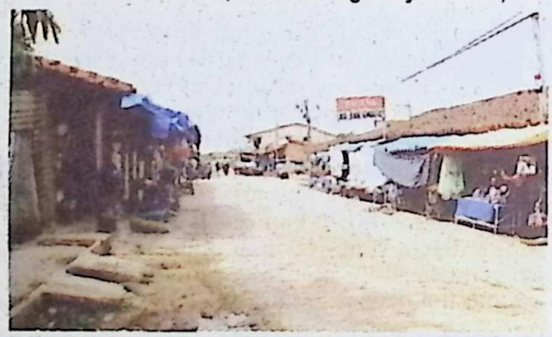


A bus and snack stand, when leaving Guayaramerin, Beni, Bolivia.



The sun is hot in Beni, where the culture inherited more from Andalusia than from the indigenous cultures of the Andes.



The central plaza, San Ignacio de Moxos, Beni, Bolivia.

O Mamoré, do you remember my little adventure in Guayaramerín? You've become the Brazilian border by then, isn't it? And apart from that little disputed island it's clear that on your far bank the Portuguese starts, in the Brazilian co-town called Guajará-Mirim. So I took the boat, do you recall? I saw how broad and fine you are –and from the heat I wished to, ill-advised, dive into you. There was ill-ease, did you sense it? I'd read I could enter the Brazilian town for the day without a visa and return but it wasn't certain what would happen. I tell you, when I went inside the immigration building on the far bank I paused with a kind of dumb, innocent smile waiting for the official to acknowledge me, wanting to humbly ask if Brazil wouldn't mind much if I slightly entered its territory for just a short while.

The official quite deliberately turned his back which I took as quiet permission to wander past the desk and out onto the street – I'm sure that's what it was about – overlooking the formalities, just as he'd undoubtedly done for foreign tourists before. I liked Brazil for that, not hung up and welcoming. Guajará-Mirim was not by appearance so different from the Bolivian side, as you know, just an outpost town in a remote pocket of that other country. It was hot, more than hot, I needed water and the shops were closed, even if they would accept Bolivianos in payment.

O Mamoré, I found a mid-range hotel, for water, not to stay, and inside there wasn't a soul at reception but after some minutes a uniformed maid, attractive, came, and all I could say, the only Spanish I found, that I knew, that she would understand was 'agua' – water, aside from the hello and thank you I managed in Portuguese.

She took a bottle from a trolley, a bottle that must've been destined for a bar fridge and I only wanted a glass of tap, and I showed her, I couldn't pay unless she would take the Bolivianos she didn't seem to want. She put her finger to her lips, O Mamoré, it was secret, without language, between us – and there wasn't much I could do. I was more than hot and more than thirsty – she could see that. Back at the riverside I boarded your ferry to Bolivia and again the Brazilians overlooked, didn't mind, and I really admired them. It's the sort of thing that's beyond Australian comprehension. I imagine you admire them too. ■