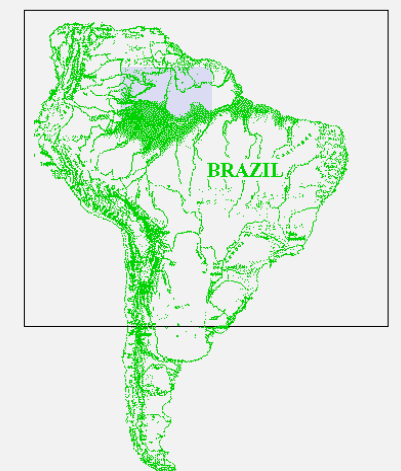




GREEN OVER GOLD

Green is the color of the forest.
Gold is the color of money.
Where there's green, there's gold.

— Gold miner at Paapiu Airstrip,
The Surucucu', Roraima



When the Transamazonian Highway was being built back in the early 70's, there were rumors all over the Amazon about secret landing strips in the jungle, about gold and diamonds and all kinds of illegal smuggling.

At first, no one believed it. The stories were all made up, they said. It was just part of the lore and mystique of the Amazon. But by the time the road was built over three hundred clandestine airstrips had been discovered along its way. Some of them were used by missionaries, others by the military. Most were run by enterprising miners who knew there was gold in God's Green Hell. Since then hundreds more have been discovered. Hundreds more remain hidden. No one knows how many are still being built.

Of all the airstrips, Paapiu is the most famous. It's the only open airstrip in the Surucucu'. That's the name the Indians gave the region; they named it after a poisonous snake because that jungle there is full of them. The airstrip is hidden in a hilly region, in the western edge of the State of Roraima, right in the middle of Yanomani Indian Territory. If you don't know the terrain and how to follow the rivers, you'll never find it. The only way the miners can get to their claims is by first flying to Paapiu.

Mining gold in the jungle is not as easy as pulling it out of a large river like the Madeira, the Tapajos or the Crepori. Those rivers are easy to find, easy to navigate, and they don't change course very much. Once the prospectors, or *garimpeiros* as they're called, get to Paapiu, they have to get to their claims by foot.

Gold is usually found along a small stream, or *igarape'*. There are millions of them winding through the jungle like a labyrinth. In the rainy season they overflow their banks, change course, and branch off to other *igarape's*. In the dry season, they might dry up or even disappear. There are cases where a miner found huge deposits of gold, came out of the jungle to stake his claim, and when he went back to get more gold, never found it again.

The airstrip is lined on both sides with an odd-ball collection of clap-trap huts, tents, shacks and corrugated-steel hangars belonging to gold mining companies that fly supplies and miners in and out of the jungle. Almost every one of them has the wreckage of a plane that crashed sitting in front of their hangars. There's also several *cantinas*, a general store, and a mechanic shop. One of the *cantinas* has a television hooked up to a satellite dish. The miners watch the soccer games with the Indians.

There's a Yanomani indian village at the end of the runway called the *Mahauteri Maloca*. A *maloca* is a round grass hut, usually about 120 feet in diameter. It's one of about



a dozen Yanomani villages near Paapiu. About eighty-five indians, counting children, live in the Mahauteri Maloca. Half of them are dying from malaria and tuberculosis brought from the south by the miners. The miners have polluted the *igarape'* that runs by the village so the Indians can't drink the water without getting sick.

Over the years, the indians at Paapiu have come to depend on the miners to supply them with food, beer and other trappings of civilization. So, they have forgotten how to plant and they don't teach their children how to hunt or fish anymore. When the planes take off the children run out with their bows and arrows and try to hit the planes just for fun. They usually miss because they're not very good at it.

Once, when we flew up into the mountains just south of the Colombian border I counted thirteen airstrips in ten minutes flying a straight course. I saw an airstrip that was at least 1200 feet long, paved with asphalt and with a yellow line down the middle. Someone has plans, big plans.

— Rogerio Prunes de Abreu, Pilot, entrepreneur, adventurer



Very little of the gold stays in Brazil. It's all illegal. The gold gets put into a small plane owned by some nameless person and it's flown at night across the border to Paraguay, Bolivia, or maybe even Columbia. Generally Paraguay because it's safer. Paraguay is one of the world's leading exporter of gold and there's not one gold mine in the country.

— Anonymous Gold Miner, Paapiu Airstrip, Roraima



All airstrips have special names: "Feijao Queimado" (Burnt Beans), "Jacare' Tres" (Crocodile Three), "Bom Futuro" (Good Future), "Biano Formiga" (Bahian Ant), "Pau Grosso" (Thick Stick), and then there's Paapiu. Paapiu is a Yanomani Indian word. No one knows what it means or where it came from.

— Goiano, Helicopter Pilot, Paapiu



They make you pay with gold. The more you weigh, the more you pay.
— Anonymous gold miner



I was coming back from my claim when I got lost. I ended up wandering around the jungle for days until I collapsed from exhaustion. That's when I fell and broke my arm. I would have died in there if the Indians hadn't found me. They took me to their village and kept me there for three months until I got better. Then they took me to the 'edge of the world.' That's a place in the forest where they say their world ends and the White man's world begins. They won't go past that spot because they believe they'll die, so they left me there. It took me another week to get back to Paapiu on my own. I still had my gold. The Indians didn't steal it. I was lucky, because it's not always that way. There are many stories of miners fighting Indians and Indians attacking the miners.

— Gold miner nicknamed Indian,
Real name unknown



The Brazilian government can't control this. They won't pay the going prices. They never did. That's why all the smuggling happens. Twenty years ago they built a Federal Banking System and they tried to put a branch in all the major cities in the Amazon. They were crazy. They should have put a bank in every gold mine and paid the gold miners going prices. The government would have made a fortune. But they didn't want to. They thought they didn't want to do that. So today, these guys say 'Screw'em! Why should I get paid \$300 an ounce when I can fly across the border and get more and not pay tax on it and not have the government nosing around, and who knows, maybe even find a good woman for the night?' So they do that.

— Placido Moura de Santana,
Gold miner, mechanic, truck driver,
CrepORIZINHO Gold Mine, Crepori River



The government has tried to shut down the gold mines to protect the Indians. They send the army up here to dynamite the runways and force the miners out at gunpoint. But it doesn't do any good, because a week later the miners come back, fix the runway and they're back in business. No one can stop this. In 1990 there were fifty thousand gold miners in the Surucucu' and only eleven thousand Indians.

— Dr. Antonio Milimino Pedrosa Junior,
Chief of the Indian Post, Paapiu



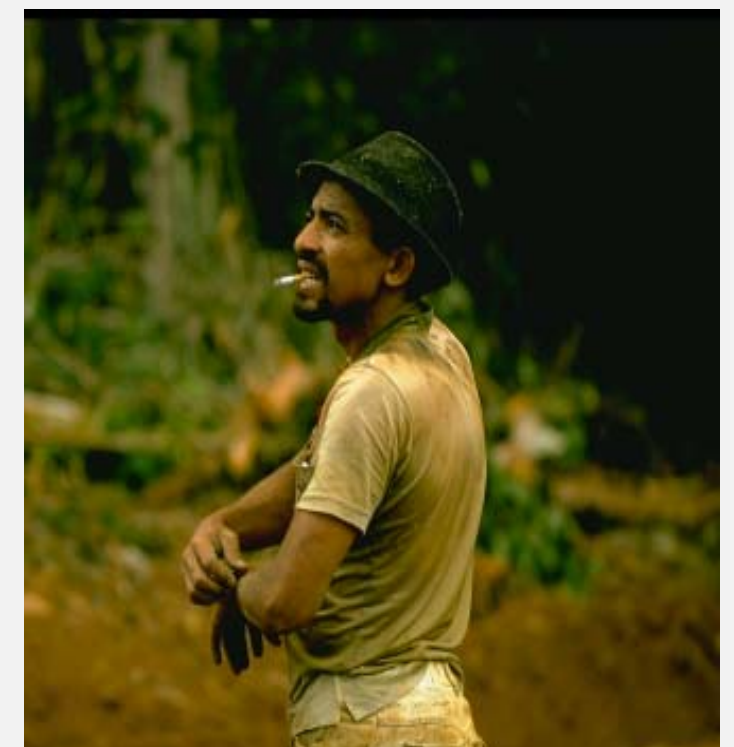
*S*how the world you have some upbringing and use the toilette seat. When you're finished show the world you have some understanding of hygiene and hang it up again.

— Sign hanging on outhouse wall in gold mine



*Y*ou know, a gold miner, he gets bit by a mosquito down there in Ariqueemes, or somewhere in the South. And then the gold mining season gets washed out because the rains come early, so he leaves. He heard there's a lot of gold in the Surucucu'. He gets on a plane, or a boat and comes up here and he brings malaria with him. So, some mosquito bites him and there it starts.

— Goiano, Helicopter Pilot, Paapiu
Airstrip, Roraima





There is news, news of a miner who found gold. They say he found it in the bottom of the Crepori river. But he had to pull a ton of ore out to get only a little bit of gold. I heard he spent all his money building boats to go up the river looking for more gold. Today he is poor as I. Easy come, easy go. I don't think they will find much gold, not down there. There's nothing in the Crepori River but water.

— Diary entry, August 15, 1972
interview with Ignac Nelson Jacob,
Sao Luiz-Itaituba



There are two places on the crepori river where there's gold. Creporizinho, that's the smaller mining town on the other side. It's only three years old. And here, in Creporizao, which is older. It's been here more than twenty years. Last year we pulled over three tons of gold out of the Crepori. Many men have gotten rich on this river over the last twenty years. But I heard that the guy who discovered gold here died broke.

— Edivan Xavier, Vice-president
The Creporizao Community Association of Miners



There's only one supplier of fuel here. He robs us because he knows we have to pay. Last year a guy came in here and tried to set up another deisel company and compete. They gave him one day to leave, but he stayed. He said he wouldn't leave. He's still here, too. In the bottom of the river.

*— Mayor of Creporizinho,
Gold Mining Town on the Crepori River*



I'm not a garimpeiro, I'm an dventurer. There's a difference. I go into the forest and explore for gold. I make the plot and then sell it.

I've got a plot — it took me five months to find it. Me and my partner. It's on an igarape' two or three meters wide and two thousand meters long. I'm selling it for eight thousand dollars American. I'll go back home and do something else. No more gold for me. The longest time I spent in the forest was forty three days, eating whatever food I could hunt. It was tough. There are a lot of dangers. You get sick or hurt or lost in there and you're dead.

— 27 year-old f who left his farm in Parana' for the gold rush in Roraima





They say the world is mad at us. They say we're destroying the forest, the lungs of the world. That we're polluting the sacred forest and the skies with fire and smoke and mercury. The greatest pollution I ever saw in the Amazon was human pollution. People living in sub-human conditions. This makes me sad. And the world is preoccupied with trying to save the forest — a forest which doesn't exist the way they believe it does. They don't care about the people. It's not right. They have no right until they come here and do what we've done.

— Elton Rohnelt,
Owner of Goldamazon

More than half the indians here have malaria or tuberculosis. They can't eat the fish anymore because the nearby streams are polluted from miners dumping mercury and mud into them.

— Mariam Blau, TV Reporter
commenting about the Yanomani Indian
village at the end of the Paapiu airstrip.

(Right) An igrarape' winds through dense forest. One of countless small rivers, this one appears to be a dirt road, though its color is caused by the dense silt washed into it from gold mining along its banks.





***T**here are places on the Crepori river where it's so thick with mud from the sluices that the water drips off your fingers like oatmeal.*

*— Diary entry, Creporizinho,
on the Crepori River*