

Overlanders in AMAZONIA

TOYOTA TRAIL - USA

by Marc Thiebaut



After my partner, Gwendolyn Prakash, and I had driven our Toyota Land Cruiser through Africa, Mongolia and Central Asia, we decided to drive the South American and North American continents, from Ushuaia, at the southernmost tip of Argentina, to the wild frontier of Alaska. There was little doubt that a grand adventure was in our future....

We prepared our Toyota HZJ78 with the assistance of Techno Raid in France, Outback Import and Euro 4x4 Parts. These three companies were our main partners for our American adventure and were clearly vital to any success we might enjoy. We also fixed an Eberspächer diesel generated heater that would be very useful for the Bolivian altiplano and when we would have to stand the strong and cold winds of Patagonia.

In order to reach the New World with our 4WD, we choose a Ro-Ro (Roll on-Roll Off), which provides the possibility to cross the Atlantic on a freighter boat. With the company Grimaldi, the only one accepting passengers

ABOVE: The HZJ78 Land Cruiser had no trouble with relatively easy tracks such as this one.

Photo by Gwendolyn Prakash



Intrepid overlanders Gwendolyn Prakash and Marc Thiebaut pose for their Brazilian Ministry of Tourism photo. Photo courtesy of Gwendolyn Prakash



The Repubblica Argentina awaits our departure from Le Havre, France, destination: Buenos Aires, Argentina. Photo by Gwendolyn Prakash



Marc Thiebaut chronicles his experiences while at Colonia del Sacramento in Uruguay.

Photo by Gwendolyn Prakash

on its freighters, we can link Le Havre, France to Buenos Aires in 23-30 days. These huge boats have 6 cabins housing 12 passengers—they were required to have a doctor on board. We shared the crew's lives, taking our meals at the officers' mess.

Our ship, the "Repubblica Argentina" was quite late on her previous rotation, so she skipped several stops, which would allow us to arrive at our destination in just 23 days! But we had a rewarding experience, discovering the world of an ocean freighter.

It was winter (July) when we arrived in Argentina; it was out of the question to drive to Tierra del Fuego as we would be transformed into ice in Ushuaia! Our aim

was to get there at Christmas time, matching with the austral summer. So we would begin our American trip with a nicer weather, in Uruguay and Brazil.

We only stayed three days in Buenos Aires (we will return after visiting Brazil) before continuing to Uruguay. It takes one hour's ferry (we were probably a boat addict!) and we were in Uruguay, on the other side of the Rio de la Plata. We arrived at Colonia del Sacramento, an irresistible, cute little town, sitting on the estuary of Rio de la Plata, in the southeastern part of Uruguay, right in front of Buenos Aires. Colonia is one of the top Uruguay tourist attractions.

Later, having our picnic on the beach, we were surprised to meet a Uruguayan couple, Milton and Margot, who built a "motor home" in an old school bus, a 1949 Ford. And very often we were boondocking among the gauchos!

Then we were at Chuy, the border town with Brazil. We thought we would stay only 15 days in Uruguay but we finally spent one month!

It took us three days to drive north to Mato Grosso State and it was, for us, the opportunity to discover Brazil's highway infrastructure. Most of the time, the roads are in bad condition because with the heat of summer, the roads are filled with pits and ridges from the thousands of heavy trucks travelling this hot pavement daily.

The western part of the country is very hilly and we spent the day climbing steep hills and then driving down a succession of down hills; hundreds of trucks passed us when we were going downhill at more than 65 MPH and we passed them at 25 MPH when climbing—it was a true remake of "Duel" but we would have preferred to have avoided it!

The good thing with all these trucks is the infrastructure of gas stations: free showers, boiling water for tea or coffee (or mate for Brazilians), huge parking lots to stay overnight, restaurants are all you can eat "luncheonettes" with a very good value. We were nevertheless surprised by the lack of room for diesel pumps. In fact, in Brazil, practically only trucks run on diesel and the gas stations are organized for them to park in front of the pump, so the trucks must park straddled over long drain pits, whose width correspond to their axles. For us, it was a perilous exercise to be well positioned.

As we headed north, the heat increased, we crossed the Tropic of Capricorn and we ended up with temperatures around 90 degrees during the day, which is nice for winter (August is the equivalent of February in the northern hemisphere). The tropical vegetation provided us with mangoes, papayas, pineapples, avocados and many other fruits to eat. It was an "all you can eat" of tropical fruits.

In the southern Pantanal, near Bonito, we had an interesting experience at the Ecological Reserve of Rio da Prata; after a



The crocodiles of the Ecological Reserve of Rio da Prata—numerous, hungry and far too close to the road.

Photo by Gwendolyn Prakash



The Rio de la Plata is a cultural experience in and of itself.

Photo by Gwendolyn Prakash



A picturesque waterfall cascades into the treetops of the National Park Chapada dos Guimares.

Photo by Gwendolyn Prakash

half-hour walk through the jungle, we swam for two hours in pristine water, surrounded by thousands of freshwater fish. Snorkeling in the clear water, we began to drift over the river, with just the current taking us for several miles. Underwater, the river's environment is magical, with all these trees submerged, these colorful rocks, and these fish swimming slowly between them. Bonito is an ecological paradise bathed by crystalline water rivers with plenty of different species of fish, grouts and hundreds of waterfalls that attract tourists from all over the world. A great adventure, truly an experience that we recommend to future travelers in this tropical part of Brazil.

Then we discovered beautiful trails through the Mato Grosso and we began to drive in the Pantanal, in the middle of great fazendas (large farms) in a tropical environment. Mato Grosso is the major producer of soybeans in Brazil and also produces 50% of Brazil's cotton. It's also home to vast cattle ranches. In one word, it's a tropical Texas, with room to grow. We were even surprised to come across Paraguayan gauchos escorting a herd of 650 cattle on a journey of 23 days; they progress at 5 miles per day with a gaucho "cooker" going first to prepare the evening cookout.

In Cuiaba, the hottest city in Brazil (104 degrees one day while we visited!), the northern gateway to the Pantanal, we were lucky to meet an architect who, with 16 other friends (doctors, lawyers...) is owner of a 30-acre chacara (small farm). By chance, it was Friday, so they invited us to stay the weekend with them—unbelievable.

With them, we had walks, a swimming pool, two hours rafting down a river, churrascos (barbecue) beside the river with very good wines and we finished the day under the full moon, with the sound of singing and guitar. We were more than 50 friends having a party and when the Brazilians make the fiesta, it is not sad! As usual, our Land

Cruiser drew lot of attention and we needed to manage the queue of visitors.

The next sequence should be called "luck is with us." On Monday morning, we had barely left behind our chacara to visit the National Park Chapada dos Guimares. But after a recent fatal accident (a falling rock on a young visitor), the park was closed for three months. As we made a u-turn, we saw three cars heading towards the entrance gate. We asked them how they intended to enter the park and we realized that they were working for the Ministry of Tourism. With the team, cameramen and photographers, we enjoyed the closed park to make pictures in order to promote tourism in Brazil!



The 600 mile stretch of trans-Amazon from Porto Velho to Manaus was quite an adventure.

Photo by Gwendolyn Prakash

Not only did they allow us to visit the park but also we were extras for their promotional film and we spent the whole day with our Land Cruiser in the park (which is normally forbidden), with a guide just for us. Another wonderful day, with a warm welcome from the Brazilians.

The next day, we went to the Pantanal, one of the last great wildernesses and the largest contiguous wetland on the planet—declared a World Heritage Site and Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO—and South America's primary wildlife sanctuary. With a total area of 240,000 sq. km located in the center of the continent, the Pantanal is a biogeography-mixing bowl, containing elements of the Amazon and Atlantic Rainforests, the Brazilian Savannah and the Paraguayan Chaco. Located in central South America, this vast alluvial plain, the largest in the world, covers about half the size of France.

With temperatures of 105 degrees, we drove the Transpantaneira, the only track that goes to the heart of the Pantanal; it's a track of 90 miles, with 125 wooden bridges. The Transpantaneira is an elevated dirt road that runs from the small town of Pocone to Porto Joffre. It is known all over the world as an extraordinary place to view and photograph wildlife—and is a Land Cruiser's natural environment.

The show was magnificent, with thousands of birds and alligators—and we had a wonderful game drive. We camped in a fazenda, one great moment after another.

The Transpantaneira: 90 miles, 125 wooden bridges—slow going.

Photo by Gwendolyn Prakash



Our HZJ78 Land Cruiser set up for the night in the southern Pantanal, near Bonito, Brazil.

Photo by Gwendolyn Prakash

After two days of travelling into the wilderness, we took the road to Porto Velho, the Amazon gateway. It's a 950-mile, rather boring road, with a terrifically hot climate. Reaching Manaus, one of the larger cities in the Amazon, we had the choice between four days on a barge with trucks on the Rio Madeira or to drive 600 miles of trans-Amazon from Porto Velho to Manaus, which seemed reasonable, as we were at the end of the dry season. We made the decision, it will be the dirt road, an adventure or a challenge, as say the Brazilians, but in any case, a great experience not to be missed.

After the first 200 miles on bad pavement to Humaita, it would be 300 miles of a dirt road in the jungle, self-sufficient (water, gas, food, fridge). We should have reached Manaus in two days but a big storm came in the afternoon on the Amazonia, the rainy season began nearly three weeks in advance, and the road was transformed into a huge mess—a real "Camel Trophy" challenge!

The first day went fairly well, not too muddy, but the second day was a different story, with huge potholes in the middle of the muddy track, which obliged us to drive the HZJ78 between these real "trenches." By mid-afternoon, we joined a group of Brazilians, three 4WD's (two Chevrolets and a Toyota) and a Volkswagen Kombi, like us prisoners of the Amazon. We made the decision to continue the trip together to support each other. The Kombi got stuck several times and the winch and tow straps were used more than once to tow the vehicles.

As we wasted a lot of time, we decided to spend the night in the middle of the track and continue the next day (we loaned our satellite phone, so the Brazilians could assure their families that they were OK).

The third day would be also difficult—to have a 4WD is more than necessary. By mid-afternoon of the third day, we finally arrived at the barge to take us through the Amazon River to arrive in Manaus. What an awesome experience and we were proud to be the only heavier vehicle which had not been stuck.

Due to the high and moist temperature, our night in the roof tent in Manaus was very bad! Manaus is the largest urban area on the Amazon. It is also the most important Amazonian port and the capital of the state of Amazonas. Surrounded by rivers and rain forests, it lies at the critical juncture of the Rio Negro and the Amazon Rivers, and serves as the port for the entire region.

Its huge market of fruits and fishes impressed us. The Adolpho Lisboa Market was founded during the days of the rubber boom. Today the market vendors sell a huge variety of fruits, vegetables, fish, handcrafts and other products.

Before arriving in Boa Vista, we crossed the equator—the imaginary line on earth's surface—and we were again in the northern hemisphere and continuing our journey of adventure...

