

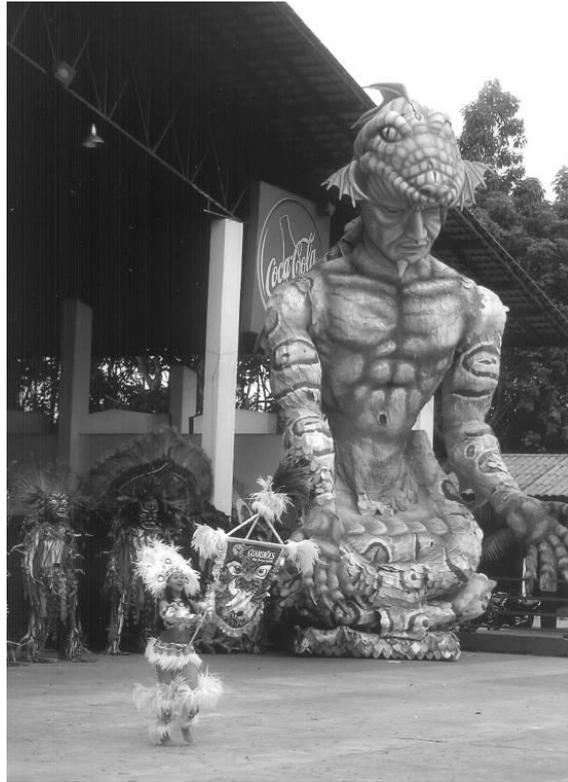
Cruising Down the River Sea - Part 1
(So called because it can rise up to 20 feet in the rainy season)

The next phase of our South America adventure began almost unnoticed by us. What with the excitement of settling into our cabin, enjoying the anticipated hot shower and sorting out our jungle gear and our smalls, deciding on which dining area to choose, etc., the fact that we had begun to move was almost overlooked. However, we were thrilled to be on our floating hotel but sad to see the end of our sojourn in the Eco Lodge and rainforest.

Our first morning passed in a whirl of welcome talks, getting to know our way around and the very important safety drill (we hoped that we won't have occasion to try the lifeboats for real!) About 40 members of the American Smithsonian Institute had joined us at Manaus – some of whom had lost their luggage. Not a nice situation for them. We could only offer sympathy – not very helpful? Nevertheless, people rallied round as they do and the Saga team was very good. We had a great many enthusiasts onboard of one sort or another. There were *'twitchers'* and lepidopterists, ophiophilists and entomologists to name but a few. Many too, who like us, just fancied somewhere off the beaten track and I think everyone was satisfied with the range of interests available.

Our first port of call at last – Parintins. We were greeted by exploding fire crackers, dancing girls, drummer boys and boy scouts. All dressed in bright colours, some in feathers and some in uniforms. I'll let you work out which was which. We enjoyed the display from onboard the ship. The girls were finding the tarmac too much like hot coal so, having sent someone to fetch their shoes, they finished the dance in flip flops and/or high heeled sandals!

After lunch, coaches awaited us to take us to see the Boi Bumba Folklore Show. Parintins is famous for this annual festival – second only to Rio's. It is a celebration of the city's Indian heritage and is reported to cost about 4 million dollars. The city has no road access – people travel by boat mostly but even so about 40,000 people get to see it every year.



We sought out our seats in the shade. Girls in feathers brought round drinks. The band got the mood going. Fantastic creatures some 30 feet high lined the back of the arena. Made out of wood and paper mâché, worked by pulleys and wires – they were pretty impressive and then the show began – and what a show it was. As each scene unfolded, more and more dancers – some as lizards, some warriors, some on pretend horses and always the girls in the feathers. The basis of the story is a contest between the Black Bull with a blue star on his head and the White Bull who sports a red heart.



The audience choose which bull to support and the contest begins. Rather like a local derby between two rival football teams. It's a case of whose team cheers the loudest, and then they and the bull win the match. Not real bulls of course!

The story goes something like this: the pregnant wife of a mixed race slave fancies beef tongue for lunch. The slave kills the landowner's prize bull in order to satisfy her craving. However, this doesn't go down too well with the landowner as you can imagine. He enlists the help of the village witch doctor and the bull is brought back to life. Quite why there are

two bulls and why the contest is so keenly fought remains a mystery to me! Anyway, it was and is a fantastic show. We were well supplied with soft drinks throughout – very welcome in the heat. The actual show lasts 6 hours – I'm glad we got the edited version! At the end of the show a winner is declared. Black bull or white – let the people decide – who shouted loudest? Good job they don't decide football matches this way! The winning bull does a lap of honour – it's very lucky if you get to kiss the bull – or unlucky if he kisses you – I'm not sure which!

Well, after all the excitement we find ourselves back on the bus and heading back to the ship for lunch. We ended the day enjoying a trio of musicians playing Mozart – quite a contrast but more conducive to a good night's sleep I think.

Next port of call on our South America adventure was Santarem. We had had extremely heavy rain overnight and when we arrived at our venue for the morning they were still sweeping the water out so that we could sit and watch the show. This time things were much simpler. We sat around a stage area and watched while dancers, some quite young children, gave a colourful and lively display.

A different folklore story emerged today. The story of the seduction by the pink dolphin of the lovely maiden. Well – you heard the one about the princess and the frog did you not? Today we were invited to join in and some of us did so. I was asked to dance by a very handsome young man – I think he must have been about 10-years-old!

We went down to the shore area – the puddles were everywhere but that hadn't stopped the local traders (*'Fair-trade'* much in evidence I think) setting up their stalls. Jewellery, decorated blow pipes, masks, hats, coconuts, etc. I seemed to acquire quite a few hats over the course of the trip – but then you know what I'm like with hats!

Back on the bus again – this time to a village nearby to see and sample local produce. Fruit, some familiar some not, nuts naturally - Brazils and also cashews. We were invited to try and buy – I must admit the number of flying insects put me off a bit. However, it was interesting to see the Brazil nuts coming from inside outer shells the size of small grapefruit which were so hard you needed a *'sledgehammer'* to crack them open. There is one animal that can manage it however – one with sharp teeth like a gerbil – the agouti. We then saw how they processed the inner flesh of the manioc tree to turn it into a sort of tapioca. Very laborious and not very tasty I thought. However, washed down with the local firewater it wasn't too bad! On the way back to the docks we stopped off at the Cathedral of Our Lady. I noted that all the floral display was of the artificial variety – blue roses mostly. But then, fresh flowers would not last long in the temperatures here so I think that was justified.

Back onboard for lunch we spent the rest of the day soaking up the sunshine going ashore again just before sundown to buy a few more souvenirs and to watch a wonderful sunset. Our days and evenings onboard ship were spent in various ways. We had plenty to do – swim, read, paint, send e-mails, and listen to lectures by people such as ex-diplomats of South America, historians, wildlife experts, astronomers, chefs and writers and others. If you missed a talk they could be seen on TV in your cabin later! Then of course there were concerts by the resident musicians, a Welsh bass baritone and jazz band and the crew themselves, quizzes – we managed to do quite well – and last but not least – eating!

The last port of call we made before leaving the Amazon was to be Belém. Before then

however, we enjoyed cruising along the Curua Una tributary. Quite a narrow passageway in contrast to the previous day's river views. Along the banks there are villages – the houses built on stilts to allow for the river to rise up to 12 feet in height. Many churches stood out identifiable by the crosses on the roof tops. Most people seemed to have some form of communication judging by the number of satellite dishes we counted. As we passed by the villages, children came out to us in their canoes (in spite of the vigorous wake we were causing) and we soon realised why this was. Our crew were throwing empty plastic bottles into the water for them to retrieve. Other items as well but we couldn't make out what they were! Obviously, they could make use of all the items we no longer needed – how's that for instant recycling?

Many moths had landed on deck during the night and seemed to be happy to spend the day with us. One adopted Don's hat and had no desire to move. Some were as large as my hand and very beautiful. We sailed on into the night. We are due to dock at Belém by morning and when we awoke we were there.

A slightly different skyline greeted us. Some high rise buildings, not exactly sky scrapers, but nevertheless higher than any seen so far on this journey and what looked like a Cathedral over to the right. The quayside was a mix of open air cafés and object d'art - one in particular looked a bit like the 'Rocket' railway engine. We walked around the city on foot first calling at the Cathedral. Mass was just about to start and so we didn't stay long. Dedicated to Our Lady of Nazareth it was packed with people. The sun reflected on gold ceiling in the Sanctuary. I would have liked to have stayed longer but had to come away. We got the impression of a lively congregation and a very well cared for House of God.

Then it was off to the Zoo. Not very large – lovely shade from trees and a few animals, including a tapir and baby, a manatee, a jaguar, birds, snakes and tropical flowers. It was very well kept and quite a popular venue for a Sunday morning. Then we were taken to the market. Now there was evidence of the approach of Christmas. Trees decorated and straw reindeer for sale! It was very hot and already signs of the market ending. I bought some more nuts – as you do. Then we were by the water again. Small boats moored side by side and everywhere black vultures picking over the debris – as numerous as our seagulls but not as pretty!

As we walked along the streets of Belém we were reminded of the old black and white films such as '*Tampico*' shot in the 1950's starring Alan Ladd! - this was Don's impression! The buildings were covered in black mould from the high humidity and gave the appearance of being old and decrepit. The city was very lively though as people went about their business in the market. We stood out from the crowds – oddly dressed, mostly elderly foreigners. I think they found us a novelty!

We walked up to the Fort that overlooked the harbour entrance. It proudly displayed some old cannons, two of which had been built in Manchester. Our buses arrived and it was back to base for lunch. The city was closing for siesta time but we had another outing booked for the afternoon. This time we boarded one of the river boats, for the last time as it was to be, and guess what? Yes more dancing girls and boys, albeit, canned and loud music. Plenty of free drinks – soft mostly. Once again we joined in but found it hard to compete with the skill and youthfulness of the colourful dance troupe! However, we did our best. Some of the party opted for a trip to one of the islands instead. They saw more wildlife including a tarantula. They also met some mossies! I was glad I didn't go with them.

Well, one more treat was in store. We were to be taken to the ballet at the theatre in Belém in the evening. An enchanting display by local children telling the story of a boy with the wrong attitude to saving the planet. He was taken under the sea to meet the fishes and other creatures whose lives were endangered by this thoughtless way of life. A lesson for us all. On leaving the theatre I fell down an unlit step and injured my knee. On return to the ship I ordered a “Baileys” at the bar and used the ice on my knee. It reduced the swelling and the throbbing and the knee was OK for use by the next day. A good unsolicited tip to cure a banged knee.

Cruising Down to Rio

We say goodbye to Belem and sail towards the Atlantic Ocean. We are leaving behind the Amazon delta with some sadness, but looking forward to visiting new places ‘with strange sounding names...’

The first of these is Fortaleza. It’s hot, hectic, humid and heaving with people, cars, bicycles, traders, pavement artists and after the comparative quiet of the Rainforest, we are somewhat bemused. We follow our guide and try to take it all in. A theatre catches our eye – wrought iron and stained glass – closed unfortunately. The cathedral – restoration in progress! – also closed but we could see its lovely glass windows from the doorway. The Cultural Museum with its history lessons and last but not least the ‘*pièce de resistance*’ – an ‘English’ bridge. This turns out to be a pier! We said (politely) it’s a pier! They wanted it to be a bridge – we gave up!

Our next port of call – Recife. A very elegant town. The Portuguese style of buildings much in evidence. Our first stop today is the Monastery of St. Bento de Olinda built in 1582. Life size figures of Saints and the Holy Family sit or stand in the green shade of cloisters. It belies its violent past when many of its monks met a cruel fate – pictures of which adorn the walls. We paid brief visits to other churches culminating with a convent on the hill overlooking the bay. The nuns were singing as we arrived and we stood listening to their voices raised in thanksgiving and praise. Outside on the pavement more stalls and very scrumptious coconut cookies! In a café across the road the staff looked a bit fed up – then we realised they were the product of artists’ ingenuity! We caught a quick glimpse of the beach before we were taken back to the ship for lunch.

Next stop – Maceio. Fiesta day. We could hear the music as we made our way on foot via a shopping arcade full of local crafts and clothes. When we arrived at the beach we were thrilled to see so many people dressed in special fiesta outfits. Some were wearing yellow, some white and some blue. We were told that the yellow represented gold or wealth, the blue was in honour of the Queen of the Sea and those in white were celebrating the Virgin Mary – perhaps the Annunciation? They all mingled and danced together; drummers and musicians were enthusiastic in their encouragement. Large bunches of balloons strained at their strings and firecrackers crackled and exploded. We stayed long enough for a strange drink at a beach café, and then it was back to our floating hotel for, yes, you’ve guessed it – lunch! You may be wondering about all the food we keep having to eat? I think it’s a cruise thing – don’t go if you want to keep slim!

So on to Salvador. A town built on 2 levels. The harbour is guarded by a fort and looks very African. Slave ships used to off-load their cargo here once upon a time. After the abolition many people of African origin stayed on and became the main ethnic people and still are.

We were taken by our bus to the upper part of Salvador for a guided walk. A local teacher pointed out places of interest including a Jesuit Church – very plain in style, and the Roman Catholic Cathedral – very ornate with masses of gold leaf.



A children's drum band played, a street barber was cutting a clients hair, art was on display every where and ladies in crinolines offered photo opportunities (for a fee of course!)



We visited the town square where people were once offered for sale as slaves and where harsh punishments were meted out. Thank goodness those that live here today look happy and fairly prosperous. We saw smiles and waves as we rolled along in our bus – passed the football stadium and a new railway station, passed the Christmas shoppers and the excited children.

Next stop was Ilheus – our last port of call before Rio de Janeiro. One thing stood out today. A school with a great line in recycling.



A classroom made from old lemonade bottles! And a Christmas tree made of what looked like can lids! We paid a visit to a café where Jorge Amado, the Author, was a frequent patron. It was called the 'Vesuvio Bar'. Jorge's bust adorned the garden and we drank his health in another 'strange' concoction.

Tomorrow we will be arriving at one of the highlight destinations of our journey – Rio de Janeiro. The dawn came up in a fiery red glow as we glided towards the Rio skyline. Was this a good omen we wondered? The weather was becoming changeable – one night a storm had ripped all the tiles from the sides of the outdoor swimming pool, but it didn't disturb our sleep. Nevertheless, the sun was shining as we drew nearer and nearer to the port. We could now make out the outline of Christ the Redeemer on Corcovado Mountain. Soon we disembarked in the City of Carnival, called Janeiro because it was discovered in January. We made our way to the train station and waited for the Ratchet train which would take us nearly to the top. The train clicked and clanked its way up the mountain. Flowers covered the banks and various animals and Disney characters gave way near the summit to biblical figures and scenes. Well as you may have guessed when we finally made it to the top, via escalators and steps, the clouds had shrouded the view both of the statue and of the city below. As we peered upwards we could just make out the outstretched arm of Christ but we took our photos anyway. So did everyone else – some getting into very strange positions to do so! Of course, when we arrived back down, the sun came out! It was still amazing in spite of the clouds – in fact it was quite atmospheric and I'm so glad that we chose this option over Sugar Loaf Mountain. Perhaps on my next visit? Once again time caught us up and after a brief visit to Rio's famous beaches – Ipanema and Copacabana – we returned to our waiting vessel. By the way, I did find time to buy another hat! Quelle surprise!

Montevideo

We are nearing the end of our journey and after two more stops in Brazil – Itajai and Santos – we find ourselves in Uruguay. The city of Montevideo is modern, elegant and full of history. We have the usual city tour, on our arrival, and are shown the very grand Parliament headquarters. The smart uniformed guards ignored us as we mounted the steps up to the imposing front entrance - and hardly batted an eyelash as we posed for photographs.



We were shown into a vast space of marble floors and oil painting adorned walls. From here we were taken to see the sculpture of the Stage Coach by José Belloni. A reminder of the days of the pioneers, etc. We linger to buy souvenirs – yes, another hat!

We circumnavigate the city, stop off for coffee/wine, etc., and then drive along the promenade back to the harbour. It was quieter than Rio de Janeiro and several of us liked what we had seen very much. We are moored here in Montevideo overnight as we have a party ashore this evening and are looking forward to a full day on a Gaucho Ranch tomorrow.

So, I'll start with the party. We had been advised that it was an add-on to our itinerary and wasn't scheduled so it was a *'surprise party'*! It was to take place in a converted convent – that sounds like a contradiction? However we could not have anticipated what a fantastic evening we were to have. It started off with our being collected at the harbour by coaches and then driven into the countryside – which, by the way, was very much like our own trees and fields and flowers. We were shown the Church to begin with. Our welcome by people in *'costume'* set the scene. The Church had been restored and decorated with modern art – rather Picasso-ish. We were then led out to a courtyard where canapés and drinks were being served and couples were dancing the tango. We were told that the Uruguayan tango was not the same as the Argentinean version – we had to take their word for it but I daresay some of the dancers in our congregation would spot the difference straight away? Then our meal was served. As we ate we could see a fire burning several metres away and we inquired why? We were told they were warming the drums for later and, as we were finishing our meal, we started to hear the beat. Soon we were engulfed in music and colour. Drums drummed and skirts swirled. Glitter and glamour was all around us – we just had to join in and we jumped and jived (don't ask me how) like the best of them. More tango and a chance to give that a go too. Don did quite well actually – I think we might go to classes on our return home! Well all good things come to an end and soon we were back on the bus and heading for the harbour lights.

Our final day was to be another highlight of this trip. It dawned bright and sunny – just like an English summer’s day! We sped along the roads admiring the scenery with fields full of maize and trees in full leaf. Mostly plane trees and palms intermixed with eucalyptus. Suddenly we were aware of a young horseman galloping along beside us with flag held aloft and fluttering wildly. He was soon joined by others of more mature years and the flags of course were the blue and white stripes, with the sun in the corner, of Uruguay. We pulled into the ranch entrance and the riders were already lined up to greet us. We were taken to our next mode of transport – bales of straw on the backs of trailers! Climbing aboard we donned our straw hats – available for all who hadn’t brought their own – and set off on a tour of the ranch. We sang as we jolted along – and as we passed the fields of corn (sweet corn) we naturally chose *‘Oh what a beautiful morning’* from Oklahoma! Our ride took us to the Rio de la Plata beach where we had some refreshments. I walked on the sands. Then it was back to base camp for a welcome from the owner of the Ranch and lunch. Various skills were demonstrated, i.e., sheep shearing, milking, etc. We could try our hand at these and of course ride horseback if we so desired. I must confess I declined on all counts as the last time I managed to mount a horse proved to be a bit embarrassing to say the least!

Another thrill on offer was a ride being pulled along on a cow hide – this too wasn’t quite my idea of fun - it looked very uncomfortable in the extreme. Well by this time the food was ready so we all piled into the barn to eat. Once again we sat on bales of straw as we sampled the delights of the enormous barbeque and a delicious salad.



Strawberries and cream followed and wine, etc., was freely available. Local crafts were for sale made of wood, vicuna wool, animal horn, all very unusual and reasonably priced.

The day was brought to its conclusion with a display of dancing, fire eating, music and singing – gaucho style. Boots stamped and black skirts swirled, white trousers or tights with black hats and white cummerbunds were quite a contrast to the varied colours of previous shows.

We reluctantly said farewell to our Gaucho hosts and made our way back to the ship. We would be casting off this evening for our journey along the River Plate to Buenos Aires.

Hope to tell you more next time both about the river and of course that lady for whom we are not to cry!

Buenos Aires

What is it about ships that we fall in love with them? This week (11 November) we have seen the departure of the QE2 for the last time from Southampton to sail to her new home

in Dubai and, although I never sailed in her, I felt the sadness of those who had done so. I always had a soft spot for *HMS Vanguard* ever since my father (Donald Guest) served as a member of the Royal Marine band on her visit to South Africa in 1947 with the Royal Family. There is nothing I like better than to watch the shipping from a vantage point at Sally Port in Old Portsmouth. Anyway I digress!

The day finally arrived when we had to say farewell to the "*Spirit of Adventure*". One last look back and a wave then we board our coach and head for the Tigre Delta. A series of inland waterways which have been developed rather like the Norfolk Broads. Magnificent villas line the banks – the gardens, with manicured lawns, stretch to the water. Jetty after jetty with boats moored, take the place of cars. I didn't see any roads but as even the shops were of the floating variety I guess the car here would be redundant! After an hour or so, in which we were served coffee and cakes. We returned to our coach and set off to our next venue the restaurant "*La Caballeriza*" for lunch. This turned out to be quite an interesting place as well. All polished wood and brass – decorated for the festive season and open to the sky in the main part – what happens when it rains? Our meal – 6 courses – was tasty with the usual mix of meats, fruits and vegetables. As everyone practically knew each other by this time, the atmosphere was like a big party. It would be the last occasion at which we would all be together.

Then a tour of the city and what a city she is – Buenos Aires. By the time we arrived at our hotel we had the impression of big boisterous and beautiful – as her name suggests. There we were in the capital of Argentina no less. Don and I did wonder how we would cope here on our own – only a handful of *Spirit* passengers were staying on. Too late to worry about that and, as it turned out, we were to have an amazing time.

After settling in our hotel – the *Buenos Aires Hilton* – we headed for the waterfront. This was actually the revamped dock area of "*Puerto Madero*". Rather like Gunwharf, cafes and restaurants line the banks and it wasn't long before we were sitting with a cup of coffee. Soon that evening we were to be startled by a firework display that suddenly exploded around us! What a welcome!

Our first day found us getting rather lost – I think we were looking at the map upside down! With the help of a friendly Traffic Cop we got back on track and found what we had been looking for – The American Express Bank! We had opted to take their cheques as currency and only one bank in the whole of BA would change them! Then it was off to the shops. All the vast precincts and arcades were of course festooned with decorations as suited the season. Some of them were amazing and offered a vast range of goods from designer to run of the mill. Street traders were also in abundance selling jewellery and tourist souvenirs.

Marches and demonstrations seem to be quite frequent. Someone told us there was usually one every day. We witnessed two anyway – one for the return of children who had disappeared under the dictatorship called the Parade of the Mothers or "*Plaza de Mayo*" and, on another occasion, it was miners and builders striking and marching through the city under police escort. The traffic was very heavy, the roads extremely wide, the green man very elusive and it was a case of move on the light fast for all!



We visited various places of interest. For example – moored not far from our hotel was an old steam and sail frigate the *ARA Presidente Sarmiento*. Built in 1897 she had sailed round the world and had even docked in Portsmouth on one voyage! She then became a cadet training vessel and was now a museum.

We saw the grand building which was the Presidential Palace – the pink “*Casa Rosado*”: also the Cathedral dedicated not to a saint but known as the “*Metropolitan*”.

We walked up the *Avenue de Mayo* to the world’s widest avenue “*Avenue 9th July*” 140 metres across. Every so often we would notice a small crowd gathering. As we drew near we would hear the unmistakable strains of the tango. After a while quite an elderly man would lead a usually young and beautiful girl into the intricate steps and, as they twisted their heads and their legs in all directions everyone stood enthralled and impressed by their skill. Well I was anyway!



We visited many cafes. One was very atmospheric the “*Café Tortoni*” full of the history of the tango with paintings of past masters lining the walls. It had a small theatre where shows were performed. We followed the theme with a visit to a tango and dinner show that evening. A chance to put on our glad rags and go out on the town.

We did track down that lady – Eva Peron of Evita fame in the *Recoletta Cemetery*, full of ornate tombs and mausoleums and such a maze it needed a map to find our way around. Now, after all the drama, she is at rest in this quiet corner.



I would like to conclude my *'saga'* by thanking everyone for their kind comments. It has even made me consider a career in travel writing! One thing for sure in writing it all down it has been a way of re-living the dream. So it is now *'Adios Amigos'* and thanks to Colin for his patience and encouragement.

Shirley Caunter