

Scramble in the Jungle

Brazil's highest mountain is a virtual lost world deep in the Amazon rainforest. With isolated native tribes and freaky plants and animals, it's like something straight out of Conan Doyle. Rowan Castle joins a guided trip to this remote peak – dinosaurs not included.





SOMEWHERE OUT THERE IN THE jungle lurks a monster nearly ten thousand feet high. It's so remote that it takes days on water and foot just to reach its base. Mysterious? Not arf. To local tribes it may have been old news, but Brazil's highest mountain was only officially 'discovered' in 1953, the year of the conquest of Everest. Almost perpetually shrouded in cloud and mist, few people have seen it, and it has never been mapped. Cutting it nearly in two is an unexplored canyon, which is believed to be among the deepest on earth. Sound tempting? Sounds like Pico Da Neblina.

This incredible peak straddles the border between Brazil and Venezuela, in the lands of the famous Yanomami Indians. Until as recently as the 1970's, these indigenous people retained their stone-age culture, living naked in the forest. Neblina is the least well known of the tepui mountains of this region. The more famous tepuis of Venezuela, such as Roraima and Auyan tepui (home of Angel Falls) are generally flat topped, whereas Neblina has a very impressive steep and craggy peak. When I first read about Neblina, it seemed that the difficulty of getting there made it off limits. After all I wasn't a government-sponsored botanist who could be airlifted in to log some of the 60% of the plants there that are new to science. Recently however, one UK adventure travel company has begun to offer treks to the summit, and I pounced on the chance to join up.

The journey began in the charming Amazonian town of Sao Gabriel de Cachoeira, on Brazil's Rio Negro. A laid-back place, Sao Gabriel has a white sandy beach, impressive rapids and views out across the forest to an abrupt mountain range. Here our party met up with Brazilian guides Marcello and Valdir. They wasted no time in telling us that the trek would be tough and that we must not wander in the jungle alone; there were many jaguars and one of the Yanomami had recently been eaten! Without delay we embarked on a three-hour truck drive to La Mirim creek, crossing the equator on the way. During the journey we had to alight frequently, so that the truck was light enough to plough through deep muddy ruts in the road. Waiting for us when we arrived at the river were our Yanomami porters for the expedition, and a large motorised wooden boat belonging to a Chief.

Water levels were unusually low, and it took us

■ LEFT: Motoring up the Cauaburi River, with Padre Peak in the background



three days to travel upstream along the La Mirim, La Grandi, Cauaburi and Tucano Rivers to the start of the trail. We then hiked to the first dry land camp in the dark, with fireflies twinkling from the jungle on either side. When we arrived, we slung hammocks from the palm trees and slept under a starry sky. We were glad to use mosquito nets when we heard that the owner of the nearby guard post had recently lost twelve chickens to vampire bats.

There was no shortage of visible wildlife on the river during the following days; brilliantly coloured macaws screeched overhead, toucans swooped from tree to tree, river dolphins surfaced nearby as we swam in the Cauaburi and clouds of yellow butterflies fed on the salty sandbanks. At one point we spotted a pair of giant otters bobbing close to the bank.

An unexpected stop was made at a Yanomami hunting camp on the bank of the Cauaburi. I left my camera behind and cautiously followed Valdir and the porters. Luckily the reception was friendly, and we were able to have a look at the Pacca (a large rodent), bush turkeys and fish that they were roasting over the fire. Tied up in neat bundles nearby were thin jungle vines that the Indians transport to La Mirim to be made into yard brushes.

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Arriving in Tucano Creek late on the third day, we left the boat for a hurried four-hour walk to our first jungle camp at Tucano Falls. We got there just before nightfall and stayed in old thatched huts. Next to these was a stand of banana trees, where I had a memorable encounter with an enormous tarantula. Valdir told us that this place was the scene of a fierce battle between two Yanomami groups some 50 years ago, and that seven warriors were buried across the nearby river.

The following day, our steep trek up through the forest began in earnest. What with high humidity, tangled roots underfoot, and scarce drinking water it was heavy going. Welcome stops were often made to look at interesting plants, such as the quinine tree, used to treat malaria. I tried some, and the extremely bitter taste lingered in my mouth. Valdir had earlier guided a Brazilian botanist as far as Neblina base camp, and he had taken many kilos of plant samples back to Brasilia for research into new treatments for cancer and natural insect repellents. Further up the trail we reached a disused campsite, and one of the porters caught a giant earthworm to show us. It was the size of a small snake! Camp that evening was shared with a group of soldiers from the Brazilian army, on their way to the summit of Neblina to repair the pole for the Brazilian flag that flies there.

During the climb to Tucaninho (base) camp, the forest began to thin. Gradually the vegetation changed, big rainforest trees giving way to ferns and mossy palms. The trail steadily climbed a steep ridge to a pass. At this point there was a natural window in the trees and we enjoyed sweeping views of the mountains and the rainforest canopy several thousand feet below. We were now on Neblina proper, trekking through a weird landscape of thick black mud, roots, underground streams and quartz rock. The plants were



- LEFT: Rest stop below the summit. The lip of Rio Baria canyon in the background. The Brazilian army unit dig their truck out of the mud. Butterflies feeding on salty mud banks.
- RIGHT: Trekking through Neblina's weird landscape of mud roots and Bromeliads. A view of Pico Da Neblina during the climb - it's rarely free of cloud. A hummingbird feeds near base camp.

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equally bizarre and ranged from tall palms to giant bromeliads. Base camp was located at the junction of two small creeks, where miners had once sieved quartz gravel for gold. It was a lovely spot, frequented by dazzling hummingbirds that quite happily fed from a cup of sugar water held in our hands. They had seen so few humans that they had no fear. One spectacular green and blue bird even perched on my thumb as it drank.

The summit attempt began with a safety briefing by Valdir, who told us that we must turn round by one to avoid descending the exposed rock sections in the dark. If it started to rain heavily during the ascent we would also have to hurry back, because of creeks that become impassable in spate. The round trip was expected to take twelve hours. At dawn we set off on the first leg, a strenuous four-hour plod through black mud, thigh deep in places. We then followed the path up a cliff, scrambling over boulders and roots. Here a fixed knotted rope safeguarded an awkward rock chute. As we climbed, trios of scarlet macaws flew noisily past at eye level.

We could just make out a sheer face tumbling into the unexplored Rio Baria canyon. Who knows what bizarre prehistoric beasts might still lurk in the depths?

An easier passage followed, traversing a more gradual slope dotted with rock pillars and home to numerous types of orchid. This terminated at the foot of a craggy escarpment. To our right we could just make out a sheer face on the neighbouring mountain, tumbling into the unexplored Rio Baria canyon. Who knows what bizarre prehistoric beasts might still lurk in the depths?

From the lunch stop we began the final climb to the summit, a tiring scramble and exposed in places. Not far below the peak was the second fixed rope, up which we hauled ourselves to overcome a short slippery face. Above us, waiting for their turn to descend the rope, were the returning troops of the Brazilian jungle warfare unit, their flagpole repairs complete. Soon Valdir spotted the reinstalled flag, and it wasn't long before we emerged onto the surprisingly roomy summit. It had just gone twelve o' clock and we were able to spend an hour on the top, during which we signed the summit book and posed for photographs. True to its title 'The Misty Mountain', the peak was shrouded in dense cloud, though this parted for a few seconds to afford a spectacular view down into the Venezuelan rainforest.

The downclimb was awkward and slow. In several places we were grateful to be belayed with a safety rope. It wasn't hard, but the exposure and slippery conditions added to the sense of danger. We made it to camp just before nightfall. As the sun set, the clouds lifted and we had a rare clear view of the mountain.

Before the return trek we enjoyed a rest day at base camp, time to explore the unique landscape around us. I spent the whole morning in a nearby creek, photographing hummingbirds feeding from the flowers. Others in the group hiked up to the gold miner's encampment to see the appalling conditions they had endured for eleven years. Valdir was busy preparing things for the next group to visit Neblina - a German TV company that would be staying for sixty days to shoot a documentary on the mountain and its extraordinary flora and fauna. Lucky buggers. After dark a gusty wind blew up, and we had an uncomfortable chilly night in our hammocks.

- LEFT: Base camp at Tucanoinho. Our home for three nights.
- Pepe with the giant earthworm he caught at Babedo Vehlo.
- Climbing the second and final fixed rope, just before the summit.
- RIGHT: The summit celebrations.

To get back to civilisation we simply retraced our route down through jungle to the boat. Travelling with the current this time, it only took us two days to reach the road. However, the journey wasn't entirely smooth. First we were delayed by a broken outboard motor, and then a fierce thunderstorm lashed us. We reached the entrance to La Mirim creek in the dark, and our boatman did an incredible job of navigating the rocks and submerged branches by torch light. The boat became lodged on a couple of occasions, and the crew had to leap out into the black water to shove us off. A dramatic way to end the journey!

If, like me, you are happiest when you can combine truly rugged mountain scenery with an interest in nature and wildlife, then this is definitely the trip for you. A successful ascent of Neblina relies on the expert skills of the Yanomami Indians and the limited space in their old camping grounds. Thanks to this, Pico da Neblina is likely to hold onto its bio-diversity, and remain remote and mysterious for many years to come. ■



Who's Writing?

When he's not looking for lost worlds, Rowan Castle is an Environmental Health Officer in Swindon. He has travelled mainly in India and Pakistan, with recent trips spent snorkelling in the Red Sea and walking in southern Iceland. Since trekking to Angel Falls in Venezuela two years ago, he became fascinated by the 'tepu' mountains of this region of South America and their unique wildlife. Rowan is a keen travel photographer, and his other interest is flying. He hopes to begin training for a Private Pilots License soon. Check out Rowan's new travel website: www.castlerevesham.net

The Lowdown

Jungle trekking par excellence, with tribes, tarantulas, boats and a bleedin' big mountain thrown in. Seriously remote, seriously worthwhile...

When to go

September - December is slightly drier than other times of year.

Getting there

Many airlines fly to Rio / Sao Paulo from London. To get to Sao Gabriel, we flew Varig airlines from Heathrow to Rio de Janeiro and got a connecting flight to Manaus. RICO airlines operate small turbo-prop planes between Manaus and Sao Gabriel.

On the Ground

KE Adventure Travel ran our trek. If you want to go it alone, you must first register with the National Park office in Sao Gabriel. On the river we met two German couples who had hired their own guide and porters. To do the same, enquire at the tourist office in Sao Gabriel.

Getting to the mountain is a bit involved: Take a 4WD taxi to the bridge at La Mirim creek, where you meet your boat transport. Follow La Mirim creek and the La Grandi river to it's confluence with the Cauburi. At this point there is a FUNAI post (the government organisation that protects indigenous Indians) where visitors must stop and report. Travel up the Cauburi to Tucano Creek, where the trail begins. It is essential to have a boatman and guide who know the river and forest well. Once in the rainforest, the trail is surprisingly well worn, but it would still be easy to lose the way or take the wrong fork.

Health 'n' Safety

This is a very remote area and comprehensive insurance is a must. In the event of an accident, the nearest point at which a helicopter could set down is the Yanomami settlement at Maturaca, three or four days walk from the mountain. A permethrin-treated mosquito net is strongly advised, as are anti-malarials. Purify your water. As far as vaccinations go, Typhoid, Polio, Hep A, Tetanus and Yellow Fever are the recommendations, plus a Rabies jab for good measure.

Comforters

Most of the camps en route are old thatched Yanomami huts. Generally they are dry and comfortable, you'll likely share them with bats and rats. Take care that timber hasn't rotted, and will support the weight of occupied hammocks. Occasionally it is necessary to camp in timber frame shelters (built on the spot) under tarpaulins. Tents and sleeping mats are not needed, because hammocks are used throughout.

Gear

A 35l dry bag is a good idea; this kept my sleeping clothes dry while I walked in wet clothes. A 50-60l rucksack should do; a slim one will get less tangled in vegetation. Light Gore-tex lined boots are best suited to the conditions, and gaiters are a boon. A large water bottle is essential. It gets surprisingly cold in the rainforest at night, even more so at base camp. A sleeping bag rated to + 5°C as well as adequate layers are needed. Don't forget the hammock.

Money

No frills travel should cost around US\$40 per day. A guide for Neblina will probably charge around US\$140, and porters roughly US\$70 each. The cost of boat, boatman and petrol for the river journey would need to be negotiated at Sao Gabriel. Air travel is expensive in Brazil. As a guide, a flight to Manaus from Rio is approximately US\$340. An airpass makes things cheaper if you're doing lots of internal flying.

Maps 'n' Books

Stuff covering Neblina is rare. Try Redmond O' Hanlon's book 'In Trouble Again', a fascinating account of the author's expedition to the mountain from Venezuela. Operational Navigation Chart (ONC) Sheet L27 (1:1 000 000) is the only map available in the UK, but it has no topographical information and doesn't show the position of Pico da Neblina. Apparently the heavy cloud cover and constantly shifting river courses have made accurate mapping difficult.

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