

FIFTEEN LATIN-AMERICAN PARAGRAPHS**Text and photos by João Vicente Ganzarolli de Oliveira**Senior Professor of the Tércio Pacitti Institut
of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*You can never cross the ocean unless you have
the courage to lose sight of the shore.*

Christopher Columbus

I met the Chilean poet Manuel Antonio Vásquez Abarca in the city of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil). The year was 1987, and neither of us had yet reached the *mezzo del camin dei nostre vite*, to use the expression with which Dante Alighieri wrote the first of the nearly fifteen thousand verses of the *Commedia*. I owe him an ever-renewed friendship spanning four decades and an appreciation for poetry, beginning with his own, which is of the highest quality, as evidenced by these verses I collected from his *Oscuro sortilegio*, a magnificent collection of “Andean sonnets,” as he calls them: “*Saber que día a día y sin tardanza / en todo será trágica mudanza / es ser en cosas ciertas advertido, / pues no hay mayor verdad, ni más certeza, / saber que todo en la naturaleza / camina inevitable hacia el olvido.*”¹



Manuel Antonio and his daughter, Vania Francesca, in the surroundings of Santiago de Chile

¹ See Pedro Mardones Barrientos. “*Oscuro sortilegio*, sonetos andinos de Manuel Vásquez”, in <https://www.bibliotecanacionaldigital.gob.cl/bnd/628/w3-article-187413.html>.

2 Passionate about philosophy, history, geography, and archaeology – the so-called “human sciences” – Manuel always lived up to the passage of the Latin-Carthaginian poet and playwright Publius Terentius Afro, “*Humani nihil a me alienum est*”, in the sense that nothing that is characteristic of human beings is alien to him. Manuel had a great interest in Latin-American culture, in particular, its pre-Columbian past, with the ruins of the Inca city of Machu Picchu, in the Peruvian province of Cusco, being a prime example.



Machupicchu, in Peru

3 Included in the political borders of Chile – and therefore those of Latin-America –, Easter Island is part of Polynesia and represents the final point reached by the long maritime journey of the Maori culture, which originated in the archipelago now known as New Zealand. Were its famous statues, the Moai, built between 1250 and 1500 AD as official archaeology states, or, as Scottish explorer Graham Hancock (1951) argues, are they at least ten millennia old and at most fourteen millennia old?²



Easter Island, in southeastern Polynesia

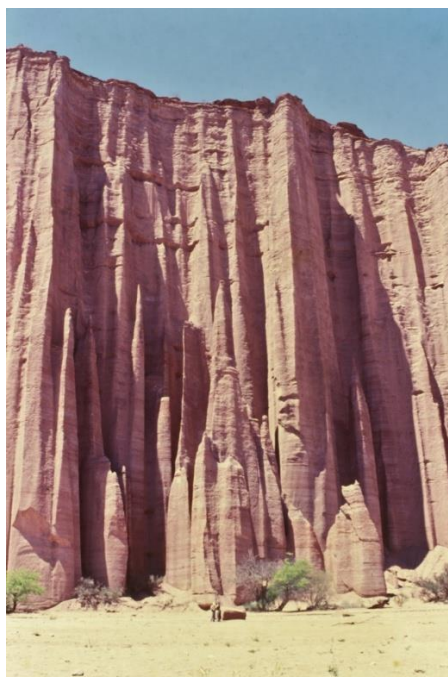
² See <https://www.jpost.com/archaeology/archaeology-around-the-world/article-838305>.

4 Roughly halfway between Santiago de Chile (city founded by the Spanish conquistador Pedro de Valdivia in 1541 and named by him in honor of the Apostle Saint James the Greater, the first evangelizer of Spain, according to tradition; hence, “Santiago de Compostela”), we come across São Miguel das Missões, an architectural relic of Jesuit-Guarani origin, located in the southernmost part of Brazil.



São Miguel das Missões (south Brazil)

5 Located in northern Argentina, not far from its borders with Paraguay and Bolivia and very close to the Chilean border, the Salta and Cafayate Geological Site contains some of the most beautiful natural landscapes in the entire Latin-American continent. With wind, rain, and cold as its artisans, the sedimentary mountain yields to the subtractive process caused by geological erosion.



Salta y Cafayate, in northern Argentina

6 Remnants of ancient Gondwana (the supercontinent formed between 600 and 530 million years ago and comprising most of the land that currently makes up our Southern Hemisphere), what we now call “Argentina” and “South America” contains countless geological treasures.



More from Salta, in Argentina

7 Framed by the volcanoes of Guatemala and the beautiful Guatemalan city of Panajachel, Lake Atitlán, particularly admired by the English writer Aldous Huxley, is the geological result of a volcanic eruption that occurred some eighty thousand years ago and is among the most beautiful lakes in the world.



Lake Atitlán, in Panajachel, Guatemala

8 Located in southern Mexico, in the state of Chiapas, the town of San Juan Chamula is notable for being home to many indigenous people of the Tzotzil group, descendants of the ancient Mayans, who, along with the Aztecs and Incas, form the triad of the most brilliant cultures of Latin-America's pre-Columbian past.



San Juan Chamula, in southern Mexico

9 As I said before, in another article, “The last Spanish stronghold in Chilean lands, the Chiloé Archipelago represents a precious example of the coexistence between the indigenous world and that of the colonizer, a fundamental feature of this mosaic of cultures that is the Latin-American world. Chiloé is made up of 16 islands and occupies a total of 9,613 square kilometers. Until the mid-16th century, when the first Spaniards arrived, the *Chono* and *Veliche* ethnic groups lived on the ‘Chilote’ islands. They were the cultural heirs of the nomadic hunter-gatherers who, around 12,000 years ago, began the process of populating the archipelago.”.³



Chiloe Archipelago, in southern Chile

³ J. V. G. O. “Estética latino-americana?”, in *Arquivos* (org. Carlos Terra), EBA/UFRJ, Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), january 2004.

10 As I mentioned in an article published several years ago, “The peculiarities offered by the Amazonian geography are many and profound. We find in the Amazon characteristics that are more continental than regional. What we have is a continent within a continent, covering an area larger than Europe (excluding Russia). Amazonia stretches across seven meridians and four parallels; it occupies more than half the surface of Brazil, also extending into parts of Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, and the Guianas. Amazonia is marked by its superlative content, things tending toward invincible immensity, for it is home to the largest tropical forest, the most varied fauna and flora, as well as the longest of all rivers in the world. The inhabitants are sparse; the Amazon River and its more than a thousand tributaries are the protagonists. Humans live along them; life and everything else that life on Earth requires depend on that rivers.” (*Cidade Nova*, ano XLII, nº 8, São Paulo, agosto de 2000).



Brazilian Amazonia

11 Not too far from the Chilean border, very close to the Atacama Desert, the Bolivian highlands feature areas of intense volcanism. This is the case with the *Sol de Mañana* geothermal field, located at almost 5,000 meters above sea level and filled with fumaroles, hot springs, bubbling mud, and active geysers.



Sol de Mañana (Bolivia)

12 Located between the 40th and 55th parallels, Patagonia is the region where the South American continent narrows toward Antarctica. Much more untouched, and therefore primitive and wild, than Argentine Patagonia, Chilean Patagonia is fragmented into more than 40,000 islands, or, to be more precise, 40,001.



Chilean Patagonia

13 Belonging to the Argentinian province of Santa Cruz, the second-largest in the country, the Perito Moreno Glacier originates in Chile, but its major part is located in Argentina. It is one of 48 glaciers fed by the Southern Patagonian Ice Field, which is the third-largest freshwater reserve in the world.



Glacier Perito Moreno, in southern Argentina

14 The same uncertainty regarding the Moai of Easter Island surrounds the archaeological site of Tiahuanaco, near La Paz, the capital of Bolivia: when, why, and for what purpose were those mysterious statues and the architectural apparatus surrounding them built? No one knows for sure.



Juan, a Peruvian traveller in Tiahuanaco

15 According to official archaeology, construction on the site began around 600 AD. However, relevant evidences point to a much older date, around 2,500 years before the birth of Jesus Christ. Research by the aforementioned explorer Graham Hancock points to this earlier date. As with the history of Latin-America as a whole, Tiahuanaco's past leaves us with few satisfactory answers; questions awaiting further exploration prevail.



Tiahuanaco, in Bolivia