

from: ***Tropical Ecstasy***  
by Norman Weeks

**Saturday, April 1. Penedo.**

I don't know how it happened that I have arrived at every single stop of my trip in the dark of night. After mind-clearing sleep, I have then been able to see each place with fresh, auroral perceptions.

Saturday morning, Penedo at its peak! For today is the *feira* (market day), when all the residents of the town, its suburbs and rural abodes, and those who live on both riverbanks of the Rio São Francisco converge on Penedo for a day of frenzied buying and selling.

The vendors work a variety of venues. There are the huge, warehouse-like, market buildings, with long counters on which meat or produce is displayed to those who file through. There are also storefronts open to the street.

But the *feira* is not contained by buildings. The vendors sell from the back of open trucks, or from wooden carts or steel wheelbarrows. They operate out of sidewalk stands shaded by black plastic, or on rickety tables, or, lacking those, on a sheet of plastic laid on the granite-block pavement.

You would think that the sellers would set up their display and let the customers come to them. But, no, there are two strategies of selling. Some sellers are indeed stationary, but others mill in the streets, wandering about and shouting their offerings, obstructing the free passage of the customers. Boys carry trays of wares supported by a strap around their neck.

Wouldn't the itinerant peddlers see the same number of people, if they just stood still? Wouldn't that be a more effective presentation of their goods? I would think that the wandering Popsicle salesboy might become overheated and dip too much into his own stock, or, worse, get his stock all melted. Better if he found a shady spot, stood there, and shouted, «*Picolé!*».

The fruits and vegetables of the *feira*, in all their colors, shapes, and sizes, in all their forms and varieties, are as tasty to the eye as to the tongue. The selection includes fruits generally not available in an American supermarket: *carimbola*, *pitanga*, *maracujá*, *jabuticaba*, *jaca*, *caju*. The tropical cornucopia is spilled into the streets of Penedo on *feira* day.

Less savory is the meat department. Here the head of a pig, its eyes shut tight in its last wince, there a row of bovine hearts—(not still beating, thank God!)—, a pile of livers, and a tableful of intestines. A large tongue lolls over the edge of the table. The stench of blood and offal rises in the crowded heat. It's enough to turn you into a vegetarian.

Nonetheless, if your stomach is as strong during the looking as in the eating, there are some choice cuts here. Brahma steaks in abundance, cut to your specifications.

I saw a butcher drop the fat and waste from his work into the basket of an old beggar woman.

Do you like chicken? Take your choice: A live one you can carry off flapping; one with its throat slit but still feathered; one cleaned and gutted; or any selection of poultry parts, even a clump of feet, if you fancy them. You can buy some live chicks to take home and raise for some future meal, perhaps when the in-laws drop in on a non-*feira* day. I heard the parting squawk of a cock just executed on a customer's orders. There was murder most fowl in Penedo this morning.

Due to the town's geographical location, the *feira* of Penedo can offer both seafood and riverfood. There are plenty of delectable piranhas or *tucunarés*; but some of the river fish had a crude, unappetizing look, like carp. There was fish fresh (the little *peixe-gatos* still panting on the dry ground) or dried-and-salted. Also, crabs, lobster, and shrimp. If you want to buy seafood in the *feira* of Penedo, I suggest you shop early, for it all sits in the sun, and such a slow cooking, I fear, does not enhance its flavor.

If, by philosophical conviction or mere squeamishness, you do incline toward vegetarianism, the *feira* will cater to your scrupulous diet. Besides the innumerable fruits and vegetables, there are grains and roots and tubers and beans and nuts and twigs and sprigs. Also, medicinal, even aphrodisiac, herbs, powders, and potions.

If, on the other hand, you scorn health consciousness and love self-indulgence, you can buy fresh tobacco cut in sections from a coiled rope. The vendor will even set it afire for you to experience and approve its aroma.

The *feira* is not a supermarket only. It provides every essential or frivolity you need or want or can be talked into needing and wanting. Down the street we go, past cosmetics and toiletries, housewares and hardware, watches and electronics, toys and *miudezas* (notions) of every kind. Around the corner to clothes and shoes. Then farther on to furniture, antiquey junk, machinery, and this-and-that.

How about a birdcage, with or without bird? I talked to a birdseller a few minutes. He told me the names of the kinds of birds he sells, imitated their repertoire, and said that listening to the radio was a great stimulus and inspiration to their singing. 'And does that one over there know any of the

songs of Roberto Carlos?', I asked him, alluding to Brazil's most famous pop singer. No, the bird hadn't yet advanced to that level of cultural sophistication.

The vendors' product line may include a hundred items or only one, like the razor blades sold by one itinerant vendor. He offered me some, but I tugged at my beard and told him, «*Não preciso*», ('Don't need 'em'). He laughed and moved on to more likely prospects.

The *feira* of Penedo has it all...well, except for diamonds and furs. You'll have to make do with junk jewelry; and the climate makes furs ridiculous, anyway.

The *feira* sprawled through the streets of an entire neighborhood; it was many times the area it used to be in my time of residence here. Last night, the desk clerk told me that Penedo has about 90,000 people, a threefold increase since I left, I think. The *feira* has grown accordingly. For those in search of sensory stimulation, the *feira* is the must-see-and-do attraction of Penedo.

As I walked the streets of the *feira*, I tried not to be the conspicuous outsider, I tried to mingle with the crowds. It is not easy for me to pass myself off as a *penedense*, for I tower over almost everybody. My three weeks of Brazil tan did provide some disguise, as did my dark sunglasses obscuring my bright blue eyes. Still, I drew some stares from the vendors and shoppers.

Perhaps I deserved their suspicious scrutiny. The sellers and the buyers of the *feira* must have thought me a strange stranger, for I spent the entire morning there—in two forays, with a breather between—, the entire Saturday morning, and yet I bought...nothing!

\* \* \* \* \*