

You know you are on an adventure when there's good reason to worry about poison darts flying out of the jungle. Join Roy and John Wellburn as father and son bond on their journey into the Amazon basin.

Two-Up Across The Amazon

Story/photos by John Wellburn

I whisked Dad off his feet at the Buenos Aires international airport. After a seven-hour layover in Dallas, followed by a nine-hour flight to Argentina, he was functioning on little to no sleep but was definitely happy to have arrived safely. He'd taken me by surprise when he just up and left home in Williams Lake, BC and flew to meet me here. I guess the emails I've sent him over these last couple years of globe-hopping—the ones that spoke of heartwarming moments I've shared with people I'd met on the road and the adventures I've had—finally got to him. It had long been my dream to spend time with my father, away from our life in Canada where we seldom saw each other anymore, and now it was finally coming true.

We claimed his luggage, then haphazardly loaded my 29-year-old BMW and went rushing into sixteen lanes of Buenos Aires traffic. This was the beginning of a journey that would take us out of the congestion of one of the world's greatest cities and into the jungles of northern Brazil's Amazon River basin. Darting through miles of jammed traffic, splitting lanes, and taking full advantage of the fact that very few rules here apply to motorcycles would be Roy Wellburn's introduction to my life of making do in a strange land.

Though he's not a traveler at heart, at 75, my father is in excellent shape, strong as an ox and energetic as a teenager. I had no doubt that he would be able to keep up with me wherever we went, and I was so excited to show him the culture of the Latin people, their way of life and their passion for song, dance and the simpler things in life.

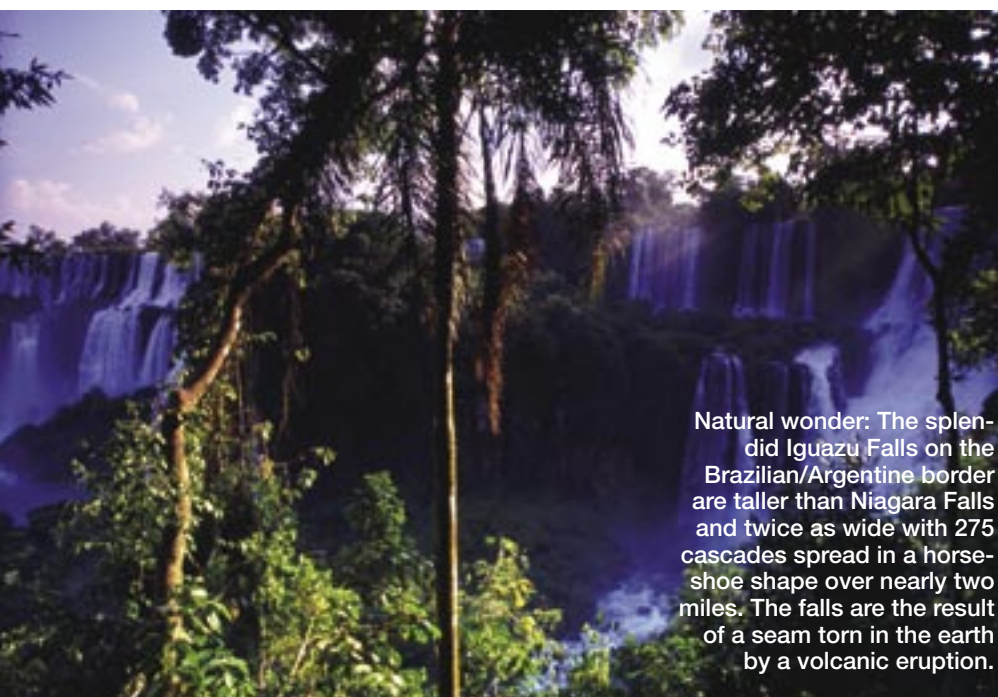
AFTER A FEW MELLOW DAYS STROLLING THE STREETS OF Buenos Aires combing through the antique shops—always a favourite of Dad's—watching tango dancers and

In the blood: Iron oxide leaching through clay turns a bad Brazilian road blood red. Treacherously slick and made worse by potholes, the unpredictability of the road ahead might have torn apart lesser beings. But, for the hardy Wellburns, the unfolding journey into the heart of the Amazon basin revealed one very clear truth—their respect for one other grew in proportion to the challenges of the day. Left, at centre, the Wellburn boys take a coconut break, far from the frenzy of Buenos Aires, bottom left, where Wellburn Sr. was first introduced to his son's wandering life. Top left, signage marking the equatorial line running through Brazil.

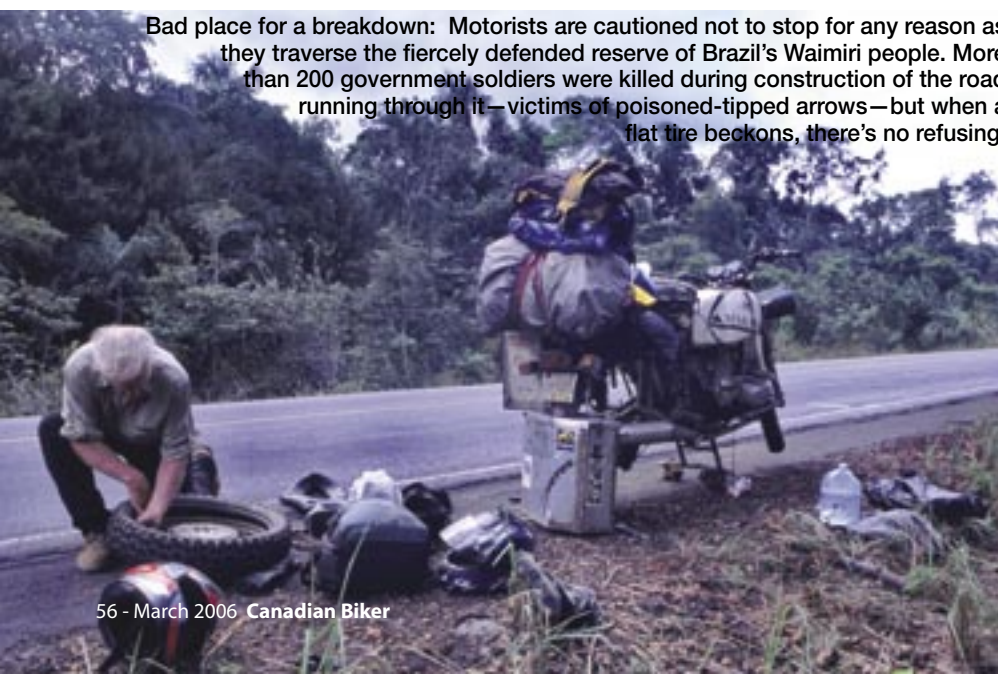




Going his own way: A lone traveler takes to the road on an ancient and heavily-loaded Yamaha single.



Natural wonder: The splendid Iguazú Falls on the Brazilian/Argentine border are taller than Niagara Falls and twice as wide with 275 cascades spread in a horse-shoe shape over nearly two miles. The falls are the result of a seam torn in the earth by a volcanic eruption.



Bad place for a breakdown: Motorists are cautioned not to stop for any reason as they traverse the fiercely defended reserve of Brazil's Waimiri people. More than 200 government soldiers were killed during construction of the road running through it—victims of poisoned-tipped arrows—but when a flat tire beckons, there's no refusing.

sipping many, many cafe con leches in streetside cafes, it was time to get my bike into road trim for the next leg of the journey. We jammed the saddlebags, lashed the tent and camera tripod to the front fender; strapped two backpacks together on the back and created an “armchair” of gear for Dad and we were off! Though Brazil, Argentina’s neighbouring giant, was our general direction, we were unsure of the specifics.

I had a few destinations in mind, but I knew that once you’re on the road anything could happen. Dad was just along for the ride and game for just about anything, but we’d have to see how he would fare sitting on the back of the old Beemer’s hard seat.

We already had our visas for Brazil, so our first goal was to get a map—Dad didn’t really even know how long he wanted to be traveling so I figured we better make some sort of plan. I got some Brazilian cash and found a bad map that was just good enough to give us some very basic information. It would have to do, I thought. Then I spotted a travel shop on the main drag in Foz Do Iguazu, the first town across the Brazilian border, and I thought that I might get something better there. The travel agent, Viviana Pacheco, was enthusiastic and immediately began speaking bike jargon—in perfect English no less. Her husband Jorge is a fellow motorcycle enthusiast, she explained. When I told her that my father and I were about to ride into Brazil with nothing resembling an itinerary, she called Jorge straightaway. He was excited about helping us form a “perfect travel plan” and insisted that we stay the day and come for dinner that evening so we could pore over the maps and plot a route. That evening they called their friend Alexandro who had traveled all around South America by motorcycle. He must have known every still-drivable road in Brazil and together we plotted a route that would cross Brazil in the west and pick up BR116, a road that would take us to the town of Puerto Velho on the Madeira River. On this great tributary of the Amazon River



near the Bolivian border, we would get on a boat (with the bike) and drift along to the Amazon and eventually arrive at the city of Manaus, in the very heart of the Amazon basin. From Manaus we would ride north on BR 174 to Caracas, Venezuela. It would be on this section of Brazilian road that we were to pass over some very troubled ground indeed.

Alexandro drew his pen through a network of roads that would wind into the west of Brazil. If everything went right we could do the entire 3,600-km crossing from Foz Do Iguazu to Puerto Velho on pavement, and that would be perfect for the extreme amount of weight I was now packing.

I went over the plan with Dad the next morning and a glow came over his face. Here was a mission, the sort of “great adventure” he’d always dreamed of. It was more than he expected, I think. Truthfully, neither he nor I really ever thought we’d one day be heading across the Amazon jungle together.

It was definitely something that would take some getting comfortable with. When you’re on the road you just never know where you are going to sleep at night. And if there are no hotel or camping options, things can

get a little hectic. I knew we would find ourselves in situations where I would have to convince Dad that things would be safe and not to worry.

OUR TIMING WAS PERFECT; WE RODE INTO PUERTO VELHO NINE days later and began searching the waterfront for a boat that would take us upriver to Manaus. Eventually we found passage on Moreira VII, a cargo hauler that was already in riotous stages of loading: sacks of potatoes, boxes of tomatoes, engine blocks and, eventually, one motorbike. We strolled the deck that would be our home for the next four days and discovered it was lined with hooks built to accommodate hammocks. There was already a fair crowd of people when we first came on board, but it looked like we would have a bit of space to ourselves and we figured it would be a good adventure, drifting along in hammocks.

We left the boat for a couple of hours while we waited for it to be loaded; they wanted me to come back with my bike when the deck was lower. At the time the deck was a good six feet above the dock and I was sure we would be in for an epic when it came time to ride it on ... or we would be hand-bombing it aboard using pure manpower. By

the time we had navigated the crazy streets to bargain on a few hammocks and returned to the boat, it had been so loaded down that the deck was now less than a foot out of the water.

We wandered up to hang our hammocks and found easily twice as many people on deck as before, and it was still early. Dad mentioned he’d seen some cabins at the front of the boat—they were 40 bucks extra. Though the thought of drifting in a hammock watching it all go by sounded appealing, I finally decided I wanted lockable space for my camera gear, so I wouldn’t have to be continually on guard against theft. Besides, in the back of my mind I knew there was no way I could sleep in a bloody hammock for long. We got the cabin, dumped our gear in, locked the door and went to find some cold beer.

By four o’clock we were back at the boat where we saw that at least fifty more passengers had bought passage. Our previous spot on the deck had been paved over by people. It was a Gong Show and we were so glad to have our little refuge from the mayhem. People were jammed in like sardines; there would have been no way we would have got a wink of sleep.

Soon though, we were off with the glowing sunset, drifting down the Amazon in peace and quiet. Well, not quite. Incredibly huge speakers placed on the top deck were blaring out Samba, the classic Brazilian boxed music. Like every Latin American country, the people of Brazil love Samba, and they love it LOUD! I have grown accustomed to this, but for Dad the full-tilt music was a bit of a shocker.

The river was in flood and just loaded with debris. Luckily we were in the hands of a skillful pilot who wove around logs, branches and assorted flotsam as crew members illuminated the inky night by swinging lights back and forth across the water. The weather was mild and the river beautiful: we saw dolphins and creatures we couldn’t identify, and were fed like kings. It was smooth sailing all the way and we pulled into Manaus ahead of schedule.

FROM THE TIME WE GOT OUR DIRECTIONS FOR THE AMAZON CROSSING from Alexandro, one thing was really unknown and it was now weighing

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on both our minds a little bit. About an hour outside of Manaus, lay Terra Indigena Waimiri Atroari, a reserve set aside for the indigenous Waimiri people. According to Alexandro's information travelers had to organize a caravan from the city of Manaus to cross the reserve as we traveled north on BR 174 into Venezuela. It was absolutely forbidden to stop at any point on this 200-km section and the road was open to the public only from dawn until dusk. At all other times the access was chained. By the time we left to sprint through this section we learned that no caravan was needed but it was still forbidden to stop. We headed out early, leaving ourselves plenty of time to get through the reserve.

For the past three weeks my bike had run without so much as a stutter. But, five minutes out of Manaus, I rolled through a military checkpoint and bang; the bike let out one last pop then came to a complete stop. I instantly knew the trouble was the ignition but, to be honest, I was quite surprised the points had lasted this long. This was the first roadside repair that Dad and I had to make in more than 6,000 kilometres. We crouched down on the pavement and got out the tools as trucks roared by inches away. As though it were a routine drill, we worked together stripping the bike to get at the ignition. It felt like old times when we had worked together on some old vehicle around the yard. But now I knew my bike so well that I was in charge of fixing the problem while Dad played the role of the helper looking for a job—I'd been in that position so many times in the past.

Within an hour we had the problem fixed and were back on the road with still lots of time to spare. We arrived at the entrance to the reserve at about two o'clock and though there were still 150 kms between us and the other side of the gate, we had more than four hours to get there. We gassed up and headed off.

Every five kms or so there were signs strictly forbidding stopping at anytime, photography, littering, etc. We were about 25 kms into the reserve, cruising along at a nice pace

when I felt a wobble ... something just didn't feel right. I pulled to the side of the shoulderless road to have a look. Many times I'd bragged to other riders we met on the road that in over 60,000 kms I had never had a flat tire. What were the odds that now, at the only point on my whole trip where stopping was actually forbidden, I would have my first flat tire? The most confusing thing was why the heck did the tire blow? I was on good pavement and had hit nothing.

I HAD LEARNED A FEW FACTS ABOUT THE WAIMIRI RESERVE that made me understandably nervous. The land had been set aside for the Waimiri in 1974 following a bitter conflict. They had fiercely defended the land against construction of the road we were now on—more than 200 government soldiers were killed by poison arrows, but casualties on the Waimiri side were much higher. From a population of 1,500 in 1974, the Waimiri's numbers were reduced to a mere 374 in 1986, when they finally agreed to negotiate with the government about construction of the road. The final agreement does not allow drivers to get out of their vehicles, and the road through the reserve is closed between six at night and six in the morning.

What I hadn't really understood was why it was so important that you didn't stop at anytime. I knew it had to be for one of two reasons or maybe


both. Either the government didn't want you to stop out of respect for the natives' privacy or it feared for the safety of travelers. But there we were anyway, speculating about the range of a poison-tipped blow dart.

With a bit of work and pools of sweat, the tire was off and I found a pinprick in the tube—what should have been an easy fix. It wasn't to be.

I battled, waged outright war, with three different patch kits and was sweating over the tube so profusely that I couldn't keep a dry surface nor get anything to stick to that bloody hole.

Finally, I got a patch to stick, but then my pump wouldn't work. The hours went by and things had become a little intense. People in cars were flying by fast and giving us a huge berth as they went. I think that people may have thought we were a distraction for a heist; they sped up when they saw us.

After two or three hours we had finally managed to blow enough air out of the pump to get back on the road. Now we had to hustle to get out of that reserve before the chain went up at the other end and we were locked in for the night. But every time a bug smacked into my neck, my hand would fly up to the spot to check for the imbedded blowdart. You couldn't help but wonder.

Despite all that though, we were sipping cold Brazilian *cerveja* as  the sun went down.

