

## People of the Rainforest: The Villas Boas Brothers, Explorers and Humanitarians of the Amazon

**John Hemming**

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John Hemming's *People of the Rainforest* is the intense, enlightening story of the three Villas Boas brothers, whose commitment to justice within Brazil's Amazon led to vast expanses of that land being preserved for Indigenous tribes.

In late 1943, Brazil's President Getúlio Vargas initiated his "March to the West," an expedition designed to explore and cut a trail through hostile Indian land, open it to settlement, and build farms and towns. The Villas Boas brothers expected adventure, but with it came searing daytime heat and cold nights, swarms of stinging insects, dysentery, malaria, hunger, and thirst. The situation was bad enough that the president changed his plans, deciding to open airstrips instead of settlements.

Adventure abounds as the brothers contact and develop relationships with isolated Indian tribes, characterized as having "gentle dignity, magnificent physiques, and naked beauty." Awed by the peace and tranquility of their forest homes where "no one ever raises their voice, not even children," the brothers championed the Amazon's Indigenous tribes, who lived in harmony with nature, as the people best qualified to steward the fragile Amazonian rainforest. Maps, photographs, extensive appendices and notes, a bibliography, and a meticulous index enhance the compelling text.

Several million Indigenous people inhabited what is now Brazil when the Portuguese first arrived in 1500; by the mid-twentieth century, only about 150,000 individuals remained. Diseases, guns, brutality, and slavery took a toll. Today, these lands, comprising the richest ecosystem on Earth, their people, and the Villas Boas brothers' legacy of respect and care are under assault, Hemming notes, because of ill-advised and toxic agricultural practices, deforestation, water pollution, and unprecedented outbreaks of fire.

*People of the Rainforest*, in honoring the work of Brazil's Villas Boas brothers, is both a timely reminder of what is being lost and a rousing call to action on the rainforest's behalf.

KRISTINE MORRIS (March / April 2020)

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