

A photograph of a person's hand holding a large tortoise on a wooden boat in a river. The tortoise has a dark shell with yellowish-brown spots. The background shows the river and the boat's structure. The text is overlaid on the top half of the image.

Somewhere up a JUNGLE RIVER

He was searching for the soul of South America's
Last Eden. But would he really find it in a tiny blue frog?

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ANDREW WESTOLL



Suriname supermarket:
Trio natives stock up
on food supplies while
heading upstream on
the Sipaliwini River.



I wake at 6 a.m.

to the soft murmurs of the Trio language. Outside, my crew is gathered under the overhang of my thatch-roofed hut, inspecting the insides of our outboard motor. The sun is slowly rising. The village of Kwamalasamutu is beginning to glow.

“*Kuday mana*,” I say, the Trio morning greeting. The men look up at me somewhat nervously.

“*Andu!*” yells Ipiroke.

“*Fa yu sribi?*” asks Lukas.

Mawa drops his wrench and walks toward me. The Basha just smiles his goofy smile.

“We have problem,” says Mawa.

“I see that.”

“Man we pay for motor not happy. Now we use my motor. First we fix.”

“How long?” I ask.

“Not long.”

“We still leave seven o’clock?”

“Yes. Seven o’clock.”

At 10:15, Lukas and Mawa screw the engine casing back into place and we ferry our equipment down to the river. Three waterproof barrels filled with cassava bread and *farine*, 300 litres of gasoline in six black jerry cans, two old detergent buckets overflowing with *casiri* beer, a bright blue jug with 100 litres of rainwater for drinking, 50 kilograms of rice, two huge tarps, two metal storm-lanterns, six life jackets, two rifles, one bow, a quiver of arrows, an extra motor, and all of our personal gear—hammocks and clothes and boots—stashed in countless garbage bags. We will be gone for a week. Aside from our staples, we will eat whatever we can kill.

As we push off and the crowd on shore

yells their encouragement, I see the extra motor sitting in the grass.

“Lukas,” I say. “*Yu frigiti* motor.”

“No problem,” says Lukas, yanking on the ignition cord. “Motor good now.” After the seventh pull, the engine roars to life.

Five minutes upriver, we stop at a small collection of huts on the opposite shore, the equivalent of a Kwamala suburb. Lukas jumps out of the boat with a bag of fresh diapers and runs up the hill to one of the houses. While he’s gone, I watch a young girl roll a huge round of cassava bread beside her like a Hula Hoop. The bread is as tall as she is. When it catches the sun I can see right through it, an orb of golden-brown with the shadow of a girl in its centre. A young boy waves at me from a nearby hammock. He makes a series of threatening hand gestures and points to the east, as if we are crazy to be headed that way. As if danger lurks upriver.

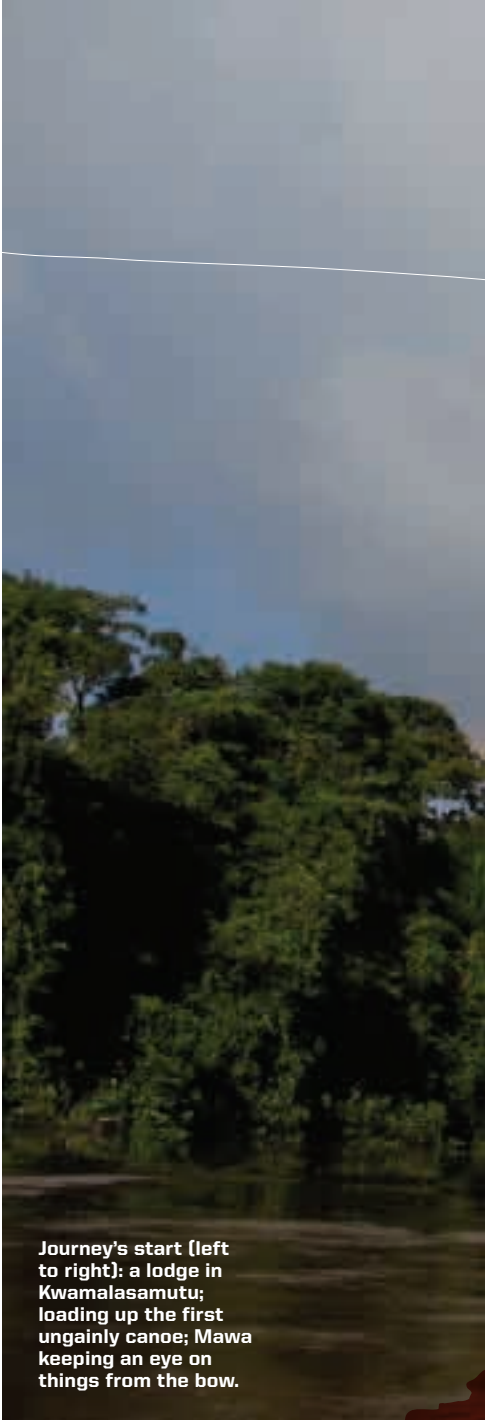
WE ARE ABOUT to disappear into a secret wilderness, in search of its crown-jewel.

Perched above Brazil in the middle of the Guiana Shield, Suriname is the least-travelled country in South America. Though many untouched places have been called The Last Eden—Patagonia in Argentina, the Okavango Delta in Botswana, the Ndoki Region in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the wild island of Borneo—this unassuming republic has a legitimate claim to the title. Ninety per cent of the country is covered in thick neotropical jungle, the largest percentage of rainforest cover of any nation on earth,

and only 430,000 people live here, with a population density similar to that of Nunavut and Siberia. Consequently, the jungles of Suriname are the most pristine left on the planet.

Five years ago, I lived deep inside these jungles for a year, at a remote anthropological field station where I worked as a monkey researcher. Ever since then, I’ve dreamed of returning. Late last year this dream came true, and I’ve now been travelling here for five months.

My curiosity has led me to Kwamalasamutu, the land of the Trio Indians, in the remote south of Suriname. In 1968, a young Dutch herpetologist named Mari-



Journey’s start (left to right): a lodge in Kwamalasamutu; loading up the first ungainly canoe; Mawa keeping an eye on things from the bow.



The paramount chief of Suriname's Trio nation has given me permission to travel up the Sipaliwini River to find *okopipi*. He says it will be the first expedition of its kind in recent memory

nus Hoogmoed discovered a remarkable new frog species while exploring the valleys of the Four Brothers of Mamia, a modest set of hills near Suriname's border with Brazil. He called it *Dendrobates azureus*, after its stunning azure-blue skin. The Trio Indians, who have known of this frog's existence for centuries, already had a name for it. They call it *okopipi*.

Okopipi is revered by the Trio for its rarity, its iridescent blue skin and the extraordinary strength of its poison. Each frog contains an average of 200 milligrams of toxin; two milligrams on the tip of an

arrow is enough to kill a man. The Trio used to catch *okopipi* and sell them on the exotic animal market, but laws have recently been passed banning their trade. Today, *okopipi* is considered one of the most vulnerable amphibians in the neotropics. The total population is thought to be no more than 300.

Having spent so long travelling this obscure nation and searching for its quintessential soul, *okopipi* seemed the perfect quarry—elusive, rare, endangered. So three days ago, I left the capital city of Paramaribo aboard an ancient Russian mili-

tary transport plane, bound for the south. Since arriving in Kwamala, I've rented a boat, rented a motor, hired a crew and spent every penny I have on gasoline. Granman Asongo, the paramount chief of the Trio Nation, has given me permission to travel by boat to find *okopipi*. He says it will be the first expedition of its kind in recent memory. Accompanying us will be the Basha, a representative from the Trio government who will report back to the Granman on what we find upriver.

Asongo has set just two conditions. First, I am not to take *okopipi* home with me to Canada. Second, I am to bring him



Slow going: Ipiroke hacks his way through one of the many trees delaying the team's progress.

as many red-footed turtles as I can find.

At our last meeting, I ask Asongo how long the trip will take. He peers up at the ceiling of his office, thinks for a moment and then gives a broad smile.

“Sunset, sunset, sunset, arrive.”

ALONG THE SHORE of the Sipaliwini River the jungle is thick and seems to brood. Young cecropia trees poke their

necks out over the water like curious children, their crowns of convoluted leaves drenched in sun. A white heron-like bird with a bright blue beak watches us pass and then plunges its head into the river.

Soon the river narrows and the rapids of *Gruni Keni* appear. Mawa stands in the bow and directs Lukas through the stones. We get stuck on the bottom a number of times and the motor chokes when Lukas

cranks the gas. Up ahead, another boat approaches. Inside sits a Trio family, the husband at the motor, his wife and two small children in the bow. Their boat is as heavily laden as ours but is shaped more like an arrow, a better vessel than our broad, ungainly dugout.

As they speed between the rocks, aided by the current, Lukas yells something to the husband, who quickly turns his boat



and meets us at the shore. The family has agreed to switch their boat for ours. The husband laughs at the thought of us attempting this journey with our current canoe. His family unloads their possessions onto the shore, a menagerie of dead or dying animals. A turtle with a stick through its arm holes, alive but in severe discomfort. A baby kinkajou with a rope around its neck. A selection of river fish



strung through the gills with a piece of wire. Two blue-and-green parrots, their feet tied together with string. An adult spider monkey, its eyes closed, its hands limp and haunting, a single bullet hole through its chest.

Lukas lifts our faulty motor onto the stern of the new boat as we load our gear into the hull. Within minutes we are back on the water and the family has disappeared up the hill into the jungle. We make it up *Gruni Keni* despite our engine's complaints. Then the river calms. Fist-sized balls of cotton fall from the *kankan*

MAP: ROBERT BIRON



Scenes from the river (left to right): Ipiroke hauling up the boat; gathering *awara* nuts; Mamiya River rapids.

trees and drift on the river's surface. We pass several *orapendula* colonies, the dark birds flashing their yellow tails as they dive for cover into palm-thatch nests, each one hanging like a blackened teardrop from the branches.

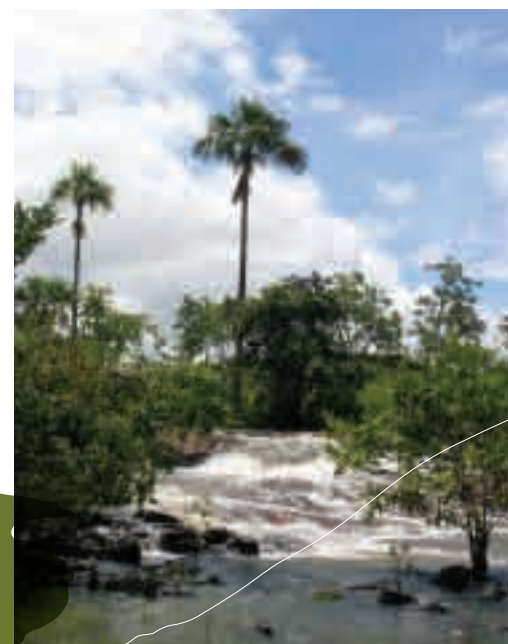
Half a mile up ahead, the river becomes a field of boulders and white water. This is *Ewana Tepu*, or Iguana Falls, the largest series of rapids on the Sipaliwini. There is no way our engine can handle this, I think. As if in agreement, Lukas steers us to the right-hand shore, where a small side-channel gradually empties into the river.

We enter the channel and become enveloped by a close, green darkness. Our route is less than 15 feet across, a shallow jungle stream that will surely go dry in a week or two. Our motor echoes against the tangled underbrush and thick canopy. At an especially tight section, a tree boa drops from its perch beside my head and knives into the water.

Now the channel is dotted with floating mangoes. I grab one out of the water and hold it up like a trophy. Then Lukas cuts the engine and lets out a moan, and we come upon the source of the fruit. An enormous mango tree has collapsed and fallen across the creek, completely blocking our way.

We jump out into knee-deep water and hack through the tree. It takes us two hours to cleave a space for our boat to pass. Just as we're pulling it through, Mawa whispers something and the Indians suddenly stop moving. Mawa's eyes are wide as he points over my shoulder.

Behind me, stretched out on one of the mango branches, a massive green anaconda suns itself. Its body is perhaps 15 feet long and more than a foot thick. I stumble back toward the boat, shocked that this snake has been there the whole time. I expect the others to laugh at my fear but they don't. Instead, everyone leaps into the boat and Lukas cranks the motor. At the sound of the engine, the snake slowly slinks back into the water, the yellow-and-black spots on its hide glistening as it disappears beneath the surface.



The Trio have no words for measures of distance. Instead, distance is expressed in terms of the amount of time it takes to travel. We have travelled one sunset so far

Without a trail we stumble blindly over thick tussocks of grass and sharp rocks the colour of rust. At any moment I could step on a snake and it would all be over



WE SPEND THE REST of the day crawling upriver and struggling through rapids. Our morale sinks as the motor worsens and we snack on dry *farine*. I am beginning to think this trip was a mistake. We've hardly made any progress today and we're wasting precious litres of gasoline.

Finally, at six o'clock, we limp to shore, where the remains of an ancient hunting camp sit rotting among the trees. Ipiroke and I jump out with our gear and the others continue upriver to work on the motor and catch dinner. Twenty minutes later, the fire is roaring and we've hung our hammocks beneath makeshift palm-frond shelters. This camp has been used for centuries by Trio hunters, but Ipiroke claims no one has slept here for at least five years. This is prime hunting territory, he says, but no one can afford the gasoline required to get here.

The sun drops beneath the canopy and the jungle closes in. Ipiroke sings to the animals. He impersonates three species of monkey and four species of bird. As a cool evening mist descends on the river, a lone bird responds to Ipiroke's call from perhaps a mile away.

An hour later, the men return from fishing with a boatload of meat. Two 40-pound tiger-fish sit in the bow, their striped flanks glowing orange in the dark, their mouths spilling out with vicious teeth. In the stern sit two 20-pound *sipali*, or electric stingrays, the primeval namesake of this river. Lukas hefts a *sipali* from the boat and hands it to me, his fingers

plunged through its eye sockets.

Fireflies dance around our camp as Lukas cooks the fish in pepper water and Mawa smokes the remaining meat. We gorge ourselves on the rich, oily flesh. Then the Basha retrieves an old detergent bucket and lifts the lid, revealing a familiar pink sludge. It is time to drink *casiri*.

The Basha adds a few cupfuls of river water to the brew and we chug it down. Above us, the moon is reflected by the leaves in the trees, the green of the jungle giving way to the black and white of the night. My crew tells jokes I don't understand and giggles among themselves. The Basha lets loose a series of spectacular farts. Exhausted and drunk, we soon retreat to our beds.

As I stumble into my hammock the crossbeams of my shelter creak ominously. Then the whole structure collapses. I fall to the ground with an awkward crash, the splintered timbers landing on top of me. The men roar with laughter but within seconds they set to work. Lukas and the Basha disappear into the jungle while Mawa and Ipiroke cut new saplings and arrange them in a lean-to fashion. From somewhere in the darkness I hear a strange ripping sound, and then Lukas and the Basha appear carrying long strips of bark.

They use the bark as rope, tying the new timbers together, and soon my shelter is rebuilt. I hang my hammock and test it out. The timbers hold.

The men return to their hammocks and chat as a light rain trickles down from the canopy. I fall asleep to the whispers of their dying language.

PRIOR TO THE 1960S, the Trio lived in small, semi-nomadic villages scattered throughout southern Suriname and the northern regions of Brazil. Their territory followed the watershed divide between the Sipaliwini Basin, where the rivers flow north to the Atlantic, and the Upper Amazon Basin, where the waters flow south to the world's largest river.

The Trio is a multi-ethnic tribe made up of several previously distinct Amerindian groups. At some point, likely long before the New World was discovered, these peoples began referring to themselves inclusively with the term Tareno. Tareno simply means "the people here" and reflects the tribe's loose geographic and cultural histories. Over time, outsiders transformed this word into its current usage, Trio.

In 1960, the Surinamese government began Operation Grasshopper, opening up the country's tangled interior by building



The people here: The author and the rest of the *okopipi* search party. Above: Winni's daughter casually slaughters an iguana.



Promised land:
The Four Brothers
of Mamia, sole
home of the rare
blue frog *okopipi*.

40 new airstrips. The following year, an American Baptist missionary, Claude Leavitt, arrived with his family in the south of Suriname. The Trio had only seen a few *pananakiri*, or outsiders, before him.

Leavitt quickly realized his task of bringing the word of God to the Indians would be much easier if he could convince the scattered Trio to settle in a single village. He promised free health care and education in this new mega-village, and soon the Trio agreed to amalgamate in an indigenous metropolis on the Wiumi River. The new village was called Alalaparau, which means “place of the Brazil nut” in the Trio language.

Life for the Trio began to change quickly. They suddenly had access to steel tools such as machetes, axes and knives. A medical clinic was established and village hygiene was improved, resulting in a greater life expectancy for the residents. A new airstrip reduced travel time to the towns on Suriname’s coast from two weeks by paddle to two hours by air. Teachers were flown in to instruct the children and literacy flourished. A small store was set up, offering a range of material goods. Within a few years, the popula-

tion at Alalaparau grew from 100 to more than 400 as the Trio emerged from the surrounding jungles to take advantage of this new-found wealth.

But as is true of missionary work the world over, the real societal gains brought about by Leavitt were accompanied by long-term cultural losses. There are pictures from the late 1960s of Granman Asongo in traditional Trio garb—his hair in a bowl-cut, his face painted for the hunt, wearing nothing but a maroon loincloth. Soon after these pictures were taken, traditional Trio dress was outlawed and Asongo was sent to Texas for theological training—now he wears a suit and gold-rimmed glasses. The Trio system of government, in which a charismatic elder oversaw a community held together by kinship ties and marriage, was replaced by hierarchical, centralized rule. Customary song and dance rituals were replaced by fervent Christian music and ceremonies. Shamanism was forbidden, as was polygamy, body scarification and the recounting of Trio mythology. All of these practices were punishable by flogging.

Throughout the 1960s, the town of Alalaparau continued to grow. But soon the

Trio population was hit by severe food shortages. With their newly acquired rifles, the Trio quickly exhausted the surrounding jungle of game. The Wiumi River ran dry for months at a time and fish populations dwindled. Gardens had been built too close together and a plague of ants decimated the crops. Agricultural land was replanted too soon and the tired soil failed to produce.

In 1975, 15 years after it was founded, Alalaparau was abandoned. The Trio relocated to virgin land on the Sipaliwini River. Their new village was Kwamalasamutu, or “place of sand and bamboo.”

THE TRIO HAVE NO WORDS for measures of distance. Instead, distance is expressed in terms of the amount of time it takes to travel. For this reason, Trio estimates of distance are always vague, highly subjective and related to the course of the sun. We have travelled one sunset so far. We have two more to go.

I roll out of my hammock at 4:30 a.m. It is dark, so time still sleeps. The wooden posts of my shelter creak and I brace myself for a fall, but somehow it holds and I walk

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to the smouldering campfire. I am anxious to wake the crew and get on with the day. Our trouble with the motor coupled with the unexpectedly low water has set us back at least six hours of travel time.

Ipiroke is the first to rise. He emerges from beneath his palm-frond roof wearing only a blue Speedo-style swimsuit.

“*Andu!*” he yells, as he makes his way to the river by flashlight. “*Andu!*”

We are on the water by seven o'clock. The motor is better this morning and we let out a cheer as our fears of another day spent crawling upriver are dispelled. The river winds its way through the jungle as if carved into the earth by a child. We pass a pile of boulders in the middle of the water and a colony of bats bursts out, enveloping the boat for a few seconds in a squeaking black cloud. The back of Mawa's T-shirt declares he is “Proud to be plunger-free.”

After we've pulled the boat through the first set of rapids, the sun finally breaks above the canopy and washes the river in light. To my left, a thick bamboo stand turns translucent in the sunshine, green and see-through like the filaments of insect wings. We pass a *kankan* tree that leans over the river with the weight of more than 50 orapendula nests. Then Lukas cuts the engine and Ipiroke stands with his rifle. Mawa jumps out of the boat, wades to shore and disappears into the bush.

Ipiroke aims at a branch-fork near the top of the majestic tree and fires off a round. The gunshot echoes up and down the river and a huge mass of green plumbets from the branch. It lands with a thud in the underbrush and Mawa yells excitedly. A chase ensues. From the boat, all we hear are Mawa's yelps and frantic footsteps. Suddenly, the injured animal crashes out of the bush—an iguana, its prehistoric body and tail more than five feet long, desperately trying to save itself. Just as it stumbles to the water's edge, Mawa bursts out of the forest behind it and snatches it up by the tail.

He hands the writhing reptile to Ipiroke as Lukas starts the engine. Ipiroke digs the blade of his machete into the iguana's chest and I hear the *whoosh* of life escaping its body. He splits the animal open from its neck to its tail, its innards splashing into the water as he cuts them loose. In 10 seconds the animal is empty, nothing but

meat on bones, its lifeless fingers long and wrinkled, its gorgeous rack of blue-green spines slumped into its gaping body cavity. Ipiroke tosses the corpse into the hull and rinses his hands in the river. Lukas taps me on the back.

“*Ewana switi,*” he says to me. Iguana tastes good.

We pass *Agarapi Kreeki*, a tributary, and the river begins to narrow. We pull our boat up a series of rapids, each of us up to our waists in rushing water, struggling to keep our footing as we pull on the gunwales. Lukas decides to motor up a particularly rough patch so we climb back in, and as the engine struggles against the current a three-foot *anyumara*—the oily river fish built like a tank—leaps into the bow. With a flash of steel, Mawa pins the fish to the hull with his machete. In seconds, its liver, intestines and air bladder are floating past me.

We are venturing through an uninhabited jungle teeming with life. During the dry season, hardly a soul travels these waters, and even when the rains come it is rare for anyone to make this trip. Consequently, the region is stocked like a supermarket. We come upon a forest turtle swimming across the river. Lukas steers over to it and Mawa simply scoops it out of the water and places it in the boat.

I ask Mawa how much further it is to Sipaliwini. He looks up at the sky and draws a slow arc in the air. As he does this, he keeps count on his fingers. Then he closes his eyes, as if remembering past trips on this river, or perhaps asking the sun for the answer.

“*Kande we go doro sixi yuru,*” says Mawa. If we travel well, we'll arrive in Sipaliwini at six in the evening.

Walaba trees line the shoreline, their seed cases like thick boomerangs hanging from pieces of string. As we pass beneath a massive wasp nest, six-and-a-half feet long and thick as a tree trunk, Lukas turns the boat down a side creek.

Mawa and Ipiroke quickly reach for their rifles again. They load their guns as Lukas aims the boat at a nondescript section of the shore and cuts the engine. The boat scrapes up onto the rocks and the men leap out. They scramble up a steep embankment into the bush. I climb over our piles of equipment and follow them.

The jungle floor is still dark. The men race through the underbrush and I strug-

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gle to keep up. When I finally reach them, both men are whispering to each other and staring straight up into the canopy. A lump forms in my throat as I realize what's happening. The men are hunting monkey.

Far above, perhaps 150 feet up, an adult red howler monkey sits with his back to a tree trunk. He does not move, just stares down at us through the thick foliage. His maroon fur glimmers gold as it catches the sun, but his bearded face is dark and ghoulish. These are the monkeys that howl like banshees, their ghostly wails renowned throughout South America for their haunting depth and power.

Mawa raises his gun but cannot get a clear shot. Lukas strips a young sapling and, hefting it like an axe, bashes it against the trunk of the monkey's tree. Now both men begin to grunt loudly from deep in their throats, impersonating a predator or perhaps a jungle spirit. They are trying to scare their prey into moving, into exposing itself to Mawa's rifle.

In seconds, the monkey is leaping through the canopy. The men continue to grunt as they track the animal. Suddenly, I see more flashes of red escaping to the west—two juvenile females, one juvenile male, an adult female with a baby on her back. I almost yell to the others but stop myself. Instead, I watch the monkeys recede into the green, winning their freedom and leaving their doomed patriarch behind.

Time moves in strange circles. I used to study monkeys and now I'm hunting them.

A gunshot shatters the morning stillness. I wait for a body to crash to the ground but nothing happens. Lukas and Mawa share a few words. Then Mawa leans his rifle against a rotting log, grips the blade of his machete between his teeth and begins shimmying up a tree.

Mawa glides up the trunk effortlessly. Far above, the monkey sits slumped over, his prehensile tail instinctively wrapped around a thick branch, keeping him from falling. In less than a minute, Mawa comes level with the dying animal, reaches out and unwraps the tail. The monkey slips from his perch, plunges through the branches and lands at my feet with a massive thud. His eyelids drift shut as a last breath exits his nostrils.

I drag the corpse back to the boat, my

hand gripping the base of its tail. The crimson fur feels remarkably soft.

AT FIVE O'CLOCK we come upon the first signs of civilization. A small dugout canoe, only large enough for a man and his hunting dog, is beached on the riverbank. Next to it, a fishing net is wrapped around a snag of wood. Ipiroke yells a Trio greeting into the bush but receives no answer. Then we round a corner and the late-afternoon sun is suddenly blinding, lighting up our boat and the water around it. The jungle on the shore has vanished. We have entered the Sipaliwini savannah.

I stand up to peer over the mud walls of the river, and catch glimpses of a surreal landscape, miles of tall grasses and rolling hills dotted with solitary trees. It looks like the grasslands of Africa. The last five months in the jungles of this country have been a dark and lonely time for me. But now, as Lukas steers us down the middle of the narrowing river and the sky opens up, I begin to see beyond myself for the first time in a long time. I imagine the crush of solitude perhaps loosening its grip, ever so slightly, slipping away with the claustrophobia of all those trees.

An hour later we see a triangular yellow flag fluttering over the river and Lukas cuts the engine. We dock beside an enormous boulder and unload our gear. Then Mawa leads us into the grasses. Two small children emerge from the trees and scurry ahead of us, desperate to deliver the news of our arrival. Their skin is wet with river water and their hair is a glossy black. We pass a family compound, rectangular thatch-roofed buildings with walls of split bamboo. Soon there is more traffic on the trail, men wrapped in towels on their way to bathe, their upper bodies rippled with muscle and riddled with green tattoos.

We stop at a small cooking hut with no walls. Inside, two old Trio women tend the fire and spill the guts of fish into the embers. They wear ancient, torn skirts and nothing above the waist. When they see me they smile and begin to laugh. Ipiroke drops the dead howler monkey at the women's feet and mumbles something softly to them. As we walk away, one of the women chops off the monkey's tail with a single swipe of her axe.

Mawa leads us to a modern-looking building and we climb the stairs to the second-floor balcony. I open the door to one of the rooms and a horde of cock-

roaches flees to the corners. I set up my hammock in the semi-darkness. Through my window, the savannah stretches to the horizon, where a range of hills glistens in the weak light.

Lukas cooks a late dinner of boiled iguana, rice and pepper water. The meat is almost white, very tender and tastes a bit like pork. As I chew a piece of the animal's forearm, tearing the flesh from its slippery hide, I chomp down on something hard and metallic. I grimace in pain and spit the meat into my hand, assuming I've lost a filling. The men burst into laughter. In the middle of my palm sits a small, grey gunshot pellet.

IT'S MORNING, and Sipaliwini wakes. The ancient ladies have started their fire and the roosters have begun to bawl. A small Indian child, his legs crippled by some ferocious disease, crawls from a nearby hut and heaves himself up into a hammock. Bees hum from somewhere beneath our building as the village dogs emerge from the grasses. The sun is up and time has begun to flow.

Before we leave, we drink *casiri* at the house of Mawa's friend. The brew is fresh and potent, stronger than the batch we brought with us, and soon my vision is swimming. We load the boat, taking only the necessities and leaving the rest behind. Today, if we are lucky, we will reach the grasslands of Mamia, the homelands of *okopipi*.

For some reason, a villager has given us an old rice sack with an eight-foot boa constrictor inside. The Basha sits with a small birdcage containing a chestnut-bellied seedfinch, or *piccollete*. The poor forest turtle has shit during the night. As Lukas guns the motor a torrent of brown water comes sloshing past my feet. Our boat is now a modest zoo.

Lukas decides to run the first set of rapids, the steepest ones we've seen besides *Ewana Tepu*. Like the rest of us, Lukas is very drunk. Halfway up, we hear a sickening sound—metal grinding on stone—and the boat lilt and begins to drift backwards. We jump out, even though the water is up to our chests, and pull the boat to a small island of rocks to inspect the damage. Our prop is still there but one of the blades has sheared off.

No one speaks. Instead, the Basha roots through our piles of gear and emerges

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with a pot and the barrel of cassava bread. Inside the pot, chunks of boiled howler monkey sit in a congealed sauce. The men dig in but I wait for them to eat their fill. Then I reach reluctantly into the pot and pull out a severed hand, the fingers webbed with grease and onions. I nibble the primate palm, and then rip a piece of stringy flesh from it, feeling the revulsion rising from my stomach. I give the hand to the Basha, who tears the fingers off one by one and sucks the meat from the bone. I take a piece of breast instead, choking down my breakfast as the monkey fur tickles the back of my throat.

WE SPEND THE MORNING hauling our boat up an endless series of rapids. The motor is almost useless now and we crawl against the current. Amazon kingfishers dive into the river beside us and emerge with foot-long fish. We pass beneath a dove's nest, the mother on top of her egg, waiting until the last moment to flee. We have left the Sipaliwini River behind and have joined the Mamia River.

At noon we pull over, exhausted and baked by the sun. We are used to having the canopy to shade us but in the savannah the heat is relentless. The rainy season was due about three weeks ago.

I assume we've stopped to rest but Ipiroke grabs the axe and wades to shore. He scrambles up the bank to the base of a giant *awara* palm, the crown of which sags with three huge clusters of red fruits. Each cluster contains at least 100 nuts; this is what Ipiroke is after. He begins chopping down the tree. Meanwhile, Mawa asks me for my lighter. He wades to the other side and disappears into the grasses.

Lukas and the Basha cast their fishing lines and I climb out of the boat. I watch Ipiroke work as I crouch in the shade beneath the riverbank, balanced on a slim piece of stone. Then I hear the crackling and smell the smoke. I climb up to the grasses and am almost engulfed by flames. Mawa has set the savannah on fire.

I can see him a half-mile away, holding my lighter to a new swath of grass as walls of flame sweep between us. I scramble back down to the shore but Lukas has moved the boat upriver and there's no way to escape. The crackling gets louder and the air becomes an oven. The grasses

above me shrivel and burn and I prepare to leap into the river.

Somehow, the fire fails to catch the trees at the water's edge and it burns itself out. Lukas and the Basha are laughing at me and Ipiroke continues to hack at the palm. I wait a few minutes and then climb back up to the grasses.

I wander through a scorched landscape. The grasses are gone, replaced by black ashes, and clouds of thick smoke drift on the breeze. The charred earth melts the bottom of my flip-flops and bakes the soles of my feet. In the distance, the fires continue to rage as Mawa walks between them, his head bent low in search of something. Lukas has joined him now and is setting his own swaths of savannah ablaze.

Then a cry goes up from the river and the palm tree begins to fall. It drops slowly at first, a shower of nuts preceding it to the ground. Then it disappears below the riverbank and lands with a violent crash. Ipiroke miscalculated. The tree now lies across the river, barring our return journey.

I climb back down and splash into the water. The Basha drifts the boat back and we fill the hull with nuts. As we plunder the palm, Mawa and Lukas appear at the top of the riverbank, covered in black ash. They carry six savannah turtles, flushed out of hiding by the flames, sticks thrust through their arm holes, 24 red-soled feet flailing in the air. The Trio treasure these turtles as pets. These six are gifts for Granman Asongo.

BY FOUR O'CLOCK, the creek is no more than a foot deep and Lukas has cut the engine. Mawa and Ipiroke use sticks to pull the boat along. Then, from a dark cluster of trees on the riverbank, a lone Indian emerges and waves us down. This must be Winni. We have arrived in Mamia.

Lukas beaches the boat and we carry our gear up a small rise, where a firepit blazes and a makeshift hammock camp leans to the north. As I approach, Winni eyes me and then grabs my hand and shakes it. He is perhaps 45 years old, with a slight build, weary eyes and the ubiquitous bead jewelry of the Trio around his neck.

Winni's daughter is here as well, a beautiful teenager with a glossed black ponytail down her back. As we reinforce the shelter and cover it with our tarps, she butchers an iguana. She holds it by the head and sweeps her machete across its belly as if playing the cello.

Winni asks to speak with me. He has changed his clothes and now wears a white button-up shirt and black pants. He welcomes me to the Sipaliwini Nature Reserve. Granman Asongo had radioed him to tell of the white man and his search for *okopipi*, so he hiked four hours this morning to meet us. Winni will be our guide into the mountains. He is happy I am here and hopes that I will pay him. He also hopes I find what I'm looking for, because without the rains there are no guarantees. He finishes by warning me not to leave Mamia with *okopipi* in my backpack.

I thank Winni, give him his money and promise not to take any frogs. He seems to relax a little and we settle in for dinner. The others have caught a few *dwala* and have boiled them with the iguana. As we eat, the sun sets and the *mopira* flies ease. Afterwards, we hang our hammocks and my crew collapses into them, exhausted and happy to have arrived.

Before bed, I light a smoke and walk out to the savannah. The moon is full and casts a cool, grey light. To the south, the Four Brothers of Mamia rise up, the land's last sigh before Brazil. Mosquitos have replaced the *mopira* and fireflies dance among the grasses. Forty years ago, another white man came here to climb the Brothers. He fell off the mountainside and died before help could reach him. The missionaries had just arrived.

TODAY, more than three decades after the failure of the missionaries' experiment at Alalaparú, the Trio Indians face a new kind of threat. The Surinamese government, its gaze fixed on the rich deposits of bauxite and gold that are believed to exist in the southern savannahs, is refusing to give the Trio legal title to their lands. It wants to ensure that the Trio will be powerless to oppose future mining operations.

The Trio people are taking action. In partnership with the Amazon Conservation Team, a U.S.-based NGO, they are creating the first GPS resource maps of their territory. These maps will be crucial in demonstrating the Indians' cultural ownership of the land. The Trio are also actively courting ecotourism projects to the region, in the hopes that a sustainable tourism economy will be able to compete with the potential of mining. But no one knows if these projects will be enough to

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protect the Trio and the other residents of the jungle—the birds, the monkeys and the tiny blue frogs.

Looking back over the past half-century, it's hard not to lay blame for what's happened to the Trio—on the missionaries, the Surinamese government, the mining industry...even the Trio themselves. But the Trio appear to blame no one. They seem content to be Christian Indians, to be using axes and rifles, to be awaiting the inevitable influx of tourists to their land. They seem cautiously optimistic about what time might bring them, in spite of all they've lost. Sunset, sunset, sunset, arrive.

OUR SEARCH BEGINS with a prayer. We gather in the dark at the edge of camp, where the jungle gives way to savannah, where the trail to Brazil begins. Winni asks us to bow our heads. He speaks quickly, efficiently, reverently—the voice of a man who knows faith and timing are of equal importance when you live alone in the bush. He uses a mixture of Trio and Sranantongo, the Creole lingua franca of Suriname. I pick out sections about God, happiness, white men. As he speaks, waist-high grasses squeak in the morning breeze and the sun still sleeps behind the Mamia Mountains.

We begin to walk. Winni and his daughter take the lead and I follow them closely. After three long days pulling our boat upriver, hiking feels like flying. But Winni goes slowly, bent at the waist, sweeping his machete across the grass in front of him to scare off snakes. He wears ancient rubber boots and his daughter wears \$2 flip-flops. She is 13 and has lived her whole life in the savannah with her father.

The footing is bad, made worse by the pre-dawn darkness. The trail is nothing more than a three-inch-wide break in the grass, worn into the land by the family of two in front of me, the only people who walk here. Their home is four hours away, on the far side of Mamia, a shack on an airstrip that no one uses. Their lives are defined by the scars they leave on the land—this barely visible trail, the blood-red machete wounds on trunks of trees, a pile of charred chicken bones. It is a reciprocal thing, this wounding and scarring. A country leaves marks on its people just the same.

After half an hour we stop on a small rise. The young sky turns red then orange as the others catch up. When the first rays of sunlight sneak out from behind the Four Brothers, Winni's daughter giggles.

"*Okopipi dape*," says Winni, pointing off-trail toward a valley between the mountains. This is where it lives, the only place on earth, nestled between sacred hills in the southernmost reaches of the country.

Now the footing is treacherous. Without a trail we stumble blindly over thick tussocks of grass and sharp rocks the colour of rust. At any moment I could step on a snake and it would all be over. Winni and his daughter pull ahead as my ankles twist and swell. The others take their time. They tell jokes and scan the horizon for game.

We outrun the sun to the foot of the mountains, where Winni stops in the shade and considers our next move. He confers with his daughter, who points toward a patch of giant heliconia palms, a sinister mass of green that stands at the bottom of the valley. Winni thinks for a moment, then nods and heads straight for it.

Among the palms the air is cooler, the ground soft with black mud. But everything is closer here, darker, and soon it becomes difficult to breathe. My boots sink to the ankles as Winni's daughter seems to float. We find a small creek and follow it up the valley, the shallow water stagnant and still. We brace ourselves against the heliconia that grow along its banks, but soon the water is gone and we hike up the middle of the dry creekbed.

And suddenly we are searching. Without a word, Winni has slowed and begun examining the crumbling walls of the old river, and everyone behind me has fanned out in twos and threes. We are in thick jungle now, the insects howling their morning rhythms, the lizards scrambling for cover. The little water that remains from the last rainy season glistens in the mud as the sun pokes through the canopy.

I stay close to Winni. He goes up one side of the riverbed and I go up the other. I look inside every hole and behind every rock. I lift dead cecropia leaves from the forest floor and flip old logs to peer beneath them. We go softly, quietly, as if meditating. The footfalls of my crew are above us now, the men exploring the steep hillsides that used to feed this river.

After another half-hour, Winni turns to me, his face blank but for a slight frown. "*Watra tumsi saka*," he says. The water is

too low. The same problem that plagued our entire journey—the lack of rain that made the Sipaliwini rapids impassable—now threatens our final goal. Winni has never had to search this long before.

The crew keeps looking but I take a break. I lean up against one of the boulders that, when the rains finally come, will give this river its shape. I realize I may never find what I'm looking for; the exhaustion that has been building for so long finally descends. I shut my eyes and listen as the Indians scour the bush, the soft roar of the rainforest rising and falling like waves on a distant sea.

And then someone screams. A woman's voice, halfway up the eastern hillside, crackling with fear or excitement or both. The forest comes alive with thumping footsteps. I push off from the rock and scramble up the steep riverbank, *maka* spines stabbing my hands, my backpack catching on low-hanging vines and showering me with ants. Winni races past, unsure of what his daughter has found. I do everything I can to keep up.

The crew is halfway up the hillside, gathered around a small palm tree. At its base, the leaves and old nuts have been pushed aside, and in the middle of this clearing sits a beautiful blue frog. Its iridescence is stunning against the black mud and decaying leaves, its legs a dark cobalt, its bright blue back mottled with black spots. This is *okopipi*, or *Dendrobates azureus*, the poison frog that lives only here.

Winni leans down, gently picks the frog from the ground and holds it out to me. I hadn't planned on touching it—its poison can kill a man, and the oils in my palm might harm it—but I can't help myself. It weighs almost nothing. It is less than an inch-and-a-half long. I can feel its frantic heart beat through its cold, moist skin.

Mawa offers to take my picture. Ipiroke and Lukas brandish their machetes and pose like buffoons. The Basha says nothing, as usual, his goofy smile perhaps a little wider.

I begin to feel very proud of myself. For a split second, I'm convinced that I've found what I've been searching for, that I am holding the soul of Suriname—the soul of the Last Eden—in the palm of my hand. But as soon as this feeling arrives it is gone. In my mind, *okopipi* has become a powerful metaphor. In my hand it is simply an exquisite amphibian.

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I lean down, place the frog on the ground and cover it up with leaves. We find four more as we hike out of the forest. Then Winni leads us to the summit of the Four Brothers, where we look out on the sweeping Brazilian savannah.

THE TRIP HOME to Kwamala is long and arduous even though the current is with us. We set more of the savannah on fire and have to chop our way through the *awara* tree. We shoot rapids we shouldn't and almost capsize three times. We happen upon a school of *karari* floundering in a rocky pool and slaughter more than 60 of them, poking sticks through their gills and arranging them in neat sets in the bow. Meanwhile, a nasty blister opens up on my left buttock like a giant bedsore.

We arrive in Kwamala to little fanfare. As we unload our gear, a small crowd gathers to watch. In the middle of the river, a young Trio girl stands on a submerged rock. She waves to us and steps into the water, slipping beneath the surface without a splash.

Granman Asongo gives me a bear hug when he sees me. He is happy we are safe and that no one died. He asks if we found *okopipi* and I tell him yes. He asks if I brought any back with me and I laugh and tell him no.

The next day, as I wait for my plane back to the city, I find Lukas, Ipiroke and Mawa sitting inside an abandoned cookhouse, a half-empty bucket of *casiri* between them. They are celebrating our successful return, but they are also mourning the end of the adventure and their return to unemployment.

I sit and drink with them, show them the photos from our journey on my camera. They watch as we drag our boat up the Sipaliwini River, bunk in centuries-old hammock camps and walk behind Winni and his daughter. But then the photos go dark and lose their focus. Indian faces, flashes of jungle, men with a blur of blue in their hands. I wait for the photo of me with *okopipi*, the blue jewel of the jungle.

The photo never comes. **e**

Andrew Westoll is a freelance writer currently living in Toronto. This is his first piece for explore.