

Royal Road: A Walk Into Brazil's Infancy

Contributed by Newsroom
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Glenn Cheney spent two months walking alone on the Estrada Real in Minas Gerais, Brazil. The result: *Journey on the Estrada Real: Encounters in the Mountains of Brazil*, a book exploring Brazil's culture cradle.

The Estrada Real is the oldest road in the Americas. It was built by the slaves of the Portuguese in 1697. It's still there, a dirt road of 1,200 km from Rio de Janeiro and Parati to Diamantina, Minas Gerais.

Cheney walked from Mariana to Diamantina, some 400 km. Along the way, he interviewed typical rural Brazilians.

He found many people who want to preserve the simple, rural way of life. Others want industrial development.

During his two-month hike, Cheney ate comida Mineira de fogão à lenha (wood stove food) every day and enjoyed excellent cachaças da roça (country liquors). He found the geography and the people "beautiful."

"I wrote this book because life along the Estrada Real is at a crossroads in history," Cheney explained.

"An old way of life is in conflict with the urban way of life. I wanted to record something about life on the Estrada Real at the end of the 20th century before it disappears."

Talking about the book, Brazil's Minister of Tourism, Walfrido dos Mares Guia Neto, said:

"Cheney's narrative of life on the Estrada Real shows a love and in-depth understanding of the Brazilian heartland that few foreigners have ever experienced.

"By walking through the heart of our culture, he saw our past, our present, and our future. His vision and his words will give Brazilians a new perspective on their own country and will certainly show the rest of the world a Brazil far different from the beaches of Rio de Janeiro and the skyscrapers of São Paulo."

Journey on the Estrada Real is published by Academy Chicago Publishers. The first edition is in English, but the publisher is looking for a Brazilian publisher to publish an edition in Portuguese.

The introduction to the book is on Cheney's personal website, <http://users.adelphia.net/~gcheney/estrada.htm>

Journey on the Estrada Real has 245 pages in paperback edition. It is available at www.amazon.com and www.barnesandnoble.com.

Glenn Cheney lives in the state of Connecticut in the United States with his wife, Solange (a Mineira), and son, Ian. He is the author of several books, including *Journey to Chernobyl: Encounters in a Radioactive Zone*.

Excerpt:

The Royal Road by Glenn Cheney

At the end of the 17th century, after nearly 200 years of hacking through the brush and forests of the interior of Brazil, Portuguese adventurers found what they were looking for: gold.

They also found emeralds, diamonds, aquamarines, turmalines, amethyst, and just about every other gem known to man.

The most productive mines were in Vila Rica - Rich Town - in the mountains of the region known as Minas Gerais, or General Mines.

Three years later, in 1697, the Portuguese Crown ordered that the path from the port of Paraty, just south of Rio de Janeiro, to Vila Rica be widened into a road that could handle a two-way traffic of mule trains.

The Estrada Real, or Royal Road, made it possible to transport gold from Vila Rica - later known as Ouro Preto - to the sea in 70 to 90 days, depending on weight, weather, Indians, bandits, and mosquitos.

It followed the wandering route of the first explorers, who were taking directions from Indians who didn't know Portuguese or anything about gold.

Three months was too long to leave gold on the backs of mules, so in 1701, the Crown ordered the building of a new road- the Caminho Novo - a rational and projected road from Rio de Janeiro, which was still known as Miners' Beach, to Ouro Preto.

A high-speed mule train could then make the trip in 25 days. When diamonds were discovered further north in Minas Gerais, the Estrada Real was extended to Diamantina.

The Estrada Real connected some of the world's most miserable people to some of the world's wealthiest - the slaves in the mines of Minas Gerais to the Portuguese Crown, the ultimate beneficiaries of everything that could be stripped from the land of the brassy-colored brasa wood, the source of the name of Brazil.

Travelling through Minas Gerais has been likened to navigating a choppy sea. The geography of the region seems a solidified series of waves, swells, and troughs.

The Estrada Real, rarely level, winds around the sides of mountains, dips into valleys of lush semi-tropical forest, rises over passes so high that the tallest trees are no taller than a man on a mule.

When mule trains passed each other, their pilots drew close to exchange information. When they came to a farm or way station, they stopped in for food and shelter, often as not dropping off goods from the other side of the world.

Many of the earliest churches along the route, built by the sea-faring Portuguese, are narrower at the floor than at the ceiling, designed with the infrastructure of wooden ships.

The Estrada Real was to restrict as much as facilitate transportation into the interior. The Crown did not want Brazil to develop industrial capacity.

By royal policy, the vast colony was to depend on tiny Portugal for food, metals, tools, nails, ammunition, equipment, and supplies. The Brazilian economy was to be based almost exclusively on the export of gems and gold.

The Estrada Real, therefore, was to facilitate the inward delivery of manufactured goods to the interior while speeding the outward flow of mineral riches.

The Estrada was also to remain the only route of transportation, making it possible for Portugal to control development

and exploitation.

The Estrada Real was travelled by adventurers willing to risk everything for the chance to become wealthy beyond anyone's capacity to spend. The flow of wealth inevitably led to the traffic of smugglers.

Military squads watched for them. African and Native American slaves, either marching to the mines or hauling goods and people through the hills, also populated the road.

The world's bolder merchants led mule trains of goods from town to town. But it was not a road of settlers. European women and children rarely came inland from Rio. It was a business route, bereft of beauty, warmth, joy, and licit procreation.

In a certain sense, the history of the Estrada Real is the history of Latin America. Unlike the settlers who came to North America from industrial nations, the colonizers of Latin America came from feudal lands.

They came neither to build nor to stay. In Portuguese, the verb *explorar* means both explore and exploit. The language has no other word for either activity.

As if by linguistic necessity, the Portuguese did both at the same time, exploring a region so vast that even today it has not yet been fully mapped, exploiting the land and ungodly number of native and imported people.

Once the gold and jewels were gone, the people who remained were left with magnificent churches and abandoned mines but no infrastructure for any but an agrarian economy.

That situation hasn't changed much. At the beginning of the 21st century, the Estrada Real of the 17th century is still there. Most of the road is dirt, dust, or mud, though it becomes cobblestone as it passes through towns and villages.

Many of the villages have a toehold on the 20th century - undependable electricity, a single phone, two television channels, itinerant doctors who stay in town for only a few hours - but the lives of the people there haven't changed much since the 17th century.

They still cook on open wood stoves, and they travel by horse, mule and foot. They treat their ills with roots and herbs, and they pray for rain. They live in houses built by their grandfathers and sing in churches built by slaves. They still have no infrastructure for any but an agrarian economy.

This is the cradle of Brazilian culture. It all started here, in the mountains of Minas Gerais. As urban Brazil struggles into modern times and the global economy, its slow, quiet past still lives along its first road.

How has it survived? How long can it survive? Should it survive? What, if anything, can save it? The search for the answers - a walk down the road - turns up the seeds of an odd revolution.

People who have yet to benefit from the global economy are already struggling against it. Some, poor as dirt, ignorant of the world, are satisfied with the happiness they've found in God.

Others, more aware, appreciate the wealth of their ancient culture. And some, of course, want to trade their antiquated ways for the glittery commerce and industry that bring the money that buys the stuff that promises to make life better.

This book is about the people, culture and history of the Estrada Real. The people are changing, some by resisting change, some by embracing it.

The road departs from Brazil's flashier attractions - beaches, bossa nova, Carnaval, and soccer - as it leads to a quieter economy based on history, culture, cuisine, and ecology.

All are in the balance, the culture under insidious attack from corporate values, the cuisine threatened by fast food and foreign dishes, the ecology cringing with the approach of open pit mines, dirt bikes, pavement, litter, and automobiles. Deep history is there, too, immutable and unfinished.