

Notes on Roraima Trip, February 2000

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It's snowing again. I love it. Something about the snow makes me really want to write.

It's been longer than it should have been since my last installment. I'm spending a lot of my free time looking for a nice editorial position at a publication --Web or otherwise -- that interests me, as well as writing for a couple of Web sites and I've been a bit stretched out.

Before I start into Part 3, I want to say that altho I may have made it seem that this little trip has been little more than torture so far, that's not really it at all. Of course there were a couple times I wasn't really a happy camper (only about seven hours worth). But for the record let me say that there was no time on this entire trip that I had second thoughts about whether it was a good thing to do. This kind of trip is the kind of thing I actually like to do, for some reason.

Of course, I'd do it a little differently next time.

So, where we left off, I'd had to abandon my hopes of climbing Roraima, but found a cooperative guide at the last moment.

What happened next on the trip lends to less of a chronological narration, I think.

The nuts and bolts of it are that my guide Donald and I ride the Jeep-thing up the horrible road to Paratepui, sign in at the park warden's hut and then hike for two days through the Grand Sabana to the base of mount Roraima.

That said, I'll add a few notes.

One is that the Grand Sabana is mostly grass. It's really tough grass, and it brushes up against your legs as you walk along the path, so it's better to wear pants. It looks like ordinary plains grasses from a distance, but up close you can see that the roots are partially above ground, tuberous and hirsute. The roots run laterally along the ground in places, and the black hairs on them make them appear tough and resilient, to my eyes.

You can tell that it has been longer since there has been fire in some places than in others. It looks to me like the tuberous roots allow the grass to survive fire pretty well, but Donald says that one of the botanists who went with him told him that if people keep lighting fires like they do, this will all be a desert in a hundred years.

I'm a pretty rabid environmentalist, and prone to believe predictions like this, but I don't believe this one yet. Granted, the botanist is more likely to be right than I am. I'm just saying I'm not convinced. Indians have been setting fires for longer than they've been able to talk. And obviously, the fires don't kill all the grass they burn.

Later, that night, Donald asks me for the lighter, so he can light the stove to cook. He gave it to me before we started hiking, told me to put it in my pouch. Why did he give it to me? Is he afraid he'll misplace it? He's the guide. Isn't he supposed to be the responsible one?

So I say, "lighter than what?" which he really laughs at. He repeats it several times. "Lighter than what." I had thought it was such a bad joke I shouldn't even have said it, but maybe for a speaker of English as a foreign language it's really great.

So all this makes me think about lighters and matches and how easy we have it these days and that makes me realize that there's something new in the mix. The lighter. That could be why the grasslands are in danger now. It's just too damn easy to start fires these days.

This is the dry season, so the grass is yellow and if you look out across it, over the rolling savanna, it looks a lot like Montana, or Idaho. Roraima, the tepui we're heading for, rises up from the grasses like a mesa in Monument Valley, (but all around is grass, not dirt). It's very flat on top, and the sides are straight and perpendicular, and there is a steep apron reaching up to the base of it, all around it.

There are other tepuis. One right next to Roraima, named Kukennan, and others more distant, one of which is very small, like a stump. Donald says they call it "finger" or "thumb" tepui, but the Indians call it the stump tepui. He tells me a story the Indians have about it and later I recorded it in Spanish, English and his native Indian language. I'm planning to rip an MP3 file of it and put it on the web for you. I love the story.

The sky is very blue and there are fluffy white clouds and the air is dry. The sun is hot, but there is a cooling breeze.

Every once in a while we come to a draw, or a little valley with a stream in the bottom of it. The trail leads down into thick green jungle, vines, logs, ferns and everything. In this way, I suppose it's not much like Montana.

We stop for lunch and discuss the difference between "woods" and "jungle." I suggest that "jungle" is really just tropical woods. Donald suggests that "jungle" is "woods with tigers."

I think he has captured the essence of it. The word has such exotic connotation in our western world, it's hard to define it without saying, "Jungle: A place where who knows what can just jump out right next to you and kill you before you know it." Yes, the home of the headhunter, the python, Charlie, and the tiger.

But there are not tigers here. I am hoping there's a remote chance of seeing a jaguar, but Donald says it's not likely at all.

But if there are no jaguars, and certainly no tigers, this isn't a jungle, in at least one meaningful way, dammit.

You see, I don't want to come to South America to hike through the "woods." It really should be jungle. And not just so I can go back to the US and casually mention over a good red wine after dinner some evening, referring to the exotic flower in the table centerpiece, "I saw one of those in the Venezuelan jungle, and there was a purple spider on it."

No, that little word validates the whole trip for me as well. I want an adventure like in the movies, like on TV, like in National Geographic. Not woods. Jungle.

Not that this is my first jungle. My second novel, already underway, was inspired by an adventure trek I did thru Thai jungle.

But still, it matters. And I want to be sure this really is jungle. Because behind the quest for adventure is the requirement that it be "authentic."

Veracity. Always there standing guard between our dreams and our accomplishments.

Let me belabor this point with another example. Donald's backpack isn't a Kelty or a Jansport or anything like that. It's a woven wicker basket on a wooden frame. He lines it with heavy plastic, loads it up with everything he has, then laces it shut.

I like it that Donald has a pack like this. It makes it more of an adventure because it makes him more of a primitive Indian. In the pictures of the two of us it'll look more exotic. It's more wild to trek with an Indian guide who himself is more wild, right?

But the more I think about his pack, the more I begin to doubt the whole rationale of my point of view. Donald is Donald, no matter what kind of pack he uses, right? Would I rather he had a bone in his nose? Do I wish he was named "gulu banala" instead of Donald? (Actually, I later learn that Donald is his last name. His first name is an Indian name, "Haslit.")

To what extent am I grasping at straws, wishing for the appearance of adventure where the real adventure isn't quite wild enough?

To what extent is no adventurer ever satisfied? I can imagine Captain Cook saying to his crew, "Good, they're cannibals. That's going to really go over well at the pub in Greenwich."

I just saw on PBS how Admiral Byrd went off by himself on Antarctica for no other reason than to push the envelope and bolster his flagging image as an adventurer.

As I hike, I start to wonder why Donald uses a basket for a pack. It's not that he can't afford a regular nylon pack with aluminum frame. In fact he has one, hanging on the side of his shed at his home. Does he use this one just to appear more authentic? If that's the case, it's worse than if he used an aluminum pack.

On the first day, at the trailhead there were two other guides coming out with European hikers. They had basket packs, too. Did they all agree to use only baskets because that looks more authentic to the clients?

I hope you see a little of where I'm going with this, because at the base of it is an interesting issue. Not just reality versus appearances, but something more. It has something to do with our need for both adventure and veracity.

After a couple more days, I feel I can ask Donald about his pack without embarrassing him. He says that he prefers the basket because it can hold much more than a modern pack. I then realize he is right. There is theoretically no limit to how much a guide or porter can strap onto one of those things.

There is another interesting lesson here, one Ronald Reagan would have loved.  
Sometimes the old one really is better.

I am getting too long winded. I'll just leave you with the notes from my pocket notebook for the first two days (indented, and quoted verbatim). And my explanations, (not indented).

Thanks for listening.

Ethics of hiking like a man:  
Never discuss how hard or far it was,  
or how hard it will be.  
The others with think it matters to you.

Sometimes, when I'm hiking in the jungle,  
I miss the sounds of the metal shop.  
Thank God for the billbird.

As I mentioned in part two, we stop for lunch in the *jungle*. We prepare tuna, mayonnaise, bread and cucumber, and there is a sound very much like that of a hammer on an anvil. Donald explains that it's a bill bird. "Torongan" in his tongue.

You'd think it would take a big bird to make such an insane and loud sound, but he says it's actually a small bird. I can't see the bird.

Yellow butterfly  
in the sun  
flying against the wind.

A butterfly  
making headway  
against the wind.  
I tell you.

Think about it.

Day Two  
lizard  
vulture  
butterfly

Scratched into the surface of a big rock along the way:

BENETON ES EL ULTIMO

This is the first graffiti I've seen since the beginning mile. It irritates me. Until I see the next graffito:

JOSE ES MUY LENTO

And then I see the absurdity and the humor of it.

Benneton is the ultimate?

In this setting, how could that have been written without irony?

But of course, it may well have been written without irony.

Now it's just funny, in a good way, to my eyes.

Jose es muy lento?

Jose must have been indeed lento, if his comrades had time to scratch all that into the rock.

Later, one last graffito:

QUANTOS KILOS LLEVAS?

So now the rocks are talking to me. It has been almost entirely uphill toward the tepui both today and yesterday and I'm pretty tired. The sky is still wide and clear and blue. It's hot and dry and I haven't seen anyone but Donald for 24 hours. Things are getting strange in a way I'm really liking.

We are approaching the rock.  
Things are feeling Weird. Weird?  
Like in "Picnic at Hanging Rock."

It's quiet – crickets?

Mutual  
Purple rock  
hallucinations  
with  
flowers.

At one point, everything becomes purplish.  
Really purplish.  
Even the flowers.  
It persists.  
And I finally say something about it.  
“Yes,” Donald says, “Everything thing appears purple to me, too.”  
He seems as puzzled as I am about it.

I love the idea that we seem to be having a mutual hallucination.  
But I can't accept it as one.  
It is possible that here, on this part of the earth, the rocks, sand, pebbles and flowers,  
really are purplish.  
It fits into my understanding of the world.

But still.  
It's all illusion in one way or another.  
Something in me wants it to be a dreamy conjuration.  
I still refuse to accept it as a hundred percent “reality.”

We had stopped for a swim in the Rio Tek earlier. I washed my pants, and hung them up to dry, then put them on the pack to finish drying. They dried, and I put them on again. Clean clothes are almost a luxury when you're camping and hiking.

My pants!  
Not on my pack!  
I must check.  
In my pack?  
I ask Donald.  
He tells me I'm  
wearing them.

Termite mounds  
Strange brown flower  
dried bulbs  
and oily peat bogs

We hope for  
push for  
metamorphoses  
and  
at the same time  
fear them  
for who then  
will we be?

I think – I hope –  
I fear  
I go forward.

(Freudian slip on the spelling of metamorphoses, no doubt.)