions of documentation, housing, etc. The border is so fluid that one changes from Portuguese to Spanish and back again a number of times a day and sometimes within the course of a single meeting!



... for the poorest of the poor.

they are able to learn Portuguese. As any missionary Bishop would, Dom Adolfo asked me if I wouldn't consider volunteering for a mission in a small town of Feijoal with 3,000 inhabitants made up of a mixture of "ribeirinhos" and Ticuna two hours down river.

They only get to see a priest just once a year and he feels that they really deserve a more permanent presence.

I spent a week in Tabatinga and also had the opportunity to visit briefly Umariçu, which is a small reservation town of 5,000 Tikuna on the other side of the local airport.

The predominant language there is Tikuna and the priest who serves it needs to use a translator in order to be understood while giving his homily. The Mass was in Portuguese.

I was surprised at how very few missionaries made the effort to



Umariçu

learn the indigenous languages, but with so many other pressing demands I guess it was understandable.

The pastoral work that the Marist International Community does with the poorest of the poor who work eking out an existence at the municipal rubbish dump was very impressive.

It is only at the initial stages but consists in offering one hot cooked meal a week in a church hall close-by. They use the opportunity for a little bit of evangelization and social assistance.

Most of them are Peruvians and Columbians in the country illegally. They consider it a good day if they can make US\$ 5 from recycling.

The team also makes sure that once a week they make a brief visit to the dump to see how they are coping with the conditions and checking up on their health. When I went there, we were received with a genuine warmth as if meeting old friends. Many of them had evidence of cuts due to encountering broken glass among the rubbish.

Our visit ended abruptly when a new load of rubbish arrived and there was a mad scramble to chase the truck and get the best pickings!

Another experience which I will remember for a long time was on a Sunday trekking through the bush on a muddy dirt track and over precarious wooden bridges among newly defined lots of land for 30 minutes to arrive a corrugated red iron chapel without walls which was the basis of a new community on the outskirts of Tabatinga.

Here there is no running water or electricity just people full of hope trying to scratch a subsistence existence out of a small patch of land.

The generosity and dedication of a group of lay volunteers from Tabatinga itself was truly inspiring. They are working tirelessly to build a vibrant Basic Christian Community among these recent migrants, the majority of whom have crossed the ill-defined border from Columbia.

My visit to the heart of the Amazon was very brief. The bishop thought I was going to stay at the Marist Education Centre for at least a couple of months.

Even so I believe I was able to get a feel for the life of the Church in this challenging region and it does present its challenges. Many religious who arrive to be present in this part of the world find the heat and the humidity unbearable.

Others find that the isolation and lack of a reliable Internet service is just too much for them. (When I arrived in Brazil 38 years ago the Internet was in its infancy and all my communication was via letters or a scratchy telephone connection!).

Some become overly concerned with the levels of violence, but as one priest told me that even the criminal factions have a great respect for religious and priests and as long as we entered communities accompanied by its lay leaders one does not need to fear anything.

There is so much work to do in this forgotten corner of the planet from reaching out and defending the rights and dignity of the local indigenous peoples to the building of a new way of being Church where local lay



leadership has to urgently come to the fore. The huge distances and the lack of resources makes this a top priority. All this without even beginning to mention the dire need to do everything we can to protect this vital eco-system which is so important to our continued co-existence (ours and the whole of creation) on this earth.

As the plane taking me back to Manaus lifted off one late afternoon from the runway at Tabatinga I couldn't help thinking of the words that Pope Francis wrote in his Post-Synodal Letter to the Amazon:

"I dream of an Amazon region that fights for the rights of the poor, the original peoples and the least of our brothers and sisters, where their voices can be heard and their dignity advanced."

"I dream of an Amazon region that can preserve its distinctive culture riches, where the beauty of our humanity shines forth in so many varied ways."

"I dream of an Amazon region that can jealously preserve its overwhelming natural beauty and the superabundant life teeming in its rivers and forests."

"I dream of Christian communities capable of generous commitment, incarnate in the Amazon region, and giving the Church new faces with Amazonian features?" □