

## Amazonie Équatorienne: Meeting Shuar people

Amériques : du nord au sud

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Danseurs Shuars et nous

One day, one season ago already, we reached “the other half of the world”. A part of the earth where there is only one season but several environments, the South Tropics.

Ecuador immediately felt like home to us. We found a small country wedged between three monsters (Colombia, Brazil and Peru) as children discover a new source of games. This land has numerous facets and cultures; tropical coastal, cool mountain, Amazonian and is a mixture of them all. We chose to spend most of our time in the steamy Ama-

zon rainforests with their famous head-hunters, the Shuar. Like many Amazonian tribes, these people lived until a short time ago in autocracy before the Salesian missionaries decide to teach them some “rules of good manners”. After the missionaries arrived other strangers followed. Firstly, the Shuar's so called colonists, meaning the mestizos who came in from other parts of Ecuador to try their luck in Amazonia, encouraged by the State (Still today their land is sold for next to nothing, without the permission of these ancestral owners). Worse than those

poorer migrant people, the Amazon today attracts the richest sorts, the foreign minin!

g and logging companies who attempt to buy these fragile populations.

As foreigners we apparently were not welcome in this land. We had to spend a lot of time with the local authorities. Many words and honest promises finally allowed us to have the Shuar Arutam Territorial Government (GTSHA, created in 2003 with the help of the Natura Foundation) trust us. We participated in several



Après-midi studieuse à San Luis

Thanks to our friend Patricio, ex-representative of the self-government and to his uncle Pedro, the indigenous mayor of Santiago, we were able to enlarge our perspective of the Shuar world. It would have been impossible to do so without their help, as Shuar people are really suspicious of foreigners. Who are they? Prospectors, journalists, ethnologist come to observe us like animals. In their eyes, one is not better than the other. Are they just tourists, then? No! Patricio al-

ways rectified: they are not tourists, they are my friends!

It's a delicate manner to make the people understand that we don't travel with thousands of dollars in our pockets either! We just come with the humble intention to know better these people and to learn what they agree to teach us.

We really started to discover the Amazonian world in the village of San Luis located on the banks of the Santiago River one hour from the main town arriving by motorized peke-

mee-tings

and finally were invited to the small town of Santiago by one of its government representatives. We should have taken seven hours to reach the town, but finally rumbled in after an eleven hours trip on the only dirt road. This road, built on the hillsides, is often destroyed by landslides caused by tropical rain storms. The bus drivers are used to these kinds of incidents and have learned to be patient. To calm their anxious passengers they repeat the words, "Don't worry, the excavator will come soon" before having a nap in a back-seat. After three hour delays one might wonder why they are here. Maybe to become more humble!

very bad condition, means that one is by average quite rich. In fact there are no more than 3 or 4 vehicles in the whole town. Even the red necks from the surrounding villages come to town by bus or foot to buy gas for their generators, motorboats and petrol lamps, or to just purchase a few indispensable items like salt and soap. We were already surrounded by the Shuar culture even right here, down town.

Nous savons maintenant que l'habit ne fait pas le moine, et encore moins l'indigène.

Santiago is an oasis of "civilization" in the middle of nature. As if nature is an enemy, people feel they have to show it who is the master. Still Santiago is in its own way an endearing place. There is only one long and dusty main street where the locals always greet you once finally there. To have a car in this place, even in



Petit-déjeuner gourmand: grenouilles et tapir

peke (traditional boat), and we were very surprised to discover this traditional village so close to the temptations of Santiago. The first thing we did on arrival was to accept a drink of chicha the chief offered us. The women of the community passed around a bowl filled with the Amazonian people's traditional drink made of masticated tapioca. It's impossible to refuse such an honour as the Shuar men offer

their most precious and priceless thing, their wife's love, with this gesture. Indeed, the women masticate the tapioca and then ferment it to give it a special taste. The mayor of Santiago explained to us one day that the Shuars don't kiss each other. The chicha is their way of kissing! We would have liked to escape such a proof of love, but after a while one gets used to drink huge amounts of chicha!

and even learn to appreciate the different tastes it has according to the quantity of natural sugar added to the tapioca base and the woman who prepared it!

Money is almost not needed in San Luis as everything the people need to survive is found in the jungle. Some Shuars refuse to say they are poor. "We are not poor! On the contrary, we are much richer than many people. We are even richer than you!" The jungle is good for them as they know how to live in harmony with it, how to understand it and how to listen to it, and its richness is worth more than any dollars they say. Unlike many empty existences, the life of the Shuar is filled



La marraine

with love, resources and commonsense.

Shortly after we arrived Martin decided to take us along with him on a hunt. Here we had the chance to enter the Amazon jungle proper for the first time. We put on our boots as did our host, for trails are often very muddy, and headed out. Of course, the gringos we are could not walk as fast as the Shuars, so were quickly left far behind. Each one of us walked at his own pace in silence learning new sounds, new shades of green, brown and blue, new smells and new energies. According to the Shuars the jungle is a world filled with spirits, those of their missing fathers whose souls live in the trees, those of powerful Ibishin (shaman) haunting permanently the forest and those of animals and plants. One must enter the jungle as entering life, with respect, contemplation and goodness. The jungle feels those who resist it and can punish them severely. The "mal aire" (a bad spirit) will grab them and can kill. Only the Ibishin can save someone from it they say.

Martin went hunting with an old shotgun, three cartridges and a blowpipe that he used to kill small birds in the head or heart. That day we walked six hours in the jungle to catch only one toucan, an endangered species protected by the environmental organizations. But Martin told us what he thought about that. "When I go hunting I sometimes have to walk up to ten hours to bring back game to feed my family. I often hunt by night to get more chance to find game. I cannot afford to respect laws imposed by people coming from cities who do not even know what it is to hunt to survive!" On returning to the village we gave the toucan to Martin's wife who immediately plucked, emptied and cut it into pieces before boiling it. That evening we were given a plate filled with a clear and flavourless soup with two blue toucan's legs in it. We had discovered Shuar gastronomy!

On the following mornings we took our breakfast with Martin who was happy to offer us healthy and 100% natural meals. Just for us his kids had

Le Shuar vous offre ce qu'il a de plus précieux, l'amour de son (ou ses) épouse(s).

Bien entendu, les « gringos » que nous sommes ne font pas le poids.

gone the night before to catch frogs near the river and his wife had boiled them guts and all. On a banana leaf plate were also charred baby birds. Finally, we were given a bowl filled of hot water in which each portion had a large piece a tapir. Every meal was a new surprise packed like a small gift in a banana leaf, from beetles and tiny fish cooked whole to even larva!

The next day we ourselves went to hunt large worms with Martin's

son. It was necessary to hike an hour into the jungle before we found a palm tree cut down a couple of months earlier. It is in this type of rotten trunk that a certain species of beetle lays its eggs. Sometime after, the large yellow larva develop and it is this moment the Shuars choose to attack the tree trunk with their machetes to expose the worms in their holes, eating some alive as they go on to catch them all. But there is another way to eat them that we tried, cooked in hot coals wrapped in a banana leaf with a palm tree heart.

The next day we were up at sunrise, a little after the daily call of the village chief at 4.30am, for a day that promised to be very tiring. On the advice of Martin we had prepared the previous day many litres of chicha so we would neither



Une larve bien grasse

have thirst or hunger. The men of the village had grouped to do communal work of up keep of the trails some 3 hours from the village. Meanwhile the women were to go and meet them around midday with food. David and I left with the men. As I was the only women present it was my duty to carry a basket with a big plastic container of chicha and half a gourd to drink it. At each rest stop my job was to serve chicha to all the men present, in bowls full to the brim, refilling as necessary till everyone was satisfied.

As the men were working on a clearing part of the path, the dogs that were with us smelt something a little off the track. Their barking scared a armadillo from its hiding hole. The dogs and three men set of in hot pursuit, in a chase that was to prove fatal for the beast.

They caught up with it some hundred meters further on in one of its other holes. With just machetes and the dogs they managed to get a hold of its feet and drag it out and wring its neck. They seemed so pleased with themselves as they returned to pass the animal to me as it was my job as a woman to carry caught game, and I couldn't escape given I was the only female present. I was hoping that the 15kg animal would not fit in my basket, but by bad luck, it just did. Luckily by then the plastic drum was almost empty of chicha.

When the women finally arrived to our surprise they immediately started to prepare the animal. No point waiting and besides everyone was hungry. First they lit a fire with a hot coal they had brought from the village. Then they scorched the animal whole to get off its exterior carapace, after which they cut it to pieces with a machete, before washing the meat in a stagnant pool in the nearby stream. Then the meat was cooked for half an hour in a large casserole they had brought with them from the village. When everything was ready it was placed on a big banana leaf along with some boiled plantains (green bananas) and everyone ate their fill.

Not everything went so smoothly during our time in the Amazon. On the contrary, at



Balade en peke-peke

one point, we thought we were the victims of spell cast by a local shaman! It was time to reconsider and not instinctively believe that as civilisation had arrived in the Amason it was as welcome as all that. Still the Shuars had started to understand and had chosen the parts they thought were good for them. Money simply has value to them but they don't really know how to use it. However

certain Shuars with the help of the conservationists struggle to keep their values of education and health, often refusing easy money from vested interests in mining and forestry. It is in that direction we finished our stay in the land of the Shuars as interpreters after an American who came to install solar panels in the village had requested our help. For these people electricity was seen as advancement

both in health and education. They were tired of damaging their eyes and lungs with kerosine lamps. “!

We want the chance to be healthy and educated like everyone else”, they insisted.

Our experiences in the lands of the Shuars were of a rare intensity. Strangely, the more we discovered the differences of our worlds the more they seemed to meld together. With the more we understood, the more we found our origins. In times of fatigue, surprise or even disgust, we realised to

which point we are all human, made by the same hands from the same soil, and although we have very different lives, they lead us to a common destiny.

To all our friends, Shuars, Ecuadorians and French, Yumin san me, Gracias and Merci.

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