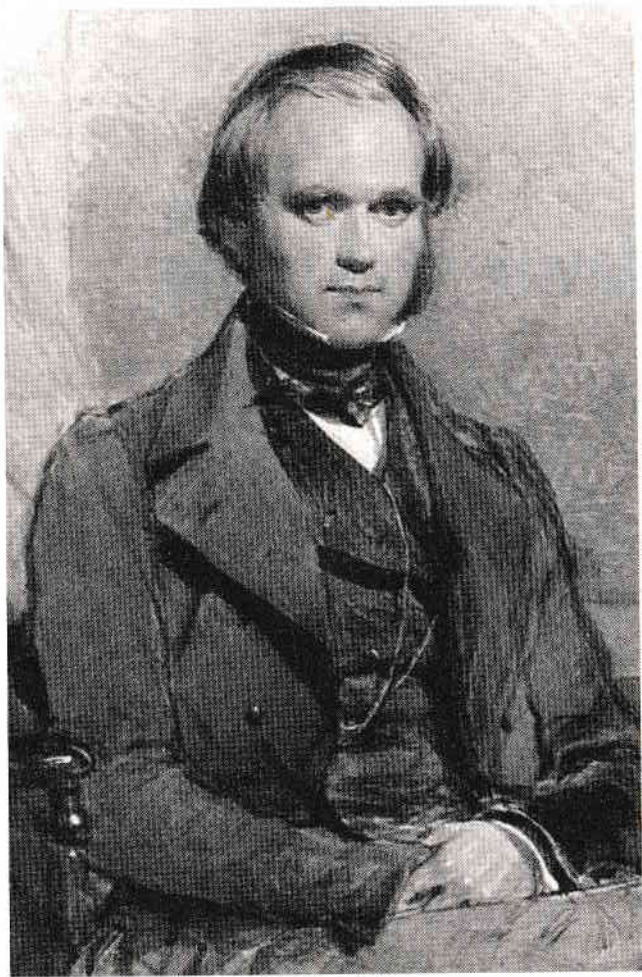


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DARWIN SLEPT HERE

DISCOVERY, ADVENTURE, AND SWIMMING IGUANAS
IN CHARLES DARWIN'S SOUTH AMERICA

ERIC SIMONS



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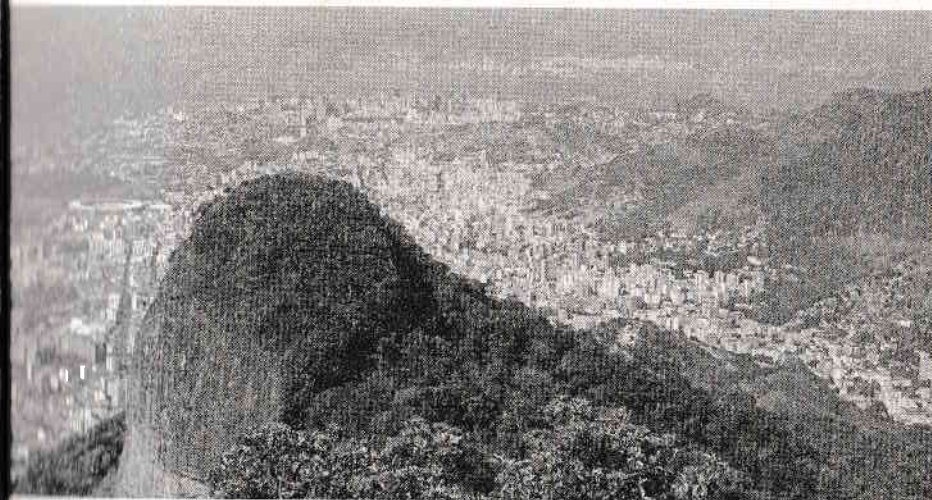
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PART I
EXPLORATION

THE CHANGING LAND ON
THE EAST COAST





1. BRAZIL

A Chaos of Delights

I do not know what epithet such scenery deserves: beautiful is much too tame; every form, every colour is such a complete exaggeration of what one has ever beheld before. If it may be so compared, it is like one of the gayest scenes in the Opera House or Theatre.

—BEAGLE DIARY, JUNE 1, 1832

BRAZIL IS THE KIND OF PLACE where you feel something's happening that's absolutely delightful and fascinating and completely foreign to everything you know, only you can't quite grasp what it is. That weird paranoia is amplified by the stunningly disorienting scenery of places like Rio de Janeiro, where huge, smooth cones of rock swoop up and

down, clad in a thriving blend of palms, ferns, cactuses, and scrubby bushes, while the glittering jumble of city runs right up to—even into—famous mountain landmarks rising out of the water.

I started my voyage with Brazil because that's where Darwin started his and because it was that exhilarating landscape that stood out most in his mind as he reflected on his trip later, as an old man. Also, as I soon found out, there was an easy comparison to make between Darwin's take on the new nature around him and my own adrenaline-fueled excitement at Brazil's crazily, incomprehensibly, wonderfully different city landscape.

The feeling I was missing something only increased as I tried to adjust to Brazilian social life. A functional grasp of Spanish couldn't get me beyond "Hello, how are you?, The dog is green" conversations in Portuguese. I was bunking down in a cramped youth hostel in Botafogo and had trouble connecting with my hostel mates, who tended to divide into camps of 1) fluent Portuguese speakers from Europe and North America who had immersed themselves in Brazilian life and did things like teaching in schools and looking down upon us ignorant gringos, 1a) not-yet-fluent Portuguese speakers who were dating Brazilians and looked down on us ignorant gringos, and 2) blissfully ignorant gringos whose knowledge of Brazil started and stopped with an aesthetic appreciation of the thong bikini.

For dorm roommates I had drawn a preening, chiseled German and an aloof Frenchman. The German liked to strut around the room in a Speedo and, while admiring

his rippling bronzed abs, lecture us about the club scene in heavily accented Tarzan-style English. "So there is this place I went to last night where the cover was 120 reales," he told us. The Frenchman raised an eyebrow at the cost, to which the German quickly added, "But you can drink up to 100 of it. And it is worth it just to see it. They have the most beautiful girls there."

The floor near the German's bed was littered with wrinkled-up napkins used to capture names and phone numbers. "Flavia," whose napkin had blown over in my direction and lay face up on the floor, had taken the time to write hearts around her number.

When the German took an interest in what I was doing in Brazil, however, I left him baffled by saying I wanted to go to the Tijuca National Park.

"What's that?"

"Hiking," I said. "In the rainforest, in the mountains. Want to come?"

"Oh no," he said. "Not for me. I'm going to the beach again. Have you seen the girls on the beach?" He clicked his tongue and gave me a thumbs-up.

Both roommates were asleep—Tarzan sprawled out in his briefs, sheet pushed away—when I tiptoed out early on a gray, humid Thursday morning. Botafogo was a one-time suburb of Rio where Darwin had taken a cottage to use as a peaceful base for trips into the surrounding jungle, and it had since vanished—along with Rio's other suburbs—under an onslaught of humanity and cinder block. I boarded a bus headed north, to Tijuca, where I expected to find not just a Darwin site, but a remnant of

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tropical forest, and a much-needed dose of natural tranquility. We lurched and honked our way along in a cloud of exhaust, past vendors and flapping flags emblazoned with the Brazilian national motto, "Order and Progress."

Order did not exist here the way it does in other countries. Sidewalks all over town blinked in and out of existence like a demonstration of quantum theory, ending abruptly, sometimes starting again a few blocks later, but certainly following no predictable pattern. Houses of various and dissonant architectural styles leaned on one another. Glass medical centers clung to the gabled offices of massage therapists, which cast their shadows on brown adobe liquor stores. Street vendors hawked batteries, scissors, pirated DVDs, cell phones, peanuts, coconuts, electric sanders, and leather-covered steering wheels, in case drivers wanted to pimp their ride mid-commute. And then the Brazilians—tanned, lean people in shorts, T-shirts, and flip-flops everywhere, all on their way somewhere. (I suppose, given the national motto, they were on their path to progress.) The hum of conversation mixed with the cries of the vendors, the rumble of idling motorcycles, the drone of airplanes and sightseeing helicopters, and the whines and sighs of trucks braking to stops and moving on again. Blasts of exhaust, sweat, grime, and dust joined the humidity to create a suffocating cloud. In the shade of the omnipresent buses, manic taxis, scooters, policemen, pushcarts, and bicycle delivery riders for "Bob's Burgers" competed for space on the street. One messenger company that dispatched riders to sites around the city was called, in English, "Boy Delivery."

While I struggled with a radically different version of social order, Darwin confronted in Brazil a radically different version of the natural world. Darwin hailed from a country that, after thousands of years of cultured habitation, had essentially become one big garden. A big cultivated garden in a cold climate. A two-month boat ride and he found himself sweating and marveling at an intensity of color he had never encountered outdoors before. Vegetation grew uncontrollably, in a way that seemed a direct challenge to a stiff-upper-lip-loving Englishman's sense of the universe, and his reaction to virgin forest pretty much mirrored my German roommate's reaction to the girls on the beach: "Delight is however a weak term for such transports of pleasure" and "I can only add raptures to the former raptures." He concluded his diary entry from his second day in Brazil with "Full of enjoyment one fervently desires to live in retirement in this new & grander world."

In the 1830s, Rio de Janeiro amounted to a whole lot of neat monolithic rock formations with jungle covering everything in between. Twelve million people later, the city forced its will on what little natural spaces remained, presenting its own profusion of growth—an urban mirror to the bursting vegetation of Darwin's day. Now tall, clean skyscrapers rose above all else, lifeless towers of cement and steel punctuating the swarming, sweltering, steamy mess below, competing for attention with forest-clad mountain peaks in the background. It was the pure state of nature, still—just the "nasty, brutish and short" Hobbesian version.

After my forest-bound bus had lurched through that tumult for more than an hour, crammed streets gave way to a shadier, quieter neighborhood. The road climbed a winding hill, with thick tropical foliage hanging over the road. Gated driveways led to fantastic houses overlooking the skyscrapers and curving white sand beaches below. ("On the road, the scenery was very beautiful," Darwin declared from the same spot, "especially the distant view of Rio.") At the top of the hill, in a tranquil neighborhood called Alto da Boa Vista, another long gated driveway curled into the Tijuca National Park like the entrance to a wonderful tropical mansion. A creek and verdant forest, infused with the pure smells of tropical flowers and wet soil, quickly surrounded everything.

A guide introduced himself as Jean Marx Muñiz Belvedere and politely broke into my reverie to invite me on a walk through the forest. To get him talking in English, which he claimed to be uncomfortable with, I asked what he had done before he came to the park. "I was an artist," he said. "How you say, *trapezista*?"

He swung his arms and flashed a sly half-grin.

"A trapeze artist?" I said.

"Yes," he said matter-of-factly. "That's right."

To him, this was perfectly normal. This was one of those times when I felt I was missing something. When you finally do find someone to talk to in Brazil, he makes it sound like everyone local just happened to have a past that involved circus performances.

Jean the former trapeze-artist looked stereotypically Brazilian—tanned olive skin, hirsute, toned limbs, a head

of short, dark, curly hair, and a perpetual humid-jungle fog on his thin-rimmed glasses. I asked what he knew about Charles Darwin, and he asked me how much time I had for the answer.

It turned out he didn't ask because he was a Darwin expert, but because the best thing he could think of to do with my question was to take me hiking to the highest peak in the park, the 3,400-foot-tall Pico Tijuca. "It's where we traditionally take visitors," he said. "The ones who can walk. You can walk?"

There wasn't much in Darwin's own account to follow. On June 16, 1832, he left his cottage in Botafogo early in the morning to see the waterfalls in "Tijeuka." "Neither the height or the body of water is anything very imposing," he wrote, "but they are rendered beautiful, by the dampness so increasing the vegetation, that the water appears to flow out of one forest & to be received & hidden in another below."

Now the park's largest waterfall is the 115-foot-tall Cascatinha Taunay, and the main pathway into the park crosses a bridge directly below the falls. The rainy season was coming to a close and the waterfall was flowing fast, probably more so than in Darwin's time. Moss and jungle plants clung to life on the sheer rock face supporting the falls, while vines and creepers webbed their way over the top of the waterfall. From the top, water cascaded into a small pool, flowed downhill into a larger, calmer pool, and then joined the creek running down toward the entrance to the park.

I asked Jean how the waterfall might have looked in

Darwin's time, and he surprised me. He said the park, in its present incarnation, was actually more jungly now than it was in 1832. Modern-day Parque Nacional Floresta Tijuca, Jean told me, was the result of a bold and successful environmental engineering project—one that dated to just after Darwin's visit. Rio de Janeiro's early history runs along the usual lines—backwater town booms when resources get discovered—but with a bit of a twist. The entire Portuguese royal family moved to the capital of their Brazilian territory when Napoleon invaded Portugal in 1808. The population of Rio boomed, and it kept expanding, carving rapaciously into the surrounding jungle in search of more land for plantations and suburbs. The entire forest where we stood admiring hundred-foot-tall trees that appeared ancient had been burned to the ground and turned into a coffee plantation. "Naked," Jean said, staring off into the jungle. "This entire spot was naked."

In the mid-1810s, King John, who continued living in Rio after Napoleon's defeat, began to worry that the destruction would harm the city's water supply and issued orders that the land around streams be replanted with trees to guarantee a potable water supply. His commands went ignored until the springs that provided fresh water for the city went dry and Rio suffered four massive droughts. Darwin, who visited in 1832, missed these—the last had happened in 1829, and the next would hit in 1833—and he didn't mention any water supply troubles. But the most severe dry spell, which occurred in 1844, finally convinced the government to act. By that time Brazil was independent from Portugal, and the country's new rulers decided to

put some money and thought into conserving the forests and waterfalls of Tijuca. In this case, conserving meant replanting.

In 1861, Manuel Gomes Archer was named administrator of the Tijuca Forest project, and together with six slaves, he began to replant the forest. Archer had no formal training but was considered a local expert, and he decided to replant the area with native plants in roughly the same ratio he had seen in other Brazilian forests. Over the next twelve years, Archer's six slaves planted 72,000 trees. The springs, according to a report Archer prepared near the end of this administration, regained and retained their former water levels.

Jean told me that our trail was called the Major Archer trail. On the way into the park, I had seen a sculpture at the visitor's center of a man holding out a fresh, live bromeliad, and Jean explained that it honored the six slaves who returned Tijuca to the forest.

"Do you know what the word *ecologia* means?" Jean asked.

"Ecology? Sure. Why?"

"What does it mean?"

"I don't know. The study of ecosystems—plants and animals and the environment."

"No," Jean said, "what does it *mean*? What does *eco* mean?"

"Oh. I don't know. Environment?"

"*Eco* is Greek for house, home. *Logia* is Greek for study. *Ecologia*, ecology, is the study of your home. And what does *economia* mean? *Eco*—home—and *onomia* means