Behind the South American Stories

Chatty Letters During a Journey From Aruba to Rio

During the past few months, journalist Hunter S. Thompson has been roaming through South America. His informative dispatches on social, economic, political conditions and personal experiences have been appearing in The National Observer.

But another side to reporting that seldom shows up in travel dispatches—the personal experiences of the digger, inquisitive newsman. These often give fascinating insights into the land and the people. Witness these excerpts from Mr. Thompson's personal letters to his editor in Washington.

Aruba.

I am leaving by smugging boat for Colombia in a few hours. I am going to get this off before I go. (Article on Aruba, The National Observer, July 14.)

It is probably too late and too long for you, but I hope not, because I think it is a good and valid look at island politics, personalities, etc.

In about three days I plan to be in Barranquilla, Colombia. After Byrnam, I plan to go up the Magdalena River to Bogota, thence to Peru in time for the June 10 elections. But this is tentative.

Bogota, Colombia.

Here is a sort of offbeat travel piece that might interest you (Article on Quito, The National Observer, Aug. 2).

In Aruba, they are probably announcing the election results right now and I imagine they will be of a lot of people digging holes in the bleak Aruba landscape.

If you can think of anything else you might want, let me know. By the time I get to Ecuador I will have seen most of Colombia at close range. If not, write.

The Valencia piece (Article on Colombia, The National Observer, June 24) will be in the mail to follow this one.

Call, Colombia.

There is an alarming tendency (in Colombia, anyway) to view the problems of the local economies essentially as a thing for the Alliance to deal with. Unfortunately, this is not the case. I am a paragraph of wisdom, courage, decency, and visionary talent. On the other hand, I am working on my fourth day of dysentery, my stomach feels like a tree is growing in it, and I am medically forbidden to touch so much as a single piece of food.

I am throwing this thing in your lap today, but I don't expect anyone to agree at a distance of several thousand miles—with my certain knowledge that I am a paragraph of wisdom, courage, decency, and visionary talent. On the other hand, I am working on my fourth day of dysentery, my stomach feels like a tree is growing in it, and I am medically forbidden to touch so much as a single piece of food.

The sun is shining in Quito, the mountains are green and sparkling around the town, and my mind is running in high gear.

Most everything I have to say, however, revolves in one way or another around questions of money. There seems to be a universal impression that I am on some sort of Divine Dole, and the theory that I often require money in order to make money has not gained wide acceptance. I trust you have sufficient background in Personal Economics to grasp the full meaning of this.

I could toss in a few hair-raising stories about the emasculating effects of the US for those who have been away, but I think it would be better to leave it alone.

Quito, Ecuador.

At the end of the day, the head is not in the stomach. Monday I will fly to Lima. Monday I could go before that Saturday and Sunday are holidays and we just finished a five-day hull to have to do with Ecuadorian history. These holidays are madcap; every time you turn around they are rolling down the street and grabbing the offices. That, in addition to a noon to 4 p.m. lunch hour, makes work just about impossible.

I understand that while I was in Quito my secretary told you I was in Taira, Peru. I think the New York summer has affected her reason. Just for the record, I have never been near Taira and will do everything in my power to avoid it in the future.

Lima, Peru.

I have a good peg on Peru. It may seem like heaven in Washington, but it is a fact that democracy is just about as popular here as eating live goldfish. If you tell me now you'll have time to post it, I'll post it. I have been throwing rocks at my window all night and if I hadn't sold my pistol I'd whip up a blind man and crank off a few rounds at his feet. As it is, all I can do is gripe to the desk. The street outside is full of thugs with a stick for a place. In my weakened condition I am not about to go out there and tackle them like Joe Paolozza.

It is all I can do to swing out of bed in the morning and stumble to the shower, which has come to be my only pleasure. I am beginning to like the portrait of Dorian Gray; pretty soon I am going to have to give the mirrors taken out.

La Paz, Bolivia.

I blew in yesterday for a couple of days of relaxation. This awful spate of pain and sickness puts the fear of God in a man. The latest was the fear of not being able to sit and type, paralyzing my legs as if I'd been hit by a 50-pound swing. Anyway, after two visits to the clinic, with its wind up, and two infrared lamps, and the inevitable drink-prohibition, I'm feeling better. I brought a good walk with a cane fashioned out of one of the legs of my camera tripod. That's the state I am in, in short. I am going to bobble around La Paz like a vet from the Indian wars, averaging about 100 yards an hour on the flat.

If this hotel doesn't have any more mineral water—How long, O Lord, how long?—

La Paz, Bolivia.

I've been using that old festival cell drum as the following: Ninety cents a pound in a can is a sound in at least one level: Fears of arbitrary government price controls, expropriation, mounting labor difficulties, and the risks of long-term investments vs. the near-certainty of the short.

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Beware of the Month

Beware the January month: Beware Those hazy days, that keenly piercing air Which shaves the steers; when wide o'er fell and flood Ice in its curtained masses, nip the blood.

—Huntz, Works and Days, Eighth Century B.C.