



A Brazilian Adventure

By Francis G. Hauprich

Brazil is a South American country famous for the Amazon rain forest, coffee beans, and samba music. The Carnival at Rio de Janeiro is a colorful festival celebrated in this vast and beautiful country with almost 200 million hard working, fun loving people.

In 1980 I was invited to Brazil by Marcio Melo, a comical and philosophical Rotary exchange student who had lived with my family's Ballston Spa, NY homestead in 1972. Several years later, Marcio returned for a visit and invited me to come and stay with his parents' family in Brazil. Here are some highlights and insights concerning the places seen, people met, and lessons learned in my Brazilian adventure:

When I arrived in Brazil, I was greeted by Marcio's family with warm hugs and welcoming words in broken English. The only thing I could say in Portuguese was "obrigado" for thank you, and I would say it many times in the five months ahead.

The name of Marcio's hometown is Belo Horizonte — which means beautiful horizon. It is a bustling city with a subtropical climate in southeastern Brazil. Belo Horizonte is the capital of the mountainous and mineral rich state of Minas Gerais. I soon learned that the most precious jewels in Brazil are the people who enrich your life with their kind hearts and generous spirit.

Marcio's father, Jonas Melo, co-owned a leather tannery called the Curtume Santa Helena. He was a friendly man filled with enthusiasm for life and love for his family. Jonas and his wife Dinorah had eight children. Four were married and living in various parts of Brazil. Marcio, two younger brothers, and a younger sister along with two adult cousins lived with Mr. and Mrs. Melo.

They occupied a large, two story house that seemed like a beehive of activity. Dinorah gave orders to the servants and chauffeur who taxied everyone around town in a huge station wagon. People were coming and going at all hours, and Mrs. Melo would sometimes apologize to me for the “bagunca” or crazy confusion.

The Melos helped me learn the Portuguese language, or at least important words concerning things like food. I was not a great student and once told Marcio’s mother that she had baked a delicious ball instead of birthday cake. There were often celebrations at the Melo home, and every day there was a delicious meal at lunchtime. Rice and black beans were daily staples served along with fresh fruits, vegetables, meat, bread and cheese. As the food was passed and enjoyed the Melos discussed everything from national news to family plans.

The Melos took me along on memorable vacation trips. We whizzed through Sao Paulo on a subway, and spent a few days at the Hotel California in Rio de Janeiro. There we saw the famous beaches and statue of Christ the Redeemer who looks over a country where religious faith is important to many.

I also took bus trips to Brazilia, the modern national capital city, and to a former colonial mining town called Ouro Preto or “Black Gold” which has a mineral museum and some beautiful churches decorated with gold and sculptures allegedly carved by Aleijadinho, “the little cripple,” in the 18th century.

I also saw a professional football game in Belo Horizonte. It is said that soccer is the second religion of Brazil, and the fans were very loyal and loud in support of their team. I especially enjoyed watching a boy circle the field while juggling a soccer ball with his feet.

Because Brazil is a large country with a long history, there is a great variety of natural and cultural treasures to discover. Wherever I went I met friendly people who were eager to teach me about their country and learn about mine. As I struggled with the language I gained great sympathy for foreign visitors to the United States as well as for the immigrants who helped build our country while adapting to American customs. I also realized that Brazil and the USA are not only melting pots of many nationalities, but living mosaics of things young and old, rich and poor, sacred and sinful, ridiculous and sublime.

You can broaden your horizons and deepen your appreciation for life by traveling and studying in another country. But you can also grow by establishing roots in your own family, church, community and career. The little things we do and say are what move the world closer to that distant utopia that always seems to lie beyond the beautiful horizon.

I imagine Brazil has changed much in the 36 years since I left. Today Belo Horizonte is a metropolis of five million people and Brazil has one of the world’s fastest growing economies. I hope technology and modernization have not replaced good traditions like family barbecues and soccer games on Sunday afternoons. I hope visitors still receive warm hugs from Brazilians and long letters from home.

Mostly I hope that people from different countries will continue to build bridges of friendship so the world can live in peace.