

LIFE IN GOD'S GARDEN



A photographic exhibition looking at the work of the Anglican Church in the Amazon

LIFE IN GOD'S GARDEN

USPG photographer Leah Gordon recalls her visit to the small fishing community of Maria Ribeira, in Brazil's Amazon rainforest.

Flying over the rainforest for the first time, I could see why it is referred to as the 'green lung of the world': below me were vast swathes of rainforest threaded through with the blue veins of the Amazon river system.

We landed in Gurupá, on a runway built on a rough forest clearing. Setting foot on land, one of the first things I noticed were the alien noises – well, not quite alien, but certainly noises I had only previously heard in David Attenborough films.

From Gurupá I took a two-hour boat trip to the small fishing community of Maria Ribeira. My guide was Duca, who has been instrumental in founding a small Anglican community, named St Peter's, in honour of the fisherman disciple.

It was on this trip that I was able to appreciate the vastness of the Amazon River – parts of it as wide as a lake – its embankments fringed with trees and dotted with small wooden houses. We turned down a narrow tributary, passing through overhanging branches, hearing the sounds of frogs, monkeys and birds.

Eventually we arrived at a tiny bare wharf. We disembarked and continued on foot. I was warned not to touch the huge rubbery red flowers because they burned the skin. While I nervously checked the ground for snakes and spiders, Duca described how his cousin lost her arm after being bitten by a fast-moving tree snake. There is a serious point to be made

here. No-one in Maria Ribeira has been trained in First Aid, nor does the community have access to anti-venoms. So if a person is bitten, the only option is to take them by boat to Gurupá's sole doctor. And if the doctor cannot help, then it means a 30-hour boat journey to the hospital in Belém. Limbs and lives have been lost due to the delay.

Maria Ribeira is a loose collection of neat wooden houses either side of a wide dirt path. Watching how the people lived, I came to appreciate what is meant by the bounty of God's Creation: food was all around. Most meals consist of fresh grilled fish, served with açai berry sauce and tapioca from cassava, which is grown in small forest clearings. I saw children shimmy up trees to collect berries, watched villagers preparing cassava flour, and saw small canoes straggling back to the wharf with the day's catch. The villagers also keep bees for honey.

Everybody sleeps in hammocks, which makes sense when there are many dangerous insects and snakes prowling in the forest. Indeed, the best part of my day was catching an hour's nap in the hammock on Duca's cousin's front porch.

It was truly inspiring spending time with a community that is not dependent on a cash economy. And it is the Anglican Church that is trying to keep alive the wonderful sense of sharing and brotherhood that I encountered. ■

All photographs: USPG/Leah Gordon



The Amazon rainforest is the largest on earth – 18 times the size of Britain and Ireland. It is home to the world's greatest variety of plant and animal species. Sixty per cent of the forest is within Brazil and 13 per cent within Peru, with smaller amounts in Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana.



The Amazon is the world's second longest river, after the Nile, although some scientists claim it is the longest. It is, at any rate, the world's largest river system – meaning it is the river that carries the most water. It is also the river that contains the largest number of freshwater fish species in the world, estimated at more than 3,000.



The Brazilian Amazon is estimated to be home to 20 million people, including 400 different indigenous groups.



The Amazon has been described as 'God's garden' because fruit and fish are in abundant supply, and small crops can be grown easily. Here a boy climbs a tree to collect açai (pronounced ah-sah-ee) berries, a vital source of food for many communities. The berries are considered a 'superfood' because they are high in protein, calcium, iron and other nutrients.



This is Maria Ribeira, a quilombo, which is a settlement founded by former slaves. It is situated along a tributary of the Amazon. The community is dependent on fishing for its survival.



It is becoming increasingly difficult for the community of Maria Ribeira to catch sufficient supplies of fish because large fishing corporations are depleting stocks. The fishermen of Maria Ribeira have started using nets to increase their catch. They could work for the big companies, but the wages are very low.



The Anglican Church in Brazil heard about the plight of the Maria Ribeira community and, working with a local ecumenical group, arranged to supply the community with two fridge freezers. The freezers mean fish can be kept for longer and surplus stock can be sold at local markets to generate an income.



This is Gurupá, a small fishing town on the banks of the Amazon, close to Maria Ribeira. Inspired by the support of the church, a small worshipping community has been founded here, with the support of USPG Mission Companion Ruth de Barros and her husband Saulo, who is the Bishop of the Amazon.



This boy is selling food by the roadside in Gurupá. Educational opportunities are scarce in this part of the world. The Anglican Diocese of the Amazon has plans to help establish more schools and educational facilities.



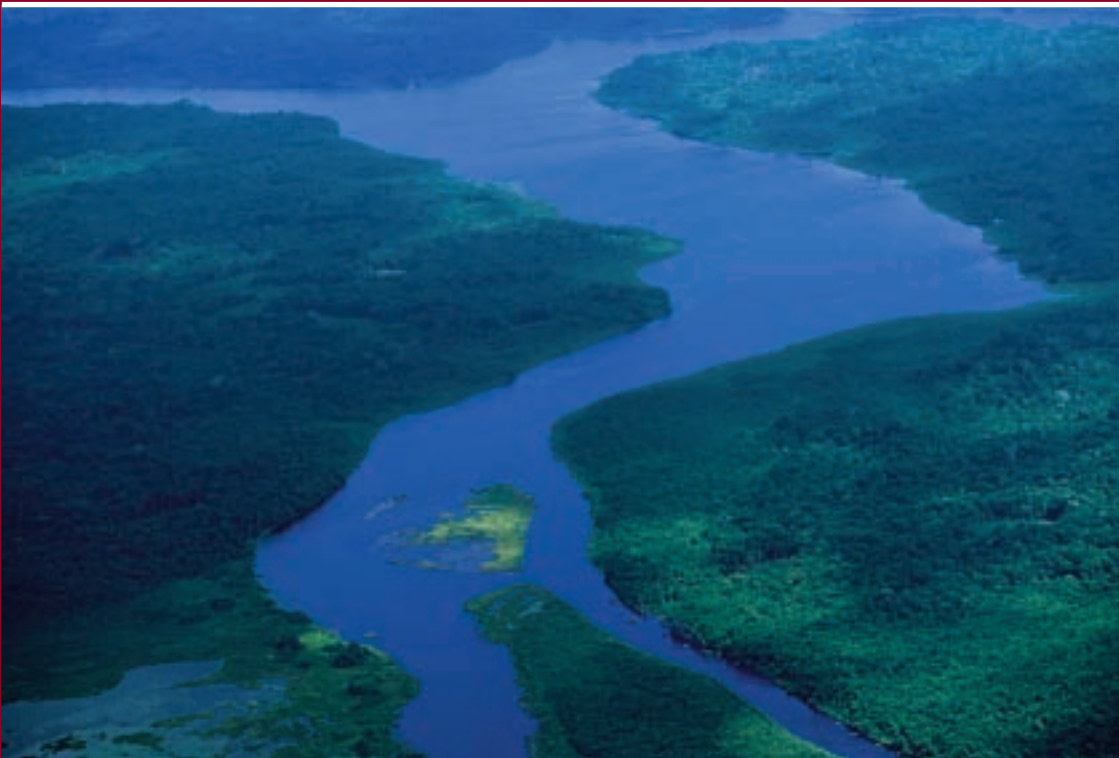
Hammocks are the bed of choice, which makes sense in a part of the world where snakes and dangerous insects are everywhere. Siesta time is an essential part of the day.



This is Vanilce Castro and her daughter Juliane in their home in Gurupá. Vanilce is a lay preacher in the new Anglican community, which has been named St Peter's, in honour of the fisherman disciple. Vanilce's father, Duca, is also a founding member of St Peter's.

'In the Anglican Church I found a partner for a new model in evangelising, liberating and taking action.'

Duca Castro, Maria Ribeira, Brazil



USPG: Anglicans in World Mission is enabling churches to share God's love in practical and life-changing ways.

We work in direct partnership with Anglican Churches in over 50 countries, helping to strengthen the church and build communities.

USPG needs your donations to support vital church work, including healthcare, education, leadership training and action for social justice.

USPG: Anglicans in World Mission

200 Great Dover Street

London SE1 4YB

Tel: 0845 273 1701 or 020 7378 5678

Email: enquiries@uspg.org.uk

www.uspg.org.uk

Registered charity number 234518

