

Chapter 6 of *To Belém & Back*

JUST WHEN THINGS were beginning to look up, our first encounter with the infamous Belém-Brasília offered a brief but terrible look into the future.

Road conditions are a big topic in Goiás, understandably so. It was July, peak family travel time, and everything I read in the papers or saw on local television emphasized the danger of federal highways versus state roads only slightly less so. Closer accountability helps, as Goiás has contracted out road maintenance to a dedicated company called Agetop, which, even if its name doesn't inspire confidence in the blacktop's freshness, appeared to take its job seriously. Not only were the backroads in less-than-disastrous shape, they were also plastered with small didactic signs to heighten awareness of the cerrado's importance, including:

The cerrado is the source of life / Avoid fires
Don't throw trash on highway / Nature thanks you
Live well with Nature
To preserve nature is to respect life
To kill wild animals is a crime

One benefit of poor and unpredictable roads is fewer road-kills – so I can report with relief that I had yet to collide with one wild critter or, inadvertently, commit a crime.

Always respectful of local wisdom, I mapped a route to our next destination, Pirenópolis, with the minimal possible distance on federal roads, only forty-seven kilometers. But what a forty-seven kilometers it was near the outset of BR-153, the dreaded Belém-Brasília, all of it marked in “precarious condition.” The potholes were so large, they were craters, the craters so gargantuan and treacherous and unexpected (I counted a dozen before losing count) that anyone in his or her right mind had to slow to a crawl. But there's the catch: not everyone in Brazil is in their right mind. Indeed, in a nation that idolizes Formula One champions such as Ayrton Senna, whose violent death, instead of dissuading, spawned thousands of wannabes; in a nation that often

seems the crazy step-nephew of mad-cap Italy, where blind passing on mountain curves is child's play; in such a place "right-minded" presumes a rationality that is, well, rationed. So it should hardly surprise that every other motorist appeared the caricature of the white-knuckled, crazy-eyed, grimace-faced mental case about to cash in on an insurance policy to the hereafter. Not to mention the numerous, recently derailed drivers who had descended from their vehicles, on the dirt sides of the free-for-all-way, in order to change tires – mindful that a second flat in a row leaves you stranded.

Yet what really startled me was something else. I had thought that the long-haul truck drivers would be the most deranged, hurling themselves into the breach of battle with only their own earthly cargo and heavenly soul at risk, battling back the road's worst with three to four axles and numerous sets of shock-troop tires. But, no, the truck drivers turned out to be Sunday school sissies in comparison to the certifiably lunatic bus drivers, who not only threw themselves into the fray with reckless abandon but dragged along dozens of wan-faced passengers into communal near-death experiences. The first time a crazed bus came barreling down on Atlas and me, all too quickly filling the rear-view mirror, I felt a lurch of relief that Atlas had been upgraded to the back seat, leaving only our supplies to be crushed in the event of a rear collision. I resisted the panicked urge to speed up over the moonscape (though I did briefly feel weightless), and was amazed when the bus sped by us on the right side, half on partial asphalt, half in dirt. When he did the same to the car in front of us, there were more obstacles and less dirt, so he drove the hapless car into the on-coming lane just as a truck came into full-frontal view. This was only the first of numerous *pas de deux* ballet set pieces interrupted by incoming projectiles, including one onrushing bus gone berserk which drove the cowering car in front of us completely off the road. We, in turn, wacked hard a number of asphalt precipices, but Fofão – the name of my Fiat station wagon which, appropriately, is a term of endearment, something like "Big Cutie" – carried on.

When the forty-seven kilometers were over I seemed to be in one piece, if mildly trembling, and calculated that during the hour and a

quarter ordeal we had averaged only thirty-five kilometers per hour, well below the Four Wheels' "precarious" pacing. It didn't take a calculator to figure out that if this pace kept up along the vast stretches of Red Rage Road at the other, Amazonian, end of the Belém-Brasília, it could take twelve hours of daylight to go only four hundred kilometers – and we still wouldn't reach the next real town.

After such a pilgrimage through BR-153 purgatory, the ascent back to the relative sanity of state roads came as a godsend. On the final stretch to Pirenópolis, we passed several "Live Bait" signs and small ponds offering "Catch & Pay" to lazy anglers. Cattle was king, as confirmed by the numerous whitish or brownish blurs dotting distant hillsides, by the "animal auction barns," and by the number of businesses, including gas stations, with the popular Zebu breed in their names. ("Zebu Gas," however, seems an unfortunate moniker these methane-sensitive days.) The narrow road curved neatly between white-washed curbs, while the Goianian veredas down in valley folds, to my eyes, had more palm trees rustling through the cerrado. A large nosed toucan flapped with effort across the country road, whose only casualties were flattened husks of sugar cane fallen from flat-bed trucks.

My spirits back up, I tuned to a local radio station in time to hear a report on the subject of kissing. Radio stations that don't play adolescent pop drivel all day long, much of it American, are a rarity in the backlands, so when you stumble on an exception you pay attention. A recent scientific study had revealed that kissing doubles the heartbeat from an unperturbed seventy per minute to over a hundred and fifty flutterings. It logically follows that the average ten second French kiss consumes an extra twelve calories, after which it was only natural to provide several "kiss recipes" – or their calorie-consuming equivalents – such as the heartening news that a chocolate treat called *brigadeiro* is atoned for with 4.5 kisses, one pleasure leading to another: the story of Brazil.

I can't avoid hypothesizing that the country's notorious sensuality, with more couples per capita wet-kissing than on the streets of Paris, is one of the secrets of her renowned pacifism over the years, a

feminization of the macho impulses so prevalent in Spanish America. (Yet given so many on- and off-road warriors, was this mooted pacifism really the case?) Also on the radio were teaser storylines for the nightly soap operas – whose huge audiences not only extend to many males, but to over a hundred countries – with names such as “The Color of Sin” (about a feisty mulatta from the northern state of Maranhão), “Madame Destiny” (which mainlines Brazil’s obsession with mysticism), and *Coboda*, literally “copper-colored,” a popular term for mestizo. Among the several plot developments promised that very night – and giving them away detracts not one iota from the suspense – was “Paula traps Tom to keep him from leaving,” and “Barbara, hysterical, is certain Paco has returned from hell in order to drag her there.”

Other than that day’s gaping window into the nation’s shocking lack of road-esteem, I was finding Goiás to be a striving, earnest, and civilizing sort of place. Besides the wildly proliferating Hug Nature decrees, I saw one sign advising, “Motorists: Respect our athletes in training,” near the modern capital of Goiânia, the first admonition to share the road with bicyclists or joggers I had seen anywhere in Brazil. If only similar signs on the Belém-Brasília admonished the bus-behemoths to avoid road-killing the slower orders – assuming bus drivers bother to lift their eyes from the next prey long enough to read them.

Due, maybe, to the fatalistic roads or to the shimmering quality of light in the high, semi-dry savanna of central Brazil, we were quickly entering a mystic nation within a nation. The first premonitions were in Pirenópolis, another historic gold-boom town like Goiás Velho, only more spiritual. Brasília, the country’s highest income per capita city with a pronounced mystical edge of its own, is only a two hour drive away, which may explain Pirenópolis’s outbreak of hippies selling Middle Earth dwarves, elf figurines, and marijuana paraphernalia from every corner, presumably to the enchanted, have-it-all children of Brasília’s well-off. These are probably the same youth who, as Dona Sonia would say, are tired of being “slaves of the commercial creed” –

and incidentally have enough spare cash to make the *de rigueur*, anti-consumerism statement. New Agers can be the most welcoming of people, such as the long-haired local who greeted Atlas and me with a booming hello and gave Atlas some rough hugs and playful pats while explaining that he once had a Labrador just like him – before he was stolen. But as I grew up in freaky Cambridge, Mass., during the Sixties, the commercialism of the well-worn counterculture gives me a frayed sense of déjà-vu, especially here where it appears more borrowed than Brazilian. One wonders if Brazil's last round of military dictatorships, for two decades starting in the mid-Sixties, inhibited the ability to let it all hang out, which now manifests itself in a more crystallized form, postponed but intensified, as if recycling wasted time.

Brazil is certainly a society in ever-transition, from a crony-capitalism fueled by patronage, whose hierarchical and self-aggrandizing tendencies survived almost intact from colony to Empire, from Old Republic to dictatorship, and are only now slowly being undermined by the nation's first tentative years of participatory democracy. This evolution, as halting and drawn-out as it is, is echoed in the much delayed creation story of Brasília, which, fast approaching its fiftieth anniversary, had resided in the nation's collective fantasies for over two centuries before realization.

The metropolis itself, which Atlas and I tried to tour in one day, is a massive concrete elephant of a planned city built on a deserted high plain, and that, against all odds, sprang from the heads of Oscar Niemeyer and Lúcio Costa, and the heart of President Juscelino Kubitschek, as if fully formed and immutable. Carved from the body of Goiás and inaugurated in 1960, it is one of the most audacious feats of societal planning in history, calibrated to tip the country's critical mass away from the coasts – where, as Friar Vicente's famous saying from 1627 has it, the Brazilians prefer “to cling like crabs”¹ – and into the forbidding interior. No passable roads existed in the region at the time, so massive bulldozers had to be air-lifted in to clear the future metropolitan area of trees. (Few have returned.) It was also founded on the theory that where politicians and money go, people will follow, which of course is exactly what happened – though in a much more

haphazard manner than the planners planned. The thousands upon thousands of laborers who fled a harsh Northeastern drought in the 1950's and then built Brasília out of the thin air of the high central plains, instead of disappearing back into the savannas and drought-parched wastelands from where they came, stayed on. But as there was no place for them in the upper middle class utopia that looked so enticing on paper, they transformed their construction quarters into squatters' camps that eventually overflowed into shanty town *favelas* and then "satellite cities." Brasília is another Cultural Patrimony of Humanity site, a Le Corbusier-inspired dream gone awry that enshrines its endearing and expensive optimism, a kind of over-enthusiasm that surfs the continuous boom and bust cycles brought in from the coast. But then I am inclined to think that centrally planned cities are authoritarian in nature, against the human – and especially the Brazilian – grain.

Having said that, I confess that Brazilians are wizards with concrete, which they brilliantly make swoop and dance in gravity-defying ways that trump expectation. Walking among the massive governmental structures of the Monumental Axis, you can't resist being awed by the sheer enormity and ambition of so many sleek concrete mammoths. One feels inconsequential and puny – and then realizes that might be the point. Other than Atlas and I, nobody was out walking under the blaring sun, not even worker ants busy around the bureaucratic nests of various ministries, much less on the dry and dusty promenades that lack any shade trees whatsoever and are cut off from each other by multi-lane causeways carrying their heavy, rushing burden of cars. Pedestrians – dare I say people? – are not really welcome at the monumental heart of Brasília. (As confirmed by a contemporary journalist not so long ago, "With an estimated population of 1.8 million, Brasília has no sidewalks or street names.")

Surrounded by so much solid munificence I had a puckish thought: why not spread only a fraction of Brasília's orgy of concrete over the federal roadway system and be done with it? But then gestures as grand as Brasília are never meant to be practical, and we need to gaze at stars even when stuck in potholes.

The ossified extravagance of the new capital was, naturally, inflation-financed through a gusher of printed money, and followed in the wake of Kubitschek's wildly popular breaking with the punch-bowl-stealers of the International Monetary Fund. Kubitschek's incitement to the nation to "advance fifty years in five" had an unmistakable command and control ring to it, yet caught the roller coaster spirit of the times, a die-hard optimism inflamed by successive Brazilian wins of soccer's World Cup. In the years to follow the nationwide festivities only intensified, while inflation and an economic crisis accelerated. (As one wag quipped: "Fifty years of inflation in five!") Government officials were enticed with doubled salaries to move from Rio to Brasília, which one contemporary journalist likens to "a theme park given over to politics and wheeler-dealing."² There the next two governments – like Brasília, built on sands of hope – floundered on the global seismic shifts between the free and un-free, until the approaching civilian showdown was cut short by a military coup for the fifth time in Brazilian history. But this time it was for real, the military dictatorship lasting for over twenty sullen, sinful years.

The gaily pink pousada where we stayed in Pirenópolis, named the Matutina Meiapontense after the region's first newspaper, turned out to be less welcoming than at first blush. Graciously unperturbed by Atlas, the young receptionist warned that the only room available was a small one, which it was, no larger than a medium-sized walk-in closet. When I noticed from a sign over the girl's shoulder that check-out was at a leisurely three p.m. and asked if anyone might be leaving that day, a momentarily animated Andrea admitted one couple planned to check out that afternoon. She suggested we come back after lunch, or around four o'clock, to find out.

By our return, though, Andrea had changed her tune, saying that the couple had decided to stay on. "And someone else wanted to rent the single," she added, "but I kept it for you."

I expressed our gratitude, as I had taken the opportunity to confirm that no other place in town was willing to accept a total of six legs: four furry, two less so. The room, snugly fitting a single bed, included a

damp bathroom and only one cramped window over the bed, made of the opaque brushed glass found in lavatories. Between this and the bare ceiling bulb the room was shrouded in a permanent twilight, which may explain why one of the panes had a gaping hole, big enough to let in an arm and a hand that, with little effort, could unlatch the door from the inside. When I asked Andrea for a table lamp, she replied they had none. When I asked Andrea if they could fix the window, she was dubious. And when I asked Andrea if the hole could at least be covered with cardboard, she said she would speak to the handyman, but her tone did not inspire confidence. As things could only improve after such blasts of negativism and inertia, we took it.

The concept of Brasília as a shining city on the hills of the *planalto*, or “high plain,” had been kicking around Brazil, like a very old soccer ball, for ages. Conception is dated somewhere between 1789 and 1823, but what really got things going, at the end of the 19th century, was when a Salesian priest named John Bosco (respectfully called Dom João Bosco in Brazil), while living in Turin, Italy, dreamed of a new civilization in central Brazil. He predicted it would emerge between the 15th and 20th parallels (which, indeed, now encompasses the Federal District...), with a new capital built between the 15th and 16th parallels (bingo: Brasília!), on the edge of an artificial lake (double bingo!) – not bad as prophesies go. His fabled dream was so widely publicized that the 1891 Constitution of the Old Republic set aside 5,500 square miles on the Central Plateau for the creation of a new capital.³ Not long after, in 1913, former President Teddy Roosevelt would visit the edge of the planalto and comment that “any sound northern race could live here; and in such a land, with such a climate, there would be much joy of living.” (From the sound of it, T.R. either caught a sudden cold snap or the local bug of fawning flattery.)

Yet the roots of such visionary tropicalism were even deeper than that, synthesizing the major veins of New World fantasies as early as 1813, when a local journalist Hipódito da Costa placed the new capital in the “country of the central interior and at the headwaters of great rivers,” where there would be constructed

a new city; which would begin to open roads to every seaport, remove natural obstacles from the navigable rivers, and thus lay the foundations of the most extensive, well-linked and protected Empire that is possible on the Earth's surface.... This central point is found at the headwaters of the famous São Francisco River. In its vicinity are the fountainheads of copious rivers, that flow to the North, to the South, to the Northeast and to the Southeast, vast prairie land for the raising of cattle, rock in abundance for any sort of building, lumber for every necessity, and the richest mines of the quality metals; in one word, a situation which can be compared to the description of Heaven on Earth.

In such a serendipitous manner, the rich mines at the headwaters, Brasília itself, and even the Belém-Brasília highway are all fundamental aspects of earthly paradise – the dreams of far-sighted journalists, priests, and politicians made tantalizingly near.

The accoutrements of our broom closet room in the pink pousada were not so inspiring. The only furnishings, besides the bed, were a luggage rack and a fan, which came in handy as even a quick shower dampened the entire space, misting the polished concrete floor. The bathroom itself was so diminutive that the toilet sat perilously close to one wall, so as to not receive the direct spray of the shower head which soaked everything regardless. While the pink-on-white color scheme had been bravely continued indoors, even the warning splash of electric pink over the bathroom's low lintel couldn't deter me from rattling my cranium several times, as unwelcome as a wayward wheel in an upside-down pothole.

I was already in a dubious mood when the room's only outlet sent a surge of electricity through my laptop's power line, causing the female end to give me a good shock and jolting me with what might have occurred had the computer, instead of I, gotten plugged. This and all the injustices of life drove me into a full, righteous retreat to the inn's living area, where I chose what looked to be the safest outlet on the premises, the one powering the public T.V., in order to test my technology – which evidently had not overly fried. Sensing, or better

yet, almost tasting revenge, I realized with a thrill that I had a cat bird's view of the reception area from my ragged sofa perch. This, understandably, threw Andrea into sporadic fits of cautiousness, particularly when a large family from Brasilia arrived asking for accommodations and, instead of saying they were full, she inquired, "For how many?"

That was pretty crafty, I had to admit, for then she could safely reply, "No, we don't have room." I was beginning to wonder if Andrea could be lit by more wattage than on first, dim impression, but then her stratagem failed when a room-needy couple arrived, leading her to speak in whispers, which comically, as if in church, caused the couple to lower their voices as well. Thanks to some kind of secular intervention a room was found.

Perhaps it was the broken window by my pillow which made me sleep poorly that night, or the free-range mosquitoes, or the cars entering and leaving the courtyard parking lot at all hours due to the Rave festival (one of those waves of the future that crashes all night long) just outside of town. Such as it is, traveling the hinterlands of Brazil with your dog. In the morning I took groggy pleasure in borrowing the cheap soap from the employees' washroom next door, and using it as my own. So there!

The hold of Dom Bosco's dream over the country's collective imagination turned out to be durable. It may explain why innumerable cults have bubbled to the surface around Brasilia and Pirenópolis, like so many hot springs. (Brasilia, specifically, has the highest concentration of sects in the nation.) There is Tia Neiva's Valley of the Dawn, whose central town is dominated by an enormous Star of David forming a lake pierced by an arrow. Then there is the Temple of Goodwill, which incorporates seven pyramids with one large cone topped by one teeteringly large raw crystal. Beyond Electric City, which was founded by an ex-airline pilot named Yokanam with the aim of unifying all (of this world's) religions, there's a well worn spot, near kilometer sixty-nine of BR-251, famous for extraterrestrial landings. The Federal District used to publish a brochure called "Mystic Brasilia"

(from the Tourism Department and with an introduction by the then-governor), treating with equal respect all sorts of groups pushing ufology, parapsychology, alternative medicine, and even the theory (seconded, no doubt, by the Temple of Goodwill) that, due to the high incidence of pyramid shapes in the new capital, Brasilia is actually an Egyptian city destined to become the capital of the world in the third millennium – that is, starting about now.

Uncowed by the competition, mystic Pirenópolis may have been trying to tell me something when I discovered the town's center is dominated not by a watery Star of David, but by a large burned-out church that had been demolished by an avenging fire only two years before. The charred carcass was wrapped in shrouds behind the colorful placards of a large advertising campaign for the renovation's sponsors, promoting Petrobras, the national petroleum company whose main sideline appears to be cultural investments to prevent being truly privatized; BNDES, the national public developmental bank; Caixa, a semi-public bank; and CELG, the state electricity company and lone regional representative.

If your impression is that state companies and state employees have their hands in just about everything, you're not far off, as it took a local visit to Iphan, the Federal Landmarks Commission, to trace the blaze's origins.

When I walked in with Atlas, the gray-wisped blond behind the main desk gave us a big hello. "How charming his handkerchief looks!" she gushed, referring to Atlas's one sartorial touch, a slate blue bandana tied around the neck.

I thanked Catarina and, in turn, complimented her on the spruced up and colonial feel to town.

"You've got to do *something* while in this office!" she replied brightly.

The fire, it turns out, occurred not long after an exhaustive renovation, supervised by Iphan, that had cost untold millions – which means, incredibly, that the town had enjoyed a pristine refurbished church for just a few penitent years. While the exact cause of the blaze remains a conundrum, it reportedly began in the sacristy where the

Father not only was in the habit of keeping his robes, but running a small candle factory as well, and where – to deepen the enigma or the ineptitude or both – several large gas canisters were stored.

When I commented to Catarina how fortunate the Father and Church have been to find sponsors for the church's re-building, she corrected me.

No, it was Iphan that had organized the sponsors and once again raised the money, which had subsequently been turned over to the same Father, "like doing all the work and then handing the keys over to others," she sniffed.

It was that old Edenic creation story all over again – but here with bureaucrats in the starring roles as Movers and Makers, setting us up for the next fall.