Pedro Carvajal of Spain located a cache of beer in an abandoned Amazonian village: “Here was found a great quantity of corn and oats from which the Indians make bread and very good beer...and this beer is to be had in great plenty. There was found a dispensing place for this beer...our men were not a little delighted.”

In quest of the rarest beers on Earth, I retraced Staden’s trail through Brazil’s jungles. In 1985, 400 years after Staden’s death, I was approached by a group of Vermonters who decided to enter the specialty beer business. These discriminating women preferred full-bodied, dark beers and stouts and deplored the fact that most of the 700 beers imported into America at the time were of the lager-pilsner types. Pooling their capital and incorporating under the name Amazon, Inc., they determined to import the richest dark beer available anywhere.

“From where in the world does the best dark beer come?” these ladies asked me, and my thoughts immediately turned to a black beer that has remained in my memory as the best of the hundreds I have sampled. Sadly, the tiny Brazilian brewery that concocted this black ambrosia (called Inglesinha) was later leveled to provide parking space for a giant lager beer factory. Nonetheless, logic dictated that somewhere in Brazil, if not in the cities, then perhaps deep within the frontier regions, there must be a beer producer brewing a preta or negra beer of equal splendor.

Bankrolled by Amazon, Inc., I soon found myself on a plane for the first of many long flights to Brazil to find the brew that lived up to my still-vivid memory of black beer perfection.

Brazil is enormous. Getting from place to place, I traveled by large jet and one-engine bush planes from city to settlement. A land of incredible beauty and varied landscape, Brazil is unique—and beer is queen. And throughout, from deep jungle outposts to the cosmopolitan beaches of Rio, beer is everywhere with tall pint tulipa glasses of cool draft beer or chopp at less than 50 cents.

The downside of this beer paradise is that the lager giants—Brahmah, Antarctica, and Kaiser—have forced the small, regional breweries—those that made the obscure, native styles of beer—out...
of business. Still, I found that many of the vanished brands had evolved from Indian beers, and some of these were still brewed by tribes living on the Amazon and Xingu rivers.

Beginning at the University Museum in São Paulo, I identified the names and approximate locations of remaining beer-brewing Indians. Many of these tribes inhabited the Xingu Basin—a vast, partially unmapped and not easily accessible region south of the Amazon. Then, flying to Manaus, a river port, I hired two guides, bought provisions, and set out on my first journey on the Amazon to look for black beer.

It is estimated that Amazonian Indians have brewed beer for at least 2,000 years. The type and quality of beer depend on the grain and other available ingredients. The two most common varieties are manioc, or masato, beer brewed from starch manioc root and chicha, or corn beer, which is brewed from maize. Other less popular styles include algaroba beer, brewed from the seeds of the carob tree by tribes in Argentina and Paraguay. Still other tribes brew beer from sweet potatoes, pumpkins, pears, apples, quince, strawberries, melons, and papaya.

These fruits and vegetables often supplement the basic corn or manioc beer recipes.

Fermentation requires contact of sugar with airborne “ambient” yeasts. A source of fermentable sugar, honey is almost always used in Indian-brewed beer. In primitive societies, women are the keepers of the brewhouse secrets. From the journals of Hans Staden comes this account of brewing, which along the Amazon continues unchanged:

The women make the beer. They take manioc roots and cook them in huge pans. They take the manioc from the pans...and let it cool. Young girls...chew the manioc and put it into containers. After the roots have been chewed, [they] put the paste into a pan and put water in and heat...containers are buried in the floor and are considered vats for beer. Pour...the manioc and cover the vats tightly. It will ferment on its own and like this will become strong. Leave it buried for two days. Drink it and you’ll get drunk. It’s thick and tastes good. Each of the huts prepares its own beer when the village wants to have a celebration...they sit around the containers that they’re drinking from, some on pieces of logs, some on the bare floor. The women serve the beer as custom demands. They drink all night long. They also dance, at times around the burning bonfires, they shout and play their instruments, and they make a terrible noise once they are really drunk.

By chewing grain, the ptyalin present in human saliva converts the cereal starches into fermentable sugars. Bolivian Indians employ more sophisticated methods in malting—after soaking and sprouting barley, they dry and roast the grain, adding additional moist, chewed mash to the fermenting vats. Indian beers, drunk everyday as a dietary staple, are lagered two to four days. They contain about 2.2 percent to 3.2 percent alcohol by volume. Ceremonial brews, on the other hand, are lagered for much longer periods and often have considerably greater strength.

Fermentation occurs in earthen jars. Some of these vessels hold up to 30 gallons. They are buried until the brew is deemed ready. Other methods call for the beer to be fermented uncovered in hollowed out logs. Some Indians add leaves or fern stems to impart bitterness, flavor, and strength to ceremonial brews. The Lencas of Central America employ perhaps the strangest additive of all. These Indians are fond of adding sheep or goat droppings to beer while it is brewing.

Taste and color of Indian beer varies across regions. Manioc beers tend to be milky white. Chichas are pale to dark yellow and taste varies from tart to downright sour. Beer color depends on how long the malt is roasted. The darkest beers are most often found to the north of the Amazon.

Among all South American Indians, beer drinking has deep social and religious significance. Hunting and fishing expeditions,
harvests, gatherings to discuss war and peace, and weddings, births,
and funerals all call for beer drinking by the entire tribe. The west-
ern Brazilian Remos and the north-central Amazonian Tapajos mix cremated human bones into their beer, thereby ensuring that the spirites of the departed are absorbed back into the living.

As nossas boas qua
idades que não são poucas.
To our good qualities, which are not few.
—Brazilian toast

Indian beer festivals are joyous occasions lasting from a few hours to many days—and always until the last drop of beer has been imbibed. The resulting intoxication can range from a mild buzz to alcoholic coma as the celebrants move from house to house, finishing off all the beer in each hut before shuffling on. Beer drinking is always done in groups; the solitary drinker is unknown.

On the lower Xingu, drinking bouts last for days without violence or discord. Elsewhere, beer festivals often lead to fatal encounters. In these more aggressive tribes, the women brewers may themselves refrain from more than a few beers, ever alert and prepared to hide the men’s weapons at the first sign of trouble. The men will continue to drink to oblivion, often thrusting a paddle or “vomit stick” down the throat. Thus, they induce vomiting, making room for ever more beer. Battles within the tribe ignite from resentments among those who have used beer often as an occasion for romantic encounters with each other’s wives. Sociologists believe that beer orgies have a cathartic effect, and that “clearing the air” helps ensure the stability of the group.

Above all, beer is an important dietary staple providing critical nutrition for all. As a daily food supplement, the Jivaro of southern Ecuador drink three to four gallons of mild beer per person per day.

Indians offer varied explanations of the value of beer in their lives. The Urubus of Brazil call beer Kau-I, meaning “crazy water,” in the belief that a spirit in the beer makes the drinker crazy. Ecuadorian Indians say that beer is a gift from spirits to “rejoice the heart” and to lend courage in asking favors from a friend. Peruvian tribes feel that beer enhances bravery before battle; they also trust in a concept called Aymara—a system of beer medicine. Mato Grosso tribes think beer drinking important for witch doctor training, owing to the spiritual insights gained while drunk. Numerous tribes worship plant spirits, praying that fermentation be quick and the brew strong.

Two years of travel in Brazil’s wilderness regions eventually yielded a clear understanding of Indian beer brewing. Negra, or black beers, result from pan-roasting grain over the acrid smoke of wood fires—a process similar to the smoked beer brewing of Bamberg, Germany. Using ambient yeasts and fermenting at high ale-like temperatures for long periods, the resulting beer is spectacular.

In Rio, a Brazilian association of Amazon, Inc. reached agreement with the Cacador brewery of Santa Catarina to brew black beer on a commercial basis for distribution in the United States and Brazil. Early in 1988, the first production of Xingu Black Beer was made from pan-roasted barley, hops, water, and yeast. Fermentation took place in shallow, open porcelain fermentation tanks—all the malting and brewing steps carried out by hand labor. Cacador’s wood-fired boilers and German three-tiered brewhouse—all very medieval in aspect—managed to do full justice to the jungle brews of the Amazon River. Xingu Black Beer is a true lager, not an ale or stout. Jet black, with color so dense that light will not pass through it, this black Brazilian, with its craggy brown head of foam, tastes remarkably light and fruity, with a flavor The New York Times found “slightly smoky.” The rest is beer history.

Xingu received rave reviews in both America and Europe. And best of all, South America is no longer a forgotten chapter in the literature of beer.

Alternately called “The Indiana Jones of Beer” and “The Beer King” by the press, Alan Eames is an internationally known beer historian, consultant,
and beer anthropologist. He has written many articles and several books on beer, including: The Secret Life of Beer, A Beer Drinkers Companion, Blood, Sweat and Beers, and Oldenberg Beer Drinkers Bible. Eames is also a founding director of the American Museum of Brewing History and Fine Arts in Fort Mitchell, Kentucky. He lives with his family in Brattleboro, Vermont.

As a seasoned jungle hand with several days in the steamy dark heart of Brazil’s Amazon Basin under my webbed Eddie Bauer expedition belt, I herewith offer my Top Ten Tips for anyone with a hankering to check out this remarkable region before it’s slashed and burned into oblivion:

1. Monkeys may jump enthusiastically onto your head, but odds are they won’t tear off your ears.
2. Tarantulas like to loll on handrails.
3. That bizarre genetic mishap you may just find snoozing lazily on your couch—the one that looks like something like a pig-pony and nuzzles like a lap dog—is a tapir. Don’t worry; it’s harmless.
4. Those frightening killer bees are wusses compared with some of the other insects you’ll find in this jungle.
5. Piranhas are vicious little buggers, but they’re far from the most dangerous critters in the river.
6. Yes, you can swim in the Amazon. (See Number 5)
7. The mosquitoes are not as big as hummingbirds.
8. Sweat is good—the more you produce, the better.
9. The narrow dugout canoes in which you do your exploring can tip over pretty easily. (See Number 5)
10. The local Cerveja Antarctica will very rapidly become your best friend. Cerveja Antarctica is beer—beer that comes in huge half-liter-plus bottles and usually stays nice and chilled for the entire five minutes it takes to consume one. That’s one thing about Brazil: the country may be a shambles, its money hyperinflated to such a point of overload that a dinner can easily cost millions of whatever the stuff is now called, but the beer is always cold.

—Richard J. Pietschmann, “Jungle Fever”

RACHEL CHRISTMAS DERRICK

Benin via Bahia

An African-American senses her roots in Brazil’s former slave capital.

SOME PEOPLE RETURN FROM SALVADOR, THE CAPITAL OF THE STATE of Bahia in northeast Brazil, raving about the gorgeous beaches, the elaborate baroque churches, the weathered pastel houses with red tile roofs and delicate wrought-iron balconies. But what impressed me most was Bahia’s unmistakable African flavor.

I had traveled to Brazil with friends, all of us African-Americans eager to see what had become of others who were part of the African diaspora. Growing up in the United States, we had been taught by an educational system that said black history began with slavery. By visiting Bahia, we hoped to learn something more about ourselves.

For three centuries, beginning in the mid-1500s, Africans were wrenched from their homes by Portuguese colonists and forced to work on Brazilian sugarcane plantations. These slaves and their descendants refused to relinquish many aspects of their old ways of life. While this African heritage is apparent throughout the country, it is most celebrated in Bahia, where the predominantly black population has kept its past in its present. Overall, Brazil’s population is estimated to be 44 percent black or mixed race. The state of Bahia is more than 80 percent black.