

Good Monkeys Gone Bad, and Other Tales of The Jungle

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What happens when good monkeys go bad?

Really, really bad!

They're sent to sanctuaries for rehabilitation.

On our trip to the Amazon Chapare (jungle) in Bolivia, we found over 300 monkeys living in a sanctuary not far from Villa Tunari.

Once, these monkeys resided in Cochabamba, a city of 500,000, four hours away. Their owners taught the monkeys how to steal -- and the monkeys were very good at that task. So good that eventually the monkeys were confiscated by authorities and exiled back to the jungle to stem their thievery.

A group of 10 Americans traveled to the jungle to get a taste of the "other side" of Bolivia. Instead of the temperate climate of Cochabamba, the Chapare is hot, humid and filled with snakes, ants, huge blind birds and bats. It is a critter kid's dream.

We are warned prior to entering the sanctuary to empty our pockets, to remove wallets and money, and take off jewelry. While the sanctuary is trying to teach the monkeys to "go straight," some of them haven't quite got the concept yet. Some still target your valuables, and if they get them, they're off into the thick brush.

The further we walked down the path from the sanctuary's office, the more monkeys we see swinging from vine to vine. At a wooden bridge several hundred yards in, we ran into monkey heaven.

Monkeys were everywhere -- running on the ground, swinging from trees, and playing with visitors. As staff kept a close eye for monkeyshine -- each monkey is known not only by name, but where they came from -- visitors enjoyed mixing it up with the primates as much as the hairy creatures like playing with humans.

One monkey immediately took to Myrna Manier, a retired teacher from Washington State. He pulled at her camera, but she held tight to its strap. Another monkey jumped on UW Eau Claire student Joe Kaminski's foot, and slowly worked his way up Joe's leg, eventually coming to rest on his shoulder.

While we were taking in the sight, yet another monkey rubbed up against the leg of one of our guides. Ever so slowly, almost as if he thought he wouldn't be noticed, the monkey started working the zipper on the guide's pants leg pocket and reached in to see what he could find.

Luckily for our guide, his pocket was empty. But it stood as a stark reminder that these monkeys really do need to relearn how to give up stealing and straighten out so they can support themselves in the wild.

One monkey decided to perch on the shoulders of Bob Sutton, a professor of business and marketing at the University of Wisconsin Eau Claire. At first, the monkey was content to eat his fruit and watch what was happening around him with darting eyes. When he finished his food, he decided Bob would make a good dessert. Starting at one end of his head and finishing on the other, he licked the professor's skin with his little tongue as if it were an ice cream cone. We all laughed.

Our trip to the Chapare started at Cochabamba, elevation 8,200 feet, and wound its way through the main highway to Santa Cruz. On the valley side of the Andes, the mountains were cultivated in neat sections. Food and flowers were grown, and animals grazed.

An hour and a half into the trip, just after we hit 12,000 feet, we rounded a bend in the highway, and the vegetation changed as instantly as if someone flipped a light switch. The Amazon jungle, which covers one-third of Bolivia, starts just that quickly.

For the next three hours, we wound our way through the mountains, eventually descending to 350 feet above sea level. The scenery was gorgeous. At times, clouds covered the mountain tops, and then the road. The road to Hana on Maui has nothing on the road to Santa Cruz.

Two interesting observations about the trip: First, about halfway down to our destination, the Villa Tunari, we ran into a checkpoint. It was manned by the military, supported by U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, said Tim Johnson, our guide. Coca is grown in the Chapare, and the highway to Cochabamba is one of two ways for it to get out.

So vehicles are stopped and searched whenever the authorities feel it necessary. It is a strange feeling, something Americans are not used to. We travel anywhere we want within our country, and the police need probable cause to stop and search vehicles. Not here. This is the main road for the drug trade, and authorities are doing all they can to try to curb its distribution before it makes it out of the country. But it still rubs lots of Bolivians the wrong way.

The second interesting point is the road conditions. Despite years of trying, it is neigh to impossible to maintain the road through the mountains to Santa Cruz. Heavy rains wash out entire sections of the road with great regularity. One minute, you'll be traveling down a two lane paved road. The next, you'll be on gravel. And a little bit further down the mountain, you'll come to a complete halt, because the road has changed into a single lane dirt road. When traffic comes up, traffic going down has to wait.

Commerce has popped up along these waiting points. Sticks, covered with blue plastic tarp, provide cover for a range of goods – from pop and candy, to a man who had caught

fish in one of the Amazonian streams, cut it up, and fried it in oil for hungry travelers. At several spots on our trip, we see individuals and whole families in the middle of streams, washing their clothes.

One of the most interesting parts of our trip involved hiking through a national park. To get from the visitors center to the beginning of the trail, we took a hand operated cable car over the roaring river. It took two trips for our entire group to cross the river. On the other side, we followed a trail that took us by all kinds of plants and wildlife.

Three of the most interesting finds were:

- A tree in which hundreds of thousands of ants lived. In ancient times, if someone was caught stealing or cheating on their spouse, they'd be tied up to the tree for a short period, and suffer multiple and painful ant bites.
- A bat cave, which we entered and made our way in pitch blackness. After a few moments inside, our guide turned on his flashlight and pointed out dozens of bats hanging from the ceiling.
- A cave housing huge blind birds. These birds sleep during the day, and hunt for food at night. But they didn't like our presence and did their best to chase us away with menacing caws.