Workers harvesting soybeans in the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso. Brazil is the world’s leading soy exporter.
HOW BRAZIL OUTFARMED THE AMERICAN FARMER

AFTER A HALF-CENTURY OF DOMINANCE, THE U.S. IS LOSING ITS EDGE IN AGRICULTURE TO A SUDDENLY BOOMING, SCIENTIFICALLY ADVANCED LATIN AMERICAN POWERHOUSE.

BY SUSANNA B. HECHT AND CHARLES C. MANN

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEX WEBB
Phil Corzine is not abandoning Illinois. A longtime soybean farmer in Assumption, a small town east of Springfield, he is firmly loyal to his state—he once ran the Illinois Soybean Checkoff Board, a program in which Illinois farmers promote Illinois soybeans. But 1,200 acres Corzine bought in 2007 are not in Illinois, or even the Midwest. They’re in central Brazil, in the state of Tocantins, part of a big swath of soy-producing lands that stretch between the Andes and the Atlantic forest, and from northern Argentina to the southern flanks of the Amazon basin. Soylandia, as this immense region might be called, is almost entirely unknown to Americans. But it may well be the future of one of the world’s most important industries: grain agriculture.

Mainly out of curiosity, Corzine visited Brazil in 1998. Like most U.S. soy producers, he’d noted Brazil’s rapid rise from experimental amateur to global soy power in the space of a couple of decades. Its scale of operations, however, stunned him. A big farm in Illinois may cover 3,000 acres; spreads in Soylandia are routinely ten times bigger. Conditions there were primitive, Corzine thought, but Soylandia was going to expand in a way that was no longer possible in the U.S. With two partners he raised $1.3 million from about 80 investors, mostly Midwestern farmers. In Illinois, he says, that kind of money “can’t even buy the equipment, let alone the land.” In Brazil it was enough for Corzine’s group to begin farming 3,500 acres in 2004. Since then, the land has tripled in value as other American investors clamored to get into Brazilian soy. This year Corzine raised another $350,000 to buy more land. “We feel like what’s going on is long-term positive,” he says with Midwestern understatement.

Twenty years ago it would have seemed absurd for an American farmer to move into South America. U.S. growers still aren’t rushing in en masse—Corzine’s group is one of about 300 mostly small-scale U.S. consortia that have invested—but doing so no longer seems ridiculous. Today Soylandia, with nearly 60% of the market, dominates the global soy trade. And Brazil—the heart of Soylandia—is an agricultural powerhouse. Not only is it the world’s biggest soy exporter, a title it seized from the U.S. in 2006, but it has the world’s biggest farm-trade surplus, $27.5 billion last year. (The U.S. surplus was $4.6 billion.) The leading producer of beef, poultry, pork, ethanol, coffee, orange juice concentrate, sugar, and tobacco, Brazil’s farm exports have grown on average by 20% a year since 2000, according to the USDA.

But of all those products soy is by far the most important—and demand is exploding. Asia has long produced its own soy foods: tofu, soymilk, miso. Now soy is ever more prominent in the U.S. diet, though it is often hidden by aliases like “hydrolyzed vegetable protein.” Meanwhile the use of soy for animal feed is soaring. China wants it for its fast-growing poultry, swine, and fish-farming industries, while Europe increasingly demands it because soy-fed cattle can’t develop mad-cow disease.

The main boost in demand, however, is industrial. Nontoxic, nonpolluting, and biodegradable, soy is becoming the precursor of choice for manufacturing paints, inks, textiles, every kind of plastic imaginable, and an amazing variety of other products (see sidebar). Soy provides oil for chainsaw motors in Montana, glue for plywood cabinets in Michigan, foam insulation for offices in Massachusetts, and backing for artificial turf in putting ranges and stadiums.
throughout the Midwest. In July, Ford announced it would replace the petroleum-based polyurethane foam cushions in its car seats with cushions made from soy foam. The company’s first green-seat car: the 2008 Mustang. Muscle-car soy! Almost anything that can be made with petroleum can also be made from soy, including—especially—vehicle fuel. Biodiesel, ethanol’s diesel counterpart, is mainly made from soy. With oil inching toward $100 a barrel, the market-research firm Global Industry Analysts projects the biodiesel market will grow more than 33% annually for the next four years.

Ordinarily this would represent a huge opportunity for U.S. agriculture. Since World War II, U.S. farmers have led the world in three staple crops: wheat, corn, and soy. Midwestern harvests have steadily increased during that time, in large part due to American prowess at moving laboratory innovations—improved seeds, new fertilizer—to the field and to the global market. Along the way, agriculture became the crown jewel of U.S. exports. Even as cars, steel, and other erstwhile national champions lost jobs and market share to international competitors, agriculture reliably put up impressive numbers on the U.S. balance of trade, offsetting at least partially our apparently limitless appetite for Pokémons, Perrier, and Priuses.

Today that is changing. The growth of Soylandia shows that crops formerly controlled by temperate-zone producers can be transformed into tropical commodities. Latin American soy production is the equal of anything in Iowa or Illinois. Indeed, it’s often better: Average soybean yields in Brazil have surpassed the U.S. in three of the past six years. Average costs per bushel in the U.S. are about $6.70, including domestic and ocean freight, while Brazilians weigh in at $5.05.
Welcome to Soylandia
Rising agricultural powerhouse Brazil now dominates the global soybean trade. Here's where it grows.

In the U.S. soy has little room left to expand. There just isn’t much unused good farmland left. Worse, ethanol subsidies have driven the demand for corn so high that many American soy farmers are switching crops. Despite the global rise in soy demand, the USDA reported in July that U.S. soy plantings fell by 15% in 2007, to 64.1 million acres—the lowest level in 12 years. Meanwhile, the United Nations reports that the four main nations of Soylandia—Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Bolivia—were growing almost 100 million acres as of 2005, the most recent year with reliable data. And that number is increasing as much as 5% a year.

Labor and land are cheap in Soylandia, but that’s not why it is shaking up the farming world. Instead, its advantages are due to its native climate and home-grown technology. Because Soylandia lies in the tropics, its growing season is nearly year-round. Two and (with irrigation) three crops a year are the norm. In addition, the region is less vulnerable to climatic extremes than the southern and western zones of the Midwest, which are at constant risk of drought and flooding—a risk that may be exacerbated in temperate zones by global warming. South America “has a clear comparative advantage,” says Robert Wisner, an Iowa State agronomist. “In the long run, there’s no obvious way for American farmers to catch up. I wouldn’t bet against these people.” South American soy, he says, “is a kind of competition America has never faced before.”

Almost nobody in Brazil actually eats soy. In that notoriously carnivorous land, the very idea of tofu is enough to cause a shudder. But as far back as the 1970s, some Brazilians recognized that the Asian bean—Glycine max, to biologists—represented a major business opportunity and a potential solution to an intractable problem. The problem was what to do with Brazil’s vast center-west, centered on the state of Mato Grosso, which is 1 1/2 times the size of Texas. “Less, probably, is known about the interior of...”
Mato Grosso than any other inhabited place of equal size in the world,” wrote the journalist and traveler Peter Fleming (brother to the James Bond creator) in 1933. Even in the 1960s no decent roads or railroads connected it to the rest of the earth. Its crumbling capital, Cuiabá, was then little more than a hardscrabble burg that serviced local cowboys and alligator poachers. Today Mato Grosso, with almost 15 million acres planted, leads Brazil in soy production, and Cuiabá (pop. 550,000) is the capital of Soylandia.

The state’s current prosperity—and its source—would have startled Fleming. Most of Mato Grosso is covered by cerrado, wooded savanna that sprawls over 700,000 square miles of Brazil, including much of the southern Amazon basin. For decades after Fleming wrote, agricultural researchers believed Glycine max could not prosper there. The plant, imported to Brazil in the 19th century by Japanese laborers, needs long exposure to sunlight; days in the tropics are simply too short. In addition, soy, like other legumes, uses symbiotic Rhizobium bacteria in its roots to “fix” nitrogen into the soil, reducing the need for fertilizer. But because nitrogen-fixing bacteria can’t survive in the tropical cerrado’s highly acidic, aluminum-rich soils, farms would have to be heavily fertilized with lime, a significant cost disadvantage. Even if the poor farmers on the cerrado had somehow managed to eke out a crop, they could not have exported it—Soylandia’s potholed dirt roads were impassable much of the year.

In the 1960s the generals who then ruled Brazil looked at their maps and observed to their displeasure that about 60% of the country was empty (actually, it was filled with Indians, the descendents of escaped slaves, peasant farmers, and other forest peoples, but the government dismissed them). To the generals’ way of thinking, filling the emptiness was a matter of national security; in any case, like authoritarians everywhere, they liked big projects.

In a program that would later set off worldwide protests, they began linking the brand-new, ultramodernist capital, Brasília (itself an earlier mega-project), to a network of roads across the interior, connecting to the port cities of rainforest Amazonia. Much of the road system went through the cerrado rather than the better-known rainforest. Not only was it much easier to clear, but it was then not even in the environmentalists’ sights, even though the dry forest is almost as biologically diverse as the wet forest.

One of the highways, BR-364, ran from São Paulo through Cuiabá to the west Amazon. In the 1970s and 1980s hundreds of thousands of migrants from central and southern Brazil thronged up BR-364, believing the generals’ promises that they could begin new lives in agricultural settlements. Instead, they encountered bad roads, rampant disease, poor land, and lawless violence: Deadwood with malaria. Many smallholders abandoned their farms soon after clearing them—few crops would grow in the cerrado’s aluminum-saturated soil. The big ranches didn’t do much better, even though many received subsidies from the government.

Despite the economic failures, land wars, and ecological havoc, the generals viewed the settlement program as anything but a failure: It opened up the cerrado in Mato Grosso, then moved north through the rainforests and created conduits all the way up to the Amazon River. By the 1990s more than half of the cerrado had been burned and bulldozed into pasture or farmland.

“It was a much bigger assault on an ecosystem than what was occurring in the tropical forest,” says Donald Sawyer of the Institute for Population, Society, and Nature, a Brazilian nonprofit. The cerrado vanished at a rate “almost double that of the rainforest,” he says. “But there was almost no complaint from the big environmental groups, because the cerrado, though very beautiful, doesn’t get put on the calendars.” According to Sawyer, the conversion of the cerrado was probably the biggest, fastest land-use change in human history—some 450,000 square miles, an area bigger than Texas and Oklahoma combined, converted in less than a generation.

Opening up the landscape was pointless if Brazilians couldn’t figure out how to use it. That was the goal of a second part of the generals’ program: sending Brazil’s best and brightest to foreign universities, most of them in the U.S. In the 1960s and 1970s state schools in the Midwest and California were awash with Brazilians studying crop breeding, soil science, and regional planning. Many of the new Ph.D.s returned to the Empresa Brasileira de Pesquisa Agropecuária (Embrapa), a network of state-run agricultural research and extension agencies. In a suite of remarkable achievements, Embrapa’s scientific teams bred soy varieties that could thrive in shorter days and strains of nitrogen-fixing bacteria that could tolerate cerrado soils—and then figured out how to inoculate the new soy seeds with the new microbes en masse.

Between 1985 and 1995, soy harvests in Mato Grosso quintupled, soaring

To make room for crops, Brazil cleared an area bigger than Texas and Oklahoma combined.

January 21, 2008  FORTUNE  98
from a million metric tons a year to 5.2 million. In the process, so much acreage was burned for clearing that soy in general—and soy from Mato Grosso, the hottest of burning hot spots, in particular—became a favorite subject for environmentalist campaigns. But most Brazilian economists, entrepreneurs, and politicians saw Glycine max in a very different light. Largely due to agroexports, Brazil stopped being a debtor nation and South American soy, its new biotechnological wonder, became a major presence on the Chicago Board of Trade’s exchange.

“These guys have the finest low-latitude agricultural technology on the planet for soy and a number of other crops, like cotton,” says Peter Goldsmith, director of the National Soy Research Institute at the University of Illinois. Soy, in Goldsmith’s view, is the first in a series of temperate crops that are shifting to the tropics, with wheat and corn next in line. In a kind of agricultural offshoring, the production chain will move from the Midwest to cheaper, emptier tropical zones: Latin America, parts of Asia, and ultimately Africa. (Not only will the places be tropical, but much of the necessary technology will be controlled by patents in Soylandia.) In the past, such shifts have had profound consequences. At the dawn of the 20th century, Poland and France, the West’s former breadbaskets, lost out to the prairies around the Great Lakes. The rise of mechanized agriculture in the Midwest helped set the stage for this nation’s industrial supremacy, much of it based on factories in those same areas. Similarly, the shift of high-tech agriculture outside of the U.S. will probably stimulate other kinds of industry—other kinds of competition adapted to the enormous land masses of the tropics.

“It’s very interesting when the U.S. and Europe aren't the center of the universe,” Goldsmith says drily. “And it’ll be even more interesting if we fall behind.”

When Kory Melby wants to show Americans what he means by the competition from South America, he takes them to a town called Lucas do Rio Verde. Melby, a farmer from northwest Minnesota, first visited Brazil in 1994. But it was not until 2001, when he and several other farmers took a trip to Mato Grosso, that Melby understood what was happening. They drove north from Cuiabá on BR-163, Mato Grosso’s other new highway. For the first hour they climbed a dry plateau. There wasn’t much to see: wooded pastures with forested mesas and water courses. Then they hit the top of the plateau, Melby recalls, and saw “an ocean of green—soybeans as far as you could see.” For hour after hour, the farmers passed by low, undulating hills covered with what is called the “soy complex”: Glycine max, and the corn, sunflower, and other crops grown in rotation with it. “We were all in shock,” Melby reported. The farmers asked themselves, “They grow two crops per year here? They can grow soybeans here for $2.80 per bushel? Can this be true? If so, I am screwed …” Melby went home and decided to move the center of his business to Brazil.

Lucas do Rio Verde is carefully laid out with neat, paved, well-lighted streets and flowered plazas—a far cry from the bawdy boomtowns typically associated with frontier settlement. Free clinics sit beside new schools; children splash around municipal swimming pools; workers hurriedly erect hundreds of neat new bungalows for incoming workers; buses wait in yards to take them to their jobs. Meanwhile, stay-at-home mothers walk to part-time jobs at a chicken-incubation plant. In the next three years Lucas’s population is expected to almost double, to 50,000.

Today Lucas do Rio Verde county—an area a bit bigger than Yosemite National Park—produces 1% of Brazil’s soy crop, 10% of its corn, and 4% of its cotton. In Soylandia, where export commodities are king, Lucas is the jewel in the crown, a place that typifies what is known in Brazilian development circles as the “Mato Grosso model.” More succinctly, it offers a peek into what Soylandia’s executive class views as the future of tropical agriculture.

Lucas wasn’t always a showcase. The city’s mayor, Marino José Franz, came to Mato Grosso with nothing but a suitcase in the early 1980s. Unlike many of the would-be farmers then pouring in, Franz—and his brother, who accompanied him—had a degree in agronomy. Conditions were harder than the migrants had been led to believe. Transportation was so rudimentary that farmers that coaxed a harvest from its poor soil couldn’t get it to market. INCRA, the agrarian-reform agency, lost control of the rapid migration and violent battles among squatters, speculators, and ranchers over homestead titles became routine. Overwhelmed, the would-be settlers in Lucas do Rio Verde cleared the land, raised a few starving cattle—and fled.

The Franz brothers are among the few early migrants who re-
BR-163, a two-lane, potholed road in Mato Grosso, is one of Brazil’s most important highways.

main. Today they run a big agricultural supply firm called Fiagril. And Fiagril played a big role in Lucas’s newest accomplishment: the soy mega-complex rising in a clamor of trucks, cranes, and red dust on the east side of town. At the center will be a processing plant owned by the Maggi Group—the world’s biggest soy grower, owned by Blairo Maggi, the current governor of Mato Grosso (no relation to the Nestlé subsidiary that produces Maggi bouillon). Up to 3,000 tons of beans a day will be trucked into one end of the facility. After crushing, the soybeans will go out the other end, into what are in effect two great pipelines. The output from one will go to a new, nearby $15 million biodiesel refinery, controlled by mayor Franz’s nearby $15 million biodiesel refinery, controlled by mayor Franz’s global meatpacker that is one of the world’s biggest. (The biggest is another Brazilian firm, FriBoi, which recently acquired the icon of Midwestern carnivory, Swift.) Part of the factory will process 500,000 chickens a day; another part, when at full capacity, will handle 5,000 hogs a day. When the facility opens in March, it will be Latin America’s biggest slaughterhouse.

The Lucas complex, Melby says, “is something you can’t find anywhere else in the world.” In no other place are “the corn growers or soybean growers all in a row with a feed mill and a processing plant sitting there waiting to buy all the stuff for their animals.” Lucas, in his view, will be the “next Des Moines or Decatur, Ill.”

Like Decatur, but more efficient. Similar attempts at integration are underway in the U.S. In Frankfort, Ind., for example, Frito-Lay, Archer Daniels Midland, and Indiana Clean Energy are building a facility that will use hog manure and corn-processing waste to produce electricity. But such complexes are easier to set up in Latin America, because they don’t require undoing 150 years of history. In the course of the crash effort to produce ethanol in the U.S., says Texas A&M agricultural economist Daniel Klinefelter, “we’re producing an incredible amount of DDG [distillers dried grains] as a by-product.” DDG is widely used as cattle feed. “The problem is we have this stuff in Iowa and the cattle are in Texas.” Texas ranchers can’t shift their feedlots to Iowa to cut shipping costs—“local communities and environmental regulations won’t let them.” Meanwhile, Soylandians face fewer constraints. “If you have a blank slate,” Klinefelter says, “it’s a whole lot easier to design things.”

Given the Amazon’s recent history of anarchic brutality and environmental mayhem, one would expect Sting and Leonardo DiCaprio to be flying planeloads of eco-activists to Mayor Franz’s doorstep to denounce Lucas do Rio Verde and the other rising agricultural capitals in Mato Grosso. But Soylandia is jacking up production even as it greens itself—or, more precisely, becomes considerably less brown than it was. This year, according to data from Brazil’s national space center, INPE, deforestation has fallen by 89% compared with 2006, which in turn was 73% less than 2005. And much of the decline was in Mato Grosso.

“It’s all due to my policies, of course,” Maggi jokes. Actually, he notes, part of the decline is because “nobody’s got any money.” The weakness of the dollar, which makes Brazilian goods more expensive, has slowed the growth of export agriculture and, with it, the drive to clear land. More important, is that both growers and government have changed focus. Environmental questions, he says flatly, “have been thoroughly integrated into everything we do—the entire supply chain.”

It is difficult to overstate how surprising these claims are. Maggi is so detested by activists that Greenpeace gave him its 2005 Golden Chainsaw award for his contributions to deforestation. Today Maggi “has got religion,” says Mark London, co-author of The Final Forest, a recent book about the Amazon. “I interviewed him 25 years ago [for a previous book], and the contrast between what he was saying then and doing now is incredible.” Earlier pressure from environmentalists and the national government had begun forcing Mato Grosso to shift course even before Maggi took office in 2003. Nonetheless, his administration not only supported the changes but has actually made Mato Grosso’s environmental standards among the stiffest in the world. And the state is enforcing those standards. For instance, growers must avoid planting on hilltops and dedicate 20% of their cerrado holdings to natural vegetation (the figure rises to 80% in rainforest). If they don’t comply, they have to pay steep fines.

Soy may simply be the first in a series of temperate-zone crops that are shifting to the tropics.
The change is not entirely altruistic. Ecological correctness, Maggi argues, can drive up the value of soy and other crops. Put bluntly, he wants to segment the soy market. One segment will be high-priced products branded as “Eco OK” for green-minded consumers in Europe, the U.S., and other wealthy areas where green consumerism is taking hold; the other will be low-value, nongreen commodity products destined for poorer places. The high-end, high-profit sector will be dominated by Brazil; the rest will be left to countries like the U.S.

Indeed, U.S. growers often cannot match Mato Grosso’s environmental standards. In making the environment into a competitive advantage, says João S. Campari, director of the Nature Conservancy’s Cuiabá office, “Mato Grosso could become a model that leads the rest of the world.”

Before that happens, Soylandia has a few obstacles to overcome. The biggest one—the one immediately apparent to anyone taking the same drive that so impressed Melby—is the roads. In fact, the entire transportation infrastructure of the Amazon basin is in a state of near-collapse. Some of the grandiose highways built by the generals in the 1970s have simply been swallowed by the forest; others spend the rainy season as muddy swamps and the dry season as gully-ridden dust sloughs. The narrow, two-lane road through Lucas do Rio Verde is among Mato Grosso’s most important highways: a lethal, near-continuous assault of hurtling trucks, separated by inches as they crash through potholes. It’s anything but a state-of-the-art supply chain: Shipping one metric ton of soybeans from, say, Lucas do Rio Verde to Shanghai typically costs $202 on average, according to an August USDA report; by contrast, shipping the same ton from Iowa would cost $77.

Nonetheless, Wisner says, “Fearing that bad transportation will offset Brazil’s advantages—and recognizing that eco-politics have made central governments wary of large-scale Amazon projects—business has begun building its own local infrastructure. Growers throughout Soylandia have constructed feeder roads—the equivalents of U.S. state highways—to supplement weak national road networks. In 2002 the Maggi group, the state oil company Petrobras, and the Amazonas state government jointly constructed a $125 million private container port in Porto Velho, a down-at-the-heels river city on the western edge of the Brazilian Amazon (barges take the containers to an international port at Itacoatiara, farther down the Amazon). And last year Brasil Ferrovias (a subsidiary of the Brazilian holding company América Latina Logística) built a 60-mile railroad from eastern Mato Grosso to the port of Alto Araguaia, on an upper Amazon tributary.

Soy! It’s Not Just for Sauce Anymore

It’s increasingly ubiquitous in our food—and as an industrial input. A sampling of where it’s found at home.

**In the Bathroom**

*Your medicine cabinet is filled with soy products: shampoo, conditioner, hair-spray, skin cream, aftershave, deodorant, hypoallergenic bath soap, bronzing powder, and even progesterone cream for menopause.*

**In the Bedroom**

*Soy can be sexy! Set the mood with soybean wax aromatherapy candles and a fake soy wax log. And check the lingerie drawer for Effort’s Stretch Soy Low Rise panties, a silky soft blend with cotton and Spandex that’s 47% soy.*

**In the Dining Table**

*Tofu is old news. Today your family can chow down on soy-fed beef, soy salad dressing, soy-enhanced bread (high protein), soy margarine (no saturated fat), and soy cheese. Even Fido’s dog food might be made of soy.*

**In the Living Room**

*On the shelf find chainsaw oil made from biodegradable soy. And don’t forget soy in laundry stain remover and detergent. The foundation is secured with a soy concrete sealer.*
Most Americans don’t last long in Soylandia: “They come down and start missing their cable TV.”

For U.S. agriculture to thrive in an era of unprecedented competition, Klinefelter says, it will have to undergo some wrenching changes. “Look at California,” he says. “As real estate values have exploded and water has become more constrained, California has had to move away from commodity agriculture.” The state still farms rice and cotton, both of which are heavily subsidized, but production is shifting rapidly to more valuable species like grapes, berries, stone fruits, melons, nuts, and tomatoes. And the production is increasingly organic. Sold to the affluent, these new crops generate profits big enough to offset the state’s environmental regulations and rising prices for land, labor, and water.

A classic example of this upscaleing of commodities, Klinefelter says, is the bagged-salad industry. Fifteen years ago few stores sold packaged salads; lettuce was available only in heads. Today salad-in-a-bag is a $7 billion industry, the single biggest-selling fresh product in U.S. grocery stores, according to the United Fresh Produce Association. Born of high-tech as surely as the iPod, packaged salad is cooled in the field, trimmed on an assembly line, triple-washed and air-dried, then sealed into “equilibrium modified-atmosphere” packaging—which contains altered levels of nitrogen, carbon dioxide, and oxygen to keep the leaves looking fresh—and then quickly trucked or flown to the rest of the country. “Brazil can’t do this like we can,” Klinefelter says. “Growing specialized versions of food on a large scale is something that we have an advantage in,” because the U.S. still has a better infrastructure and a more educated workforce.

Unfortunately, he says, U.S. agriculture is so highly subsidized that the industry is slower to move than it would be “if the market was pure—our farm programs keep excess resources in agriculture and in some cases maintain operations that are not as efficient.” That delay could be dangerous. “We’ve had a lot of cases in which U.S. industries thought they were on top of the world,” Klinefelter says. “And then, suddenly, they weren’t.”

Soylandia’s hyper-responsive agroindustrial technology treadmill, its global market segmentation, its rising use of biofuels—all this gives the place a highly 21st-century feel, an aura of ascendance. Bolstering this impression, says Mayor Franz of Lucas do Rio Verde, is its population: “young, rural entrepreneurs, the offspring of the early colonists and capitalists from elsewhere in Brazil, many barely in their 40s, who are trying to make their fortune.”

A few Americans, like Corzine, are trying to take advantage of the opportunities in Soylandia—learning the language, accustoming themselves to Soylandia’s cuisine, and coping with the isolation of what is in effect pioneer life. But most of them don’t stay long, Franz says. “They come down here and start missing their cable TV and their Internet, and they don’t come back.”

“The Americans are very welcome,” he adds. “But we’ll also build up this place without them.”

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