Darrin DuFord hikes, bribes, and barters his way across Panama, an overlooked filament of the tropics. Sampling barbecued jungle rodent and corn homebrew, DuFord encounters a land where the machete can slash through just about anything —except the nation's spirit.

Is There a Hole in the Boat? Tales of Travel in Panama without a Car

IS THERE A HOLE IN THE BOAT?

TALES OF TRAVEL IN PANAMA WITHOUT A CAR

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Introduction

After the publication of my first few pieces about Panama, several of my friends began asking me when my book on the country was coming out. "I have no plans for that," I told them before my curiosity into the isthmus spawned a second visit—and then a third. And then I began asking myself the same question.

So was it the endless variety of shakes made from sensually ripe papaya, guanabana, mamey, or whatever fruits were in season? Was it the cumbia music keeping bus patrons grooving over the continental divide? Actually, the intrigue began to coalesce before my first steps in the tropical country of 3 million inhabitants—not even half the population of New York City—who are spread out over a land area that would snugly fill the largest Great Lake. While I found it a trivial task to acquire literature revealing how many gallons of water are needed to usher a ship though the locks of the country's engineering prize—an interesting metric in its own right—I encountered little written about daily lives in modern Panama. I cobbled together what I could from a backpacker's weblog here, a Peace Corps volunteer's diary there. Likewise, while its neighbor Costa Rica has been raking in tourism by the planeload, Panama still aims to expand its outside image past "a place with a canal," or, at least, past the title of a 1980s heavy metal song bearing the country's name.

And thus, little prepared me for a land where pigs going to market stand in the front of wooden canoes scantly wider than the animals' jowls as they are paddled downstream; where recycled

American school buses, painted into one-of-a-kind exhibitions, form the backbone of the country's unfathomably widespread public transport system; where I have encountered many vibrant, laughing faces of people for whom running drinkable water remains a luxury.

Slowly, however, awareness is blooming, since Panama already hosts a growing trickle of European and North American expatriates cashing in on the low cost of living. Some Zonians, or Americans who worked and lived in the former Canal Zone, have decided to remain in Panama. Tourism is beginning to expand across the country—perhaps buoyed by the recent appointment of salsa star Ruben Blades as the head of the country's ministry of tourism—yet I usually found myself as the only foreign passenger in collective boats, buses, and other improvised forms of transport. In fact, the rifle-slung police—at some of the more rural checkpoints—thought that I was either a drug dealer or a missionary entering where few foreigners care to go.

This book is a result of three separate visits between March 2004 and March 2005, with segments occurring in both the rainy and dry seasons. The chapters are in no particular order. Altogether, I spent a total of eight weeks on the isthmus, without once renting a car. Since only one in four Panamanians owns an automobile, I felt the best way to learn about the mountainous nation would be to carry on a commuting routine of a Panamanian and take the country's abundant public transportation. Even if the country was richer and car ownership proved more popular, I would still have opted for taxis and collective transit, if only for their built-in assortment of local travel companions. From a more practical standpoint, a car simply can't reach all areas of this geographically diverse nation anyway.

Since such efficiency of transport delivered me where I needed to go, the narration covers settings both urban and rural,

across disparate climates and availability of basic services. You can expect regular brushes with Panamanian cuisine, the country's wildlife, and the inevitable intersection of the two.

You will also meet indigenous villages at varying levels of autonomy. But anyone who claims that the indigenous nations still existent in Panama "live just like they did when Columbus first saw them 500 years ago" is probably writing marketing copy for a travel company, especially when referring to the villages now accustomed to receiving boats full of tourists. Certainly, the time-honored architecture of thatch roof houses still abounds, but greenbacks, blue jeans, and battery-operated radios have reached all but the most isolated jungle slopes of the country. In many indigenous communities, marginalization has felled traditional sustenance. Even the Internet has arrived for some, although the villagers usually have to travel to the cities to check their email. Some call it progress; others call it cultural blanching; one thing is for sure: it's reality.

Speaking of the people, I changed the names of some folks I met in the cases where I thought one's privacy should be protected.

Lastly, this is not a guidebook; the text does not suggest what activities you should pursue while in the country, nor does it rate the softness of hotel mattresses (there are fine sources for such information elsewhere). It's about experiences and discoveries in the company of the people that are Panama.

Darrin DuFord

December 2005

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Darrin DuFord

1.
The Last Monarchy of the Americas

"DARÍO, WE FOUND you something," echoed the morning mantra.

I looked up from a breakfast of creamed plantains as a few groundskeepers uncovered another surprise for my inspection and called out to me using the Spanish version of my name. What critter would it be this time? A bullet ant? A scorpion?

The crew waved me over to where they had accidentally exposed the current protagonist—two, actually. A snake was attempting to stretch its mouth around its own breakfast of a plum-sized frog, head first, a couple strides away from the Wekso Lodge's open-walled dining hut. The location of the lodge, up a river meandering into the forest of northwestern Panama, proved so isolated that the locale had served as the military's jungle survival training camp under Panama's dictator Omar Torrijos and strongman Manuel Noriega. The days of the camp's students washing down raw game meat with the blood of dogs at graduation have ended with Noriega's ousting in 1990, giving way to the conversion of the concrete barracks into cabanas and the area's designation as a national park, conserving all the biting wildlife you can shake a machete at.

Since the resident indigenous Naso nation has taken care of the region for centuries, the entire ecosystem has been preserved

well for this day and age. The abundance of such arboreal dwellers as sloths and toucans serves as a revealing sign. At night, sticky fingers of red-eyed tree frogs hang onto palm stalks with bold regularity. In fact, so much fauna resides in the forest near the lodge that you might be inclined to suppose the groundskeepers tied the poor creatures to the branches before an outsider's arrival. Such a circus of diversity bewilders not, however, when noting that the Nasos claim a history of respecting nature as part of their traditional sustenance lifestyles, and those I had spoken with wanted to maintain many of their practices, despite the recent arrival of much-enjoyed compact disc players, t-shirts, and anything else that can fit in a dugout canoe.

While the lodge often hosts birders feverishly filling up their checklists and biologists researching the bounty of the park, I claimed another impetus for my five-day journey into the newly formed autonomous region, or comarca, of the Naso nation: they have maintained the last remaining monarchy in the Americas. The Naso kingdom of 3,000 subjects, officially recognized by Panama as a legal political entity, claims a distinct royal bloodline, a palace for the king, and—like any monarchy worth its lineage—a family feud. In January 2005, Tito Santana, the king since 1998, was visiting Panama City for a meeting when his uncle, Valentín Santana, executed a coup and seized the palace. The painful wedge between the uncle and nephew, which has also divided the Naso people, is the proposed construction of a dam within the kingdom that would supply electricity to a community outside the kingdom.

Tito was elected king seven years ago in a tradition that allows the Naso to vote for any candidate from the Santana family lineage. A vigorous proponent of the dam, Tito claims that the dam would generate income to the community and modernize the Naso people. Valentín, a soft-spoken elder who only speaks the

Naso language, maintains that not only will the project sire ecological disaster, but also that his nephew desires the project to pilfer most of the profits for himself. After the coup, it wasn't clear to outsiders who was currently wearing the king's crown of feathers. Because of such internal tension, Panamanian news outlets had reported that journalists were not allowed near the village of the king's palace to investigate the current political topology. I wanted to find out why.

* * *

"There is no ban on journalists," said the passenger nimbly seated on the bow of the canoe as we traveled to the Wekso Lodge the night of my arrival. He was curled up in a shoeless ball and was hitching a ride home to a village deeper upstream in the comarca.

Then who was the king? His answer came quickly, as if I should have known. "Tito."

So had the situation returned to normal with Tito back at the helm? Well, not exactly. When I arrived at the lodge, one of the groundskeepers, Milton, an energetic youth who would later educate me on the area's history, asked me what I wanted to do during my time in the kingdom. I responded that I wished to meet the king, if he would be willing to accept me. "You mean you want to meet Valentín?" he asked.

No one at the lodge knew if I'd be able to meet the king—whoever it happened to be—but they would try to arrange a meeting for my last day. During the wait, the lodge wasted no time introducing me to the rest of the centuries-old kingdom that spread out before me along the lush green slopes rising from the River Tjer Di, heard as "Teribe" by the first Spanish explorers. When I told them I enjoyed cooking, I found myself in another dugout canoe (so-called since the canoe is carved out of a single

tree trunk) headed across the river to the village of Bonjik, the potential future site of the dam, to help harvest our lunch of palm hearts.

The boat launch of Bonjik, however, looked more like a beach littered with a scattering of dead trees, all curiously facing the same direction—parallel to the river. The Naso territory had withstood its worst flood in 30 years just six weeks before, destroying most of the crops sustaining the village. The disaster stripped the riverbanks raw of all vegetation in a coldly even line 10 feet above the normal level. Were there any palm hearts to harvest?

I followed the squishing rubber boots of Raul, my boatman, leading me to his family's house, its concrete floor offering a respite from the mud and sand smear that was lower Bonjik. Luckily, crops on higher ground survived, which meant that some of the Quintero family's harvests would live to hit the market, including coveted cacao pods and some tender palm shoots like those that would provide our lunch.

His father, Plutarco, a compact bale of calmness in a white t-shirt well soiled from a morning of farming, walked me through what remained of his medicinal plant garden. A monstrous blitzkrieg of water had subjugated the valuable plot into serving as part of the waterway's new riverbed just weeks before and then subsided after taking most of the foliage with it. Protruding oddly from the dead silt, however, a tree crouched, its frame as knurled and stubborn as a centenarian. In a desperate cling, hundreds of worms and other insects hid among its bark.

Plutarco claimed the tree, *viña de bu*, could be prescribed to combat back pain and colic. But he was not alone in realizing its uses; scientists from Western countries such as America and England have offered him $50 for a small, prepared piece. (That might explain the relative fanciness of Plutarco's house with its

costly concrete floor.) Still others have paid Plutarco $100 per gallon of an essence made from the bark of another surviving specimen, *caraño ediondo*, utilized for everything from ridding headaches to exorcising evil spirits—not a bad all-around med to keep in the cabinet, for sure. "It's a remedy sent from God," Plutarco remarked.

Playing tug of war with the mud over our footwear, we hiked up an incline to find one of his noni bushes producing knobby, yellow fruit, each covered with dozens of swollen eyes like an embryo gone hideously wrong. But that's just the beginning of the funkiness of this Polynesian transplant. Considering the arresting scent of noni nectar, you might imagine the fruit were paying homage to sun-ripened dumpster juice, yet thrill seekers following the latest in natural remedy trends regularly wince while imbibing a potion of noni juice and milk for the promised yield of sexual power. If the noni works too well, Plutarco can also cook up a remedy for gonorrhea.

In the forest in back of his house, Raul had already found the source of today's palm heart: a pixbae tree. Towering high to steal the sunlight from the runty plants below, the pole of the tree evenly armed its bark with thousands of nasty, 2-inch spines. With a few healthy swings of his machete, Raul hacked off a small shoot growing from its base from which he carved out a femur-sized rod—its heart.

Like many tropical crops, pixbae harbors several uses. Raul would somehow be eluding the tree's thicket of spikes when he harvests its treetop bunches of fruit, peach-sized and tasting somewhere between yucca and chestnuts, in a few weeks when they ripen. I had purchased pixbae fruit before at the markets (where they call the fruit *pifá*) and always boiled them up without knowledge of how they were obtained. Despite the fruit's inexpensiveness at two for a quarter (Panama uses the U.S. dollar

as its currency), I grew a new appreciation for pixbae—and especially their farmers.

Meanwhile, Plutarco hacked open a football-sized cacao pod, revealing its cache of slimy white seeds. I found it difficult to imagine that in just one week of fermenting, drying, and roasting, the lathered kernels could morph into that precious substance chocolate, the elixir that had fueled Aztec warriors with battle power and, in our times, provides the trimmings of romance and indulgence. Before me lay its infancy, albino and ugly, cradled in buttery ectoplasm.

And edible, apparently. "Try it, try it," goaded the father and son duo. I dug my fingers into the guts of the pod, my agility matching that of a medical student dunking a clumsy hand into a chest cavity for the first time, until I managed to pluck off a nodule. They both followed my motions with anticipatory concentration as I slid the thing into my mouth. For the briefest of instants, I thought they might have been playing a joke on me but, after a few chews, I began to register a subtle texture redolent of coconut meat, the seed saving a hint of the telltale bitterness of chocolate for its long finish. Pretty tasty. The slime had vindicated itself, yet was still not quite the thing to thrust upon one's sweetheart.

I forgave the seeds again after I drank the creation Raul and his sister had prepared from an already dried batch of cacao seeds back at the house. They had ground up the seeds, then a nutty brown, and mixed them with boiling water and sugar atop their kerosene stove—the only furnishing, besides a radio, lining the plank wall of the house.

I doubted the recipe had been limited just to sugar, water, and cacao seeds, since the viscous drink sprouted with a tingly spice of cinnamon and chili pepper. Too many personalities for too few ingredients. The recipe must have been hiding something else.

"No, just cacao and sugar," Raul laughed, a slightly surprised, slightly apologetic laugh.

Raul had chopped up the palm heart femur—the original objective of the afternoon—and stewed it with onions, garlic cloves, achiote, and chicken consommé. Absent was that bicycle-licking flavor of canned palm hearts; Raul had shown me that fresh palm hearts taste like a tender vegetable, an offering that provided an energetic counterpart to the chocolate libation I had been downing in obsessive haste. I was ready for battle. I was ready for love. "Would you like more?" Raul asked, still laughing at the muffled, Cro-Magnon syllables I had been uttering. Yes, this kingdom was definitely worth defending.

Observing the bouncy faces around the house, I found it easy to forget that the town had been almost completely flushed down the river a few weeks ago. Around Bonjik, people were back in the jungle slashing off fruits and vegetables for their dinners. Seeds were stuffed into the tortured ground. Raul's children snacked on ice cream cones, minus the ice cream—in other words, the cones themselves—a standard snack of the comarca. Girls brushed each other's hair, giggling in a mixture of Spanish and the Naso language, the latter of which pounced upon by scholars because of its rarity and its unusual "prelabialized retroflexed lateral flap phonemes," apparently ear candy for the obsessive linguist yet, to me, I merely heard the undeniable sound of children playing. Only a team of young volunteers from a church group constructing concrete walkways around the town indicated any sense of urgent recovery. The pigs were even happy for a little extra mud in which to romp.

* * *

For every poison dart frog someone had carefully captured in cupped hands for me to see, several more, brought out by the

rains, were hunkered down among the undergrowth around the lodge. Barely the width of a quarter, the pretty neon creatures keep themselves off the menu by perfuming their skin with a coating of eau-de-death. Fortunately, their defense is of little threat to a big mammal such as a human, unless someone fancies licking the frogs or spends all afternoon enthusiastically rubbing about a dozen of them into an open wound (to each his own), since the toxin must enter the blood to send its client into paralysis followed by heart failure. Or nothing at all may happen, owing to a few doppelganger species possessing the neon markings but none of the poison with which to back up the threat, although, if I were a groundskeeper, I would have still washed my hands afterward. From intense red to DayGlo camouflage, there were enough varieties to keep a herpetologist crouching on all fours for years—with rubber gloves, I trust.

Junkies aside, at least you can avoid licking a frog. Sometimes, when meandering about the forest, coming face-to-face with a bushmaster snake is unavoidable. That's exactly what happened to Pitino, a lodge groundskeeper and guide, a few days before my arrival. He was clearing a patch of land on which to plant rice when a lounging bushmaster didn't appreciate its jungle home being slashed to bits. One well-placed swing of Pitino's machete cut off the venomous head before it had a chance to deal Pitino a bite boasting a three-in-four mortality rate, and that unsavory statistic includes victims who already received antivenin treatment.

Normally, the rustlings of several people walking would scare away the venomous creatures before they are accidentally stepped on. Three young hiking guides and I, however, were still not able to shake a yellow eyelash viper out of its vigil on a leaf just a foot from a jungle trail on which they took me one morning. The tiny, 18-inch snake held its best pet-like pose—with its exaggerated,

cartoon character eyelashes—but I wanted to give the creature its space. I voted that we move on. "It won't attack now. It's not standing up like this," Pitino told me while curling his arm into an S-shaped aggressive posture.

Rosendo, another machete-poking guide leading our pack, remarked, "Don't worry, if it bites you, it won't kill you." It probably will not; the eyelash viper usually leaves its human victim with mere tissue damage or an amputation, depending on where the bite lands. Keep in mind that since the eyelash viper hangs out in trees, bites often occur on the face.

A sting of the bullet ant wouldn't kill anyone either—that is, if there were just one. But these six-legged venom guns, a caravan of which we hopped over, work in a colony of hundreds. After just one sting, however, I would imagine the victim would run away as far as he could, unless he faints from the pain, often described as comparable to a bullet wound, hence the master-of-the-obvious name.

The inherent hazards of a healthy tropical forest do not limit themselves to things that bite, crawl, or jump. Consider the resident mushrooms, for example. Some are tasty. Others are too poisonous even for the most devoted flower child. "Over the generations, we have forgotten which mushrooms are edible, so we stopped picking them," Daniel, an artist and my third guide, narrated as we trekked across the heights of the primary forest, ravines tumbling away on both sides of us. Just last year, he recounted, a Costa Rican living just over the border made a pizza topped with wild mushrooms harvested fresh from the nearby forest. His culinary creativity was rewarded with a road trip to the hospital where he lay on the edge of death for several days before he finally awoke (at which time he swiftly altered his recipe).

Not to be outdone, the recent flood scored a piece of the action when it almost tore down the wooden bridges over the low-lying

portion of the trail on which we were walking. One expanse, already weakened with rot, had collapsed on one side, leaving one intact beam across the stream. One at a time, we edged across the good side, clinging to its railing in slow motion, its sole spongy beam ducking with each step. I was glad it wasn't my turn to carry the 40-pound bunch of plantains we had harvested along the way.

When we returned to the lodge, one of the groundskeepers had brought Ana, the cook, a gift of a few quivering scorpions, to try to scare her, I would imagine. He had placed them inside a metal cup that Ana had used before to serve me her guanabana leaf tea. From then on, I always looked into my cup before I drank.

* * *

Almost as unnerving as the destruction caused by the January flood was the timing of the destruction: in the middle of the dry season. Or, at least, January used to be in the middle of the dry season for the region; presently, rain in the comarca arrives year-round without a break. The Nasos blame the recent alteration in climactic temperament on global warming. One villager told me, "Now only soccer has a distinct season here."

The flood felled the lodge's aqueduct, a plastic pipe that used to be tied to a cable above the River Tjer Di. The support posts, along with a segment of the pipe, had long since washed into the Caribbean Sea. Bathing in the outhouse's shower stall became a leisurely scoop-and-pour affair from a 5-gallon bucket, as the occasional voyeur roach, the size of a change purse, watched on.

Another amenity, however, has always been absent: electricity. The impromptu post-dining chats thus fell to the

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