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A piranha swam up my pants -- now what?

By Gary Robbins 7:41 P.M. NOV. 25, 2014

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UC San Diego engineering professor Marc Meyers travelled to the Brazilian Amazon to lead an expedition on the Roosevelt River, also known as the River of Doubt. *Jeffrey Lehmann*






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If you're planning a trip to the Brazilian Amazon, know this:

Anyone who ventures on to the Roosevelt River may have to deal with electric eels, piranha, pig-like tapirs that are longer than a couch, and waterfalls that can devour a kayak.

It's not unusual for an inch-and-a half of rain to fall in 30 minutes. The vegetation is almost impenetrable. And the heat can bring a person to their knees.

UC San Diego engineering professor Marc Meyers experienced all of this during a recent



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23-day expedition along the Roosevelt River, which also is known as the “River of Doubt.” Meyers was retracing the mostly-uncharted path that Theodore Roosevelt and explorer Cândido Rondon followed during a famous scientific expedition a century ago.

The 68-year-old Meyers was accompanied by Jeffrey Lehmann, a 50-year-old Del Mar filmmaker who chronicled the trip for an upcoming TV special. They traveled the roughly 500 miles from Vilhena, Brazil to the Aripuanã River. It was a perilous journey made possible by Hiram Reis and Ivan Angonese, a couple of retired Brazilian Army colonels who served as guides.

Meyers and Lehmann discussed their adventure upon returning to San Diego.

U-T San Diego: You’re just back from an adventure that was challenging from the start. What happened?

Meyers: On the second day, we reached Navaite Falls, a waterfall where the river goes from being about 15 yards wide to only two to three yards across. That makes the current



Del Mar filmmaker Jeffrey Lehmann and UC San Diego engineering professor Marc Meyers—*Gary Robbins*



Veteran Del Mar filmmaker Jeffrey Lehmann chronicled the expedition. *Barnstormer Productions*



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A photograph of a golf course during the Farmers Insurance Open, with a large crowd and a sign that says 'FARMERS INSURANCE OPEN'.

move really fast. It's dangerous, scary -- and very loud. The waterfall sounded like a low hum when we were far away. Then it was like a hiss. When we got there, it was a roar.

We got out of the river at the last possible moment. If we had gone another 100 yards, we could have been sucked down the falls. At some point, you can't fight the current.



Source: ESRI

U-T



Navaité Falls, Roosevelt River, Brazilian Amazon. *Jeffrey Lehmann*

Lehmann: We had to do a portage, or carry our 700 pounds of gear around the falls. The distance wasn't too bad -- about three-quarters of a mile. But we had to walk across rocks that were razor sharp. If you fell, you'd get badly hurt, or worse. We would have had to put the injured person in the canoe and gone in search of help. And there was no help nearby.



Meyers and Lehmann encountered giant otter on the Roosevelt River. These mammals are carnivores that can reach 5' 6" in length. *Jeffrey Lehmann*

U-T San Diego: Did you feel like you had left civilization behind?

Lehmann: Absolutely. You don't hear the sound of humans. There are

no airplanes or cars or freeways. We didn't even see a plane during the 23 days we were out there. You hear the sqawk of parrots and buzz of mosquitoes. The buzz of insects starts before sunrise, and it's loud, like rush-hour traffic. It's like humans don't exist.

Meyers: My eyesight got better because I wasn't spending every hour of the day looking at a computer.



Black piranha formed part of the team's diet during the expedition. *Jeffrey Lehmann*

U-T San Diego: You had a dangerous run-in with the Cinta Larga indians not long after that. What happened? Meyers: On the third day,

we reached a bridge that was in indian territory. This is a rich area for diamond mining. There's been a lot of trouble there. The Cinta Larga killed at least 29 people diamond miners years ago. The figure could be over 100. They control what happens.

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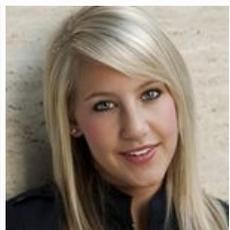
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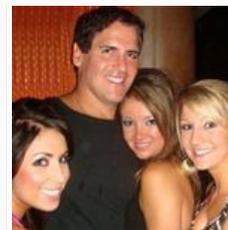
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Inge Morton · University of South Florida

Great story about the Roosevelt River. I am looking forward to the TV segment. I hope you publish the date, time and TV channel.

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