

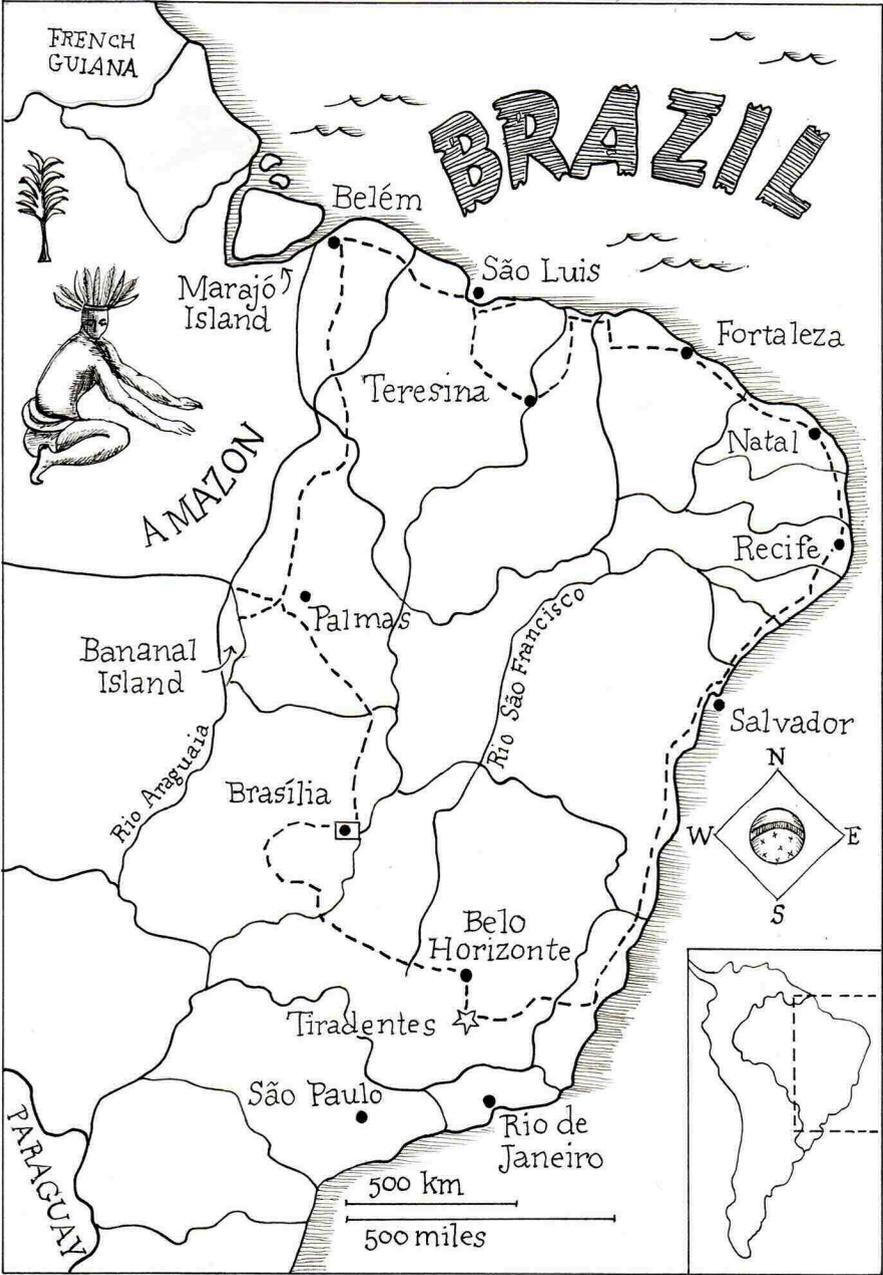
TO BELÉM & BACK

*Backroads Brazil
with my Black Lab*

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She complimented me
in a language I didn't know;
but when she blew cigar smoke
into my ears and nostrils
I understood, like a dog,
although I can't speak it yet.
They showed me room after room
and took me from here to Belém
and back again in a minute.

– Elizabeth Bishop, “Riverman,” from
Questions of Travel

“– in these parts all men travel with fierce dogs.”

– Richard F. Burton, *Explorations of the
Highlands of the Brazil, Vol. II*

TRAVEL IS OFTEN AN EXCUSE to accomplish something else. Call them exterior motives, but journeys are rich in metaphorical potential, driving the change catalysts, the line trajectories of one's path. Is your life stuck in a rut? Does your motor need a kick-start? Although the clichés are dated, recalling dirt carriage tracks and motorbikes, the parallels between life and travel are omnipresent, bordering on universal. So the allure continues, the desire and need to get out of one's self, one's routine, one's humdrum responsibilities, to chuck it all to the four winds and find a new potential at the crossroads within.

If Brazil is, famously, the country always of the future, what better place to discover your own glorious potentialities? A nation of endless summers, cheerful, attractive, and half-naked people – what more could you want? True, these are the perky postcards of a hard-won reputation for shimmering beachscapes, simmering Carnival, fruit-hatted Carmen Miranda, and a burning Amazon. Yet postcards are just that, subversive missives to the homeland of our banality, *I Wish You Were Beautiful As It Is Here*, now that I have been freed for a vacating while. To top it off, an old colonial saying from Brazil claims “beneath the Equator there is no sin.”¹ Imagine that! A New World that is not puritanical, the un-Cola of the Americas, where sex-ed is unnecessary because it is redundant.

You may fault me with an over-zealous imagination, but then I am a prime candidate, a willing villain of circumstance, in the long parade of life's pratfalls. I had recently divorced and left an expatriate career of habit-forming perks: the corporate car, the company apartment, the trips home, the business boondoggles, and – for a brief but intensely

pleasurable spell – a country club membership. I was even offered a *severance package*, or hush money after being de-limbed, which allowed me to contemplate a state of blissful unproductivity, at least for a pregnant while.

So if I was going to have an early mid-life crisis, why not, after a fashion, do it in style? I have traveled haphazardly before, hitchhiking from one country to the next, seeking the alpine highs of cultural rushes; so perhaps a roadtrip – a prolonged and even hazardous roadtrip – in one stupendously large country, a cultural, historical, and even geographical excavation rather than a peek-to-peek balloon ride, was not such a bad idea. Brazil is the size of Europe, after all, with far fewer foreign tourists – away from the coasts, almost none – and is therefore ripe for intrepid or just curious explorers, as it has been, languidly and patiently, for over five centuries.

But are there any roads?

I should confess up front that my ex-wife is Brazilian. And that I had already been living off and on in the country for seven years when the road urge overcame me. So I admit, I was and am a lot less brave than it sounds. Back when flying to Brazil for the first time, on a three month internship, I had in fact felt terrified, but that had more to do with the viral hepatitis picked up while slumming around India than any specific Brazilian reason for travel tremors. The multinational had given me two weeks notice and refused to pay for Portuguese classes, so after some language tapes I found myself on an overnight flight returning to the chaotic uncertainty so certain in the Third World. The plum overseas internship had been in London, complete with a plush company flat, so Rio de Janeiro didn't appear, at first blush, like much of a consolation prize. My body, not long recovered from several jaundiced months in bed, was in physical rebellion from the expected relapse and would have thrown itself out the night-filled porthole if given a chance. I don't recall sleeping at all. Then, as if to confirm my airborne fears, the local affiliate didn't meet me at the airport; the random taxi driver unkindly dropped me off with three months of

luggage on the wrong side of a six-lane busy downtown thoroughfare; the cosmopolitan manager refused to speak in English even when welcoming me; and my first night was in a dark, stifling hotel room whose only window opened onto the kitchen air shaft. It could only get better from there – which it did.

One internship led to another and, then, after business school, to a long-term relocation to São Paulo, Latin America's juggernaut of business capital. Within a week I had met my wife-to-be, so while I came to Brazil to work I ended up getting married – the fate of untold foreigners since the days of Portuguese colonizers. She had one of the most beguiling smiles I've seen, one that could conquer, as did the *Bandeirantes*, much of a continent.

The work was good enough, while it lasted – including a stint in Costa Rica where, within the company at least, I was called *El Presidente* – but not sufficient. When a huge European corporation acquired our large American one, the Latin American president (from Argentina) told my Mexican boss that I would have to leave Costa Rica immediately – or else. Undeterred, the *else* still showed up two years later back in the same Brazil where my career had taken off, in the wake of the slow, corporeal torture called an *integration process*.

Regrettably, the integration of my marriage turned to disintegration as well. It was a multicultural marriage, fusing joys and challenges, but in the end only the challenges remained: different languages, differing cultures, confounding genders, confusing expectations. My wife refused to move to New York with me and, even then, was far from happy in quaintly provincial San José. The move from Costa Rica back to São Paulo, to familiar turf, was a relief in some ways, but at the same time the terms of our marriage contract were becoming clear: in the balance between America and Brazil, the former was in the past, the latter the future. My wife, apparently, could not be happy with me outside of Brazil, but was I ready to forsake my background, my history, my culture – even my English – to go native?

When I left São Paulo, our marriage, and the corporate cocoon of life support in an unfamiliar land, I moved to a small mountain retreat

in the interior of Minas Gerais, a land-locked state the size of France. Out the window, then, went the all-in health and life insurance policies, the big-city comforts enjoyed with big-city friends, the imported products, the international foods, the bookstores, the newspapers, the cable television, the broadband internet and, missed most of all, the searingly beautiful day trips to the breathtaking beaches of the Brazilian Atlantic. It was like going cold turkey by taking a vow of Franciscan asceticism, some self-abnegation in the hope of starting a new, long-shot career, my third or fourth.

Brazil is not an obvious choice for a relaxing roadtrip. I see the difficulties that newly arrived foreigners, and many Brazilians, encounter all the time. Except in the tourist trap of Rio, road signs are only in Portuguese and place names often an indecipherable string of syllables in Tupi-Guarani, which complicates getting directions when you can't pronounce the destination. Worse, when road signs do exist – which is far from a given – they rarely confirm the highway or route number and instead simply list the next town or two ahead. Even with a good map, which itself is a challenge to find, driving is strictly a potluck affair, served up freshly each day with frequent stops, while getting lost, along the way.

Most Brazilians consider their national highways to be dangerous in the extreme. There are many solid reasons for such an opinion, which include: the deplorable state of the roads themselves, with frequent and unflagged potholes; a general lack of signage, reflectors, lane markings, or rail guards (which makes driving at night or in the rain nearly suicidal); and a mind-boggling proliferation of commercial trucks that clogs, pollutes, and tears up main roads with glee. Given the high rate of lethal accidents, many people drive only as a last resort. How else can you explain why so many travelers choose crowded and cramped all-night buses instead?*

* The high price of gasoline, for one.

Not that such a delightfully scandalous reputation dissuades everyone. I, for one, have always enjoyed the laissez-faire freedom of a car trip, and over the years have gotten used to the local hiccups. To be fair, things are gradually improving. Many years ago, during visits to a factory hours outside of São Paulo, I was puzzled to find the federal highway linking Brazil's first and third largest cities reduced to a lone, solitary lane for dozens of kilometers. While the Road Poobahs had gotten around to resurfacing the outgoing lane, the incoming one – somehow forgotten – was so impressively full of potholes no one used it. This created non-negligible problems when opposing traffic, including trucks and buses on blind curves, played chicken with your car, daring you to stay on the strip of blacktop that you had naively thought was yours. Such a valuable introduction to King-of-the-road, Brazilian-style, lasted for over a year until it was suddenly and superficially smoothed over, at least until the next rainy season.

So there I was, concerned about going native, but rather than returning to the U.S., like a normal re-pat, I moved six hours further inland. I had abandoned the busy Brazilian coast, yet instead of retrenching to the more familiar, predictable, and colossal Nook of the North was pressing into the largely backward, vast, and – to most outsiders – unexplored interior. Something about São Paulo – among my favorite cities anywhere – had gone sour. Despite being the one place in Brazil where things tend to work, the city had lost its manic allure and gritty romance for me. Not only is São Paulo much more expensive (of import to an out-of-work alien), it also prides itself on being different from, and better than, the rest of the country. Perhaps it was time to get closer to the more quietly yearning Brazil, the large and slowly changing country beyond the bustle of São Paulo and hustle of Rio, before giving up on the nation altogether. Maybe I could rediscover the desultory charm that had attracted me to Brazil in the first place, to relive some of the snake oil magic before a more permanent separation.

Unfolding a large map on the dining table of my small country

house, I started to look for what could qualify, from my obscure base of operations, as the longest possible round-trip within Brazil. I calculated that driving down to Brazil's more European South would be short on distance – and drama as well. West was possible, but the roads just dotted or faded out among the headwaters of the Amazon. Which left north, reaching up to the mouth of the Amazon at the Equator before curving back south along the sun-stunned paradise of Brazil's never-ending Atlantic coast.

Perhaps such a long, circuitous roadtrip could teach me a thing or two about a country that, despite my seven year itch, still remained an enigma to me. How, you have to wonder, can such a fine people be so poorly governed? How can a country so rich in history and resources feel, at the same time, so backwards? Could an exploration of the nation's vast and less developed interior, teetering between past and future, give insight into the bewildered present? Most pressing, for an unmoored me, was the nagging doubt whether I belonged here any longer – that is, if I ever had.

You can learn many things from maps, so when I noticed that northwestern Brazil – whose entire Amazon region is larger than the Indian subcontinent – is all river systems with next to no roads, it got me wondering. Attempts have been made to beat back the wild, including the Trans-Amazonia roadway built by several military governments in the 1970's, but even that has reverted to jungle and is largely impassable. It just stumped me that the most westerly road you can take to Brazil's northernmost city of Belém, on BR-153 or the Belém-Brasília, runs up the middle of the country's bulbous head, bisecting it. Which is akin to discovering that the most westerly road to St. Paul, nearly midway across the United States, only reaches there east of the Mississippi.

I had also heard some enticing things about Belém, a decaying colonial city at the mouth of the monstrous Amazon River, the capital of Pará, and one of Brazil's oldest ports. I like places that time has passed by, for no better reason than I identify with them. All of which suggested I would particularly like Belém, for time has passed it by

repeatedly – much as it has the country.

Why?

There is a *pardo*, or mixed-blood, friend of mine in town, originally from Rio de Janeiro, who runs our village's only bar with any charm – which is to say, that isn't fluorescent-bleached or cluttered with folding metal chairs. As Pedroca has driven twice down to South America's other extremity at Chile's Tierra del Fuego, once by motorcycle, he is invariably encouraging about what far-flung travel does for the soul. So one evening I brought by a good, large map (made in Portugal) to discuss routes and seek his advice, only to find him entertaining a distant cousin and her husband, a voluminously unpleasant consultant for the national petroleum company, Petrobras, who works in Mato Grosso just south of the Amazon. Not one to beat around the bush, cousin-in-law Marcos had this to say about my proposed itinerary:

“You're traveling alone?”

“Yes.”

“Along the Belém-Brasília highway?”

“I'm thinking about it. Why?”

“Let's see: you're fair skinned, blondish, obviously a gringo; your Portuguese is OK but that foreign accent is unmistakable. And you plan to drive alone? On a highway famous for its assaults? I have only one word for it: suicidal.”

Nothing Pedroca or I said could dissuade Marcos from his assessment, which he repeated several times for emphasis, evidently enjoying the slide of tongue, the quickening sluice of syllables punctuated with a bass finality: “Suicidal. Just *su-i-ci-dal*.”

In his teens Pedroca had hitched around much of the country, but Marcos reminded him that Brazil has changed greatly since then, that thieves now kill not only for a watch but for the pleasure of it. And in places as remote as I planned to visit, that I would stick out like a sore thumb – or, more colorfully, like an armful of watches.

Marcos's dire warnings had the opposite of their intended effect, as a strangely familiar joy came over me, that began as a faint stirring in

my legs and turned into a tremulous smile across my face. For some time I had been rummaging around for a crazy scheme to rattle me out of my lethargy – a debilitating sort of lethargy, born of a divorce and a career’s end, that seemed to dog me no matter how long or hard I tried to shake it – and might have now, finally, stumbled upon one worthy of the name. How good, at last, to have a plan! The northern route it would be, then, along the profoundly uncertain and wondrously unpredictable Belém-Brasília, for the road chosen should be every bit as interesting as the destination, if not more so.

Around this time I approached my ex-wife and asked if I could take our Labrador Retriever along for the ride. “You’re crazy!” was her immediate reply, and I knew better than to press further. So I let her think about it for a while, to be precise for a month, before broaching the subject again. The second time she relented, adding, “I’ll let you take Atlas for one reason only: your safety.”

As Atlas’s Mom lives in São Paulo and has custody, she offered to help me find trip supplies for our black Lab that can only be found in the great, central distribution souk of Brazil – her home town. So we went to a pet superstore (“Your Animal’s Shopping Mall”) that would put many a *homo sapiens* supermarket to shame. It is huge and pleasant and well-lit and has dozens of high quality shopping carts that glide effortlessly up to one of fourteen check-outs. In fact, it’s much nicer than any of my local food markets in the interior. Atlas had recently torn his bed to shreds (what would a dog Freudian say about that?), so I bought a new one from the “Boutique” section. Then there were the two fifteen kilo bags of special dog food just for Labs, with this and that essential mineral, which his veterinarian had recommended as added protection against all the nasties a vet-vacuumed dog can pick up in Brazil’s backlands, as well as the new dog tags on which I planned to etch both my cell phone number and Mom’s home phone, in case I died in an accident and Atlas survived. Not to mention the citronella bug spray found in the “Pharmacy” – yes, dogs can get malaria too – and four small rubberized booties to protect his pads

from tropically scorching metal or sand, as well as from the invasive boring insect *bicho de pé* that burrows into paws on rustic farms. I also wanted to buy a cover for my station wagon's back seat, which came in two colors, black or light gray – causing a nostalgic flare-up down marriage row. I preferred black, she chose gray; fortunately Atlas didn't come shopping that day and had no say in the matter. After eyeing the “Bath & Brush” emporium through the picture windows, he would have mouthed most accessible temptations (Toys: Aisle 10) below knee level. Although nearly five years old according to his Costa Rican birth certificate, Atlas was a young five at that.

Purebred dogs, I've come to realize, are largely a phenomenon of the First World. Outside cities such as São Paulo and Rio or along the tourist-trampled coasts, they are practically unheard of in Brazil. Many developing nations show a lasting preference for hardscrabble mutts, the scrawny short-haired roof-top dogs tasked with security, who look the way most dogs did before anyone had the bright idea of selectively breeding them. Closer to their canine roots, Third World mutts are well adapted to survive deprivation, disease and, worse, two-legged contempt, to live incredibly long dog-lives against all odds. Pedigrees, on the other hand, are so little known in Brazil's interior swathes that I had to respond a half dozen times a day to children yelling, “Pitchy bull! Pitchy bull!” or less frequently, “Rottweiler!” – which must make the local news when one mauls someone a world away. In other words, Atlas was as strange and puzzling a sight as I was, which made us quite a pair.

When I loaded up the station wagon with his bare necessities and Atlas leapt onto the gray-covered back seat for the drive back to my mountain retreat, little did he know how many tasks I would give him in the months ahead, as we waved goodbye to Mom and pulled out of São Paulo for the six hour drive north, still within the mostly civilized patch of Brazil.

There are two major concerns about the Belém-Brasília highway, and the first, the abysmal condition of the road, is linked to the second,