

A year abroad trying not to leave the ground

Fiona Frank January 2025

I went on a six month's travel adventure in 2018. That was lucky, taking six months off work when I was still working rather than waiting till I retired – when I retired, in September 2020, there wouldn't have been any travelling allowed for at least another year.

But I'm just on my way back from ANOTHER travelling adventure. This one took in five months travelling in Brazil (including carnival in Salvador and a month at a Portuguese language school), a month in Peru, a few more weeks in northern Brazil, a trip up the west coast of the USA, four months travelling across Canada from west to east, and a final month in the USA – and I'm writing this in the Queen Mary 2, 2 days out of New York! I did the whole thing (including the journey from the UK to Brazil) on ships, buses, trains and boats, except for a plane journey from northern Brazil to southern California, and a couple of planes in Peruvian Amazonia in order to try and catch up with myself and make sure I arrived at a festival in Brazil on time... (it didn't work, I might as well have stuck to boats and buses for all the good it did me what with plane cancellations, unavailability, etc).

The whole trip was sparked by the murders of Dom Phillips and Bruno Pereira in Brazilian Amazonia in June 2022. Dom's sister, Sian, taught the choir in Halton for years, and I wanted to support her and her family after this tragedy, so I helped to organise an exhibition about Dom, Bruno and the Amazon, which expanded into a month-long festival about the Amazon which ran during November 2022 in ten venues across Lancaster and Morecambe. I decided I wanted to go to Brazilian Amazonia to find out more about the new Institute that Dom's widow has set up in his name, and to meet the indigenous leader, Nelly Marubo, who spoke at the conference we organised as part of the festival. I also wanted to return to Peruvian Amazonia. The first time I went there was in 1984, when I met Pete, an anthropologist who was leading the tourist tour I went on, and who took me to the remote Amazonian village where he'd done his PhD fieldwork after the tour. I returned with Pete to this village four or five times over the next thirty years, including, in 1994, with my daughter who was then three years old. In 2023, I heard the sad news that Pete had died, and I decided I wanted to go back to Peru in 2024 to mark the fortieth anniversary of when I was first there. So I planned a six month travelling adventure in Brazil and Peru. I didn't know if it would be possible to get back to the same village I'd been to with Pete – I needed someone to take me, and it didn't look very likely, but I wanted to give it a shot.

Then my daughter moved from London to Los Angeles for work – so I decided I might as well rent my house out for a year rather than six months, and I extended the trip to include the USA so I could visit her and her boyfriend. I'd had a really lovely short trip to Montreal in 1999 and remember feeling that it was a city I could live in one day... so when I was thinking of a place to celebrate my 70th birthday in September 2024, Montreal was high on my list. Freya, a young woman from Halton, had challenged me to go with her on the TV reality show 'Race Across the World'. We sent in an application video, and actually got through to the third round of applications for the show which ended up being the one that took the five successful teams from the east to the west coast of Canada. Even though we weren't successful in getting on the show, we decided we'd do that journey under our own steam, and Freya flew out to Vancouver to meet me, and we spent three weeks travelling by bus and train from Vancouver to Montreal.

So that's how a death, a murder, a birthday and a television programme got me out on a year's travelling adventure!

When I'm at home I play English, Irish and Klezmer music on melodeon and concertina, in local pub sessions and festivals. I took both instruments with me and over the past five months I've played in Irish music sessions in Seattle, Montreal, Halifax, Charlottetown Prince Edward Island, and New York... Cajun sessions in Lafayette, Eunice and Vermilionville (all Louisiana), traditional Quebecois music sessions in Montreal, Quebec, and New York, and even Acadian sessions, in Cheticamp on Cape Breton, and Moncton in New Brunswick. I also stayed with an 88 year old pianist and fiddle player in New Brunswick for a week, and we played all kinds of music including his own compositions. I also learned Forro rhythms in Brazil, and was invited to join a Forro band for a couple of weeks after my day's class. And I got very distracted by a dance form, Cacuria, in the northern Brazilian city of Sao Luis. I'd been invited there by a friend I'd met in Salvador, and had planned to spend a week with her. But I ended up not only staying a month and going to five dance classes a week – but also returning there in June for their 'Sao Joao' festival.

As well as music and dance, I visited a lot of galleries and other centres, trying to learn as much as I can about the First Nations/indigenous/native people of each country I was in, as well as trying to find stories of Black History everywhere I went. I also found out the horrific story of the Great Upheaval of the Acadian people of Nova Scotia, Quebec and New Brunswick in the Canadian Maritimes, where thousands of peaceful francophone farmers were exiled by the British in 1755. Many of whom ended up in Louisiana – which is where 'Cajun' music has its origins.

I met an indigenous international fashion designer in Manaus whose work using traditional weaving and dyeing techniques has been seen worldwide: I met a Lancaster scientist based in a remote Amazonian study centre who measures the nutritional value of game caught by indigenous groups living nearby in the rainforest; I was lucky enough to meet Dom Phillips' widow Ale Sampaio, as well as several journalists and researchers working on indigenous issues in the rainforest. And at the last minute, just when I'd thought it wasn't going to happen, I got a call telling me that Pete's former student had found someone who could take me to the Peruvian indigenous village I first visited in 1984.... so I was able to return there for the first time in sixteen years and had a beautiful reunion with people who remember me from the very first time I visited the place, and from the time when I visited with my daughter, then aged 3, in 1994.... and I've just been sent a picture of a baby born there last month who's been named after me!

It's been a momentous year. I don't want to forget any of it, and I want to introduce some of the people I've met to each other, and to a UK and European audience. Many of them came to a zoom '12 months away' party I held in November in three languages – Portuguese, English and French – and I'm hoping to spend some time reflecting and writing, and hopefully putting together a few more, thematic, Zoom meetings to share some of the ideas, music and culture I've come across.

SO I've booked the art lab in Halton Mill for six Monday mornings starting at the beginning of February which I've called 'Get That Project Done' in order to help me find the motivation to get started on this 'reflection and amplification' project. At the time of writing I've already attracted four other people to join me. We'll be working on our own writing or art ideas but also hearing about each other's projects and cheering each other on. The cost is a nominal £36 for the six weeks, to

cover room hire: please come and join me if you've got a project that you'd like to do in the company of others. You'll find a link to enrol on the course, a link to get info about any future open zoom events about my trip, a link to my travel blog, and a link to a longer version of this article, on my 'linktree' page, <https://linktr.ee/fionafrank> .