

# The heart of Darién

Matt Maynard explores the post-conflict landscape and meets the Panamanians driving change in the infamous province that is home to the Darién Gap. Is this biologically unique region at the waistband of the Americas about to come out of the shadows?

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATT MAYNARD



Encounters with soldiers are common when traversing the Darién Gap, but violence is less an issue since the FARC conflict ended

This cross-section of rainforest is the only place in the Americas where ecosystems are not dissected by a road

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he star fighters are attacking. Or at least that's what it sounds like. The high-pitched gurgling of the black oropendola bird is like a *Star Wars* ray-gun effect being strangled out of an 1980s synthesiser. Every few seconds a lightening-yellow tail feather flies out of the great guayabillo tree some 40 metres above the remote dirt road. The long pendulous nests dangle from thin branches like knitted Christmas stockings.

It's a gift of a sighting. But suddenly, after five days of remotest travel in the Darién province, something even rarer happens. An open-top Jeep with a half-dozen white tourists comes rolling along the track. It's early May 2017 and the weather in Panama at the start of the monsoon season is as unsettled as the recently brokered peace with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Their activities have been known to spill over the Darién Gap border. But just for a brief moment – with the tourists' binoculars trained on the giant guayabillo birdhouse – the scene resembles any exotic safari. And then the men with guns arrive.

Twenty Panamanian border police, known as SENAFRONT, armed with assault rifles, camouflage gear and twitchy eyes come trekking down from the deeper jungle. They look like they have been on their feet some time. The startled tourists are quickly whisked away by their driver. But my guide, Isaac Pizarro, and I are on foot and we get mixed up with the armed men.

#### DANGER SIGNS

For anyone who has heard of Darién province, it is usually when collocated with the word 'Gap'. The Darién Gap denotes the 60-mile band of mountainous jungle dividing North and South America. It covers 6,000 sq km and is at the furthest tip of the 11,892 sq km Darién province in the southeastern most reaches of Panama. For the developed world, it is where the continuous ribbon of asphalt from Alaska to Patagonia is cut.

This 'missing' road to Colombia has been the source of some consternation. In 1961, three two-wheel-drive Chevrolet Corvairs obstinately smashed through the rainforest, cutting trees along the way to make 180 improvised bridges. In 1971, US President Nixon dedicated funds to build a road through the region. His plans were met with objection by environmental and indigenous groups. Construction was only fully stymied,



Crowded buses regularly traverse the six-hour route from Panama City to the end of the road

however, once spiralling costs and the potential transit of foot-and-mouth disease from South America became a threat on home soil. Stories of foreigners' misadventures within the Gap – due to tropical disease, disorientation and kidnap by FARC guerillas – helped further plunge the region into deeper ignominy.

In Spanish, however, it has another name – *Tapón de Darién*, or the Darién Plug. This cross-section of rainforest is the only place in the Americas where ecosystems are not dissected by a road. Most of the *Tapón de Darién* is a UNESCO heritage site and national park. Jaguar, the giant anteater and the largest bird of prey in the world – the monkey-eating harpy eagle – share their home with the indigenous Emberá, Wounaan and Kuna tribes who live beneath the canopy. The wider Darién province itself is home to the main population centres, and is riddled with waterways where the *Dariénita* inhabitants travel as freely as on any roadway.

It would be easy to unpack these competing values of progress versus conservation; danger versus beauty and sensationalism versus domesticity – as simply the developed world versus Panama. But even before I begin the six-hour bus journey to the end of the road from



The stilt-houses of the Emberá tribes

the Albrook Terminal in Panama City – something unexpected has already happened. Panamanians themselves are warning me not to go.

On board, my travel companions are returning to their home province for the weekend. Over the pulsing clip of cowbell cumbia and samba, there's a girl with a giant birthday cake, crying quietly into a telephone. There's a man with a giant-blue gem on his index finger who laughs freely, exposing bright gold incisors. And lots of young children. The bus is crowded, but instead of offering seats to families, passengers simply reach out and coo-oo strangers' children on their laps. The Latin scene looks ordinary enough.

The spectre of danger, drugs and FARC that Panamanians had warned me about is hinted at as we pass through the armed SENAFRONT checkpoint on the Darién border at Santa Fe. It's serious but selective, with all but the solo 'gringo' traveller escaping passport control. After this, a group of very well-heeled young women board our bus at ISAE University. And just after, I disembark, meeting my guide, Isaac, in the 8,000-strong town of Metetí. Over fried fish and deep-fried plantain, he answers my questions and allays my concerns. 'The only thing you will die of in Darién,' says the man who claims 15 crossings of the Darién Gap and who has met with FARC fighters, 'is illness.'

As we begin the hike over the mountain the next morning, a thick rain begins to fall. Isaac is taking me to visit a remote clan of the Emberá tribe. Their village is six hours on foot from the nearest dirt road and the sodden jungle trail is soon running a terracotta-red. Isaac has the consent of the village leader, the *dirigenté*, to bring outsiders to the village. Currently he brings just one or two a month. Along our trail, Isaac slashes with his machete to remove fallen foliage from recent rain; and at the top of the pass a crested eagle swoops imperially through the jungle canopy, inspecting the human intruders.

An avenue of banana plantations eventually leads on to pan-flat grassland and the village of Llano Bonito. Here the thatched-roofed roundhouses of the Emberá stand on stilts metres off the ground. Behind them the mountains rise interminably again into cloud-snagging rainforest. First order of business is to pay respects and a \$10 tourist tax to the *dirigenté* – an affable but perhaps surprisingly timid and taciturn young man living on an isolated sideline of the village.

Greater insight into the lives of this Darién tribe can be gained by visiting village elder Ancelmo Cunampio. He watches us approach from a hammock suspended from the eaves in his elevated home. Pigs snuffle happily beneath the house's support posts, and geese squawk between small feet as his children return from playing in the river. 'I've spoken to academics and professionals from all over the world in this home,' he says in Spanish, after we've climbed up the carved wooden ladder to his platform dwelling. 'We've talked about education until three in the morning,' he adds, pointing to the recently built brick school house in the centre of the village.

Ancelmo was the *dirigenté* for many years and was only recently ousted, Isaac believes, after jealousies arose over his control of the albeit modest tourist tax. Besides



Visitors to the Emberá tribe are infrequent but just enough to require an official guide

**At the top of the pass a crested eagle swoops imperially through the jungle canopy, inspecting the human intruders**



Children from the Emberá tribe

the division sown by money in this largely sustainable community, Ancelmo highlights the issue of dwindling population as tribe members are drawn to Panama City. The old and new are beginning to grate in remote Llano Bonito. Jaguar are still slaughtered if they are found killing pigs – but Ancelmo is aware of how this is perceived by outsiders. 'So what do you think of that?' he quizzes defiantly. As the village falls silent at twilight, the tribesman challenges with yet another stinging rhetorical question: 'You know the problem with your British education system? Not enough love.'

#### **GENERATION GAPS**

Education is the topic of conversation again as we retrace our steps to Metetí, and then travel on to the very last town on the North American continent. It's dark in the back seats of the bus to Yaviza, but Paulina – a recently qualified teacher from Panama City and fellow passenger – is still happy to talk, describing the children who attend her classes in the frontier town.

'Some of the kids tell me they live by themselves,' she

## Despite the disarmament of FARC, the coordinated drug enterprise appears to continue unabated

says. But despite her concern, Paulina's vision for her students' future is greater than just putting a roof over their heads. Using short moralistic stories she is preparing them for the future. 'What these children really struggle with,' she says resolutely through the shadows, 'is analysis.'

Yaviza is in many senses the heart of Darién. Morning brings a constant stream of bananas, yams and smartly-dressed school children arriving on motorised piragua narrowboats. They are arriving from the roadless interior.

Mendoch Cordoba, a 72-year-old Afro-Colombian immigrant serves us breakfast at 6am, buying eggs from the second-generation Wu family supermarket across the already bustling street. Mendoch is a thin, slump-shouldered man. 'When you are a foreigner in this town,' he complains, 'you don't have any standing.' The septuagenarian has worked largely as an agricultural worker since arriving here aged 16. But for most immigrants, Yaviza is just an important staging post on a much longer journey to the United States.

The coyote people smugglers charge between \$100 to \$150 to transport one immigrant across the Darién Gap from Colombia to Panama. 'They say it will take a few hours,' explains local human-rights lawyer Jehad Muhammad, 'but actually it's more like six days.' Jehad herself is a second-generation immigrant from a Jordanian mercantile family. She believes she is treated well and accepted in this frontier community because her family started their own business and they don't threaten local jobs.

The immigrants she represents, however, are usually abandoned inside the Darién Gap; left to blindly ask directions in each mountain village they stumble upon. They survive, she explains, by eating biscuits and drinking river water. 'A few months ago,' she says, enumerating on her fingers, 'there were people arriving from Bangladesh, India, Somalia, Haiti – a hundred people coming every day.' Recently there has been a sharp decline. Jehad thinks it's due to President Trump's new border restrictions.

### BEYOND THE ROAD

Darién National Park beckons. Our precarious narrow boat drones upstream on the Chucunaque River into brilliant sunshine. Even the most committed nature and wildlife tourists never normally make it this far, discouraged by the bureaucracy of permits, fees and a further SENAFRONT checkpoint at disembarkation in El Real to the south of Yaviza.

From here it's another 12km on Isaac's motorbike through the UNESCO buffer zone – a region dogged with illegal logging of cocobolo wood for Chinese export; palm oil land grabs and intentionally caused wildfires that in April 2016 destroyed 100 sq km of Darién forest.

And yet, once beneath the park's jungle canopy, it's spell-bindingly beautiful. Abandoning the bike, we set out on foot and spend the next day and night exploring the area of parkland around the Rancho Frio Ranger Station.

Isaac navigates with his ears as much as his eyes. We stoop to see leaf-cutter ants, delicate tendrilled mushrooms and the deadly pit viper snake poised among millennial leaf mulch. In the lower canopy, guaba and cacao plants intertwine with chain-like monkey vines as thick as any ocean liner's mooring. Isaac opens these fruit

Schoolchildren disembark from a motorised piragua, the only mode of transport in the interior



Despite the dangers, the wildlife proves a draw for tourists



A pit viper snake among the leaf mulch



A medical centre at Yaviza

with a machete and we snack on the sweet pulpy flesh while gazing skyward into the great green tapestry.

We push on through river beds, peeling back curtains of giant ferns before emerging at a sparkling jungle pool. Water cascades over a slick rockslide, and we climb it before sliding back down to splash-land among skittish fish that nibble curiously at our toes.

At dusk at Rancho Frio, the fireflies are out and a ranger describes a path with his finger where a jaguar once prowled through camp. The howler monkeys are calling as I sign the guestbook. I am the first visitor in 14 days.

### PLUGGING THE GAP

We wake to a darker side of the jungle paradise. A team of US and Panama City biologists arrived late last night to Rancho Frio. Their previous field-tests had discovered a gamut of neglected tropical diseases in the area – not necessarily deadly, but creating a negative spiral among the tribal population of education opportunities lost, recurring infection and poverty. The guards were more circumspect too, lamenting poor pay, wildly overstretched manpower as well as their new khaki uniforms which they feared would falsely identify them as SENAFRONT border police in an encounter with FARC forces.

On our return the next day, the men with guns come plodding past us through the sci-fi birdsong soundtrack. The SENAFRONT captain calls Isaac over, asking: 'What town will we encounter if we keep walking down this road?' It feels frustrating that this captain knows so little of the terrain his men are moving through. Just a few days earlier, a similarly decorated border policeman told me in a hushed tone that there are now less FARC at the Colombian frontier, but more cocaine than ever. Despite the disarmament of FARC, the coordinated drug enterprise appears to continue unabated.

Isaac, however, is more diplomatic and understanding, politely telling the man what lies ahead. Maybe his approach is the right one: it's a difficult and thankless job these special forces are doing in what local environmental minister Hermel Lopez describes as a maligned and largely forgotten corner of their own country.

Darién at its heart is still a wild and mysterious province. For it to now emerge from the shadows and open to the world – education, bureaucratic reform, environmental protection, favourable publicity, better health care and drug-trafficking crack down are all essential. But as Isaac and Ancelmo in his tribal treehouse would argue, maybe a little love is needed too. ●