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NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

Hidden Tribes of the

AMAZON

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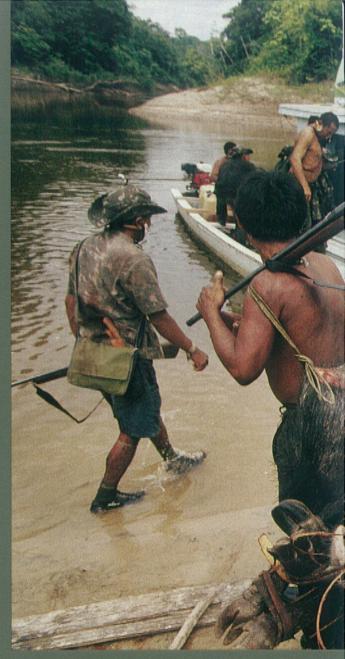


THE KANAMARI INDIANS
ALL AGREED ON THIS:
THE FLECHEIROS ARE
DANGEROUS—"UNTAMED."









To help achieve Possuelo's long-term goal-discovering where the Flecheiros live so authorities can more effectively keep out intruders-the 34-man crew first takes care of short-term essentials. Stopping along the Itaquai River to hunt for dinner, they bag a load of peccary (above). When their boats bottom out upstream, the team members pack their gear and slog along on foot (top left). Some Indians on the trek treat their eyes with a traditional potion applied with palm leaves (middle). Brutally painful, the drug alters vision, giving the jungle's dense green walls greater texture and dimension—and making it easier to spot a woolly monkey (bottom) for a quick meal.

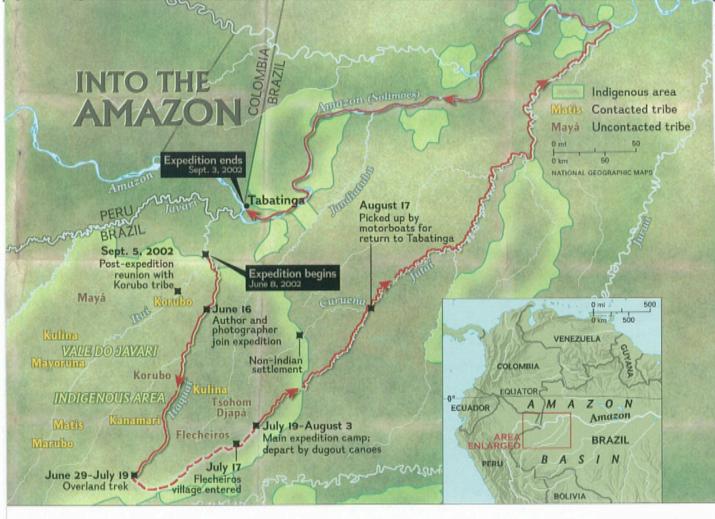


a hundred feet from the treetops to the forest floor. Just ahead of me, Sydney Possuelo strides double-time across a stretch of level ground, a welcome break from the steep hillsides we've been scrambling over for days. "We're probably the only ones who have ever walked here," he tells me. "Us and the Indians."

A cantankerous iconoclast with bulging hazel eyes, scraggly salt-and-pepper beard, and wild locks flowing from beneath a floppy camouflage jungle hat, Possuelo, 63, is widely considered one of the Amazon's last great wilderness scouts and the leading authority on Brazil's remaining pockets of isolated Indians. After two weeks of river travel and 20 days of steady bushwhacking, Possuelo has led us into one of the most remote and uncharted places left on the planet, near the headwaters of two adjacent rivers, the Itaquaí and the Jutaí. This is the land of the mysterious Flecheiros, or Arrow People, a rarely glimpsed Indian tribe known principally as deft archers disposed to unleashing poisontipped projectiles to defend their territory against all intruders, then melting away into the forest.

Suddenly Possuelo stops in his tracks. A freshly hacked sapling, still dangling by a shred of bark, lies across the path in front of us. In itself, the makeshift gate could not halt a toddler, much less a column of nearly three dozen armed men. But still, it bears a message—and a warning that Possuelo instantly recognizes and respects. "This is universal language in the jungle," he whispers. "It means 'Stay Out. Go No Farther.' We must be getting close to their village."

Which is something Possuelo wants to avoid. He wheels around and with a silent, dramatic



wave directs our column to veer off the path into the dense undergrowth on our flanks. A half hour later, after slogging through boot-sucking mud and dodging branches that swarm with fire ants, we arrive by the steep banks of a clear, narrow creek, where Possuelo orders a halt to the march while we wait for stragglers to catch up.

The Flecheiros figure among 17 so-called uncontacted tribes living in the far recesses of the Brazilian Amazon. In this part of the rain forest, the Vale do Javari Indigenous Area, there may be as many as 1,350 uncontacted indigenous people—perhaps the largest such concentration anywhere in the world. Most of them are descendants of the survivors of massacres perpetrated by white intruders over the centuries. The Indians then scattered into the rugged folds of the region's headwaters and continue to shun contact with the outside world.

But violent clashes account for only a fraction of the deaths suffered by native communities at the hands of outsiders. Most died from epidemic diseases, including the common cold, for which they had no biological defenses. Ivan Arapa, one of our scouts, is from the Matis tribe, who were first contacted by the outside world about 25 years ago. Ivan still remembers the wholesale death that accompanied these very first visits of Brazilian government officials to his village.

"Everyone was coughing, everyone was dying," he recalls. "Many, many Matis died. We didn't know why."

More than half of the 350 Matis living along the Ituí River inside the Javari reserve perished in the months following contact, officials say.

IT'S A DISMAL STORY THAT'S

become all too familiar to Possuelo during his 40-year career as a *sertanista*, a uniquely Brazilian profession that folds all the skills and passions of a frontiersman, ethnographer, adventurer, and Indian rights activist into a single, eclectic vocation. That's why our mission is not to make contact with the Flecheiros but rather to gather information on the extent of their territory's boundaries, information Possuelo will use to bolster his efforts to protect their lands. In other respects, the Flecheiros are to remain, in large measure, a mystery.

As we passed through squalid Kanamari Indian settlements on our way up the Itaquaí River a month earlier, villagers gave vague, contradictory tales of the Flecheiros-third- or fourth-hand accounts, translated in halting Portuguese, of sightings of the Indians and clashes between them and logging crews that once operated in the area. Some said the Flecheiros are tall and muscular with long, flowing hair. Others told us they paint their faces and bodies red and clip their hair in a classic bowl shape common to many Amazon tribes. But the Kanamari all agreed on this: The Flecheiros are dangerous, "untamed," they said, and villagers carefully steered clear of Flecheiros lands upriver. "We don't go there," said a Kanamari man we met one afternoon as he paddled a small dugout in the honey-colored waters. "There are indios bravos, wild Indians, up there. That's their territory."

These are stories Possuelo actually likes to hear. In his encounters with the Kanamari he actively nourishes an image of the Flecheiros as a deadly peril to be avoided. "I prefer them like this-violent," Possuelo says. Isolated tribes willing to kill intruders to defend their lands, or that have a reputation for doing so, make the most tenacious guardians of the pristine forest. Beginning at an outpost south of Tabatinga, Possuelo's thousand-mile trek traverses a swath of the Vale do Javari Indigenous Area (map), nominally a safe haven for roughly 3,900 Indians. The sanctuary's southeastern flank, however, is barely monitored, leaving uncontacted tribes vulnerable to encroachment by non-natives. Possuelo's trackers relied on small tips-footprints, a chewed wad of sugarcane, a snapped sapling (below)-to locate the Flecheiros without making contact.

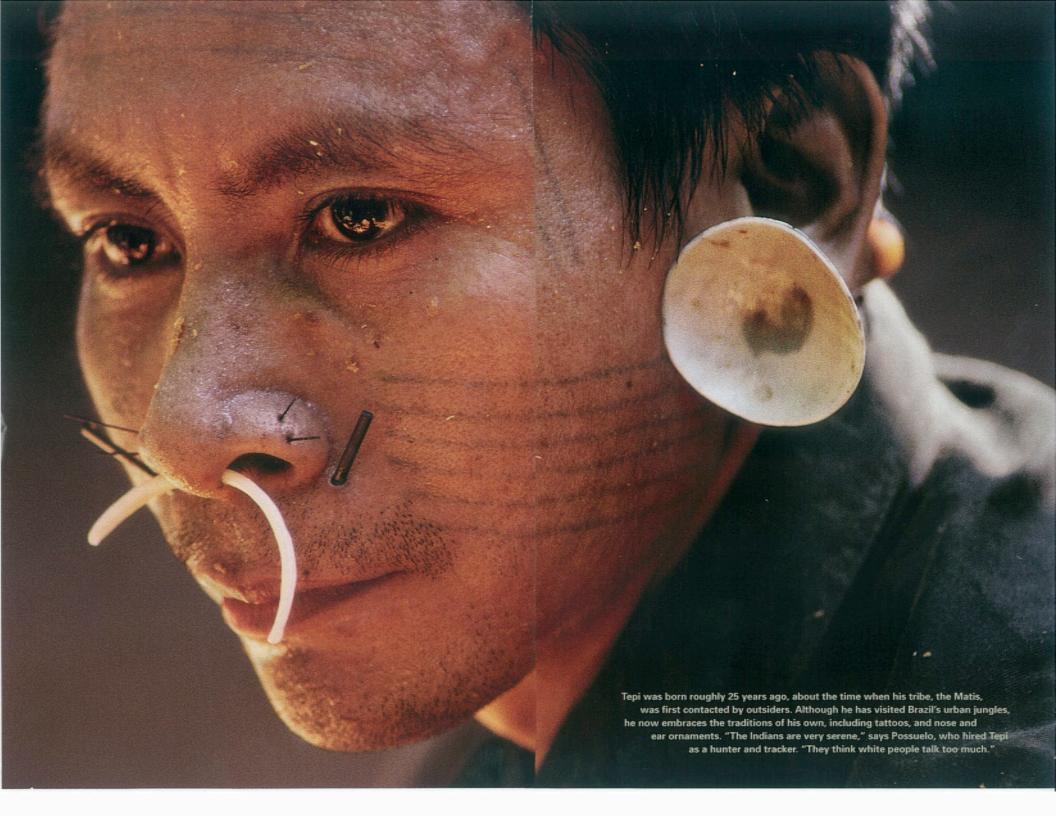


"THIS IS UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE IN THE JUNGLE," POSSUELO WHISPERS. "IT MEANS STAY OUT. GO NO FARTHER." WE MUST BE GETTING CLOSE TO THEIR VILLAGE."

At the same time, isolation offers groups like the Flecheiros the best hope for maintaining their cultural vibrancy, even their very survival. This interplay between ecological preservation and the protection of uncontacted tribes lies at the heart of Possuelo's work. "In protecting the isolated Indian, you are also protecting millions of hectares of biodiversity," he says.

During the past few days we've found signs of the Flecheiros everywhere: crude blazes hacked into tree trunks, decaying old lean-tos, overgrown footpaths. All bear witness to an isolated, semi-nomadic people still living beyond the reach of our "civilized" world in a distant, virtually Neolithic past. Yesterday afternoon we broke through dense underbrush into a sunlit clearing to behold a cluster of low-lying palm-roofed huts that looked more like hobbit dwellings than shelters for full-grown human beings. It appeared to be an abandoned fishing camp. Two tapir jawbones, still filled with teeth, were slung from a small tree, some kind of totem, Possuelo surmised. A cone-shaped cage fashioned from sticks gouged into the ground sat nearby. Alongside it lay a perfectly round, soot-blackened clay pot. "These Indians are very close to the way Amerigo Vespucci would have found them," Possuelo said with a touch of marvel and admiration in his voice. "They live by hunting, fishing, and gathering."

Most of the vestiges we have found are days, weeks, even months old-far enough away in time to presume a relative margin of safety in distance between the Flecheiros and our expedition. An experienced tracker like Possuelo can observe such signs and instantly date them. The fishing camp, Possuelo figured, was from the previous dry season, the time of year when





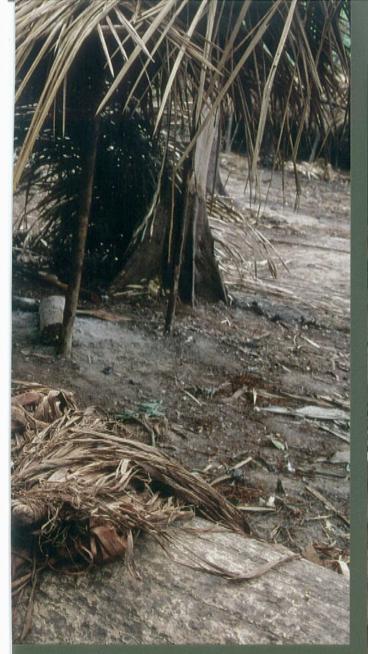
floodwaters draw back from the forest floor, and animals as well as humans move toward the Amazon's larger rivers and streams in a primordial quest for food and water.

But shortly after we departed the camp, our scouts came upon fresh signs of the Flecheiros, a piece of coiled vine and a chunk of masticated sugarcane left on the path. "These are from right now!" Ivan Arapa whispered excitedly. Just ahead we found fresh footprints. Possuelo read the skid marks left in the mud and said: "He saw us and took off running." He raised his hand for silence and sent word for all to maintain visual contact with one another along our single column that stretched far back into the forest. For the first time since our journey began, Possuelo strapped on his pistol.

Minutes later, our trailblazers glimpsed a pair

of naked Indians as they dashed across a log footbridge and vanished into closed jungle on the far side of the river. Possuelo tried to reassure them of our peaceful intent, calling out into the forest: "Whooo! Whooo!" Only the forlorn cry of the screaming piha replied.

And last night, another first: Possuelo posted sentries to keep vigil as we slept fitfully in our hammocks, straining our ears above an eerie, reverberating chorus of frogs for any snapping of twigs or rustling of leaves that could signal an approach by the Flecheiros. As we got under way this morning, Possuelo ordered the men to leave behind a machete and a knife as a peace offering. Does Possuelo suppose the Flecheiros will subject our campsite to the same sort of forensic scrutiny we have brought to bear on theirs?



Fresh footprints, maybe 15 minutes old (top right), indicate that the Flecheiros are nearby. Are they preparing to attack? That danger doesn't dampen the curiosity of two team members. Ignoring Possuelo's first commandment—thou shalt not make contact—the pair sneaks away to explore the area and stumbles upon an empty Flecheiros village. They find and later try on ceremonial masks made from long strips of tree bark (above), and discover pots with curare, a poison put on arrows and darts. Turning up only one weapon a broken blowgun and dart (middle)-Possuelo's men keep their eyes open and rifles ready (right). Perhaps dozens of Flecheiros live here. Where have they gone?

FOR THE **FIRST** TIME SINCE OUR JOURNEY BEGAN, POSSUELO STRAPPED ON HIS **PISTOL**.







"Com certeza," he replies. "You can bet on it." What might they be thinking about us? He looks me straight in the eye and answers with an edge of foreboding. "I imagine they're thinking that their enemies have arrived."

NOW, HAVING

detoured around the strange Flecheiros roadblock, the men reach the embankment in groups of three and four, staggering under the weight of their backpacks overstuffed with provisions, collapsing around us on the damp forest floor. Among us there are a dozen Matis Indians, six Kanamari, two Marubo, and the rest mostly non-Indian frontiersmen. We guzzle water straight from the stream, but as the minutes wear on and Possuelo takes a head count he realizes

that two of our Kanamari porters are missing. Laughter gives way to a tense silence. Possuelo paces back and forth, stealing glances at his wristwatch with a scowl. Though it's approaching midday and we're only a few degrees off the Equator, I've begun to shiver in my sweatdrenched fatigues.

"Damn it!" Possuelo snarls. "These guys are holding us up! A total lack of discipline!" With that, he dispatches a half dozen Matis to look for the stragglers. But when the Matis fail to return, an unspoken dread slowly creeps over all of us. Have our missing companions been captured, perhaps even killed, by the Flecheiros?

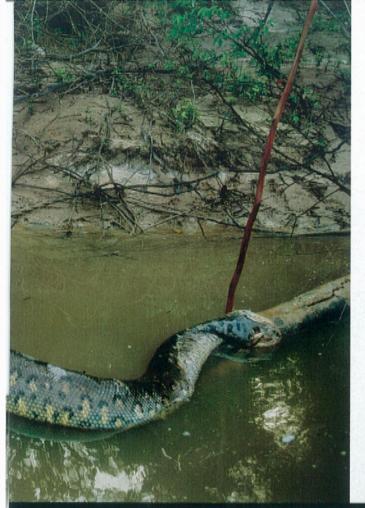
This certainly isn't the first potentially lifethreatening crisis Possuelo has faced in his career. He was once held hostage by Kayapó warriors and on another occasion was pistolwhipped by white settlers seeking to invade Indian lands. He's had malaria 38 times and has received as many death threats. In the early 1990s as president of FUNAI, the Brazilian government agency that deals with indigenous peoples, Possuelo squared off with army generals, influential politicians, and a violent rabble of gold prospectors to win protection for the



homelands of the Yanomami Indians, on Brazil's northern border with Venezuela. A few years ago Possuelo yanked 22 men on a FUNAI expedition by helicopter from the Peruvian border after they were surrounded by hostile, isolated Indians. This time he has assembled a large, well-armed contingent; the Flecheiros would have to think twice before attacking such a numerous force. But Possuelo has issued standing orders: If we are attacked, the men are only to fire warning shots in the air.

From the very moment I met Possuelo, I found him to be a man of boundless energy. Photographer Nicolas Reynard and I had joined him aboard the *Waika*, one of four vintage Amazonian steamers that was hauling us upstream toward the Itaquai's headwaters. He barked orders to the men while amiably fielding my questions without skipping a beat. Once we left the boats behind, we would spend nearly a month marching straight through the heart of unknown territory, he told me that first night. Eventually we would build our own dugout canoes to navigate down the Jutaí and back to civilization.

Our route would take us through the



Bloated and beginning to decompose, an anaconda emits an awful stench on the banks of the Curuena River but offers few clues about who killed it. Another local puzzle: How to evict a handful of non-Indian settlers who illegally remain in the Javari reserve. Possuelo wants the settlers out, but his critics say development of the Amazon Basin is as natural as a downpour in the rain forest (below)—and almost as inevitable.



ISOLATED TRIBES WILLING TO KILL INTRUDERS TO DEFEND THEIR LANDS MAKE THE MOST TENACIOUS GUARDIANS OF THE PRISTINE FOREST.

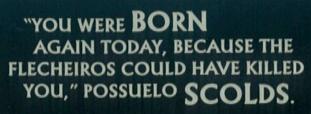
southernmost reaches of the Javari reserve, a vast wilderness area set aside by FUNAI in 1996, the year government agents under Possuelo's command expelled all non-Indian settlers and loggers from the territory. Picture the southern half of Florida, roughly the same size as the reserve, in pre-Columbian times: not a single road, a mere 3,900 inhabitants spread out over an enormous expanse of steamy woodlands, swamps, and alligator-infested rivers.

In fact, southern Florida 500 years ago hosted a much larger population than that, and ethnologists say it's certain the Javari drainage itself once did too. Archaeologists estimate that millions of indigenous people occupied the Brazilian Amazon at the beginning of the 16th century. Today there are some 350,000 in all of Brazil, including isolated groups like the Flecheiros whose numbers, along with many other

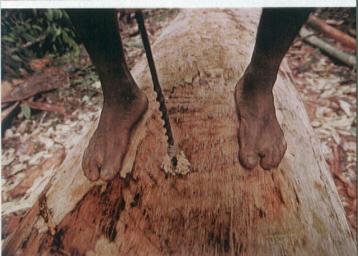
things about them, are a matter of guesswork.

Not even Possuelo knows what language the Flecheiros speak, what their ethnicity is, or even what they call themselves. "It's not important to know any of that to protect them," he says. And anyway, it would be impossible to glean such information without exposing the Indians to deadly disease or a host of competing values that could erase their traditions. "Once you make contact, you begin the process of destroying their universe."

Possuelo didn't always think this way. Like other sertanistas, he once thrived on the excitement of contacting "wild" Indians. A FUNAI scout's professional reputation was built largely on how many first contacts he had notched. In all, Possuelo has been credited with seven since the 1970s. But in the course of making those contacts, Possuelo became disillusioned. The











Their mission accomplished, Possuelo and company build their own canoes to carry them home. Using axes and machetes, they fell two large trees, then strip the bark off each trunk (top left). Drilling an array of shallow holes on the bottom of a log (middle) guides work on the top side; the men hollow out the wood until they hit the holes, which ensures the canoe's hull has a uniform thickness. Later the holes are plugged. Roasting the hull over a fire (above) makes the wood malleable, enabling workers to pry the hull open wider then jam wooden slats inside. Two weeks later the canoe is river ready (left), and the team is primed to push on.



Indians began to visit the rough-and-tumble frontier towns, started drinking, and lost all sense of who they were. To meet new needs and wants created by the dominant white society, such as clothing, medicine, and consumer goods, they began selling off timber, despoiling their land in the process.

Possuelo eventually came to see contact as the undoing of once proud indigenous societies. "The curiosity I once had about uncontacted people has been subordinated by something else—the imperative to protect them."

Possuelo's last contact with an isolated tribe came with a group of Korubo in 1996, also within the bounds of the Javari reserve (see page 24). But he undertook that initiative, he says, only to save the Korubo from increasingly violent clashes with logging crews. This position has

placed Possuelo at loggerheads with a broad array of adversaries, including missionaries who, he says, have accused him of playing God with the Indians while shielding them from pastoral efforts to spread the Gospel and the word of everlasting life.

BUT NOW OUR OWN LIVES

are at stake. Possuelo dispatches a second team, a dozen fully armed scouts, to look for the Kanamari and the missing Matis search party. One of our scouts finally returns with disquieting news. The tracks of our missing companions led straight past the Flecheiros gate—the broken sapling on the trail—then followed the path through a huge garden of cultivated manioc and plantains and into the clearing of a large Flecheiros settlement, about 14 huts in all.



Long hidden from modernity's gaze, a man from the Tsohom Djapá tribe (below) was first contacted three years ago by Kanamari Indians, who are believed to have lured some members of the Tsohom Djapá into servitude. Collisions with outsiders have been catastrophic for isolated peoples, says Possuelo, who sees gold dredges bordering Indian lands (right) as yet another shadow ahead. "Uncontacted Indians live in a lost paradise," he says. "I'm just giving them some time."





POSSUELO IS SURE THAT ONCE YOU MAKE **CONTACT** WITH THE INDIANS, YOU BEGIN THE PROCESS OF **DESTROYING** THEIR UNIVERSE.

The Flecheiros themselves had fled into the surrounding jungle, leaving behind prodigious heaps of smoked meats—monkey, tapir, turtle and smoldering campfires.

"It's their system of security," Possuelo nods gravely. "They scatter into the forest."

The Flecheiros seemed to have been preparing for a feast, the scout reports. In the middle of the village, the scouts found several ceremonial masks made from long strands of bark, alongside ceramic vats filled with red urucú dye used to decorate faces and bodies. More ominously, the Indians took all of their weapons with them when they fled. But they left behind a sharp bamboo arrowpoint and the broken end of a blowgun, which the scout now holds aloft for all to see.

We thus learn for the first time that the Flecheiros have other weapons besides the bow and arrow. And they also left two large clay pots brimming with curare, the dark poisonous goop that they apply to their arrow tips. Most disturbing of all, the Kanamari's footprints vanished without a trace down a path on the far side of the village.

Now Ivan Arapa silently demonstrates, covering his mouth with one hand and drawing an imaginary vine around his neck with the other, how the Flecheiros could have jumped our companions from behind, gagging them and yanking them off their feet into the undergrowth.

"I'd say they've been taken by the Indians," Possuelo says. "Now we have to get out of here. Maybe the Indians will let them go." He looks out into the shadowy forest surrounding us. "But we can't wait for them here," he adds. "We're going to march to a more advantageous position. We'll camp by the river and see if they show up."



By now both search parties have come back, leaving only the two Kanamari unaccounted for. One of our lead scouts reports seeing footprints that match the Kanamari's rubber-soled sneakers farther ahead, spaced out in long intervals that would suggest the strides of men in panicked flight. Possuelo dispatches Soldado, his most dependable scout, with orders to overtake our fleeing companions and, if necessary, fire into the air to summon them.

Possuelo clamps his hands together as if beseeching God. But it is still another hour before Soldado and the two wayward Kanamari appear at the edge of the riverside clearing where we are preparing our campsite. The Kanamari bow their heads contritely as Possuelo glowers at them. But clearly he is more relieved than angry at the men.

It seems the two Kanamari thought the Flecheiros might be long-lost relatives separated from the main riverside settlements decades ago. They admit they ignored Possuelo's orders and ventured off to satisfy their curiosity. But fear washed over them when they got to the far side of the village. They leaped off the trail and took off running. Not until they heard the report of

Soldado's rifle did they realize they were not being chased by the Flecheiros.

Possuelo seizes the occasion to call a kind of political pep rally around the campfire. "I'd say to our two Kanamari friends: You were born again today, because the Flecheiros could have killed you," he mildly scolds. "We're not here to get to know them. We're here to find out if the Flecheiros use this land."

Possuelo then reminds the Indians of the extraordinary things they saw today. Their incursion into the Flecheiros village amounted to a flagrant violation of Possuelo's policy to avoid making contact. Nonetheless, he is clearly elated by what he has learned from the unlikely visit.

"Here the Flecheiros live well," he says in slow, simple

Portuguese, making sure his words sink in. "You could see it in their village. They hunt, they fish, and they grow food. They must be very healthy. Their babies must be fat; their mothers probably have lots of milk. They have parties. They are happy."

The last traces of daylight have faded from the sky, plunging the jungle into darkness. Luminescent moths zip through the trees overhead, and the nighttime chorus of trilling insects and croaking frogs has begun.

"The work we are doing here is beautiful, because they don't even know we're here to help them," Possuelo says. "We have to respect their way of life. We're not going to pursue them.

The best thing we can do is to stay out of their lives."

Possuelo pauses to stare into the flames of the campfire. "Now we're going to continue our work and our journey," he says. "We're all going to get out of here alive."

WEBSITE EXCLUSIVE

Experience the Sights & Sounds of the Flecheiros expedition, then view images of first contact with the Korubo people. Join our Forum and share your thoughts on the future of isolated tribes at national geographic.com/0308.

SSIGNMENT

Trial by Jungle

Three months on the Amazon weight-loss plan

ooking back, writer Scott Wallace laughs when he thinks about his preparations for his trip through the Amazon. "I'd already been going to the gym a lot," he says, "but nothing in my life prepared me for the deprivation and physical exertion of three months in the wilderness."

Scott (below, with expedition leader Sydney Possuelo) and photographer Nicolas Reynard (left, standing on a 60-foot-long dugout canoe on the Jutai River) endured slim rations and constant danger to chronicle Possuelo's effort to learn about an uncontacted culture in the Vale do Javari Indigenous Area. "For protein we were totally dependent

on what we could hunt or fish," says Scott, "so the fare waslet's call it meager, usually tough monkey meat in a stinky broth. I lost 30 pounds on the trip."

One day Scott's feet went out from under him while following the team's bushwhacking scouts. As he fell, a razor-sharp sapling, hacked off by the machetewielding scouts, tore through his shirt and nearly impaled him. "After that," he says, "I decided I could handle the hunger. I just wanted to avoid serious injury."

And if he had been badly hurt? "The nearest helicopter was a thousand miles away. Even if we got through by satellite phone, it would have taken four or five days for help to arrive."

