



## Atlantic South America

### GEOGRAPHY

### River Life in Brazil

*Brazil's rivers play a major role in the lives of many rural Brazilians. Here, an American outdoorsman, on a fishing trip to Brazil, describes the scene along the Rio Negro, in northern Brazil near its border with Venezuela.*

Life on the river, in the equatorial jungle, isn't exactly unchanged and timeless, but it's close. Planes do occasionally fly over on their way to [the cities of] Manaus or Rio de Janeiro. Diesel generators provide power that lights some of the houses dotting the higher reaches of the river bank. Some of the native canoes are pushed by gasoline engines.

Still, some of these 20th century intrusions are somehow softened by the fact that the planes are the only way other than the river to travel across this immense country. The few isolated houses are on stilts to escape the inevitable [expected] rainy-season floods and the canoes are dugouts, made by hand to fit a fishing lifestyle.

"I've had a house on the river for 26 years and it hasn't changed much," said Gilberto Castro [a fishing-trip guide]. . . . "Life moves back and forth. When times get hard, people move back to the jungle." Times do occasionally get hard. There are no welfare programs in Brazil, and many of the millions who have sought a different life in Manaus or Brasilia often don't find the things they seek.

"People go to the cities because they want to find hospitals or better schools for their children. But in town, everything you have to pay for," Castro said. "On the river, you don't pay for the land. You don't pay for the water and you don't pay for the food."

Anyone who wishes can find a small spot on a river—the Negro or Solimões or dozens of others—and erect a small house. They can clear a little land to grow potatoes and manioc—a root vegetable that is used to make flour, a staple in their diet—and they can fish for food. They fish as families have for centuries and send their kids to small schools in the larger villages. Most of the guides who work the . . . [fishing] boats on the rivers go back to their villages and fish during the off-season.

Everyone is taught in Portuguese, Castro said, a unification movement dating to Brazil's decision to join the Allied forces in World War II. City folk can talk to country folk and that gives them a head start if they do go back to the land, Castro said. "Brazil is still very family oriented," he said. "If you move to the city, you have family there to help you. It's the same on the river."

The lone exception . . . are the country's small tribes of primitive Indians. "Nobody is allowed to go near them," Castro said. "They are living far up the rivers. It's more the fear of disease they are not equipped to handle than anything else."

But even those Indians share the river with the rest of Brazil and the river, by any name, still is life in Brazil. At the peak of the rainy season, the waters of the Amazon can be more than 100 miles wide. At the peak of the rainy season, about one-fifth of all fresh water on earth can be found in the Amazon Basin. Half the freshwater fish in the world—2,500 to 3,000 species—are found here.

There are more species of animals and plants than anywhere else on earth. Where else can one see on a single day giant river otters, alligators, pink dolphins, tree sloths, and pythons? There are howler monkeys, macaws, parrots and parakeets squawking and fighting for territory in the jungle canopy. . . . The size and diversity [variety] are beyond any real comprehension for anyone who hasn't pushed a boat out into the black waters of the Rio Negro or stood on the north shore in [the city of] Manaus and tried to see across [the Rio Negro's] confluence [meeting point] with the Amazon.

"The river is still the road in Brazil," said Castro. . . . In five days traveling the Rio Negro . . . we passed communities that comprise a few small houses and usually a school and a church or two, Catholic and sometimes Baptist. Residents farm and fish and watch the river flow by.

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From "Brazil: Brazilian life flows on river currents, even in 21st century," (retitled "River Life in Brazil") by Mike Leggett in the *Austin American-Statesman*, March 12, 2000. Copyright ©2000 by **Austin American-Statesman**. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

**Understanding What You Read** After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. According to the reading, why do many people who have gone to live in Brazil's cities return to its rivers during hard times?

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2. How do most of the people who live along Brazil's rivers survive?

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3. What evidence does the reading cite to show the tremendous amount of natural resources that are present in the Amazon Basin?

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**Activity**

Create a poster for a government campaign to convince the poor people of Brazil's overcrowded cities to relocate along a river in the Amazon Basin.