

The reader of Palmari



RICHARD EMBLIN

BY RICHARD EMBLIN
editor@thecitypaperbogota.com



I heard he was out there, but I didn't have a name or face to go by. All I knew was that he was Austrian-born and lived deep in the Amazon, working the land, fishing the estuaries of the Yavari, a carver of wood and a boatman for hire. Axel Antoine Feill, the dedicated owner of Palmari had told me some of his story, how every month he waited for *The City Paper* to arrive. So I set a bundle of newspapers aside for my enigmatic contact and made sure that Axel would send them on to Leticia where they were put on a boat in Tabatinga along with tourists, snacks and fishing rods. The boat then headed four hours south, past Benjamin Constant along the Yavari River until it reached Axel's jungle lodge.

When the eco tourists arrived, word got out and the intrepid Austrian would take his boat three hours up river, navigating sand banks, fallen trees and accompanied by pink river

dolphins. My anonymous Austrian was an anomaly in this corner of the Brazilian rainforest, and I heard how he would climb the ramp to Palmari, order a beer at the Welcome Center and without turning a single page of *The City Paper* talk with the staff before packing his crisp edition to once again return to the wilderness.

I recently tried to catch up with my reader when Axel organized a trip to his lodge. But it was in vain. As I left a stack of recent issues for incoming visitors and set aside the Austrian's copy, I was told that he was probably trading in Manaus or guiding tourists on the Colombian side of the Amazon. In time, I thought, I would meet him and be able to say thanks for his loyalty. Palmari was my most remote distribution point - and I do not use the past tense lightly - and my "reader" a rare breed indeed. One thing is to pick up the press and glance over current affairs in the setting of the 93 Park, another is to deal with the currents of the Yavari, the caimans and insects.

Tragedy struck Palmari last month. Twenty years of hard work by Axel razed to the ground in a matter of minutes by a criminal gang of arsonists. The news of the fire spread quickly among the global community of scientists, bird watchers and fans of this once beautiful lodge, but one thing was clear: this was no accident. The fire which destroyed Palmari

was as malicious as it was dangerous. Fortunately the last of the tourists had departed, especially the Europeans and school children on their excursions from Bogotá. No one was hurt in the fire, but entire communities have lost their main source of income as the lodge employed cooks and guides from six towns along the Yavari as well as those who sold their arts and crafts to tourists, the maintenance materials and the volunteers who would stay and study at Palmari. The naturalist and social development institute Idsavj (www.idsavj.org) also dies with Palmari; and its disappearance has a profound impact on the educational projects for children from indigenous communities nearby.

In the beauty that is the Amazon, there are dangerous elements. Wildlife not being one of them. Narcs want to keep the tourists away, loggers want pristine forest to tear down and animal traffickers see conservation as a threat to the trade. Whatever the motives of the fire at Palmari, tour operators working the Peruvian, Colombian and Brazilian Amazon are easy targets and tourism to the region can dry up if those responsible for senseless acts are not caught.

The importance of Palmari wasn't its structure, but its spirit. A place where memories were made and friendship forged. A lodge where one could appreciate the abundance of nature and where I had the most loyal of readers.

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Richard Emblin
Director

María Claudia Peña
General Manager

Hugo Avila
Art Director

Liliana Grillo
Intl Projects Manager

Contributors

David Noto
Nicolas Petraglia
Vicki Kellaway
Claudia Mahedy
Jimmy Weiskopf
Kofi Martin
Rachel Pook
Mauricio Sánchez
Marguerite Ransom
Jeb Blount
Tom Vogel

Photography

Salvatore Salamone
Piers Calvert
Jess Kraft

Logistics

Luis C. Caballero

Printing

Editoriales La República

www.thecitypaperbogota.com

TEL.: (571) 607-4497
Bogotá, Colombia

E-mails:

editor@thecitypaperbogota.com
advertising@thecitypaperbogota.com

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