

The Frog Poison Seeped into my blood. I would gain clairvoyant powers



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ALASTAIR CAMPBELL, writing on these pages about his holiday in France, sneers at columnists other than himself who describe their travels. And there I was, hoping to tell you about having the venom of a poisonous frog introduced into my bloodstream in an Amazonian ceremony which locally is called *El ritual de inyección de sapó*. Forgive me, Alastair, but I've started and so will continue.

I never met the frog or knew its name, but its type is *Phyllomedusa bicolor*, or giant waxy monkey tree frog; the Amazonian Indians call it *acururú*; and later I looked it up:

"Known for skin secretions loaded with biologically active peptides... tribes employ *Phyllomedusa bicolor* secretions applied to self-inflicted skin burns to produce an agonising attack of diarrhoea, vomiting, tachycardia and systemic collapse, that is followed by a state of hyper-acuity of the senses attended by abundant energy and stamina without need for food or drink. Among other components, it contains dermorphin and deltorphin, peptides with analgesic properties 2,000 times more potent than morphine at the cerebral level."

So there you have it. I knew nothing of this when, near the point in the rainforest where the borders of Colombia, Brazil and Peru all meet, we were at supper one night at the Reserva Natural Palmari, four hours by motorised canoe up the River Javari. The Javari is a tributary of the Amazon, and Palmari a riverside lodge on wooden stilts, offering accommodation, transport and guides both to scientists and naturalists, and to curious travellers like my friends and me. Seated outside the big thatched huts in the soft glow of paraffin lamps, and serenaded by the night-sounds of the jungle, we were devouring a river fish cooked by the formidable Maria, a big, brown Brazilian lady, and drinking a concoction of limes and cane spirit; and the lodge chief, Victor (himself from an indigenous tribe) was describing the frog-poison ceremony.

"We go an hour down the river, not far from Atalaya do Norte," said Victor. "They burn two little patches in your arm, just to get through the outer skin, then with a knife they scrape off the burnt skin to make patches of raw flesh. Then they put on the poison to penetrate. This may make you dizzy or sick. But it is believed to give powers of clairvoyance, and knowledge of the intentions of others, and to understand things better, sometimes in

dreams. When you begin to faint we can wash it off."

Victor put this idea to us fairly tentatively; he did not urge us to do it and he made the ill-effects very clear. He was organising for us a trip to see how the indigenous peoples live, and the frog poison was only one of many options. It was we — one of my fellow-travellers, Paul, a Spaniard called José, and I — who jumped at it. I volunteered, naturally, out of a sense of duty to you, reader: you want your columnists as clairvoyant as possible. So, early next morning, off all we set with Victor in a canoe — frog-poison volunteers and abstainers alike.

Atalaya was dusty and intensely hot. All Amazonian towns consist of a crumbling and filthy riverbank and tumbledown jetties, a grid of streets with broken pavements, a big diesel generator, endless bars and a citizenry riding in purposeless circuits on scooters for fun — all the roads out leading finally nowhere. In the back of the open truck that Victor had organised to take us a few miles down a dirt road to the communities of the Marubo tribe, a sudden thunderstorm cooled us. "The Marubo are friendly," Victor said as we stretched our arms gratefully out in the rain. "They must not be confused with the adjacent Korubo, who are cannibals."

Our Marubo hosts were indeed friendly. The headman, or *cacique*, of this small settlement (his Christian name was Esteban) was not expected

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back for a couple of hours so we sat in his family *maloka* — a vast, round, palm-thatched, mud hut whose smoke-blackened rafters soared as high above us as a two-storey house.

Surrounded by the jawbones of jungle boars and by Esteban's three wives and myriad children, we tried *rapé*. This is a powdery mix of tobacco and the ashes of coconut leaves, scooped into a yard-long blowpipe, an end of which is inserted into one of your nostrils. A friend then puffs violently into the other end, and you get an eye-watering noseful of the stuff, followed by an adrenalin-rush. Then you drink from a big nutshell of *yagé*. You can take this (an extremely bitter extract from the *ayahuasca* plant) with or without a hallucinogenic supplement made from the flowers and nuts of a special kind of cacao tree. We passed up on the hallucinogens: ours was *yagé-lite*.

Esteban returned. He was in shorts and a Toshiba T-shirt, carrying a plastic bag. We had hoped for loincloth and feathers. But he had a kind and fatherly face, and I trusted him.

We all went outside. Paul, José and I rolled up our sleeves nervously. The two ends of a double-barrelled wicker

taper called a *cipochichica* were placed in hot coals until they glowed like lighted cigarette-ends.

First. Each of our left arms received a double-branding at the top, where you get your smallpox jab. It didn't hurt much. An old Marubo man joined us for his own fix. Then from out of the *maloka* came a bearer with a big dollop of something that looked like spit, in the shell of a nut. Esteban peeled the burned skin from each of our double-brandings and the poison was smeared generously into the raw little depressions this left.

I felt fine. Esteban advised us to walk 30 yards down to a stream and sit on the trunk of a fallen tree. The old Marubo man just lay on his back on stones on the other side of the stream. We sat on the trunk. "You've gone pale," I said to Paul.

"So have you."

"Now you've gone scarlet."

"So have you."

"I think I'm passing out," said Paul. Then, with a pitiful "Where am I?" he slumped unconscious on to the tree-trunk.

To the other side of me José was being violently sick. I felt the giddiness which comes before you faint.

"Wash it off," I croaked, but Victor was already bringing water from the stream, and washed all our arms.

"Where am I?" whispered Paul again, as he came round. I had not quite fainted and sat now, dazed, between him and José on the ground by the tree trunk. When we left, the old man remained lying still on his back by the stream.

Our flushes faded. Within half an hour we felt nothing beyond a slight unsteadiness. So much for systemic failure. For safety's sake we postponed until the morrow the climb into the forest canopy, which we had planned for later in the day. Instead we swam in the river, where pink river-dolphins play, and that evening went looking for (and found) caymans. By the time I climbed into my mosquito-netted bunk that night I had forgotten about the frog poison.

Then I had the strangest dream. It seemed to last all night. I was helping a rather frail Baroness Thatcher along the seafront at Brighton. We passed a flat where Michael Portillo was said to live but did not invite him along as we feared he might steal the show. Others joined us and soon we were a throng. Lady Thatcher encountered difficulty with a sandy incline and I got down on my hands and knees and scooped little steps in the sand for her. She did not thank me. Then her late husband Denis turned up and did not acknowledge me, but everybody climbed into his car, his wife (wordless throughout) in the front. I got into the boot. And off we went. I don't know where. Then I awoke.

What could this mean? Where does it point? Was it the work of the *Phyllomedusa bicolor* toxin? I have christened the poisonous frog "Alastair".