

TAKEN HOSTAGE ON THE AMAZON

BY LON HALDEMAN



I was in Peru since October 20th and I returned just before Thanksgiving. It was a busy month with lots of exciting adventures. The primary purpose for my trip to Peru this year was to help on our “Andes to the Amazon” bike tour. We had ten cyclists from the United States and five riders from Peru on the tour who worked as the support staff. The women of the Peru National Cycling Team organized our trip. The money raised from the tour would help with their travel expenses and race entry fees for the coming year. The Women’s Team doesn’t receive as much funding as the men’s cycling team or other mainstream national sports teams such as soccer. I helped them develop a cycling business similar to PAC Tour called “Peruvian Adventure Cycling Expeditions,” or shortened to “PACE”.

Alessandra and her sister Samantha were the main organizers of the tour. Alessandra had joined PAC Tour for the Northern and Southern Transcontinentals in 2021. They had also joined us on our past five tours across Peru, so they knew how to plan a bike trip.

After everyone arrived in Peru on flights from the United States, we started with a Lima City Tour. Peru had many sophisticated civilizations for the past 2,000 years, 1,000 years before the Inca Empire dominated Peru. After the Spanish arrived in 1532, the culture changed again with the influence of Europeans. Our Lima City Tour showed the ever-changing history of Peru.

The next day we flew over the Andes Mountains



to the city of Tarapoto, located on the eastern slopes of the mountains. This area would be our base for three days of rides in and out of town. This region is tropical and on the rainforest side of the mountains. We were still in the foothills of the Andes so the terrain had several long climbs every day, going to the mountain towns of Lamas and Sauce (Pronounced Sow-see).



On our fourth day, we started riding further east into the region of the Amazon basin. Our road had been paved fifteen years ago, which provided access to the most remote sections of jungle heading to the river port of Yurimaguas. The road went over a mountain range and had over 100 hairpin turns in the 50-kilometer descent. It took us two days to reach the riverport of Yurimaguas. There we would get on a barge-type riverboat and start a 400-mile journey to the city of Iquitos, located on the Amazon River. Iquitos is one of the most secluded



large cities in the world with 400,000 people and only accessible by airplane or riverboat. Along the way, the riverboat would deliver bags of rice and pick up bundles of bananas from villages along the river.



Our boat was over 100 feet long and the lower deck was filled with cargo. There were about 110 passengers, most of whom were local people going from Yurimaguas to Iquitos. The boat had spaces to hang our hammocks on the upper deck. Some of our group preferred to sleep on foam mats that we could spread out under the hammocks. The whole boat was packed with luggage, families, and hammocks. It was like a giant slumber party and everyone got to know their neighbors sleeping next to them.

We had 15 bikes and ice chests from our bike tour that we needed to bring with us. The bikes were secured on the roof and covered with tarps. We had a supply of cookies, crackers, and other snacks from the bike tour. In addition, our stock of bottled water and soda would be helpful on our boat excursion. We departed Yurimaguas at 5:00 PM and were glad to be moving with the river's current. The captain predicted we would arrive in the town of Nauta 24 hours later, in time for us to get off the boat, have dinner at a restaurant, and sleep in a local hotel. The next day, the plan was to ride the final 100 kilometers on an excellent, paved highway into the city of Iquitos.

Our first evening on the boat was relaxing as we watched the sunset highlight the silhouette of the trees lining the shore. The river is still huge here even though we were on the Huallaga river, which connects to the Rio Marañon, which connects to the Amazon near Iquitos. All these rivers become wider and deeper, doubling in size every 100 miles. Our river at this point was similar to the Mississippi near St. Louis. Standing by the railing and watching the jungle go by is one of my favorite pastimes of river travel. Everything was peaceful except for the roar of the giant Caterpillar boat engines on the deck below our hammocks.

The boat had a kitchen with a cook who prepared 100 meals of soup, rice, and chicken. That was our evening dinner and it wasn't too bad. Traveling on an Amazon riverboat is like camping on a boat. As long as you are comfortable in those conditions, it is a good adventure. Our group of riders were exceptional travelers with a great attitude, and they could make the best of any situation, which would be useful in the days ahead.

The following day we could look out at the ever-expanding river. Sometimes we went through a channel of



islands and the braided river became one-fourth its size. I am always amazed how the boat driver knows which deep channel to follow until the river opens up to a huge, vast expanse of brown water again.



After breakfast, we made plans to get off the boat in the early evening in Nauta. We knew we had to get all the bikes off the roof and transport our other supplies for the bike tour to the hotel. In Tarapoto, we had bought several bundles of school notebooks, pencils, workbooks, and other supplies. We were going to deliver them to some village schools when we stopped to drop off bags of rice. We had done this many times on our other tours down the river. We knew we had about 15 minutes to get off the boat, find the school, then get back on the boat without being left behind. We made a plan with the captain of where we could deliver some school supplies during the day. He said he knew a village about an hour ahead where he needed to stop and meet with the village leaders. He thought we would be stopped for at least an hour so we would have plenty of time to get off the boat and find the school.

As we neared the village where we would deliver the books, we noticed three boatloads of men with spears coming toward our boat. They had a sizeable Peruvian flag posted on each boat. I thought it was a nice welcoming party to greet us as we docked the boat near an island on the other side of the river from the village. However, Alessandra and Samantha sensed something was wrong and started informing our group that we were being

forced to stop and would not be allowed near the village. The three boats of village warriors were going to take over our boat. The warriors started boarding our big boat through the rear doorway near the propeller. We could hear the yelling on the lower deck in the engine room.



A fight with the crew ensued. After a few minutes, the yelling stopped and the roar of the Caterpillar engine was quiet. The warriors had taken the motor battery. We began to realize the warriors were not a welcoming party and had stabbed one of the crew members in the chest with a spear.

We didn't know what to expect next as the warriors started coming up the stairs to our upper deck. Alessandra said we were not at risk, and the warriors were looking for the captain and crew members. During the next hour, the warrior's plan became more evident. They took the captain and crew prisoner and transported them back to their village. We were supposed to stay on the boat. They said we could be here for five to six days. There was a lot of yelling in Spanish by the other Peruvian passengers. Alessandra was trying to keep everyone calm by talking with the warriors and telling the rest of the passengers not to make the situation worse by starting a fight.

We didn't really know what to expect if we were to be held captive for five days. I immediately started inventorying our water and cookies and determining if we had enough for our group of riders to drink at least one liter per day. The boat kitchen was closed so we couldn't access other food.

By mid-afternoon, some of the warriors came on board and met with Alessandra and some passengers. The warriors told us that everyone had to exit the boat and assemble on the island for a meeting. They told us to leave our luggage behind. I put some of my important documents in my backpack and took it with me. The warriors were actually quite helpful in assisting everyone off of the boat and walking along the narrow wooden plank to the shore. They even helped a fellow in a wheelchair, carrying him down the stairs and up the shore bank.

After we were all on the island, the village leaders started speaking. They encouraged passengers with cell phones to make a video of the meeting and email it to the television stations in Peru. The announcements and speeches went on for about 30 minutes. It was all in Spanish, but we understood they were talking about their village's problems with the trans-Amazonian oil pipeline that crossed the land around their village. For several years, oil leakage from the pipeline had been polluting the river and causing health problems. The village didn't think they were receiving any benefit from the oil companies drilling on their land. We were allowed to return to the boat when the meeting was over.

I stayed behind with Alessandra, Samantha, and the chief and asked the chief a few questions. His name was Galo, and was a serious, muscular guy about 35 years old. Alessandra said he must have had some education because he knew the



legal terms of taking prisoners. Even though the village warriors had guns for hunting, they were careful not to threaten anyone with a gun during the takeover of the ship. Instead, they only had spears and clubs. Some of them dressed in traditional colorful robes with warpaint on their faces and headdresses on their heads, adding to their warrior appearance.

While we had a private meeting with the chief, Alessandra asked what he needed for his village to improve their lives. He was well prepared for the question and said:

1. The oil company has to stop polluting the river.
2. They needed medical attention for the villagers with cancer or other problems from contaminated water.
3. They needed a clean water source.
4. They needed more economic opportunities to sell produce or grow food.
5. They need better education opportunities at their school.

We thought we could help with some of his requests. Samantha had a job working with the government for economic development in rural jungle villages. She traveled to remote villages and lived with them for several weeks while sleeping in a hammock and living in a basic hut. The chief was impressed she had contacts with the government who could help. We told the chief about the two schools we had built in the past and our continued support of school supplies to many river villages. We could help his village with more educational support in the future. In another village, we installed a water purification system at a school with 1,000 students. The filter used a series of charcoal and ultraviolet light to purify several hundred gallons of drinking water per day. We thought a similar system could work in his village

and be solar-powered. The chief was thankful for our understanding of his village's problems. Even though we were still hostages, we felt the chief and warriors had reasonable requests that could be solved.

It was now late afternoon, and we knew we would be sleeping on the boat again that night. We had limited cell phone coverage, but we made a few calls to the American Embassy. We heard back with many different reports of what would happen next. Some reports said a rescue boat was on the way, and others said that the police were coming to take back the boat. We were in the middle of nowhere, and even the fastest motorboat would take 10 hours to reach our location. Fortunately, the cook on our boat was allowed to open his kitchen and prepare an evening dinner for everyone. We had a good meal and a peaceful night's sleep without the rumble of the Caterpillar engines.

The following day we heard new reports about what would happen next. During the night, a large boat similar to ours had docked across the river. Unfortunately, it wasn't for us. Alessandra was on the phone with the director of the Amazon Navy and trying to find out why we couldn't use the recently arrived boat. The conversations continued throughout the day. We did hear the news that the village would hold our original boat and crew hostage and let the rest of us go. The other British and German tourists on the boat had said their embassies sent smaller boats to pick them up. The American Embassy said a boat was on the way to pick up our group of 15 people, but they would not have room for our bikes or extra luggage from the tour. Alessandra told the director of the Amazon Navy that rescuing part of our group and leaving luggage behind was not an option. She asked the director why we couldn't use the

big boat that was docked nearby. After several more hours of negotiating, we heard that we could get on the other big boat, but they wanted to be paid \$35 per person for the 100 people getting on their boat. Most of the Peruvian passengers on our boat did not have an extra \$35. Alessandra negotiated again with the captain of our original boat and told him he was responsible for paying everyone's passage to continue their trip to Nauta and Iquitos. The negotiations continued, and the original captain finally agreed to pay for the new boat to bring us to Nauta.

The new boat pulled alongside our original boat, and everyone started climbing from one boat to the other. The boats were not quite touching, so we had to be careful to avoid dropping luggage and supplies into the river between the boats. Our riders climbed up on the roof, passed the bikes to the new boat, and tied them into a bundle. We soon learned that the new boat was narrower and shorter. All the hammocks that barely fit on the original boat were even more tightly crammed together. Everyone was trying to find a walkway or empty corner to hang their hammocks.

The good thing was everyone on the boat was friends by now, and we all realized that we could put up with some discomfort as long as we were on a boat that would get moving again. Most of the cargo from the lower deck also needed to be moved. The village warriors helped transfer bags of rice and bundles of bananas. Before we left the village, Alessandra and I met with the chief and other leaders and gave them the school supplies we had been carrying for three days. It was a small token of support for their village compared to what they needed, but they were pleased by the gesture.

Our boat left the riverbank in late afternoon, and we finally headed toward Nauta. The new boat had a loud Caterpillar engine that shook the upper deck, just like our old boat. We were relieved to be moving. We hadn't eaten all day, and the new boat didn't have food for everyone because they didn't think they were having guests for dinner. About an hour later, we stopped at another village. They had a small general store where we bought spaghetti, canned sauce, and an assortment of items to prepare for dinner for our group and some other travelers. We could use the boat kitchen, boil the pasta, and cook the other supplies. Overall it was a good meal considering we didn't think we would get anything to eat besides crackers.



We made good progress on the river that night. We were now over 30 hours behind our original schedule. We were calculating when we could get off the boat upon our arrival in Nauta. It looked like we would get there in the late morning. It would be too late to ride the final 100 kilometers to Iquitos. Considering what we had been through during the past two days, everyone was happy to load the bikes on a bus and drive to Iquitos. We could still get there by mid-afternoon. Alessandra had organized a bike race for the next day, and she still had to get riders registered and

prizes sorted for the races. We were all glad to arrive in Iquitos and take a hot shower after three nights of sleeping on the boats.

We were fortunate that everything worked out. We had a fantastic group on our tour who pulled together to make the best

of a bad situation. Everyone was impressed with how Alessandra and Samantha negotiated with the village and the other boat passengers to keep everything under control. It is not an experience we want to repeat, but it was an adventure we will all remember.

Alessandra and Samantha are coming to the United States this summer. They will be part of the PAC Tour crew on the Northern Transcontinental and New York Tours. If you have the chance to meet them, you will certainly enjoy listening to their stories about living in the Amazon jungle.

