

# ANOTHER VOICE

MATTHEW PARRIS

## Barefoot in the jungle, I did my bit for the Rest of the World

**N**oël Coward was right about mad dogs, Englishmen and the midday sun. How it was that I found myself playing in my first football match since leaving school four decades ago, at noon, in the Amazon, barefoot, against a team of Amazonian Indians in football boots, I struggle to explain. But I shall never again sneer at Michael Palin's televised adventures, supposing that it just doesn't happen that a Tibetan village turns out in force, and spontaneously, to play cricket with him, because something very similar has just happened to me.

We were staying at the Reserva Palmari, a wonderful find: a basic but comfortable palm-thatched lodge by the muddy Brazilian bank of the River Javari, about four hours upriver from the Amazon to which the Javari is a tributary. Here at Palmari the curious and the serious can stay as paying guests, using it as a base to explore river and forest and track the birds, reptiles and mammals of one of the most unspoiled parts of Amazonia.

River is the only way there. There are no roads, and of course no airstrip. To reach the Amazon, where a canoe will collect you, the Peruvian Air Force flies a twice-weekly hydroplane service from Iquitos to the great river's confluence with the Javari at Santa Rosa. The 300-mile flight costs \$60 and was the best fare I ever paid. But you can get to the same stretch of the Amazon upriver from Manaus or downriver from Iquitos, or take a commercial flight from Manaus to nearby Tabatinga, or from Bogotá to nearby Leticia. Three countries, Colombia, Brazil and Peru, meet here.

We had arrived at Palmari the night before. The plan was to spend our first morning just swinging around in hammocks and relaxing, but the thrill of the night sounds of the jungle, the call of the monkeys and the swish of the river that dawn had filled us with excitement. So how should we start our week there?

The lodge chief, Victor (himself from an indigenous tribe), suggested we might like to see the small community of Santa Rita further up the river. I wanted to buy a dugout canoe and Victor thought we might find one there. So led by Victor a strikingly multinational group of us — my Catalan nephew Adam, two British friends, Paul Twinn and Dominic Wong, Juan Diego our Colombian guide, a boatful of local Brazilian staff from Palmari and a Spaniard called José — piled

into a big canoe with an outboard motor and headed upriver for Santa Rita.

Santa Rita is on the eastern side of the river, in Peru. A big red-and-white Peruvian flag fluttered from a smart flagstaff raised above the bank. A large painted sign of an official nature announced that this village was the beneficiary of government plans 'to make life better'. The sign did not say how. In itself it represented the only discernible outlay of cash in the village attributable to a government. There was little else.

For Santa Rita was a negligible place. A small, sleepy community, baked in sun, soaked in lassitude and pickled in *yagé*, a bitter hallucinogenic drink made from leaves and seeds, the village consisted of a handful of huts on stilts (the Javari floods every year) above a high, steep and slippery river bank, a few fruit trees — and nothing else. No roads to anywhere; no roads at all. No amenities. Just a big, baked patch of earth and dead grass with wonky goal-posts at either end.

We took a stroll around. The sun was directly overhead. Everyone in Santa Rita seemed to be either crashed out, zonked out, stoned out, or under the age of five. Then from the darkened recess of one of the thatched huts a bare-chested youth emerged and challenged us to a football match, for the stake of 20 Brazilian *reals* — about \$10. 'Why not?' we thought. With us in the canoe had come some of our guides, including our best footballing hope, Manuêlo (who was inking crosses onto his arm because Victor had advised that this would cure a rash), plus Carlos and Cayo, two identical twin brothers, of indigenous extraction, who organise a 130ft rope-climb up into the treehouse above the jungle canopy. And our Dominic Wong said he had played football before.

The community of Santa Rita looked hardly capable of producing a decent football team. Victor accepted their challenge: an eight-a-side match on bare earth and dry grass, 20

minutes each way. Santa Rita vs the Rest of the World. Now we needed to pick our team.

Nearly 40 years ago, leaving school, I vowed never again to play football. I had no talent and even less interest in this appalling game. I'm scared of balls whizzing about. The only position I could play was called (then) 'right back', where I would try to stand between the goalkeeper and whichever member of the opposing team had the ball, and get in the way. So why did I agree to play Santa Rita? Pride, I suppose, and a disinclination to be a spoilsport.

Our team had no shoes. While we drank some fortifying shots of cane spirit mixed with lime juice, the Santa Rita team emerged from their huts. They were young, they were fit, they were muscular — and they were putting on proper football boots. We stared at them glumly. Victor began smashing ice for another round of crushed lime and cane spirit.

The sun was beating down as we took barefoot to the field. The game began. Santa Rita scored at once, then again, but our goalkeeper (our boatman) battled on. Among us tourists Wong emerged as a serious forward player. Twinn was credible. I was crap. The impossibly good-looking Manuêlo was our star striker. I raced around doing my best to avoid the ball while getting under the feet of the other team. Odd how all the habits of 40 years ago came back in seconds, along with that old, sad longing for the sound of the half-time whistle.

We scored. They scored twice. We scored again. Half-time. The heat was intense. The game ebbed and flowed, and we went down, panting, to a credible 6-3 defeat. We handed over the money and shook hands. I could feel my face scarlet as we retired for a little refreshment. I had sustained a minor groin injury and three substantial ant bites to my feet. I felt blissfully happy.

Chugging back down the river at dusk, as parrots chattered, huge bats flitted around us, pink river dolphins played and caymans watched semi-submerged from the banks, we killed the outboard motor and drifted, diving from the canoe into the warm river and splashing around like children. Can life be better than this?

And I did buy a dugout canoe. It's in Bogotá now. Lord knows how I shall get it back to Limehouse.



'Leave it, Goliath, he's not worth it!'

Matthew Parris is a political columnist of the Times.