

A SHIP CALLED PERU

This is the story of a riverboat built in 1936 by the famous German firm Gebrüder Sachsenberg of Dessau - Rosslau, in the Elbe, East Germany.

It had a length of 43 meters (142ft) long and 6 meters (20ft) wide; weighed 46 metric tons with a lower hull and deck constructed of approximately 1 / 8 inch (2.8cm) thick steel sheet equally riveted on steel frames and had a flat bottom characterized by a draft of only 60 centimeters (24in) that permit it to easily navigate on Peruvian rainforest shallow rivers.

It was equipped with a steam boiler, that functioned with wood, able to reach the constant pressure of 14 atmospheres, level of energy that gave the 96 horsepower necessary to action the traction machinery that moved 2 huge rods, one on each side of the ship, ended by a drum type propeller composed of 3 wooden helixes that could be easily replace when they broke, for example, on a floating log in the water stream.

Originally, this riverboat was sold to Brazil, equipped with a single covered deck and a command bunker on the second floor, at the ship's bow.

Brazil modified it by completing the second floor, adding three cabins with a toilet, sink and shower. The crew rested in hammocks located on the first floor, which had a unique bathroom with sink and shower and a small economic cast iron kitchen which was also operated with wood.

The holds were scattered throughout the hull and used to store the firewood. Each hold, which was sealed compartments, was equipped with a steam pump that extracted water. From the freeboard to the ceiling of the second floor, all the beams, rails and torsion bars was built with steel. The upper works of the second floor (floors, ceilings, walls and stairs) was built with tongue and groove wood.

The construction of this second floor unbalanced the boat, which was not designed to have heavy weight on the second floor. Probably for that reason, Brazil sold it to Bolivia.

However, the ship had to go up the Madeira Manoré and part of the Beni rivers, tributaries of the Amazon, and for both river, they were 2 major obstacles: the Madeira Manoré Falls on the Brazilian side and the "Cachuela Esperanza" or falling rocks in the Bolivian sector of the Beni River. It was impossible to navigate in these areas so the ship had to be moved from the bottom to the top of the two top obstacles using the "Decauville" railway systems, used on very wide and short trajectory, serving in those areas to transfer boats from the lower to higher point, and vice versa, facilitating the navigation on those route.

In Bolivia, the ship did not find much use and was sold to the Navy of Peru who resolved the oscillation problem due to the weight of the second floor by always sailing with the berthing of a "Albarenga" or smaller wooden boat, which was coupled to one side of the larger vessel with wooden beam that created a stable platform with no risk to overturn.



The Navy painted the ship entirely of navy blue and renamed it "*Fitzcarraldo*" under which it was known along the 68 km (42 miles) navigable part of the lower Madre de Dios River.

Subsequently, due to the excellent relations with Bolivia, it was useless for Peru to have a naval presence in Puerto Maldonado and the Navy withdrew his ships and gave the boat to the Bank of Agricultural Development who wanted to dedicate it to carry rubber and Brazil nuts.

The problem was that the largest gathering of Brazil nuts was on the ground close to the border with Brazil and Bolivia; and the rubber was produced only in the Iberia area, also close to Brazil and Bolivia, and was more easily transported by land or air. So the boat was completely useless and was berthing at the port of Puerto Maldonado and left there.

In 1954 came to Puerto Maldonado Arturo González del Río García, a Spanish missionary doctor who will be the only doctor in the entire region over the next 12 years. After several trips along the river, giving medical assistance to the local population, in precarious boats of poor condition, he came to consider the abandoned ship only watched by a unique guardian that lived in it.

González del Río contacted the Bank of Agricultural Development and obtained the transfer of the ship to the Ministry of Health, specifically to be use into the Puerto Maldonado area. A skilled mechanic called Felix Bernedo, repaired what was possible with the assistance of an old fireman named "Pachequito", a confirmed dipsomaniac.

González del Río turned to friends as Franco Pizzoli, Italian owner of the Oleoficio Company in Lima and to Augustine Albiol, a Catalan, manager of the same company, who provided him steel plates to replace the corroded one of the ship and new pipes for the steam boiler and the rivets to attach the plates.

For the repair, the ship was put on a sand beach of the Tambopata River after the rainy season and was put back in the water when the water reach bask it normal level. After repairing the hull, the boiler get fixed, and a diesel generator was install to light up the boat along with a cabin made of itahuba wood that serve as a small clinic.



The Ship started sailing in 1955 and toured the Madre de Dios River and offered health, educational, social and religious services to the local population. Sometimes, it went as far as 260 km downstream beyond the border of Peru, providing the same services to the helpless population of the Bolivian jungle.

The service was not totally free, but payment was vvery peculiar. To have access to the Medicine, movies, priest, children's toys, educational books brought by the ship, every family had to provide a cubic meter of firewood on the edge of the river. They gave fuel in exchange of the doctor services.

But in 1960 the ship's hull began to deteriorate again. The doctor's friends were gone and the Ministry of Health did not want to put any money for its repair.

So the boat was introduced in a stream of what would later become the headquarters area of the Institute of Tropical Studies, also founded by Gonzalez del Rio himself while the Madre de Dios River was very high. When the dry weather came back, the ship got stuck on the ground. And so it has remained ever since.

First, the nature decomposed the wood and the local dismantled the most useful part, leaving only a pierced hull and the boiler. Apart from this and in a higher place in the forest nearby, still remain the two wolf rudder and the driving wheel of the boat.