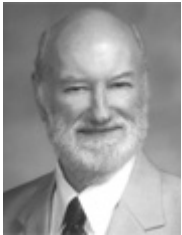




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O Asilo Novo: Caconde, Brazil, February 2009



By John Loofbourow, MD

WE ARE 15 PEOPLE with luggage, and rent four small station wagons at the airport, two Chevrolets and two VWs. The process is slow but we survive. The cars smell like alcohol when starting up; they are flex fuel, can automatically adjust to any mix of ETOH and gasoline. Alcohol is about 1/5 less efficient but cheaper; it smells so friendly that during the next two weeks we never buy any gasoline. The overall cost per mile is roughly equivalent to the US. The automatic Brazil built Chevy compares very favorably in every respect with the VW.

The road north from Sao Paulo is fairly typical in this state; it is a new four lane freeway, built and operated by private investors. The traffic is heavy and typically threatening at first but in an hour we are out of town, despite it being a 6 p.m. weekday. We are on a toll road where about one or two dollars is the common charge. The freeway concession is multi-year, but temporary, and carefully drawn. The Brazilians seem to suspect it is good for foreigners to spend a lot of money to build their roads. We begin to pass dozens of electronic industrial campuses among glitzy residential communities and shopping malls. It is a Silicon Valley, and I am later able to do some elegant shopping which may help to atone for my being here most of February.

Subtropical Brazil.

The road climbs gradually in brilliant green low rolling hills, pasted with row crops, sugar cane fields, and eucalyptus or radiata pine hortas, or orchards. These are only a few years old, expected to be ready for pulp harvesting at 15 or 20 years.

Both the private toll road and pulp industries were pioneered in South America by Chile 35 years ago, which has a long and mutually beneficial relationship with Brazil that is, unfortunately, unusual for the continent. Even so, everything Brazilian seems to be so large scale, and there are so many young pulp forests that one wonders: Will there be a glut when these are ready for harvest? But I used to think that about sugar cane, and now I am riding in an alcohol driven Chevrolet, and cane is far more efficient for alcohol production than anything else so far. Apparently Brazil does not need to import oil even though it has little of its own. So up and on with alcohol we go.

It is the height of summer, equivalent to our August, but here, sub tropical. The sky boils with restless afternoon cumulus clouds that hide the sun and provide a light breeze.

We leave the prosperous electronic industrial region and climb to about 1000 meters. More Brazilian Brahma humped cattle are seen. Facendas or haciendas appear, towns become sparse, the hills are dotted

with blossoming jacaranda trees, and populated with wild fruit trees, vines, shrubs, that nourish parrots and brightly colored big beaked birds that I think are toucans. White and black buzzards search the green vegetation and the red earth for a meal.

Everywhere is water: ponds, lakes, brown rivers, and the watrous sky itself. Bananas and coffee become more frequent, and for some reason the coffee plantations are bordered by bananas, like wind breaks. The afternoon and evening tropical rains appear. Roadside papayas trees are full with clusters of ripening fruit. A walk among the dripping vegetation reveals 'wild' avocados, several varieties of ripe delicious guava, and many fruits and birds I can neither name nor recognize.

I think of the now Panamanian Panama Canal Zone where I interned and learned that the tropics above 2000 feet is heaven on earth: soft gentle moist air scrubbed each afternoon by sometimes torrential yet kind rains. Skirts of clouds clinging to a wild thorny green world where there is no north or south, up or down, and one is mud encased, thorn scathed, and utterly lost in minutes.

Who, How, Why.

My companions are mostly from my daughter Amy's Methodist Church in Los Gatos. Our destination is a rural town of about 15,000 near the Minas Gerais-Sao Paulo border. Caconde (CaCONjhe) is one of the poorest communities in the state of Sao Paulo. There is little work except in coffee for about six months a year. Yet the roads are paved, the sidewalks reasonably sound, it is orderly, and clean, dressed in the patina of old mining money.

We hope to help resuscitate an *asilo* project, an ambitious expansion of small existing homes for the elderly or disabled. *Asilos* are often found in rural Brazil, and preferably are community built and operated. *Asilo Novo*, an expansion of the old home, had been conceived and begun by a local Catholic priest but was abandoned 30 years ago shortly after the shell had been constructed. The new project originally had been funded by an annual 10 day, church-sponsored Festival; but the priest was moved, and a decision was made to devote the income to some other purpose. Nonetheless, the community continued to support the adjacent old facility, built for 20 people, and now housing and feeding 50 residents.

Eliana Vasconcelos Brown is a member of the Los Gatos church born and raised in Caconde, who visited San Jose to see and learn the world some 20 years ago, and never left. However the *asilo* was ever on her mind. She led an international effort, raising \$20,000 in California and \$35,000 in Caconde, enough to complete one third of the *Asilo Novo*, which would provide for about 60 people. Most of the construction would be done by a local contractor.

After a couple of trips to Caconde to verify the situation, the project moved forward and a Methodist Volunteers in Mission, VIM, sponsorship provided valuable non-profit authenticity. Participants paid their own travel and shared expenses, and on January 10, 2009, we went.

The Asilo.

The Brazilian concept for an *asilo* is to become independent of government, or any other agency; to take it out of the political/economic miasma and make it self supporting. We visited a nearby *asilo* with 100 residents, which had succeeded through many ingenious interrelationships in the community. It had seven small rental units for income. These were one bedroom units available with or without meals. That *asilo* provided two classes of elder care, one paid, and one free, though all payments were very small by our standards. It recruited local business people to sponsor every aspect of the *asilo* in return for advertising on murals, chairs, and the like. It had a privileged location with fine views, and a rental hall where Rotary and other organizations meet, where parties and weddings are held. Much of the food is donated; the key, obviously, was community; the village matters.

In Caconde, strong local support was evident, making the likelihood of long term success reasonable. A nearby university school of environmental architecture provided revamped plans for the full development, with particular attention to access for the disabled, and social/environmental/esthetic considerations. An interesting fund raising detail is that a local person had donated a nice piece of land for a raffle. However, not all tickets were bought in time for the raffle; *an unsold ticket won*. So another raffle will be held, because the *asilo* won! Original ticket holders automatically participate but more tickets will be sold until gone.¹

We were convinced that a resurrection of the *Asilo Novo* would be a Caconde project, and we would only provide some assistance and encouragement if we could. With the local and outside funds at hand, one third of the *Asilo Novo* would be finished, with 30 more single rooms for residents. Later, rental units can be built. The remaining two large units, for which solid structure shells are already there, can be finished. The enthusiasm and energy provided by the rebirth of the project should be very significant.

The Work; and so forth.

For two weeks, we work daily from about 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., assisting with plastering, and preparing interior walls and painting. We manage to finish half of the middle section as projected. Methodists are quite focused in such matters, believing as their founder, John Wesley, that acts speak louder than words.

Our project ends as the four day local Carnival begins. It is very homey and different from its big city cousin. We meet the same people every night and became quite friendly. Three of us go para-sailing with the Brazilian national champion for 2002. Some go rafting. The nearby town of Pocos de Caldos sits (surprise) in an old volcanic caldera; there we do a hot bath in a typical old European style spa.

One morning I visit the office of an ophthalmologist to watch him finish the morning with his 13th, 14th and 15th cataract surgeries/lens implants of the day. The operative equipment seems very up to date, very comparable to the US. He explains he has done 30,000 of these in the past 22 years. He notes there are many differences in the economics of medicine compared to the US. For a revealing example, the surgeon for an indigent patient's C Section is paid 30 reals, or less than \$15 US. Obviously no one does a C Section on a poor person unless it's really necessary.

Comments:

Brazil is a very vigorous young country, average age less than the US and far less than Europe or Japan.

While the frontal cortex of the nation - the money, the power, and the glory are in the large metropolitan centers, the arms and the soul - the resources and the future are in the countryside. Unlike the city slums, no one starves in Caconde.

This is a very wealthy country by almost any measure of people, land, water, natural resources, CO2 sinks. (Brazil sells considerable carbon credits to Europe and looks forward to the Obama presidency for another big market.) It is a world leader in exports of iron, coffee, beef, poultry, sugar, ethanol, sugar, and soy.

In many respects Brazil is very advanced technologically, with a large and fast growing middle class. It is the world's 7th largest producer of automobiles, busses, heavy trucks, and the 4th largest producer of regional jet (120 passenger) planes. There is a pervasive confidence and optimism, the sense that the future is now. If I were younger, I would dollar cost average invest modestly in Brazil, one way or another, and hold on for 20 years. The returns, I think, would be startling.

There are three practical languages of the Americas: English, Spanish, and Brazilian Portuguese. Ambitious young people would be wise to learn all three. These are reasonably closely related members

of the Indo-European group of languages, so that to learn one is a big leg up to the others. To learn two is to nearly know the third. (After a few weeks, as a Spanish and English literate who has learned only about 400 Brazilian words not common to either language, I can read 95 percent of what is found in Brazilian newspapers, understand about 60 percent of TV news anchors, and speak enough to be understood; but understand only 30 or 40 percent of street talk because the phonetics are still very difficult for me.)

I found people very friendly and tolerant. At the Carnaval, 80 percent of the early morning crowd were beer-drinking youngsters whose frenetic but curiously gentle and happy behavior was herd-like. Each morning as we walked to our cars, we passed a certain garage door lined with at least 5 urinating young men, who created a small rivulet running down toward the distant sea. I never understood the attraction of that particular spot, the choice of disinhibited herd youngsters. Somehow it was not offensive; at worst, the rain would scrub the sidewalk within hours; at best, it was not my garage.

The samba, in its variations, has a definite form, but can be whatever you want, so long as you manifestly enjoy yourself; like Brazilian cars it runs well on alcohol. Given the chance, I would make this journey again.

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