

Vinhetas do Brasil

*A Narrative of the Journey of Friendship Force of Central NC to
Friendship Force of São Louis, Maranhão, Brazil – June 2017*



Key Learnings on the Way to São Luis

Ah! The exigencies of travel! Twelve of us met at the Greensboro airport on the afternoon of June 10th, later joined in Atlanta by Derek, William and Juanita. Nancy Jo Hoecker, the last ambassador to join the Journey, was the first to arrive in São Luis. Coming all the way from Oregon, Nancy arrived in São Luis two days ahead of the rest of us.

We had three major learnings by the time of our arrival in Sao Luis:

Learning #1: Tell the ticket agent the ultimate destination, not just where the first flight is going. There was much confusion with checking bags through to the final destination. And we learned to expect this type of thing when traveling on more than one carrier.

Learning #2: Do not overuse sleeping aids on overnight flights!! May result in unusual actions, loss of memory, and loss of hearing aids. (Enough said.)

Learning #3: Keep cool, go with the flow and be flexible. Our flight to São Luis made an emergency medical stop in Brasilia where we were met by an ambulance and one passenger was removed by EMS technicians. Needless to say we were late in arriving to São Luis.

But what a welcome! Signs and posters. Red shirts of the Friendship Force club, many smiles,



and even song and dance! A great welcome for weary travelers.

Jane and I were soon on our way, in a frisky Citroen driven by Mary Borges, our hostess for the Journey. At home, we met the family, ate, and soon collapsed in bed.

Others, we heard, went out on the town to hear music, experience the folk festival, and have other adventures. Good for them.

Ralph Cauthen

Head for the Dunes

As far back as last June, beginning with the circulation of Vinhetas do Brasil Update 1.0, we've been nourished on a steady diet of exotic culture, friendly natives and spectacular landscapes. We were all exhorted to be adventuresome, flexible, courageous, and assured that Charles would take care of us through thick and thin. On this Monday, June 12th, Mary Borges, our charming hostess, roused Ralph and me from our beds for a 7:00 a.m. departure for Barreirinhas. What were our expectations?

Selma, Nato, Glória and Paulina from the São Luis club rode with us on the four-hour bus ride to Barreirinhas, our first extended opportunity to plant the seeds of friendship after the warmth of their reception at the airport the previous day. Update 1.0 describes the Lençóis Maranhenses as "a magic landscape of desert, beautiful white dunes and turquoise lakes". But getting there from our hotel, the Gran Lençóis Flat Residence, the landscape was anything but serene. We were all thankful that it wasn't a "walk to the Lençóis" as promised in the itinerary.

Instead, we boarded two Toyota Hilux trucks, specially equipped with exhaust stacks and open seating for sixteen on the back of each. The ride to the dunes and back was beyond our expectations. For a while we went along a sandy, but rather rough trail with the trucks bouncing up and down, but easily driving through pools of standing water that seemed to appear with increasing frequency. These pools soon turned into lakes that threatened to swallow the truck as our expert drivers piloted these Hilux 'boats' through and out of these lakes.



For those of us who sat up front in the cabs, we held our breaths as the water surged up and covered the truck's hood, while those in the back were screaming, laughing, and maybe praying. It was a real relief when, at last, the dunes appeared.



The reward was standing in awe while admiring the view and then refreshing dips in the lakes.

Some courageously climbed or crawled down a huge dune to get into a large lagoon. Others took a very smooth and level trail to a refreshing time in a smaller one.

Reactions and impressions from some of the group:

- A rare experience of a lifetime. One like no other.
- I was apprehensive. Not sure that it would work out well. The seven hour journey to Barreirinhas was worth the work to get there.
- A similar experience to Machu Picchu and Mt. Fuji.
- One of the seven natural wonders of the world.
- Pleasant to be on the cool sand. A welcome change to the hot and humid weather.
- Toyotas and Diesel drivers who had the ability to handle difficult situations like crossing the water, etc.
- Far exceeded anything I ever imagined. Over the river and through the woods, and then to the pools.



All day the group shared an adventurous and exciting attitude. Most enjoyed the free evening with dinner by the river.

Jane Cauthen

The River Preguiças



Next day, June 13th, we traversed the River Preguiças by motor-boat with stops along the way to the Pequenos Lençóis and the lighthouse of the Mandacaru. The Preguiças flows through a constantly changing landscape of mangrove forests, acai palm groves, nature preserves and riverfront developments.

We stopped for a walk on the Pequenos Lençóis, browsed in the gift shop cum riverside bar, and enjoyed lunch at Caburé. Caburé has a comprehensive installation of the most beautiful hammocks for after-lunch relaxation.



Next, we motor-boated to the Mandacaru lighthouse, from the top of which is a breathtaking panoramic view of the Preguiças valley.



Now, after the beauty of the dunes and the rich diversity of the river landscape, we begin to understand the alienation that Gonçalves Dias spoke in his poem, *Canção do Exílio*.

“Minha terra tem primores,
Que tais não encontro eu cá;”

“My land has beauty,
That I cannot find here;”

Charles John



The Welcome Dinner

The next morning, Wednesday June 14th, we headed back to Sao Luis carrying with us the magic of the dunes and the rich diversity of the river. We made a rest stop at Pedra Grande, the same rest-stop on the way to Barreirinhas, and I ran into the Brazilian lady from Australia whom we met on the plane while waiting in Brasilia. They were now on their way to visit the Lençois. We chatted a bit and parted ways again. I guess it is a small world in Brazil as well.

Back in São Luis, we were reunited with our hosts who met us at Churrascaria Sal & Brasa for lunch. It was a great meal, with the varied choices of grilled meats, sausages and a buffet of soups and salads.

After lunch, we went with our hosts. It was a very a restful afternoon at the Sousas, enjoying the hammocks and chatting with Fatima. Hammocks, *rede* in Portuguese (pronounced 'hedgy'), are ubiquitous hereabouts. Most porches and bedrooms are equipped with sturdy wall hooks from which they are hung. From the comfort of a hammock on the patio, Fatima and I, through the agency of Google translate, chatted about life in São Luis and the economy of the state of Maranhão.

As a multi-journey Friendship Force ambassador, I try to grab any opportunity that offers possibilities to foster and deepen friendships. They come in all forms. The spontaneous collapse of the bathroom sink under Derek's body weight, the simultaneous rupture of the water line with water spewing out from under the counter splashing against the opposite wall, and the promise of a flood, was just such a moment. It fell to Fatima to deal with the situation. In an instant she turned off the main valve to the house. Later on, when John came home he made temporary repairs that allowed the main valve to be turned on with Derek's sink being the only out-of-service point. By the next day a plumber came and restored full service. It was a moment of drama that focused attention on solving the problem and engendered admiration for John and Fatima and their handling of the situation. The damage to property, the resulting inconvenience, the matter-of-fact resolution of the problem, all seemed to draw us closer together. Needless to say this excitement delayed our departure for the welcome dinner.



The welcome dinner was a beautiful affair; Brazilian folk songs by the impromptu Sao Luis club choir, a dance performance by club member, Graça Chaves, a mini classical guitar presentation by Tónico, and finally, portrait photos of matched ambassadors and hosts.



It was a long day, and Ophelia, Derek and I were ready for bed. On the way home we passed an area where there were lots of people out celebrating. This was part of Bumba Meu Boi, São Luis' festival of the Bull. Fatima asked us if we wanted to stop, but we all quickly said no. Tomorrow after dinner we will go back to that area, as the celebration lasts the entire week.



So I had another good night of sleep, initially on the bed as there is more breeze there, but towards morning, I moved to the hammock for a bit. It was very pleasant.

Martha Brown

A Day at the Beach



This morning found us joining the group on the beach at Litoranea, São Luis. June 15th is a religious holiday – Corpus Christi Day – and lots of people were celebrating the day at the beach. The edge of the surf was lined with hundreds of small canopies, chairs, and tables, ignoring the rising tide. Bathing beauties of all sizes, shapes, and colors were seen up and down the beach. The Brazilians come to the beach to socialize, eat, and play – not necessarily swim. Most of the Brazilians in our group never got wet, but some in our club enjoyed the warm waters of the Atlantic Ocean, reminiscent of home. Cars are allowed on the beaches in Brazil and one had to navigate carefully. Since this day was a religious holiday, most businesses were closed. Our host, Ivone, had the day off from her paper store and her 14-year old granddaughter, Lorene, was out of school. However, Lorene, had exams the next day and had to study in the afternoon.



Lunch today was in town at the Cabana do Sol restaurant, a treat from us ambassadors to the host club members.

On the way home from the restaurant, our host stopped at a local ice cream shop for dessert. The afternoon back at our host's apartment was reserved for Jim's nap time, Barbara's sudoku puzzles, Lorene's studying, and Ivone's cooking.



Our plans for the evening included a potluck dinner at the home of Selma, the Host Coordinator, with some of the ambassadors and their hosts. Since this was a "free night" with our host



families, several of the ambassadors were busy with other host family activities and were not present. Selma and her husband, Nato, live in a lovely home surrounded by a beautiful courtyard. They were the gracious hosts for Charles and Marylin. It was a wonderful opportunity to taste the different delicious Brazilian dishes prepared by our various host families. Lorene's dad, Junior, was among the guests invited and it was our first time meeting him. It was a lovely evening eating in the courtyard - a nice ending to another busy day in São Luis.

Jim & Barbara North

More Reflections on a Day at the Beach



On a bright sunny Thursday on June 15th, there was a holiday in Sao Luis which allowed the whole group, hosts and ambassadors, to drive in individual cars to the beach. As we arrived there was a traffic jam and I marveled at how we all found each other. We gathered together on a clean beach where there was ample parking for cars next to tents with chairs and hammocks for all to sit under as the waves flowed under and around them.

kites - all in enjoyable morning!

A hefty meal at the by the Friendship ambassadors to our

meats, fish and salads in abundance. The day ended with a walk on a long pier along the coast with my three host family members. Always exhausted with joy!



An array of vendors walked in and around the beach goers selling lemons, oranges, and blue cooked crabs from long poles. Others hawked bags of shrimp, oysters, quail eggs, cashews with coconuts for sipping juice and eating. Every drink imaginable was offered to thirsty swimmers, waders and just plain sitters. The children were offered toys on sticks, water toys, and small abundance for one to buy. What an

restaurant Cabana do Sol was offered Force of Central North Carolina host families. There we indulged in

Barbara Hughes

The City Tour



Our day began with a city tour of São Luis. We gathered at the square of lovers and learned its history. The statue of Gonçalves Dias was the focal point of the square. Antônio Gonçalves Dias, born 11/03/1864, was a poet, playwright, ethnographer, lawyer and linguist. He is famous for writing “Canção do exílio” (arguably the most well-known poem in Brazilian literature). He died tragically at age 41, by drowning in his cabin when the ship on which he was returning home from Portugal ran aground in the port of Guimarães. Gonçalves Dias’ troubled love-life gives an ironic twist to the designation “square of lovers”. He was denied marriage to his first love because he was a mestizo and the only child of his loveless marriage was stillborn. The street is now considered “our street of power.”

We continued on cobblestone streets to a Gothic Church and the revival square which used to be a port for sailors. On Star Street we heard about the history of the arts and saw many tiles that were from Portugal, of which the Brazilians are very proud. We walked through a market with food, clothes and souvenirs. Some of us were

brave enough to try a shot of purple tequila.

We visited Casa de Maranhão (House of Culture) where we saw a display of the Bumba Moi Boi story. In one version of this Brazilian allegory, a pregnant woman has a craving for the tongue of an ox (*boi* in Portuguese). Her lover kills his master’s prized ox, and finds himself before a vengeful judge for his heinous crime. Luckily, the juju intervenes, the ox is magically resurrected, and the husband





is pardoned and reunited with his love.

We visited the Palace of Lions, the seat of government. One half of the palace is the governor's residence and one half is a museum with French style furnishings and international works of art.

The group enjoyed a seafood buffet at the Senac Restaurant.

After
night
boi,

Mary



some free time with our hosts that afternoon, we gathered later on for a presentation of folk rallies: bumba mei Cacuriá and Tambour de Crioula.

Davis

Sitio Piranhengas

Throughout this visit communication with our hosts was an issue. They understood little English, and Nancy and I understood even less Portuguese. Thank goodness for Wi-Fi. They had it in their home and at many restaurants as well as a few venues. Between hand signals and Google Translate we managed to somewhat communicate. Our hosts were very accommodating and easy to be around.

We started the day with a rather nice breakfast. Every day we were served a very nice and large breakfast... eggs of some kind, several breads, at least one meat, several jams and several assorted cheeses as well as coffee. I think they didn't know what would please us, so they served as many items as they thought was necessary.

After breakfast we all headed out for the activities of the day. We went to what I thought was going to be an orphanage. It was called Sitio Piranhengas. Turned out to be a large former plantation, now much of it being used as a facility for helping local poor children rise out of poverty. Upon arrival we saw a number of kids playing soccer in one of their fields. We were greeted by Carla Marian who was our excellent docent. We proceeded to an inside area where they ran what looked like an auto or motorcycle repair shop. In fact, it was a classroom for local young people to learn the trade of auto/motorcycle repair.

In another classroom, we were serenaded by several students performing on improvised wind and percussion instruments made by them from household utensils and other found objects. This program gives these children a feeling of confidence as well as developing a musical skill. You could tell the teacher related very well to the children and made this a very important program.

We got into the cars and proceeded to the old plantation part. First we visited the chapel where the original owner's cremated remains reside. Next stop was the main historic house of the plantation where we were given a tour of the main



house and some of the gardens overlooking the river. It was built in the early 1800's and had a number of unique features that were very modern for that time (e.g. early electric lights). After the site was abandoned in 1939 it was subject to looting and fell into disrepair. In the mid-1940's the last real owner began to restore a lot of the former grandeur with tiles, pieces of pottery (that she herself broke) and grand wood furniture and accents for the many rooms. On the patio,



with a garden surround and a view of the river below, we were served a very nice snack of assorted fresh fruits.

After that we went down a steep embankment at the side of the main house where we viewed the former slave quarters and a lime processing mill. The slave quarters consisted of one large room with about a 40 foot ceiling. It had a dirt floor and the only “windows” were basically

vertical slits that were similar to old forts where they would use these slits to stick their long rifles and small cannons thru for defense. Not much air movement because there were only two doors for entrances. The docent claimed that, because these quarters were so close to the house, the owner must have been a “good” slave master. It looked very uncomfortable and uninviting to me.

Proceeding to lunch, we went to Hotel Luzeiros, a beautiful location on the coast with lots of windows and sun. Down one level, the restaurant faced the hotel pool which overlooked the ocean. A very good buffet lunch was served. This included feijoada, a typical Brazilian dish with a wide variety of meats, along with breads, cheeses, salads, and desserts.

Next we went home with our hosts, rested a bit, and then we went out to dinner at a very nice French Bistro. Very comfortable and inviting and perhaps the best meal we had on the trip. The restaurant had Wi-Fi so we were able to communicate a bit. It really is hard to have a meaningful conversation when you have to resort to Wi-Fi.

After dinner we went to a smallish bar that doubled as a convenience store. The owners had been there for years and the place was loaded with old memorabilia from the US. Old iron’s here, old radios there, skis, shoes, can openers... you name it, and I think they had it. He had a large collection of old records. The music played was general 50’s popular music (think Frank and/or Nancy Sinatra). Interesting place. Mary Davis was there with her host, Angela Medeiros, so that made for a complete day. The highlights of the day for me were the children, the historic home, and dinner at the French Bistro.

Peter Peiffer

Vignettes of São Luis

Marylin and I have just said our goodbyes to Selma and Nato, as well as all the other hosts who have come to the airport to send their ambassadors on to the Rio extension of the Journey. We are sitting in the departure lounge, a little quieter than usual for this group, no doubt reliving vignettes of the past week of fun, fellowship and friendship.

My thoughts go back to our arrival here on Sunday, June 11th, when our hosts met us with, as Ralph so eloquently put it, a *“great welcome for weary travelers.”* Their smiles, the songs, and the warmth of their hugs made a first impression that will be a lasting memory.



Equally memorable are the next two days in Barreirinhas, our gateway to the enchantment of the Lençois Maranhenses and the richness and diversity of the River Preguiças. It was unforgettable.

All this fun and adventure before the official welcome party in Sao Luis - as if anything could top the airport welcome. But our Brazilian hosts did just that. Looking back, the conviviality of the welcome

party was a marker for our journey from the handshake of strangers to the embrace of friends. We were at ease with one another, dressing up in costume, dancing, and enjoying good food and music. The party set the mood for the remaining days of the Journey, and we never looked back.



For Marylin and I, the most outstanding memory of the journey is the gracious way Selma and Nato took us into the bosom of their family. Every day, over every meal, relaxing in the hammocks, enjoying a cachaça or a caipirinha, we treaded our way around halting, sometimes totally absent, English and/or Portuguese to find enough meaning to converse about food, family, and other aspects of our lives. The household includes Mamai, Selma’s eighty year old blind mother, Nato’s teenage nephew, Iago, and Alycia, the teenage daughter of Nato’s farm manager. Conversations flowed much more freely when the younger members were able to translate for us. We met Chiago, Selma’s and Nato’s only child, his beautiful wife and the grandchildren. It was our chance to dig much deeper into current sociopolitical

issues in Brazil, as both Chiago and his wife speak fluent English and, as senior federal civil servants, are very knowledgeable of these matters.



Yes, I not only enjoyed a few caipirinhas, I enhanced my barista skills by actually mastering the fine art of mixing this hallowed Brazilian libation. Nato proved to be a very talented teacher.

They are calling for us to board the aircraft. Goodbye good friends. See you in Central North Carolina soon.

Charles & Marilyn John