

Floating in midair

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We bought the hammock on the street in Manaus, Brazil. Manaus doesn't get many tourists, and not many folks in the U.S.A. can place it on a map (toward the Northwest there). Its only real tourist site, O Palácio Rio Negro—The Palace of the Black River—only rises out of the humid mists of the jungle river to take solid form during a full moon. Items bought at the gift shop often prove to be a disappointment when taken home.

So I imagine the hammock vendors by Manaus's central square, near A Igreja da Matriz (the Church of the Matrix), were selling for locals. You see the hammocks in the houses. Most of Manaus's buildings were built in the late 1800s, and everybody keeps their big French doors open all night long, so you can look inside to the front parlor. There'd be a tall ceiling, exquisite molding in some disrepair, and nothing else in the room but a hammock stretched from one corner to the other.

People at the dumb little hotel in Santa Elena (Venezuela, on the border) told us that the original intent of the hammock was to let people sleep among trees so they wouldn't get eaten by jaguars in their sleep. I'm more inclined to believe that it's just so you can get a cool breeze under you. They were happy to show us how to string up the hammock and sleep in it properly. The trick is to sleep cross-wise, so that any one part of your body is equidistant from the two support points (remember that definition of a line from your Geometry class?). Sometimes, when I was feeling paranoid, I thought this funny position was all a joke played on the tourists, but it makes a lot of sense.

I was especially skeptical because I was sleeping in a travel hammock: a nylon thing that winds down to well within a bread box, which you have to carry with you if you want the cheap rate at the hotel. Their main use, after the bohemian tourists, is for children, so they're appropriately not quite big enough. Most of them have themes familiar from the sheets we all know and love: little stars and fire trucks and Hello Kitties. Mine had a green paisley pattern that in retrospect probably looked grandfatherly. Kept the thing for almost a year, until it started tearing here and there, and then I threw it out, thinking it'd be better that way. I later forgot that I'd thrown it out and searched everywhere for weeks.

But the hammock I now use is much more robust. We'd bought a half-dozen hammocks for pals, thinking everybody would want one. They were also incredibly cheap, about ten US bucks (but then shipping was twice as much). Then we got back to the States and found out that not a single person had



Figure 1: The bed

actually put up the hammock we'd bought for them. I somehow got back the one I'd given to my roommates, and here it is, in my little brick house, by the doors I'd leave wide open all night but for the mosquitos and the winter.

I'm glad I have the thing, because it's an awful lot cheaper to ship from California than a bed would be. That and a few Therm-a-rest mattresses and the place is furnished. [OK, maybe I made a trip to Ikea too.] Since all of my past mattresses have always wound up on the floor, this is also the highest off the ground I've ever slept, which is great for an asthmatic geek like myself.

The height gets me anxious from time to time, but I take medication for that. On the more fitful nights, I can hear absolutely everything in the apartment, and it all sounds like either snapping string or slipping mortar. So I try to keep something soft underneath me, and make sure the Ikea endtable is out of the path my head would take on the way down. The design is pretty fault-tolerant, though: breaking a few threads won't make a real difference, and the white nylon strings at either end are designed to slowly unravel should something go wrong, gently laying you down instead of dropping you. Unless the hook just comes out of the wall, of course.

The hammock conforms very well to your body, and there's a lot of fine-tuning that you can do: shifting your arm a little bit up or down can entirely change the feel. So yes, there's a learning curve to my bed. I didn't sleep very well the first few days, but now I know exactly where to put my legs so that my

hip is perfectly in line with my spine, where to shove a pillow so that my kidneys feel well-supported, et cetera. You can even do finer calibrations by pulling the nylon strings to shift tension around—so yes, my bed has options and settings. I used to try to do these sorts of things with my flat beds, using complex arrays of pillows under my belly and around my head and such, but that never quite worked, and I had to make up for not sleeping well during the night by sleeping in all morning. Now, with the hammock, I sleep wonderfully—so wonderfully that I *choose* to sleep in all morning because it feels so good.