For some time, I had been interested in exploring the Amazon rainforest. Originally I wanted to see whether or not it differed significantly from the Costa Rican rainforest, which I had visited a few years earlier, and to observe first hand if the world's largest natural resource was diminishing at the rate ecologists were depicting. My interests were self-centered; to take information only for myself with no intention on my part of giving anything, other than a few dollars for transportation. This was all about to change, big time, at the end of April 2000.

My research for this trip was mostly internet based, and most of what I saw was exactly what I thought I wanted: a plane ride, a boat trip up or down the Amazon, and a guided tour to see the birdies and the monkeys in a guarded wildlife preserve, as the boat glided by an occasional village hut. The more I researched, the more apparent it became that I was not going to be satisfied with someone else showing me their version of life on the Amazon. I had already done that in Costa Rica, Tahiti, and most of the many other places I had visited. Now I was ready to strike out on my own.

One night, after following many links from an online search engine, I discovered the organization known as Amazon Promise. The group had no religious affiliation, and their sole purpose, four times a year, was to bring medical professionals together in Iquitos, Peru, to traverse the head waters of the Amazon and visit riverside and remote villages, while providing medical and dental (if they could get a dentist) health care.

So I left Ohio with my three large Rubbermaid containers of personal belongings and dental supplies to meet a group of people I did not know, in a third world country about which I had no idea, and where I could not speak the native language, other than no entiendo.

An uneventful plane ride from Dallas and a solitary, uneventful night spent in a back-street hotel in Lima, led, the next day, to a mid morning take off and a short, two-hour hop across the Andes with a noon arrival in Iquitos, located at the actual headwaters of the Amazon. The Amazon from 30,000 feet looks like a large ribbon and can actually serpentine 100 miles or more to travel only 10 linear miles. This, plus the fact that during the rainy season the river raises 30 to 50 feet, turns the river, and the jungle, into one huge, watery snake traveling through hundreds of square miles of glistening, steamy, mirror-like swamp.
Arrival at Iquitos was a total experience in third-world immersion. The primary mode of transportation was either motorcycle or motorcar, which was usually a 250 Honda motorcycle with the rear wheel removed and a tricycle rickshaw made for two passengers welded on the back. These instruments of chaos were everywhere, and since there were no stop signs or traffic lights to speak of, getting through the many, many, many intersections in town became an exercise in terror only Stephen King could dream of. However, I must say, these drivers were so skilled that they could pass within millimeters of each other and not even shift gears. True genius existed here!

I spent two-and-a-half days in Iquitos, and visited and photographed many absorbing places, not the least of which was a floating sub-city of Iquitos named Belen, which truly floats on the Amazon during the rainy season. The people actually lived in floating houses and got around in boats during this time of year.

I also stayed with a shaman (witch doctor) and participated in a true cleansing ritual with the chanting and the smoke and the herb-steeped water poured over my body. The definition of refreshing is a 90-plus degree air temperature with cool, evening water being poured slowly over your head. The shaman also had an actual medicinal botanical garden in which he planted hundreds of medicinal plants and trees. Ethnobotanists visit here to learn about the qualities of these plants and, in many cases, take back samples to study for adaptation into drugs for, what we so egocentrically call, the "modern world."

On the third day, I boarded a riverboat for a trek about 110 miles up the headwaters of the Amazon into the Yarapa and Tahuayo rivers. It took an entire day; one night on the river and another entire day to arrive at the first base camp. During these two days, what became very apparent was how totally and completely I was being immersed into the vastness of my surroundings. At night, the moon was like a bowl turned upside down ♦ not the crescent I was used to. I could see the Big Dipper (Ursa Major) on its side, looming huge on the northern horizon, while the Southern Cross sat like a crucifix to the south. I was literally where the Northern Hemisphere meets the Southern Hemisphere, and everything looked so vivid and surreal. Primary, secondary, tertiary, and quaternary stars looked about two feet away! So incredible and so awesomely beautiful!

The first base camp was called Tambo Amazonico. It was very accommodating and very primitive, with a small water tower into which river water was pumped for showering, no electricity, and only bottled water to drink. When the sun went down, the light went out and only
the glow of five or six kerosene lamps filled the screened-in dining area. The sleeping area was screened in, porch-like in nature, with four bunks covered by mosquito netting and two kerosene lights. Save for the monkeys, Mealy Parrots, Red Bellied Macaws, bats, a tarantula or two and many thousands of other creatures, we were totally alone in the jungle. What an awesome feeling of freedom and discovery came over me after a few days here.

The days from this base camp, and another base camp on the second week, were centered around getting up at first light (by the way, days and nights are equal on the equator so it’s dark by six and light by five), eating breakfast (usually, pancakes, eggs and fruit), and then boarding a smaller boat to travel to villages for medical and dental assessment and treatment. Usually by 4:30 or 5 p.m. we were done, mostly because of the lack of daylight light, and we returned to base camp for dinner and stories of the day. It was truly amazing how quickly we became a team and how well everyone worked together.

During the 14 days I was gone, eight were spent in clinic. The clinics were MASH units, basically making do with what could be brought in, literally, on the backs of the villagers. There was no running water or electricity. We used bottled water, which was at a premium, and sunlight. My first dental chair consisted of a wooden stool next to a pole, to which we secured a floatation cushion with duct tape for a headrest. I did take small, battery-powered Mag lights for the difficult-to-see areas. Since there was no electricity, there was no opportunity to do much restorative dentistry, although I did manage to do a little nineteenth century hand tooling and filling with self-curing composite. Ninety-nine percent of the work was extractions and minor oral surgery. Even if restorative dentistry could have been done, one of the basic staples of a village diet is sugar cane, so what was filled then would have been carious in six months.

By actual count the clinics as a whole saw 561 patients and I, personally, saw 143 people and removed 379 teeth. Not withstanding the above statistic and observations, what impressed me most about these people was how overall healthy they really were, both physically and mentally. Sure, most of the children had worms, but in the face of how they were living, the overall incidence of diseases like cholera, dysentery, and e-coli based infections, or any other problem one could think of from living at one with the environment, was really relatively low. The teeth, although considerably decayed, were not generally infected, and the overall incidence of periodontal disease, although observed, was not as high as one might think. Most people just pull their own teeth when they get bad, and I saw no sequelae of any morbidity from past infections or from previous, self-inflicted surgeries.

Mentally, the people appeared very well adjusted and totally at peace with how they were living. They take only what they need, not what they want, because they want very little. There were
constant smiles on the faces of the children. The children had roles and the adults had roles, they all knew what they were, and life was simple. These were very kind people. There was honest and emphatic gratitude from the entire village for what we provided. (When was the last time an entire town turned out to thank you for helping them, and watch and wave goodbye as you left to go home at night?) I never felt in danger or unwanted.

These are not "poor" people. They are at one with their environment and at peace with themselves. Poor is a state of mind, and I personally see and know people, who live in the higher-end communities of my own town, who are by far more "poor" than these villagers will ever be.

Unfortunately, the blight is coming, the world is getting smaller, and by the turn of the next century or so, this population will probably end up like our own Indians: nowhere to be and nowhere to go. Too bad, because there is much we can learn from their way of life. These are the true children of the earth.

This trip changed my life in many respects. I went with a self-absorbed voyeuristic attitude and returned with a far more heuristic approach to the world I live in. I can't become one of them, nor would I, particularly, want to live the way they do. But maybe, just maybe, I'll pick up the trash and recycle it a bit more; I'll make time to walk and be totally a part of nature; I'll certainly tell the people I love how much I care for them. Most importantly, I'll appreciate what you do for me a lot more and try to pass it on to others without asking for anything in return.

We really don't need all that much if we stop to think about it. We just WANT it.

Maybe there was something to the shaman's cleansing ritual I went through at Sachamama.

Dr. Bob is now Dental Director for Amazon Promise. He wrote this report after going on an expedition with the organization along the Yarapa River in April 2000.