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
The 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 lightning-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 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 guerrillas – helped further plunge the region into deeper ignominy.

In Spanish, however, it has another name – Túpón 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 Túpón 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
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 coochy-coo 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 terra-cotta-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 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.’

**Children from the Emberá tribe**

PEOPLE

Darién

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

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On our return the next day, the men with guns come plodding past us through the sci-fi birdsong soundtrack. The SENAFRONTE 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 return 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 Andreino in his tribal treehouse would argue, maybe a little love is needed too.

Isaac navigates with his ears as much as his eyes. Even the most committed nature and wildlife tourists never normally make it this far, discouraged by the bureaucracy of permits, fees and a further SENAFRONTE 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 terrdriled mushrooms and the deadly pit viper snake poised among millenial leaf mulch. In the lower canopy, guayas and cacao plants intertwine with chain like monkey vines and thick as any ocean liner’s mooring. Isaac opens these fruit 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 we sign the guestbook. I am the first visitor in 14 days.

Despite the dangers, the birdwatching is exquisite.

A pit viper snake among the leaf mulch

A medical centre at Yaviza