

This story from March 23, 2003, reveals an obvious success. Today's Web site shows larger trucks and more touring options... in Portuguese, but the photos tell a thousand stories.

The Hotel That Hits the Road

By TONY SMITH

WHEN Flavio Melo, the young, adventuresome owner of the Exploranter, an overland hotel on wheels, promised to show me the "unexpected Brazil" on one of his tours, he wasn't joking. By the end of the first day, we'd eaten crispy fried ants, visited slave dungeons on a coffee plantation, been overtaken by a hearse with a flashing light and siren, and heard village news piped from loudspeakers in a church belfry.

The 25-ton Scania truck and trailer that make up the Exploranter's lounge, kitchen and 28-berth sleeping quarters can go "on the backroads, to parts of Brazil that nobody knows," Flavio had told me a month earlier, in October, as he launched his tiny four-member company at São Paulo's adventure sports fair. "We are the antithesis of the pasteurized resort," he concluded.

An Exploranter trip can last from three days to three weeks, depending on the group and itinerary. While on the road, you can view the scenery from the relative comfort of the Scania's enclosed top deck, furnished like a railroad car with reclining seats and tables. The view of the surrounding lush, green, hilly landscape of Minas was commanding, and Flavio, who is 33 and speaks English, kept everyone amused with tales of previous journeys and an interesting selection of lounge music. In the main truck, which Flavio calls Romeo, the kitchen equipment is stowed below the passenger deck; the sleeping areas and three bathrooms are in the trailer behind, known as Juliet.

Once the Exploranter halts, its side panels open up and a huge canopy is unfurled to create an outdoor kitchen and living and dining room. During the day, when the journey is under way, everything is folded up and stowed. The cook and cook's assistant travel in the cabin with the driver, while Flavio entertains his guests upstairs.

Flavio's concept for the Exploranter, was inspired by the overland expedition trucks that have been taking adventure tourists on safari camping trips across Africa for decades. A trip aboard the Exploranter, for those choosing its cheapest "participative" option at about 130 reais (\$40) a day per person traveling in a group of 20, can be basic. Passengers are expected to help the cook, clear the table and wash dishes. For an extra 70 reais (\$20) a day, you can opt for "complete service," meaning a crew of five will travel along to pamper your group and make sure your hands don't come into contact with detergent.

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Excerpt from: *TONY SMITH contributes to The Times from São Paulo, Brazil.*