

THE GREAT BANDIT LAMPIÃO



I'd been to this prison years before – it was a historic spot, relatively speaking, and if you ever found yourself in the backland town of Queimadas, you wouldn't want to miss it. It was here, on these very steps, in the late 1920s, that the great bandit Lampião killed six of the seven town policemen, and then threw a dance for the townsfolk. The last time I was there, in the early '90s, I'd met the old man who'd played guitar for that dance – the bandits had given him his first drink, he told me, and cigarettes, "good ones, Jockey Clubs." We laughed, and then I walked into the prison, to have a look.

I wasn't expecting the cell to be so close to the door, nor to find myself right there, within, well, spitting distance from the prisoners. There were six or seven of them, tough guys heavy into a game of dominoes, and though they looked up and nodded, the main thing was the game, plus lunch was about to be served. The menu was on the wall – beefsteak with beans and rice. Lemonade, rice pudding and sweet black coffee. No wonder the dominoes were slamming.

But when I went back this year, there were no dominoes – no table, even, because there was no room. The floor was covered with filthy mattresses. There were 20 guys in here, or more. No menu on the wall. "What about lunch?" I was just asking, when two big military policemen in tight black jod-

phurs and Raybans came in to stand beside me. One on either side. It was 96 degrees in the shade there, but it froze me.

The prisoners got to their feet and walked to the bars. Amnesty International, I was thinking. When had it all changed? They'd cut down the trees in the square outside, too. It used to be beautiful here. Now it was nothing but dust and heat.

The policemen muttered something about drugs, and asked what I was doing here. I wanted to ask the prisoners about conditions but wasn't sure what my US passport was worth inside this room. The police could "heat up," as they say, and knock out my front teeth, and then be sorry. Regret it, and even get fired. Afterwards.

I walked up to the bars. At least the prisoners still had on their own clothes – shorts and mostly sleeveless T-shirts.

"Lampião came through here once," I said to them.

One of them put his hands on the bars. "A long time ago," he said. His skin was brown, but his eyes were blue, from the Dutch 500 years ago.

I wanted to tell him that Lampião and his bandits had killed the police, right here, held them in this very cell and then took them out, one by one, and shot them on the steps, just outside the door.

But I'd seen my own small face in the black reflection of the policemen's shades, and "Lampião opened these doors and set the prisoners free" was all I said.

The prisoner nodded. He could have shrugged, but didn't. Brazilians are kind even in extremity. "But now there's only God for us," he said.

I wanted to say something, but what was there to say? I took his picture, and that was enough for the police.

"Vamos," they said, and we walked out into the square.

The heat that used to be softened by the trees hit us full in the face.

Vicky Shorr
via email