

Darién

where two continents do(nt) meet

"For some men, nothing is written, unless they write it."

Lawrence of Arabia

It's been over a month in Colombia and about time to send this little story on its way. As you will see it turned out to be much more than just about the Darién crossing. I took the chance to elaborate on some issues that are important to me, things that put it all in context and hopefully increase the reading experience. I am sorry for those interested only in the raw facts of how one might go about this no-mansland. However, they will find all the relevant information along the storyline. I surely never intended to produce a guide for would-be attempters. Far from it: even though I am happy to have gone my way I have no intention to ever do it again. Essentially because there are bigger challenges waiting and probably nicer ones too. But like myself, people will take choices for diverse and personal reasons. I am not here to encourage or dissuade anyone but simply to narrate and share the experience I had.

Whatever you make of all this, let it be stressed early on: as of 2018 crossing the Darién gap remains illegal and against immigration laws of Panamá and Colombia. Ignoring these will have consequences for you and may result in expulsion or severe fines. In this regard, I doubt followers will enjoy such luck as I did. There is no reason to believe that either country could change their policies in the near future.

If you like what you read, please let me know, but also don't hesitate in telling me if you don't. It is my first writing attempt and I actually found myself enjoying the process. But what if you don't enjoy the result? At the very least I then shall refrain from sending it out to you. Any comment or suggestion is welcome, and I look forward to it.

"Pictures can tell a 1000 words", they say. At least good pictures do. My priorities were somewhere else during my Darién, but there are a few which hopefully can give an idea of what it was like. They are meant as visual support but, often lacking the right light or even sharpness, probably won't match what you might expect. If that's the case, consider a bloody National Geographic Magazin, although it won't be about 'The Gap'!

Now, my dear friends, I invite you to relive it all over again. Let's go!!

With kind regards, from Antioquia, the coffee triangle of Colombia
J. Carlos Popelka
(jcpopelka@yahoo.de)

Should anyone want to reproduce this text or fractions of it, I would appreciate you inform me before hand. Same goes for the Pictures!

How to write a piece like this? Do I want it to be a compilation of facts, numbers or even instructions? Do I want to be one more of those selfy shooting types: "look at me! Look how great I am!"? What do I want to achieve with writing this down anyway?

I think of the last piece I wrote back in Panama City on crossing the canal. Reactions were generally good with the exception of one german friend of university times who wondered what I was escaping from, a question often asked by my german acquaintances. To her, this whole trip seems like a selfinflicted torture rather than fun and made me wonder myself why I was out here to begin with. Why am I pushing through things when there are easier options?

The white shirt in that story was also meant metaphorically for revised stereotypes and also surprises we encounter along the way. Experiences we only have if we take chances and remain open for anything that may come our way. I tend to believe that excessive planning would be a hindrance and I generally take things as they come. Let life unfold and deal with it as it develops. It usually turns out to be quite different than I thought beforehand anyway. And its always good, in the end.

The question however remains: why am I out and why on a bicycle? I guess I don't like flying if its avoidable. Although I don't really believe in god, I like to say that if god had wanted us to fly we would have wings. Someone once replied to that: "we don't have wheels either!", and he had a point.

But its not about the bike. For me its about connecting, about slowly passing from one region to another, feel how cultures, languages, traditions blend into each other, how over days things shift and change. Hairstyles, smells, manners, music, accents, foodstuffs... sometimes the changes are shockingly abrupt, like changing from the lush, hot and humid caribbean side anywhere in central america to the dry, almost desertic pacific coast. With this come entirely different lifestyles, different crops, different people. I love that, and I believe it can take me a long way in understanding a bit better why things are how they are. And the bike gives me time enough to process those changes and also to engage with what comes my way. It allows me to truly immerse if I want to.

Panamericana: As a teenager growing up on Chile I had to cross the panamericana everyday on my way to and from school and in many occasions, I looked at the grey tarmac thinking how cool it was to be able to go one way or the other to the respective very end of the continent!

On my bicycle I have come to appreciate smaller often unpaaved roads and tend to avoid the big highways of the world. They seem to be similar wherever in the world you go, while smaller tracks take you through places that have remained more original and often exotic, usually deserving the effort of travelling independent on a bike. I came from Europe across Asia following the Silk Road; not actually a road but an idea, an historic and cultural concept in form of a network of trails, tracks and roads, with many alternatives to the fast arteries of modern transportation. On the American continent I never really intended to follow the panamericana at any length, but inevitably you cross it many times and the narrower central america gets the fewer the alternatives I had. And then she suddenly ends. What? The panamericana does not go all the way from Alaska to Ushuaia? No, she doesn't! I don't recall exactly when or with whom I had this enlightening conversation (I think it was while still in Asia) but somehow it came as a shock. Then, for the first time I learned about the Darién gap and the fact that not only did the panamericana have a gap, but there is no road, track or anything that connects Colombia and Panama. Or is there? And I remember looking at the map and thinking "Oh, that's a short distance?!" The closer I got to Panama the question of how I would cross into Colombia and South America became more imminent and I had a few internet searches to this end. Essentially there are three legal ways to cross: 1.) Take a flight from Panama to Colombia. This would be the most popular option, perhaps because it is the cheapest and easiest. My least favoured though. 2.) Go along the coast, either on the pacific via remote Jaque, or on the caribbean side along the paradisaical San Blas islands, either on a cruise from Colón to Cartagena (500\$US) or island hopping between Sugdu via Puerto Obaldia and onwards via La Miel and Capurganá to Turbo in Colombia. In theory this last route would be the most adventurous of the legal options. What I didn't like however, was the dependance on locals to provide transport between islands. I see my bargaining position somehow restricted on an island. Besides, the local Kuna indians have a very bad reputation for overcharging making this a potentially very costly affair. Most importantly, it was not actually crossing the Darién proper, over land, inland!

Wikipedia gives a good general overview as to why there is a gap in the first place, and the fact that historically people have crossed. Many decades ago Chevrolet organised an

"expedition" and had an entire indigenous tribe chopping a route into the rain forest and then proceeded to drag the cars across. Well, not quite: one car sits now roosting in the forest near the border making you wonder "wtf, how did that get here?" If you haven't already please do read it: FARK guerrilla, poisoned arrows throwing indians, people smuggling, corridor for the drugcartels, difficult terrain and mountains in Panamá and swamps on the colombian side, dangerous animals, hostile locals, lawlessness... to just name a few of the reasons mentioned there as to why it is not an officially sanctioned crossing.

I started to read a blogg of a cyclist with big ambitions, but it turned out, unfortunately as most such entries, it was just foam around nothing and no one I found had even attempted an actual crossing or had first hand experience there. This obviously doesn't stop people from writing comments and warnings. It is now, while writing myself that I came across two entries in a tripadvisor forum from late 2017: "Darién gap is an extremely dangerous place and you should stay away from it. You not the first person that wants adventure, but this is just asking for trouble. Guerrillas, drug traffickers, illegal migrants and hostile indigenous tribes will all be danger to you. There are no paths to travel through and it is one of the most impenetrable pieces of jungle on the planet teeming with venomous snakes, plants and others.

If you run into hostile individuals or get bitten by a venomous snake, your chances to come out of it are pretty slim.

I could compare this to travel through ISIS or Taliban territory. Think carefully if its worth it." ISIS, Taliban? The author of this entry surely must have known what he says!

Another one writes: "The Darién is a no go, - unless you have the \$\$ to outfit a group with security - even then it would be dicey." He might be right about the money, but the security..., well, money could'nt buy that out there.

And then, out of the blue I ran into this frenchman, resident in Guatemala. A hiker, not a cyclist, he had walked across the Darién in three occasions with his wife. On a piece of paper, he drew two routes through the gap with some names and the final opinion: "you won't be cycling much but you could probably push the bike along!" 3.) This option is the classical Darién gap crossing, or "tapón" as the locals call it. A "lit", an "end of the way" sort of thing. Roughly it means getting to the end of the paved road in Panamá at a place called Yaviza. How to go on from there was unclear. The region is of difficult access due to many rivers, such as the Tuira river and its many tributaries. According to the frenchman locals traditionally moved on water but in some instances, there were jounle

tracks as well. In any case it would all lead to an indian village called Paya, famous in panama for being the closest one can get to Colombia. For some reason everyone in panama knows the name, yet I never found anyone who had actually been there until I got there myself. From Paya there are two theoretical options, of which only one is really feasible, via a borderstone called "palo de las letras", which is on every map, and from there into Colombia, a large swampy region around the mighty Atrato river.

Traditionally this swamp has posed the biggest challenge in the traverse but there are rivers here too, like the Cacaricas, a tributary to the Atrato, which makes an allmost 300° loop more or less paralell to the border before skirting the edge of the swamp flowing into the big river towards the caribbean.

By the time I reached panamá some fellow cyclists who had looked into crossing the Darién themselves, perhaps with me, had to discontinue their journey. I profited from some information they had gathered on their research, including the news that a group of motorcyclists had recently crossed the gap. For any cyclist it is clear: if a motorbike gets trough a bicycle can go 100 times. I felt encouraged. But under what conditions had they done it. And had they really crossed? The information was scatchy at best. The one thing they seemd to stress was "to take a lot of money along!" What would that mean for my attempt in terms of local attitude, trail conditions, borderpolice, if any?

As one can imagine the Darién became my prime focus once in panamá. Every conversation would lead to the one question: "how will you get to Colombia?". I think I had mostly made up my mind and really wanted to see how far I could go. With many months of panama visa in my favour I could easily turn back and try one of the coastal alternatives. Honestly, a few days on the beach slurping cocconuts wasn't such a bad plan-B. What really pushed me however was the general opinion that I would fail. One brazilian cyclist I met at a bikeshop got furious: "You are insane! You are suicidal! You have never looked into a gun!" I didn't like the guy from the start and he didn't know anything about me! If he knew!! What I knew about him though, was enough for me: a classical "roady" as we call the cyclists who stick to big roads, he was following the panamericana and was probably taking a cruise across to Cartagena. The good people of the bikeshop in all honesty wanted to persuade me to go with him (and get a better deal on the boat). Most importantly though the dude knew it all about the Darién, like everyone else who had a strong opinion on the subject. Except, off corse, that they all didn't know a thing at all. This would become the one constant of the next days, over and over again, 100 times per day. And what can you say?

Can they really be all so wrong?

I had tried to find the headquarters of the panama border service "Senafront" to enquire about special permits. They are along the canal about 15km inland, a beautiful ride that gave me really nice impressions of the mighty waterway. I couldn't find it even though it turned out I had stood in front of their offices. In retrospect I think that was a good thing. Instead I went to the immigration ministry downtown, to enquire how I would obtain my exit stamp. Somewhere in a stuffy cellar office I found these people visibly bored who were responsible for the Darién region. "If you cross via the gap you will be punished with a hefty fine! It is illegal to do so! Do not go that way!" O.k, fair enough I thought. "But I might be in Colombia then. What would that mean there?" He swallowed and didn't reply. I left encouraged! Next stop was the geographical institute of panama, supposedly a good source for maps. Unfortunately, that was another one of those internet stories. The maps on sale are pretty much useless. They are "working on a highscale topografic map" which might be sold in specific sections later this year. Whatever! The most valuable maps hang from the walls of the entrance hall. A three-dimensional map of the Darién made me think that navenation near the gap would be easy given the clear cut in the mountain range.

In that moment I decided to go for it!

Before I finally departed from Panama City I wanted to know what the Colombian position on the issue was. Where would I get my passport stamped? After much waiting I entered the room of the Consul General and explained my plan. Since I travel with my German passport the diplomat took the chance to practice his German and we had a lengthy discussion in a friendly and amicable tone. The person responsible for the caribbean area happened to be around, a curvaceous elegant lady with high heels and enormous décolleté and a generally negative attitude towards my intentions: "I have been in the area! That trail is a very steep hill; I could hardly walk on it!" I wasn't listening, I have to admit, my eyes fixed, as she leaned over the table. Funnily it soon became clear that she was not even talking about the gap but rather about the coastal passage around La Miel. I pictured her with her heels and melting makeup in the heat and wondered of what value such an assessment could be? There was a phone call to the consulate on the Canarian Islands to speak to another official who earlier had been responsible for the Chocó area, the colombian side of the Darién. His assessment was devastating: a crossing

by any means would be impossible! Local indians, knowledgeable of the forest would take anything above 2 weeks to make the crossing. A stranger like me would perish even without the hindrance of local bandits. "The forest is very thick! It gets dark very early! No, no, impossible!" To my surprise the Consul himself said to me: "well, well, beaurocrats!" He was on my side, calling me the reincarnation of Alexander v. Humboldt, well knowing that the german prince was among the first strangers who ventured into the area. He determined that the Atrato swamp posed the biggest hindrance of any connection between the oceans. A railroad would be desirable but with the americas of the time, lacking any source of steel, the only option would be if the rails were made of gold. The area of the Darién, according to some, was rich in gold and reports of chickenegg-sized nuggets went around. Oh, well, where have I heard that before?

Three hours at the consulate where extremely frustrating but would be just a start of similar pointless discussions with officials along the way. I told the honorable Consul: "If no one had explored, tried, dared, risked, we would be sitting in a cave now." He acknowledged that I had been proactive in approaching him and clearly wanted to do the right thing. So, we made a deal: If I made it I should go to Turbo, the first town in Colombia and clear immigration there. Should there be any problems he should be contacted, and he would try to clear the way.

Wow! Thats what I wanted to hear.

I left at once.

Innitially I had thought of getting read of some of my stuff. I travel heavy with 4 paniers, a tent, cooking gear, all sort of heavy spareparts. But I would need things later again. All those winterclothes for instance, my expressomaker and not to forget the milk frother! It is the cyclists eternak dilemma. In a big effort I dropped of a few grams but basically just took it all with me knowing that I normally can't even lift the bike when fully loaded.

As I finally left the big city via Avenida España, the most direct way out I bought a roll of gray duct tape to seal some holes in my bags. The longdistance cyclist knows that pretty much anything can be fixed with that and cableties, something fun to put to test as long as you then can actually fix it. Broken racks, split rims, muddguards, ripped tires or shoes... anything!

But how much of that will I face here?

Was I ready for this? Who knew. No one really would if I didn't try.

I consider myself a strong cyclist. After so many years how could I not be. But would it even matter?

I had crossed some difficult areas of Papua and New Guinea some years ago. The legendary Kokoda trail connecting the southern capital Port Moresby with the northern coast of New Guinea had been a huge test. Something told me this would be similar: lots of mudd, steep ups and downs and no views across thick vegetation of mostly secondary rainforest near the equator. It had taken around a week, but I had shipped the bike to an airstrip near the end of the trail and was packed light and moved fast. I still wonder if I could have crossed with the bike. I always will!

There was another memorable section in that region finding a way across the mighty Sepic. There are numerous rivers in the area and swamps. In one occasion I reached a river swollen by high tide and no canoe around. So, in one of those "what do I care" moments I went into the water and realized for the first time that a fully loaded bicycle actually floats! There seems so much air in the paniers to keep it afloat and, if packed well, it goes straight. I pushed the amphybian bicycle as I swam across, realizing midway that the water was salty, and I soon was the amusement of a huge crowd which had gathered on the far side. Little naked pikininis on tiny duggouts swarmed around. Where had they all been five minutes ago?

Once out of the river they were generous with fresh water to rinse the bike and with coconuts, seemingly the only foodsource there. I have often experienced that situations like these open all doors and hearts. There is nothing less threatening, I believe, then some idiot swimming across a river with a bicycle. The final section across the Sepic and its swamps was on duggout canoe through Sago palms and finally upriver along the shore aavoiding the strong current. We had run out of petrol about halfway. The boatsman however had a tiny mirror (!!!) to reflect the sun upriver convinced that someone would see it and come to pick us up. Yes, I thought the same as you at the time. How on earth will we ever make it? That mirror was simply the most ridiculous emergency plan you could come up with. But don't judge prematurely. Believe it or not, soon someone came and pulled us to a tiny hut on the riverbanks where a few bottles of fuel were bought. And how handy to have a "masta" on board to pay for it! In the end I had spend the night at their community before resuming my bikeride. Although on the river I had been upset, it was all for a good reason and great end. It always is!

Now, as I zoomed towards Yaviza I wondered just how different it would be here.

Early on the second day I reached the first and last police checkpoint before the remarcable iron bridge over Bayano. After passport control and explaining my intentions I was told that there was no road so surely, we would see each other again in a few days.

"We'll see." The area around the bridge has become a transportation hubb for the artificial lake, with many canoes comming and leaving to settlements in the area. It is also the first place I came across the colorfull traditional clothes of the Kuna women (sometimes written Guna), their orange leggcovers with elaborate embroydery really sticking out. But the color of their hair really takes the cake. Its blacker than black, somehow blue!? I soon learned that they dye it with an inkish extract from a local tree. I saw many carying a little pot with the dye using any chance to comb it in. In one roadside market, as in most of central america owned by some unfriendly and grumpy cantonese, I met this girl who not only had her hair dyed, but also half her face below a straight line from ear to ear in between nostrills and upper lip. Her lower face was completely black including her neck. "Its a tradition" she said and hushed away between aluminium pots and out of date preserves.

And then one evening I reached the provincial border of the Darién, the largest yet least developed of panamas 10 provinces. There are multiple signs announcing the province, most notably the arch spanning over the road, but most noticeable is the suddenly brandnew road. Darién may be the poorest region, but it has the -by far- smoothest road in the country. It was finished only 2 years ago replacing an earlier bone crunching dirtroad from that arch to Yaviza.

Soon after crossing I was stopped at a checkpoint in Agua fria. This was not police but Senafront, the borderunit that in the Darién has replaced all other forces. They are police, army, mediators. "You have a problem, go to Senafront." And they are everywhere. Every village in the province has an outpost. I explained my intentions and the reactions were the usual: no road, not possible and very dangerous. But after a surprisingly short conversation it all seemd fine after saying that I could always return if I couldn't proceed. It became my prime strategy. "Let this idiot go and fail and we will have our fun when he returns". They never said that, but I am sure that was the logic. I had to register at a window of a container office. As the window slided open I got a cold shock. The lady behind the glass was wrapped in so many layers, she looked like the mascot of Michellin. Her a/c was on 17°C. Perhaps panamás Snowqueen? And she went on yet another tirade as to why my plan was way to dangerous and impossible to complete: "Its jounge out there, there is no road!" On the other hand, she and her supervisor were certain that with this registration I was clear to go as far as I could. "Just say you registered here". They even let me pitch my tent behind their quarters and during the evening many soldiers came to persuade me to not go further. If you read this and think: "Yes carlos, we get it",

put yourself in my position at the time. I had heard it sooo often it was tiring, and I kept asking the one question: "So how do you know?" They all just knew. One soldier claimed to have been at the borderstone "palo de las letras" once, flown in by helicopter to clear around it. "If you get there you can cycle the rest into Colombia. The path is very wide, like a road. But the people there are bad and will probably take all your stuff." "Really? A bicycle?" He and his comrades also informed me of several wide trails beyond Yaviza where large forest trucks were extracting timber. Ah yes, and of a guy who was building a private road into Panamá. The stories got more colorful by the day but in retrospect, looking back now, none was entirely true. The only source of information had been things they had heard from someone who had heard of someone who had heard... Still, I would soak in every piece of information, sometimes write or draw it down and compare.

At this camp however, I heard more specifics about the migrants crossing the area. For some this may come as a surprise. It was for me! If the Darién is such a dangerous and remote region, why would people choose this place to cross. Besides: who? Where from and where too? And never mind about the why in this context!

I had heard some stories about Cubans and Haitians making their way across Nicaragua. While Costa Rica and Panama had a "let them through" policy, police in Nicaragua would arrest and deport people back to their countries of origin. Avoiding road controls had many taking risky paths along the Pacific coast or across Lake Nicaragua. I heard horrific stories of many drownings there, of corpses being eaten by those black vultures so typical for Central America.

According to the soldiers the situation had gone completely out of control in 2016. So many people were crossing that Yaviza and every town up the road had large refugee camps providing relief, and medical attention. Refugees were allowed to recover and move on. Recover? It appears that many were not only exhausted but also had been robbed along the way. My French source had told me about bandits specifically targeting migrants. "So where are the migrants now?" I asked. "In those years they came through the gap and looked for the Senafrent posts. But now they avoid us. It has changed since the cartels are in it."

"Huh?" "The good thing", so they said, "is that due to all the people who came across, the trail should still be very wide."

I continued south towards Yaviza trying to fine-tune my orientation with the sun. It was clear by now that the compass on Google Maps is useless out here. With the road straight for long stretches I marked the position of the sun in relation to mine on a map every hour,

as well as the approximate angle to its height. I did this for several days and thought it worked as long as I knew the time, except between 11am and 13pm when the sun was exactly above my head. If you ever wondered how to entertain yourself on those never-ending stretches of the road?... and I reached Yaviza by mid afternoon.

It is not a pretty town. It is almost surrounded by water as it sits in a river bend with a large boat landing to the west where people from the entire Tuira river system arrive in their long canoes. Few dugouts remain today and have mostly been replaced by very long flatbottomed vessels made of woodplanks often protected on the inside by metal sheets. These so called piraguas are typically propelled by an 15HP outboard Yamaha boat engine which can easily be carried up the banks to the respective hut. Boats bring in plantains, bananas (or guineas) and avocados which are reloaded onto trucks destined for Panamá city. If one wanted to go upriver by boat this is the place to find a ride since many piraguas leave empty, at least half the way, picking up people later along the river. While people at the river harbor are mostly Indians Yaviza town is predominantly black. In many ways it reminded me of Belize City. Everyone is happy, most are drunk, and the attitude is somehow pushy. Even when you want to stay cool you are on edge and finding a quiet corner somewhere is impossible. There are just too many kids around. Near the small park there is a large footbridge to New Yaviza across the river where the population is entirely Indian, representing all tribes from upriver.

There are several well sorted stores across the road from the boat landing where river people buy all their consumables in large bulks and any traveller heading upriver should get all they might need. There isn't much at all upriver from here although one can be lucky if supplies have just arrived; the prices will be at a premium.

On my registration with the snowqueen I had promised to report with the Senafront in Yaviza, a military post around a small parade ground and a flag next to the river. I pushed the bike through a large gate leaned it against a wall and reported at a desk so high I couldn't see on its surface. The soldiers were friendly and amused until I told them of my intentions. The usual "I must tell you..." came and as soldiers would pass I felt again like in a brain loundrette. "I really appreciate your concerns and opinions. I listen to all your recommendations, but I have made up my mind. I am here just to report, not to ask for a permit. That, I have been given by your headquarters in Panamá (of course a lie) and during my registration in Aguas frias (which was true, although partly based on the same lie)." They didn't know about anything and needed to consult with their commanders. "Since I probably won't leave today, could I pitch my tent somewhere for the night?"

Somehow the attitude was positive, but no one dared taking decisions. The commander would have to say. So, I left until late afternoon to get my foodstuffs and enquire with locals about possible trails onwards.

Aside from the river, a dry season trail, trocha in the local slang, connects New Yaviza with other settlements, including El Real de Santa Maria, the historical hubb of the region, as well as smaller communities up river, including Vista Alegre, Unión Chocó and as far as Boca de Cupe. The dirtroad was sufficiently decent that 4WD pickups provide transport for people covering the distance in 4 hours, while goods are transported on the water which is also the only options in the wet season. Suppose that it is gentler on the bananas. These were excellent news for me!

By 17.00 I returned to the Senafront where I expected to talk to the person in charge, a very large intimidating man standing on one side of the parade ground, giving orders to soldiers that appeared running about even more confused than me. I tried to be friendly and humble in explaining my case. His look was all but approving, in fact I wondered if I wasn't talking to myself as he kept turning his back on me. It was impossible to catch his eyes. Without any response at all in regard to my proceeding I still dared asking about pitching my tent. Suddenly he talked. "You can NOT stay inside the compound. Pitch your tent outside if you want. I don't know if you can go ahead!" I explained my earlier registrations again to his back, as he was in fact walking away. I had enough "Sir! With all due respect: if I am the cause for your behaviour and unfriendly attitude I would like to apologize. If there is any way that I could contribute in improving your foul temper and bad manners I will be glad to assist." I had his eyes fixing me at last. "I now will sort out the tent and hope to talk to you soon." I took the bike and went to the gate, choosing a spot at its side starting to remove some dry dog shit. I was pissed off: I don't like camping in public, and knew there would be much movement here, and I didn't like the unresolved issue of passage. the dogshit wasn't a problem. Once you have slept in human faeces (that was once in Bolivia) anything can come.

Scraping the poob around suddenly I notice the Captain at my side. "There is a guard at the gate all night, so you will be safe. You may want to put the tent further over there." "What do you mean by bad manners?" I told him that where I came from turning your back to someone or walking away suggested not listening, at best". He didn't share that opinion, but I think he was just being a captain in command. He said that we would talk about the matter of my passage in the morning since he had to consult with his superiors. "Could you give me water, Sir?" "No. Go and buy!". I got water at a small hut nearby,

my neighbours for the night, a friendly indian family that filled large barrels with public water out of a -sometimes- dripping pipe.

Within the communities, the Senafront also provides a certain oversight and security by patrolling the streets all day and night. Children are not allowed to be on the streets after 9pm. I saw many cases in which the soldiers would intervene and mediate, and the community only talked in high regards of them, even the kids. As I was cooking my dinner in front of my tent a constant stream of soldiers would walk in and out, some on patrol, many privately with a towel over the shoulders to take a bath who knows where. Many came to see what I was doing there, earning laughs about my plan -"with a bicycle??, ha ha" and much unsolicited advice, of course.

The bike, usually an icebreaker wasn't doing the trick here, but the camping stove was. "Is that gas?" It occurred to me that they could not relate to the bike as much as they could to a stove and food. And some seemed very impressed about that flame. "Petrol? Really? Like for cars?" My soup of chickenbones and vegetables, fried chicken in breadcrumbs and other things I intended to take for the next days lunch had turned their attitude into encouragement. "You will be fine..."

Next morning -at 7am- I was packed, had my coffee and was ready to roll. "What are you doing here?", "You can not go anywhere!", "You need to report inside!", everyone was eager to give instructions when normally they are on the receiving end. "Keep cool Carlos!"

I did as I had the day before, asked if I could lean the bike against the wall and went to that strange desk. New faces: "What do you want". Oh, not again!

"Wait!" Someone told me to talk to my friendly Captain who was standing alone where he had stood the day before overseeing a still chaotic platoon taking formation in front of the flagpost. "What do you want? What are you doing here?" Wow, this can't be serious! I was back to square one... "Everyone is giving orders here and I am losing my temper too, Sir. I just want to do the right thing, so..." "What is that bicycle doing there? Take it away, we are going to make a foto..." Huh? "Go out of the compound!" "O. k, I will be standing outside the gate". And as I stood there a flagraising ceremony took place, twice, because something had not been proper. I have always believed that some people take this flagbusiness way too serious. Gosh, people die for that. It was actually amusing to see these three soldiers walking up in a very slow and shaky semigoose step and fiddle about nervously until at last the banner was on top of the post, to general relieve. "Go in now!" I was told "...but leave the bike there!", pointing to a lamppost inside the compound. There

was some more waiting since the commander of the unit, someone I never saw, had to give his approval. There was much passportchecking done to which I react sensitive since my previous pass was ripped by Uzbek police in central asia. It had caused a lot of trouble and about three months of waiting in order to renew and secure onwards visas in the new document. I am very protective of my new passport now, but these people don't give a damn! Why do they need to go through every empty page over and over? Do they expect a stamp to pop up if they just check often enough?

Then -I was already rolling my eyes pre-emptively- I got another lecture of all the risks and that, if I proceeded I would be on my own. "We can not take responsibility for you!" "Excellent! Can I give you that in writing?" A note to this end was placed in a small notebook, apparently the stations registration book and I signed. And now? "So, you are really going?" "I am 46 years old, older than most of these little fuckers", I thought, "I really don't need anymore of this!"

I agreed to report at every Senafront post I would pass and I was promised that I would be given free passage. "They will be reporting back to here and we clear your way, so you don't need any paper!" I had a handshake with the Captain, but I wasn't sure what that would mean in this part of the world. At last I was gone, out and away.

I went over the large hanging bridge towards New Yaviza. One could also take a 1 US\$ canoe ride across to the beginning of the track but there is a paved foodpath from the bridge leading through the place. It later deteriorates into a narrow trail before a steep section connecting to the 4WD trail. Luckily a couple was heading out to their fields since I was taking the wrong turn. One has to go right, away from the river. The main track is fairly dusty, but decent and good to ride, except some exceptionally steep bits, which allow some views to the nearby fields and burned patches. The area is mostly just being cleared, with large patches of still smoking trees and brunches, a terrifying sight anywhere in the world. Other patches had a first crop of maize and on older fields bananas and plantains were looking promising. The road is fairly obvious and at intersections the right-hand side is always the one to take. Looking at the maps I had assumed the terrain would be even, but the 100m contour lines are misleading: its not flat, its all but! There are some very steep sections, mostly short but it takes a lot of effort to push uphill, then it goes down much the same. After some 15km dwellings appear on the right-hand side. This is Vista Alegre where a chain blocks the road and locals on 4WD transport have to register and pay a small fee. I asked for the Senafront and two friendly men lead the way between the huts towards a camp with sandbags on crucial positions. A surprisingly

friendly soldier came with a big smile and immediately recorded my data and looked for specific hints on the bicycle in order to describe it in his protocol. "Grey color" was the best we could find. He described the road ahead and how I would find the next post at Union Chocó, gave me water to fill my bottles and wished me good luck. The road to the next post was totally out of place: the forest had been cleared several hundred metres on either side of the elevated road. One would think they were about to put concrete on it and make it a superhighway. It lasted 5km and ended at the edge of a small settlement. While the onwards track actually goes left before a little bridge, the Senafront post is straight ahead, across a soccerfield and alongside the schoolground. There were lots of people sitting around eager to point me to the right direction. Had the previous post been a positive surprise, this one was back to the usual, but, although unfriendly they let me go on without mayor hassles. I wanted to be smart and cut across the village back to the trail. There were two types of huts in this village: either square base with wooden walls completely closed or with round base and conical roofs above a two-storey construction of which the first were stilts. I later learned that these are specific for different tribes, the former being typical for the Embeme (and further upriver Kuna) while the Wounaan seem to prefer rounder shapes.

These tribes speak different languages and talking to some about the others I got the impression that they didn't like each other much. No one talked very well about the Kuna. I had some trouble finding my way back to the trail, cutting across some banana fields and even a hip-deep river. It was a refreshing relieve, but where was I? Somehow, I found myself in Yapé, a place no one had ever mentioned. Locals were amused watching me cross the river and pointed to a trail back to the main track. It's confusing though since they actually refer to it as "the highway"...

Back on the road I continued rolling fast since the terrain somehow flattens out a bit. Fields seem older and more established mostly with plantanes and the occasional avocado tree. Just before Capeti, some 26km from Yaviza I passed a coffee field in full bloom with a beautiful scent. Two farmers were returning home and I walked with them for a short while. "We are Wounaan", they said, "...not Kuna!" I enquired on how one should proceed within an indian community. "Is there a village head and can and should I try to talk to them?" They genuinely appreciated my question and recommended to introduce myself to the respective Cacique. They were elected by the community and generally were respectable people who could also give me valuable advice on trails and directions. At a large watertower not yet in use and next to the village school I turned left downhill

while the village lays beyond the school. These men had said that the checkpoint was at the other end of the village, so I just gave it a miss.

There is a rivercrossing with an extremely steep exit where I wondered how any car could get up there. Had those motorbikes gone true here too?

As I rode the last kilometres of the day it started to rain turning the ground into a very sticky and muddy affair within minutes. I looked across a fairly wide river onto the houses of Boca de Cupe. It was all so slippery that I just leaned the bike against the earthen side and enjoyed the refreshing downpour.

Canoes were passing by, some stopping at some concrete steps leading to the houses above the river. One man made gestures asking if I needed passage. I made signs that I would cross by foot... and went in to check the depth. I was hip deep at most and mostly about knee high, so I grabbed the bike and waded across. There were so many canoes at those stairs that I had to walk around them. Most of the people sitting in them had their mouths open in amazement, as if I had actually rolled over the water. It took a while for me to rest before tackling the steep stairs. I was about to remove the bags and carry them up separately when a young fellow offered a hand. Great. Sometimes people want to be helpful but don't really know where to pull or grab the bike. Usually they take it from the bags or some straps so that they come off or even rip. I showed him how to hold the bike on the frontrack while I took the back and we went up in no time. He was from Púcuro, one of the Kuna villages up the river and they were leaving now. "Are there piraguas to Paya as well?"

"The river is very low now" the people said, "but they get thru." So how much would a person have to pay for a ride. "Oh, you can take a boat for yourself..." "... or I could go as a passenger with others..." I never got a price and it would take me a while and much trustbuilding with some villagers to get a somehow fair estimate. On top of the stairs a man noticed me and enquired if I needed a passage to Paya. "There is a piragua in the morning. I will find out and let you know. The way to the Senafront is over there." Perhaps because it was my first milestone and the day had been successful, I liked Boca de Cupe. The houses are all made of wood with corrugated iron roofs and were last painted several years ago. They remain colorful. People sit around in front of their houses, visibly bored so a fully loaded bicycle immediately creates much chitchat. Everyone was greeting, and I felt welcome. The population is mostly black with a very few white people while indigenous folks inhabit more traditional houses, e.g. with organic roofs, to the upriver end of town. Houses are in parallel rows to the river with paved walkways to their front

and sometimes connecting between houses. I followed such a path to the local medical centre, mostly maternity ward, and found the Senafront station behind the ward surrounded by a generous grassy field. I had not yet walked onto the grounds when a man in leisure military garments came out: "Ah, the frenchman is here!"

Although not quite right it was a warm welcome and we introduced ourselves. The friendly man from Vista Alegre had announced my possible arrival by radio and the sub-teniente, I think a sub-lieutenant, in charge of the group had been waiting. "That's what I had been thinking of!" I thought. I was allowed to camp inside the grounds under a roof and, since there were no mosquitoes they gave me a fieldbed and a matrace to sleep on. Later I learned that the Captain himself had suggested this via radio. "You could have stayed here even if he says no! I am in charge here. And we will give you food too. Where there is for 5 there is enough for 6!" I couldn't believe it! There was good water, wifi and a tree full of Cashew fruits, but of a type without the nut, called Marañón. It was very comfortable and I used the chance to check my bags for leaks, fix them and dry what had gotten wet.

Now I just needed to find a piragua upriver to Paya! Boats upriver from Boca de Cupe go either to Paya or Púcuro, two Kuna villages also connected by a forest trail. They are located on different tributaries to the Tuira, named like the villages. At the waterlevel at the time it would take about 8 hours and 5 hours respectively. These facts were easily obtained, while the "normal" price for a passenger appeared a common secret. Everyone was fast to conclude that those Kuna would surely see \$-signs all over me!

I walked the path and chitchatted with some people along the way stopping at a house where a lady with a friendly and somehow very happy face caught my attention. She was sitting on her terrace behind a closed wooden railing, so I could just see half of her upper body and face. What really caught my attention was a mesh on her head fixing her blond hair. It looked most ridiculous but didn't stop the selfconfident women of Panamá to wear it often. I had seen it all over the country and wondered if they had been inspired by smurfs. "That's a nice headdress Madame" I said, probably in a sarcastic undertone. The lady laughed. "Yeah, silly isn't it? There is nowhere to get my hair done around here so I keep it in place this way". We introduced each other, and I learned that she was a schoolteacher from Panamá city. There is a financial incentive to come to remote places like these by tripling the salary. After a few years one can get reassigned to the big city while keeping the increased salary.

Considering the high living costs of Panama City and the low wages for teachers there, this was a good way to have a decent life after a few years of sacrifice. And I could tell for her sacrifice it was. She had to bring in her bottled water from Yavizas store and her grandson, whom she had brought to relieve her daughter was visibly ill. Poor boy apparently didn't tolerate the riverwater and so could not even play there as most other kids seemed to enjoy so much. Her son, a friendly and courteous fellow hated it for reasons teenagers dislike rural places: internet is hard to come by, his friends were all in Panamá and people of his age were really not kids anymore. Some kids of his age were starting to date, some were having children themselves.

He told me all that as we went to find a man who apparently could help with the boat upriver, as suggested by his mother. A new teacher for Paya was arriving and would need a piragua to get there and this man would know when that would be.

The man was among the unfriendliest persons I met in Boca de Cupe, a white man, bitter and frustrated from within. I was to cross his way several times while there and not once did he greet or even look up. As we went back to his house the kid said to his mom that he never ever wanted to have to talk to that man again. He had all my sympathy! In the end the teacher was flown in by helicopter.

The consensus at the riverfront was that a gringo had to go express, implying that I would have to rent an entire Piragua if I wanted to get anywhere upriver from here. I wanted to go on as passenger, where you contribute to the fuel expenses as every other passenger does. I met a tiny kuna lady from Paya with her children who was waiting for her brother in law to go back home. While he had gone all the way to Yaviza to sell his Plantains and Avocados they stayed back in Boca de Cupe to visit the medical station. This is very often the case.

Mrs Martinez was a very pleasant lady, selfconfident and with clear and straight answers, I immediately liked her and was hopeful to come to an agreement with her relative. Oh, how wrong I was! By evening no boat to Paya had arrived so I had to spend another night in Boca de Cupe. Luckily the Senafront unit was great. "You relax. Tomorrow we all leave together". Indeed, there would be a change of units in the region. After one month on Duty the platoons would be replaced. Everyone was eager to go home. I learned that the next location was probably going to be in another area for each member. "What about those chickens?" They had a small poultry area with chicks that would provide meat in a few months. "The next unit will feed them, but we will have a soup with that chuck", and

of we where to catch the biggest hen. It was a great soup indeed with plantanes and some starchy root I had never seen before.

Otherwise the day was long. They had turns at the radio system and there was a constant stream of locals coming to access wifi. Schoolkids came often to do their homework, sometimes assisted by the soldiers and in some instances I too stepped in. For such a tiny village there was a lot going on. At midafternoon a cocconut fell onto a birdsnest taking nest and chicks to the ground. The kids had found them and were now figuring out what to do. While the mother was overhead chirping and stressed there were suggestions to sell them. "Really? To whom?" I asked. They all looked dissapointed. I think I had been an essential player in their plan.

I walked through the village often and had many chats with the blond smurf lady even though she seemd to avoid the headgear now. I also told her about my reasons to be here and for some reasons about the day in Yaviza, the grumpy Captain and all. She listened, asked for more details and wanted a description of that Captain. I gave her my best, stressing his grumpy character, when she starts loughing out loud. "Thats my husband!" In german we call that "stepping in a bucket of grease", classic! She explained that he normally wasn't grumpy, but these days with the regional guard changes he surely was under stress. There was an evaluation taking place too and he was about to retire. My popping up on a bicycle had been bad timing...

Next morning, I packed my stuff early and the soldiers too were getting ready. I looked for Mrs Martines who was staying in one of the houses next to the river that provide basic accomodation and food for people travelling the river, apparently charging around 10US\$ per night. There was talk of several piraguas on their way and in the meantime, I had been given some reasonable prices for passengers. Downriver a local would pay between 10 and 15US\$ corresponding to the local price of around 2 gallons of fuel (gallons in an otherwise metric country). Upriver would be a bit more, between 15 and 20US\$ per person. When Mr Martines finally roared up the oposite, deeper riverside and came to a hold on a sandbank midvillage I went to negotiate.

Following international boatprotocol I asked for permission to step on the boat. The Piragua was the largest I had seen so far: easily 8 metres long and perhaps a metre across at its widest.

Mr Martines never directely looked at me from under his baseballcap. With his out of place leather (?) jacket, tall, very skinny physique and thin, long and very pale face, eyes sitting deep and a sick grinn between rotting black teeth, to me he looked like a burmese

borderofficial: unpleasant in every sense. "Yes, I go to Paya now. How much you pay?" "I was hoping you would tell me, and I have a bicycle with me too!". "Ah, I don't know!... but you one, the bicycle one more!" "So how much will you charge me as a passenger?" Between loughs with another boatman in the next boat he sais "1000US\$". "Oh, I see. Would that special price include the bicycle?". He got the sarcasm and went down to 150 and in a very bad tone sais: "This is my boat, I can charge what I want!". "No worries, I will continue looking for that gold shitting donkey which you think I own! God bless you, thank you very much". I keep wondering why, when I really want to swear at them I usually say "god bless you" instead!

Piraguas heading to Paya tend to land and load at the upriver stairs in the indian area of the village. Anyone wanting to catch a ride pretty much needs to sit there and wait, catch the boatman somehow and negociate the fare. Mrs Martines was sad that I wasn't going, I could tell. But what she probably didn't know is that there were lots of other passengers waiting. By the time they left that Piragua was packed with luggage, supplies and people. Not long after another one roared in and a young boatsman ran up the stairs. As I tried to talk to him he bought a large barrel of fuel and was dragging it across the ground. Just before the stairs I tried to help him when he half screams at me: "80\$. You guys charged me 20\$ for the Taxi in Yaviza!" What? Another man came up from the boat to help with the barrel and soon he was poaring the oil into the barrel, tossing the empty, open containers into the river. So bitter, so sad. People around were obviously all following the scene some shaking their heads: "Kuna!" Obviously, there was a conflict in this mans head, between his kuna world and the rest of the planet, my world, and I just had to accept that.

A lady washing her clothes half submerged in the river picked the containers that had been cought in a whirl between some canoes and I took them from her to throw them into a barrel next to the fuel shack, wondering where they would toss them from there.

Honestly, I was starting to get anxious. It started to look like a long wait. By this time, I had walked the village path so many times up and down that people were starting to enquire what I was up to. They had great sympathy for my cause, but none had a piragua or was going to Paya. The gestures were nice though. The landlady of where Mrs Martines had stayed was particularly supportive: "there is a piragua coming up with supplies. I will talk to them." She invited me into her house to take a rest, gave me a coffee and later a bag with frozen fruitjuice while I told her and a bunch of other people of my plans. It was a great round with that unique ethnuk mix of this place. One very young fellow came

up to me and said: "I am going to Púcuro a bit later..." The landlady stepped in and asked them to charge me a fair price. We agreed on 20US\$ and sealed with a handshake after everyone had discussed if this would be a better alternative for me. There being a trail from Púcuro to Paya I would get to Paya without having to wait for a fair price in a Piragua. By midafternoon I got a signal and soon was taking my bags and bike down to the boat and we roared off. We where 5 on board, the young fellow at the motor, his two smaller brothers I had met earlier sitting in the front watching for loggs and rocks, and their bigger brother, whom they had come to pick up, and me on either end of the bike. The big brother was returning from Panamá city where he had spent a few months, finding occasional work. He hadn't liked it much, he told me, and I could see how happy he was to be almost back home, taking big deep breaths of fresh jounge air and throwing river water over his head. His sibblings were happy too so we had a sheery ride from the start. The river is extremely sinuous and, due to low water levels challenging to navigate. These guys seemed to know every sandbank and where the deepest waters were. Several rapids were tackled rushing up through the centre where the stream was strongest and, in many occasions, there was assistance with sticks to give an extra push. The banks changed constantly from steep rocky to sandy at riverlevel, covered with dense untouched bush or slashed burned fields. The constantly changing direction of the sun and the evening light was fascinating and beautifull. It felt most wonderfull to feel the fresh air in my face, the clean riverwater splashing... and I felt happy to be on the move.

As we entered the Púcuro river to the left it all got narrow and we reduced speed. There were more rocks and shallow sandbanks so we all had to go out and push the boat to the next pool or deeper section. It is hard work, but the refreshing water was a welcoming change. Me moved slowly into the night until visibility was gone. Just a torch in front we moved on wading, pushing and sometimes floating with the only natural lights coming from hundreds of fireflies hovering in the trees.

After hours in the dark we passed canoes on the riverbanks and then heard first voices comming out of the dark. People here tend to shout and jaul a lot, a bit like coyotes I thought, and my boys responded, specially the big brother who would shout the loudest, announcing his return. Whenever I got a glimpse of his face it was beaming! Here and there we stopped for some chitchat with people bathing in the river. It was hillarious because we couldn't see a thing.

Eventually, at last we arrived at a long wooden staircase leading up to the huts. There were lots of headtorches of ancient designs flickering about. I carried the bike up and

before I knew it all my bags were there too. There must have been a hundred people around, welcoming the brother, son or friend back home. I may have partly stolen his show though. It was an exceedingly welcoming scene. The boys told the crowd of my plans and several offered their services as guides. "Thank you, but I will go slowly alone" yeah, the track is very clear and no way to get lost! The boat boy wanted to take me to the village head, mostly known as Cacique, but in Kuna communities generally referred to as Sailas, to officially request to stay. He actually mounted the bike, sitting on the frame and rolled off into the dark while a small group of boys and I followed by foot. Passing a few houses on stilts and a large flat grassy field we arrived at a hut and a man came out to speak to us. "Yeah, no problem at all, just report to the Senafront". I thanked and expressed my hopes to catch up in the morning before continuing to Paya. Then we went out beyond the school area and approached the Senafront Camp announcing our arrival from afar. You never know how trigger happy they might be. We greeted a surprised but friendly platoon with a very young sergeant all sitting around a tv screen run by a generator. I explained my reason for being there and they took my data and radioed back to Yaviza. They were perhaps the least inquisitive and least pedantic with warnings and they let me pitch my tent next to their camp too.

As I paid the boat dude he told me that he would be walking up towards Paya in the morning and would be happy to show me the trail through the fields if I was there in time. I slept very well, tired and happy and eager to continue.

I had bought some fresh chicken just before leaving Boca the Cupe, which I cooked into a soup while packing my tent and getting ready to leave. By the time I took off the soldiers were just emerging from their camp going to the river for their morning toilette. In a few hours they too would be replaced by a new platoon flown in and out by helicopters. "They will be changing in Paya as well today". In the moment I didn't think much about this little detail...

As I rolled across the large grassy fields I met the Sailas as he walked alone towards me. "Good morning. So, you need a guide!" It was not a question, but I just thanked him for his concerns but that I was going alone. Besides the boy was going that way. "He has long gone!" "Really? Well, then I go alone!" "You know?", he said, "when tourists come we have this rule, not a law, just a village rule, that they pay something for sleeping here. Like only 30US\$! They take fotos and make films and all, and sometimes come with motorbikes. We need to keep the trails in good conditions too." I didn't like where this was going so I went into hyperbolic courtesy mode. "I understand that and surely all the

tourists coming here would leave an impact that has a cost. Do there come many tourists here?" "No, very rarely, but they will come now!" What about those motorbikes? Did they come through here? "Ah no..." he said. "They went straight to Paya and payed a lot there!" I understood. Word had spread, and foreigners had money to relieve them from. He must have sensed my reluctance to pay anything, he finally said: "but since you are heading off now, that's fine."

As I rolled passed the huts people came out to point the way. I could'nt recognize a thing from the night before. Then a man came out of a hut next to the river with a huge smile in his round face. He had been the first person to welcome me the night before. I had shone my head torch into his face; the first full face after all that darkness left a mark in my memory. Besides, it was the proud father of the boys and he still had the same beaming smile. Slowly a small crowd gathered as I noticed a beautiful Ara Macaw, a huge yellow and green Papagayo on a roof. I had seen few birds so far, and this one was on a chain. At least they hadn't pulled his feathers yet, I thought. Later I learned that they aparently are almost extinct in the wild.

"Your son has left early?" I asked. "No, he is still sleeping" said the father, "but we are leaving now..." said a group of youth behind me, among them the brother who had arrived with me. "Let's go!" I must confess I had thought of hanging out a bit longer. They were all so friendly, but I also knew that the way to Paya would be a long and difficult one. And going with these guys would ensure that I at least found the trail. The frenchman in Guatemala had recommended to engage some kids to lead out of the villages and nearby fields. "Once in the jounge its easy!"

The trail started on the opposite side of the river, opposite to the wooden stairs I had arrived earlier. As I was about to remove the luggage a guy comes and grabbs the frontracks "I help you!" I could'nt remember his face but I knew he was the guy who back in Boca the Cupe had helped me and who now knew exactly where to hold it. As I went through the water, the group crossed on a canoe, with dogs and all. We were about 8, the number constantly changing as people would join, leave, go back, return. In difficult parts they would push and assist and in easy bits they would send me riding ahead just to catch up as I struggled on a steep bit or through a gorge. The group was fun, friendly and engaging. All had machetes in colorfull leather cases attached to their leggs. One or two had rifles too. There was an older man among them, nicknamed "el chino" although, honestly, they all looked east asian to me. But the star in the group was the guy who had helped me with the bike, whom they referred to as "Idol". I never found out why but it

seemd a running joke that kept amusing everyone. The footwear of choice are gumboots, or bare feet. Only Idol had actual boots, a gift from the Panama City fellow who himself had flip flops. My own shoes where bicycle shoes with a small metal plate to click into the pedals. At this stage they still looked like shoes but after a few days they were falling apart. Good that I had duct-tape. Although proud of them, Idol wasn't very impressed about the boots and kept complaining thst his feed hurt. "You should piss in them", I suggested, just as they would do in the army. Everyone loughed and offered to help out. About half way he actually took them off and threw them into the bushes. I had heard that people here are fast walkers, but these guys moved as if on steroids, regardless of the foodwear. The trail was generally good, and I rode a fair bit, but there was no way to get any considerable way ahead. Whenever I had to dismount they soon were there, and mostly Idol, sometimes el chino, gave me a helpfull hand. There were also tricky bits, steep muddy sections, gorges with large trees bridging across. We kept passing small mounts of earth on the side of the trail. Several had small crosses made of sticks on them. These were graves of people who had perrished on the trail. "Do you know who they were?"

"All sort of people!", they said. Some of colombians fighting for the paras or escaping from the army. Many from migrants. Showing his little finger, one guy said: "some where just bones, very week!". I was to see many such mounts along the trail but most here between Púcuro and Paya, and later near the summit on the Colombian side, although there seemed to be no crosses there. Perhaps they were just mounts then?

"Let's make five!", they would say, meaning a short brake. "So where are you going?", I enquired. Aparently there was a large group of Sailas and Caciques comming from Colombia and Paya for a gathering in Púcuro. A 'congress' as they called it.

We were expected to reach them in any moment now and soon enough there was much greeting and chitchat as the visitors' bags were taken by the boys and they told them about my intention to cross into Colombia. The Sailas of Paya mentioned the Motorbikes and a lady, his wife perhaps, rolled her eyes "Pah, those Motorbikes" as if referring to something really bad. We said good bye and all of a sudden, I was on my own.

At last I could go at my pace and I was much slower now, without the help of Idol. But I was also happy. I needed to see if I could go allone, better earlier than later. Slowly I made my way over the many fallen trees and stumps blocking the trail. On very steep bits I would remove the paniers, carry them up, two at a time and finally drag the bike up too. Downhill I usually didn't do that but made sure I kept the controll with the backwheel

brakes while letting the frontwheel roll. There is nothing worse than having all the load on a blocked frontwheel. The risk of losing a few spokes or bending the rim is very high with those forces. Been there, done that!

I crossed two shallow rivers, the Púcuro for the last time and the Tupalisa about halfway. By midafternoon I was rolling through plantanes and then stood on the riversedge high above the water. A group of people working on a canoe across the river only saw me when I had passed the river and was starting to lift the loaded bike up the stairs one wheel at a time: front, back, front, back.

"Bent ze kneez" would a german say!

Before I reached the flat top one of them came to look, noticed by a Senafront man who then came with his mashine gun ready. "What are you doing?" "I am trying to lift my bike up these stairs", I said out of breath. I could tell these were the new crew, just way to eager. Besides, an hour earlier I had heard several helicopters flying passed. The Senafront post was on the other side of the village while here at the boatlanding they had a sandbag fortification as an outpost. The soldier leading the way, as I passed traditional houses arranged around a large rectangular grassy area with generous spacing I saw Mrs Martines popping out of one, waving "Good, you made it!" It felt good and I promised to come by later.

The outpost is a large wooden hut in green camouflage colors surrounded by an earthen perimeter about hip-high, with a small gate to access. I leaned the bike against the perimeter and proceeded to report. The unit would have arrived about two hours earlier at most. They all were annoyed about me showing up and didn't even try to hide it. "No, you can not camp within the perimeter. First you need to ask the Sailas if you can even stay here." The commander was a classical no-sayer and refused to return my passport until the "unlikely clearance from central command to allow me to continue", as he put it.

I protested in vain! Of all the units I had passed this one was by far the least pleasant to deal with. While they all were aloft in the hut on stilts I would have to stand on the ground in front. I never got a hand to shake or got to talk to someone closer than from three or so meters. Worse was the commander, who would often be in his windowless room at the back of the open foyer talking from there. They were still trying to figure out the radio and light system which ran out of power early.

Suddenly there were two youngsters shouting at and pushing each other some 200m away. Two soldiers went, stepped in before a fight could start and brought them into the area.

People streamed in and I used the chance to steal myself away to talk to the Sailas and Mrs Martines.

To find the village head required some asking around since the actual Sailas was in Púcuro. The deputy was an old man who at first would not address me directly but only through a young fellow who helped translating from Kuna to spanish.

Yes, I could pitch my tent and a place was suggested next to the Senafront. No, I had to wait for the Sailas to come back and allow passage. Besides, the Sailas would have to fix the fee to be payed for sleeping in the village and for using the trail. "All the motorbikes that pass have to pay because we keep the trails clean for them". He made it sound as if this was the newest business in the region, a fast-booming source of income. The young fellow clarified that I was allone, on a bicycle and that I had arrived by foot from Púcuro. I sized the oportunity to inform him that I had met the delegation earlier and that I had talked to the Sailas. "Where did you meet them?" He asked out of curiosity. "About half way in a certain gorge passed the river. It was around 1pm". He nodded in approval. I continued: "I would love to wait and meet them again, but 2 days might be to long since he has personally allowed me to proceed at once and that a fee would not be required". "Oh, in that case its fine!", and I wondered if Kuna play poker! Honestly, I sometimes scare myself when I seem to keep a straight face in an outrageous lie like this.

On my way back, I greeted Mrs Martines and told her the details of my journey to Paya and then passed by what looked like a gathering of youths who had called me to join. There seemd two types of people here: those friendly and welcoming, and those pushy and inquisitive. The conversation shiftet to the motorbikes and that one had been abandoned in the jounge before reaching the border. "Will I see it on the trail?" "No! We brought it back and its here now! You want to buy?" Days earlier someone had told me they were Harley Davidsons. I was curious. "Where is it?" Aparently the owner of the house was gone but I got a glimpse of it through some woodplanks. It was not a Harley but a sturdy Enduro with seemingly new tires and an Alaska registration plate. All the upholstery had been removed. The carcass looked shiny and like new. "What is the problem with it?" The suggestions were diverse including "Its just the battery".

I went into a small kiosk in the centre of the grassy area to see if they had anything worth carying over the mountain. I had very little food having expected a chance to purchase here. The offer was very grimm indeed: cans of sardines in tomato souce and some salty crackers was all I found usefull.

Back at the Senafront the crowd had slowly dispersed. There was a lady and her small son together with one of the fighting youngsters sitting on a bench, while the second one was on a place on the other side in the perimeter with an armed guard near by.

I informed them that I would pitch my tent

under the stilts of a hut opposite to the post and enquired if there had been a response from Yaviza. "They don't know of anything. You can't go. You have to go back. You don't have a written permit..." This was no poker. These guys were seriously suggesting I go back. "So how do you think I got here then? Why would the other controlposts let me pass without clearance?" Someone must contact the Captain P. and the Commander or check the protocol book in Yaviza. Their looks were degrading, from above as if I had to justify myself for some crime. I remembered that I had taken a foto of the protocol entry. They radioed to confirm and asked if someone could contact the captain. What sounds straight forward here was a lengthy unnerving fight with these naisayers. It was pure dispair from my side. Could it really be that it ends here? It can not be! No way!

I pitched my tend before it got dark but not under the empty house. I had tried but a known face came running to bark at me: "who allowed you to sleep there? You can not stay there, I won't allow it!" It was the boatsman Martines. "If this is yours, indeed I have no intention to stay anywhere near!" A coupple in the next house observed this and later came to enquire why he was so angry at me. "Perhaps because I didn't pay him 1000\$?" The dislike was mutual.

I pitched my tent under some palms, made dinner and even went for a nightbath in the river. Back at my tent I could hear everything being talked in the Senafront post also the details about that fight. The youth, brother of the small boy sitting next to the lady had cought the other youth with an erection while his little brother was crying with his pants down. In consequence the older brother had faced the other youth demanding an explanation and the situation escalated. The whole thing was talked over and over without ever calling it possible rape and it was established that no one had whitnessed "the act", as the commander put it. The mother wanted a medical inspection before filing a legal accusation. The commander clearly wanted the situation to stop there explaining to her that this would require a lengthy journey downriver bejond Yaviza. There was much radioing and phonecalls to get instructions from headquarters on how to proceed. The elder brother made his case: "If we don't clarify this, we will lament it next time!"

Among the soldiers there was much talk about a required protocol and the writing of it would fill the night. "Well", I thought, "you can't expect too much from these guys". I got the impression that the commander was pushing the mother to just drop the case, so that a protocol would not be required, and he could at last go to sleep. The latter he actually said.

I went back to push my issue and the desire to have my passport and a positive answer before going to sleep. To their defence there never came a radio call to the matter so I just had to wait till early morning. It was a mostly sleepless night with much thinking of what I would do in case they refused to let me go on. Did they even have the authority to stop me? I wondered. What if I just go on, with or without passport. Would they use force? What if I just left and reported with my other, Chilean passport. I won't have an exit stamp from Panamá anyway. There were 100s of scenarios. What if I didn't make it and had to come back!? I couldn't burn all the bridges. Should I have taken the coastal road? I could be slurping frozen Margaritas now! There could be nothing more disappointing than having to return because of this bunch of utter jerks. No way!!

I woke early to the sound of people registering at the Senafront post before embarking their piraguas downriver. It was still dark when I cooked coffee while packing my stuff. There had been no definite answer yet. There had been no radio call either. "You can not go!" I stood there angry, dissatisfied, stubborn, calculating my options, while pushing them to demand direct contact with the captain and that someone should inspect that silly booklet. And I didn't move from the spot. It was clear that everyone who knew of me in Yaviza had left for home, including the Captain and Commander who, it was said, were unreachable.

Time passed at a snail's pace. It would be the worst hours of those days. On top of the uncertainty I felt looked down upon, treated like an idiot by the soldiers and their commander. "Hey chileno!" he would shout from inside of his room. Earlier he had asked me why I spoke Spanish. "For one you surely don't speak anything else yourself... and I grew up in Chile". He then took to calling me chileno, as if it was very funny. "Why don't you just go back and take an airplane or a boat? You don't know what you are getting yourself into in Colombia!" "Neither do you!"; I started to despise the guy. The way he had tried to brush the matter of the village boys from his desk just to go to bed. The way he ran his post, the arrogant way he commented on my journey. In a way it was good to have all those machine guns on the ready, potentially against me. But what could I do? He had my passport, the bastard. He kept asking personal things like "Do you have no

family?" "Don't you have a job?" "Why are you all alone?" There was a certain undertone in everything he said or asked. At 8, after 3 hours, still no response. I couldn't see the commander. The soldiers, all with their guns hanging from their shoulders, were sitting on the raised platform staring down to where I was standing. My passport was changing hands, and everyone would flick through it for a while. Did they know that I wanted to kill each of them?

For some reason I remembered a situation in India's troubled northeast a few years earlier. On my way from Assam to Tripura, the state wedged between Bangladesh and Burma, I had stopped at a roadside eatery in a small village, for chapatti and curry, I guess. As usual a small crowd gathered around the bike and me, something so inevitable in that part of the world. A man with badly trimmed moustache and a generally shabby appearance came forward from the crowd. Big belly, tracksuit pants and green undershirt he probably was from some army or police post nearby. I wasn't amused. During the leading up days on Majuli island on Assam's holy Brahmaputra river I had these drunk policemen make me remove my campsite in the night; they had threatened to kill me if they felt like. I had a dirty street fist fight with 4 Mafiosi a few days later and then several annoying police checkpoints initially unwilling to let me proceed. I just wanted to eat my chapatti and go on. "Name!, Where?, What?" I assume he wanted to see my identification for the all-important name in the Indian context; make sure I was not one of the unwanted Bengalis who are much discriminated even when they do all the manual work and what I was doing there in the first place. "And why would you need to know that?" I enquired as the crowd got enthusiastic. "I am police!", he frowned. I didn't like him. In those days I didn't like anyone who could stop me from taking the roads I wanted, and they always tried, just to show they could, even if in the end never really did. I sized him from top to bottom: "Really? Who would believe that! Perhaps you better go and put on your uniform then, because for now all I see is a fat, rather ugly man in flipp flopps!" Had it not been for the bushy hair in his ears steam would have come out. Oh, he was angry, turned around and left, clearly on a mission. The crowd was in total silence. As I was finishing my meal the lady came close and said pointing to where the man had gone: "Very bad man! You better go now!" The crowd approved, and I can't remember many mountain roads I climbed that fast and looking back so often. How different my approach had been these last days; how similar I still was when it came to the issue at hand. And then the all awaited radio call: "The cyclist can proceed! Let him go!" There was a general sigh and one soldier made a sign for me to step closer to get the passport.

"Proceed where to? Back to Yaviza?" the commander barked from inside his room. Are you serious now? "You really don't want to let me go!" I said. A radio call was made, and another 10 minutes passed.

Why was this man so eager to see me go back? He had looked for any way to do the least possible in the case of the alleged rape but now he was going far out of his way to block me. Did he gain personally from that? I wondered about a lot of things during that small eternity. Why did they care so much about what I did? I didn't care about them! I didn't feel like having the right to tell them what I thought they should do with their lives. It didn't bother me that they would spend 30 days on that post, far away from their families, mostly standing around, bored. I felt that they had made a choice to that end. I had made my choices and felt, as long as I didn't bother anyone they had no right to hinder me. And in many parts of the world that is how it works. On my arrival in Canada the previous spring there was a huge snowstorm coming in from the Pacific. The forecast for Vancouver Island was bad and I was heading out into a forestroad from Lake Cowichan towards Bamfield. A logging truck had blocked my way earlier, the driver trying to persuade me to go back. I hadn't and now was ankle deep in snow, taking a brake under a pine. It was so cold that I had problems holding a cupcake in my hands as I tried to get it into my mouth. That's when a police truck approached slowly cutting two lanes into the fresh snow. The window was lowered, and warm air hit my face: "Where are you going in this weather?" I told them. "So, you know where you are?" "Washington State, right?", referring to an area across the Juan de Fuca Strait in the US state of Washington. It took a moment but then they laughed. She wanted to know a few things about my gear and eventually left towards the way I had come. She had asked questions to find out if I was prepared but in no way tried to persuade me to go back or even hinder me. They care for you and make sure you are not completely stupid, but then leave you to it. I love that about Canada and the Canadians.

The Radio finally cracked, and the respond came: "Let him go to where he wants!". The commander had come out and stood next to the radio. His grin got angry, the soldiers were unsure on what to do. "Give him the passport" he barked as his eyes fixed me from above. As I walked to my bicycle somehow angrier about this bunch now surely staring at me than happy to finally be moving, the commander shouts: "Chileno! Why do you go there? What is it that you do?" I paused for an instant wondering if I should not just shut up and leave him standing there. I had a long way ahead and was late. But I knew I would regret not saying anything. It would have me thinking all the way what I should have said.

I wanted to end this and go on. I turned around and said: "You know, there are things about me you would never understand as much as there are things about you I will never understand. We will have to live with that and accept the fact that we are fundamentally different in many ways, whether we like it or not. The reason why I go there, is because you would never go there. The things that I want to do are things that you would never want to do. In a way the aim is to be as different to you as possible." Although I ment it exactly like that I now feel that he may have seen it as an attack on his way of life and choices. But it wasn't. I would never say my choices are better. Just for me they are. I need the uncertain outcome, the challenge, the exhaustion, the thrill. Feeling tired, experiencing heat and cold, hunger, thirst, angst... it made me feel alive in ways nothing else could. That's why I am out for, to seek life at its fullest! As I slowly rolled away towards the village school I realized that I had never seen it this clear. Perhaps it had required those last days to get my very own epifany. And all of a sudden, I was thankful to those guys. I felt like gliding away back into life at last.

The kids were out playing inside the fenced off compound. It surprised me that there would be one, but it seems to be a panamá standard: two-meter fence, blue-white buildings and blue-white uniforms. The excited kids glued on the fence, so I stopped to talk. Besides I wasn't entirely sure of where the trail went. A man came and explained: you go here between the houses and cross several small wooden bridges. Go along the landing strip to the river. Go on ahead after crossing until the "palo". "Just before that take a small right track to the river. From there its clear and easy to find to the borderstone of Palo de las letras". It sounded straight forward and in retrospect it was, but on the ground, it was a different thing. I cycled along the airstrip which had not been used since a missionary had left the area due to safety concerns. Senafront use helicopters which land in the Village. The new village as it turned out. Old Paya had been further upriver, bejond my first rivercrossing of the day, on a narrow stretch of land with the Paya river flowing on both sides in opposite direction due to a loop in its cource. There had been too many floods and there wasn't enough space for the large comunity. The only reminders today are the large concrete stairs leading up from the river and a concrete strip which used to be the footpath between huts. There had been no mention of this. And what about the "palo". While in most spanish speaking countries a palo is a wooden stick, in Panamá it usually refers to a tree, dead or alive, to a piece of wood or the said stick. And I was sourrounded by forest! There was an out of place woodcut standing next to the trail and a path went down on the right towards a river crossing. "This is it!" I lowered everything

into the rocky river and crossed the slippery ground, including some deep pools with substantial current, and emerged into a banana plantation. The general direction was right but there were hundreds of paths going everywhere. I rolled towards south expecting a clear trail into the dense forest. After all, the motorbikes had gone through here, I thought. It was hard going, specially where large trees had been cut. Lifting the loaded bike over a small stump was a mayor effort. Some of these logs where above my hipps and there was a lot of undergrowth and brunches. All paths eventually terminated forcing me to retreat again and again back to the clearest path and try another place. "Gee, this is not going well!". I ventured out without the bike but had to pay attention in order to find it afterwards. After 1,5 hours I desided this was not the right place and totally soaked in sweat returned to the river and crossed back to the initial trail. I went further on, passing more wooden bridges and a second overgrown airstrip belonging to Old Paya. The path was very clear and there were several small trails leading to the right as the man had said. But "how far was the turnoff?" This is an easy question for most of us but a difficult one to answer to many. Over the years I had learned that it is also a cultural thing. Most people in the world have no concept of distance. When you ask, "how far is it from here to there?" depending on whom you ask the answers may be quite surprising. "Like, on a bicycle?", as if the distance would depend on the mode of transport. This is because for most people distance is measured in time. The distance to that path was 10 minutes. I assume by foot. But Kuna walk fast...!

In a way though it was still something most can relate to. I remembered back in PNG where the answer would have been something like "That is about 5 Kina away", Kina being their local currency and the number the usual fare in a vehicle. Here in Dollar crazy Kuna land that would surely be a flexible and ultimately useless measurement.

I ventured into most tracks, crossed the river multiple times, sometimes without the bike to check the depth and the trail ahead first and then came back and went fully loaded. They all would eventually end or had clearly not been used by the motorbike expedition. Instinctively I was evaluating every path in that way: could motorbikes have gone through here? It was pure frustration. I really had wanted to reach Colombia early. I had spent 4 hours waiting to get the passport and now had lost 5 hours in vain, pushing, lifting, dragging my bike through the jounge and still had not found the beginning of the path. I could spend a week like this. Should I go back and hire a guide? Should I stay in the village for another night and try again in the morning. I was already totally exhausted. And I feared the Senafront. I didn't want to take chances and woried the commander could

invent an excuse to keep me from going out again. I also wondered if the Sailas could get in contact with his deputy somehow and blow my lie. Should I even quit, now that I still could? No way!

That was not an option, at least not yet. In all my years of bike travels I had never gone back on my own will and only twice had I been forced to backtrack, both times at gunpoint. After all, this one was just starting. After a lengthy respite in the shade I descended to the initial rivercrossing again and pushed my bike to those last huts on the eastern edge of the village. I must have looked quite miserable since several of the Indians swinging in their hammocks jumped up and came closer "What happened?" "I am unable to find the trail!" "Five hours trying and trying and nothing!" An old man drew a map on the ground and later we made the same on a paper sheet. By now I knew every riverbend and every "palo". Just where was the damn trail? We all laughed at my disgrace and a young woman in traditional clothes came with a bunch of guinea bananas, those that melt in your mouth. I could almost feel the sugar flooding my veins. The man and three of his kids were about to go spearfishing "we go to the trail, we show you the way." I ate some more guineas and we took off, back to the familiar trail. While in the morning I hadn't seen a single person to ask now there were many, mostly familiar faces from the evening before. Coming back from their fields or from the river they all enquired why I was still there. There were friendly laughs, encouraging talks: "Finding the trail is the most difficult. Once you hit it there is no mistake until the frontierstone." It better bloody be! The kids had long harpunes and straps of elastic in one and some oldfashioned single glass face masks in the other hand. I rolled ahead so they wouldn't have to wait for me on the river or the one steep incline. Needless to say, that they caught up with me every time. And then we took the sidetrail, indeed, just next to a huge tree trunk cleanly cut with a chainsaw as if to allow a motorbike to go ahead on the main track. I had gone straight first, for an hour or so, including rivercrossing and bushbashing and all and then I had backtracked and gone into this trail as well, twice, first without, then with the bike and had decided that a motorbike would never have gone through there. After I had mentioned this to the man he replied: "but the motorbikes didn't come here! They came up on the water all the way to there", pointing at a sandbank on the opposite side of the river. "From there they started. If you go from here, you will find the trail and see the track left by their wheels in the mud".

As I was filling my waterbottles perhaps for the last time in Panamá the boys were face down legs up in the water, sometimes splashing arms and spears onto the surface. It

looked hilarious. And then: Zack! The first fish, a beautiful armsized catfish! Very impressive!

I left through the bananas and soon found the deep mark of a tire cutting a lane in the hardened earth. I imagined some archeologists finding this imprint in the distant future, a clear evidence of a direct connection and much traffic between the continents?! My blood sugar seemed good thinking nonsense again, my spirits were high, and I felt fresh like a well rested athlete.

The trail went steep up at once so that I proceeded to take the bags off and carry the stuff up in parts, when a man came walking downhill towards me. It was the man who had enquired why Martines had been so terribly angry at me and in the morning while I was having my coffee had invited me to join him to the beginning of the trail. I had to wait for the Passport. Now he was heading back from hunting with a wild piglet and a Pavón -a large turkeylike bird- in his bag. His dog dragging behind with a damaged leg from a fight with the pig. "Gee, you certainly had a more prosperous morning than me!" Before we parted he gave me details of the trail ahead: 2 long steep sections and flatter bits in between. There is one section with some views beyond the second steep bit. Most logs and trees across the trail had been cut to allow the motorbikes to pass, but some have fallen since. About 4 minutes (!?) before the frontiermarker I would pass the old car. "Make sure you take all the water you can since there is none until deep inside Colombia". I enquired about the trail on the colombian side. Is it really such a good trail as I have been told by the Senafront? "No way," he said. "At first, perhaps, but once down the mountain there are many creeks and gorges to cut across." In a conspirative tone, lowering his voice as if someone could hear us, he said: "Today you will not get to Palo de las letras, its to late. But once in Colombia you should try to reach Tulé. Its on the Cacarica and you have water and good people there. No problems. From there you need to go on perhaps to Pueblo de Indios and try to get a canoe downriver with them!"

Lifting his finger in a warning he continued: "Do avoid Bijao at all cost!!, you hear me?" "If you can, do not go there!" I had heard about Bijao, the largest settlement on the Cacarica and last place for me to reach by trails. Beyond that I would have to go by water avoiding the big atrato swamps. And I had heard that the place was dodgy. The pueblo de indios people had the motorbike expedition reported to the paramilitaries there in an attempt to prevent trouble. I heard that a substantial amount of money had changed hands in order to obtain passage; not for transport but for being let through.

Was it those guerrillas he referred to? "No! With a bicycle, alone, and downriver they will probably not bother you much." "Bijao is a black village", he said, "those people are bad and will take all your stuff!!"

I thanked him for all his advice and started to scramble up the steep dry trail in sections. I felt great. Finally, on the track I could push through knowing it was taking me into the right direction. Head down and go on. I was totally soaked, like the previous days but with no refreshing river awaiting any time soon. The trail was good to scramble on foot but hard when pushing a bike along your side. The handlebar would inevitably get tangled in the branches and vines on one side and I would stuck and scratch through the other. Although mostly cleared of large branches they had been cut at an angle high leaving pointy, sometimes sharp stumps sticking out. Some longer ones would drag under the bikebags or block them altogether. There were stones, rocks and roots all doing their best to slow me down. Over the next days I often thought of this. I had long come to the conclusion that there was nothing friendly or ideal in rough nature. It is all but harmony, nothing but an eternal struggle to prevail. Everyone and everything was in the same game and on both sides at once. Here in my little bubble I felt as if all my surroundings had come together in joined forces against me. Now that bureaucrats and Senafont were finally overcome it was nature I had to face. Every branch, every stick would tangle and block and cut. Branches went into the spokes from the strangest angles, leaves would gather in the chain and vines would catch us like lassos or traps. Roots and rocks seemed all to be in the most obstructive place, position and shape possible. And let's not even talk about the insects. There were few mosquitoes, luckily, but those were the more annoying, getting into my ears, nose and eyes. Little red ants would crawl up my legs as soon as I rested, and their bite was fierce and burning. At least the ground was dry. I didn't dare thinking of how it would be after heavy rain. Would there be leeches? By evening I had gone through both steep bits as well as the area with the views. This wasn't a lookout, but just a short area along a ridge where the dense secondary forest allowed a glimpse of the mountains beyond. And it was a fine scene in the afternoon light. There was nothing but forest; instead of a monotonous green it appeared like a colorful mosaic. Large tree crowns would stick out, particularly of the gigantic Cuipo trees that I had seen all along the way during the last days. Now, they were devoid of leaves looking a bit like Baobabs, those peculiar trees that look like someone had turned them over leaving the roots towards the sun. Some of them were in bloom, turning into a beige-brown before dropping the huge 5-winged seeds that sometimes covered the entire ground below. Undisturbed it looked like a fairy

t(r)ail. Other trees were covered in yellow or pink flowers forming strong contrasts to the green background. From the ground this was rarely possible to see, but from above and afar it was spectacular.

The main attraction at ground level were the leaf cutting ants transporting the organic material to their nests on long broad trails. More often than not we shared the trail and I kept wondering who had been first. Their road was, relatively speaking, like a multilane superhighway, smooth and clean. There was no doubt friendlier to the user. The load some of these critters carry is truly exceptional, and I kept thinking whose the bigger burden was.

But all in all, there was little room to appreciate the big and small around me. Perhaps, in retrospect, I should have stopped more often but I wanted to get as high up as possible. There would be more airmovement, perhaps it would even cool down a bit during the night. I surely noticed it getting dryer and that meant less mosquitoes. My reststops were really just moments to regain some focus, lower my heart rate and catch a breath. "Let's go!"

Indeed, in most fallen tree trunks they had cut a gap, about a meter wide to fit a motorbike or in my case a bicycle rolling through.

These had been a major hindrance on my explorations in the morning and on the trail on the day before so in a way now it was actually "easy" to move. These gaps also gave me a regular reassurance that I was still on the right trail. It felt invigorating to know that every push was worth the effort. But who had dragged a chainsaw all this way? When those motorbikers had contacted locals to plan and later execute their traverse a man by the name of Mr Pizarro had offered his services as a guide. Although from Paya I was told that his family actually originated from the Colombian side. He convinced the village council that a good trail would be a good thing. It would also allow many porters to participate during the actual traverse and earn big money. Overnighting fees, porter fees, trail clearing fees..., and that's not even considering piragua fees up to that starting spot. Apparently, a special boat had been hired and was brought upriver to Yaviza. Some day I would love to hear the real figure of how much that traverse costed. But the villagers had not been happy with the payment and demanded more. Of course. It's never going to be enough once the dollars roll. To stop these out of control demands Mr Pizarro had convinced the villagers that the trail would now serve other groups and expeditions, promising a regular flow of money for related services. They were quiet at last but people

coming behind, like me, may face high expectations when it comes to money. Mr Pizarro seems to live in Panamá city now...

At any rate, I was thankful for those gaps which doesn't mean that without the lifting over logs it was an easy trail. If there was one reoccurring thought, then it was the question of how in gods name had they gone up through there; 17 helping people or not... it was ridiculous. I passed a number of spartanic camps where people had slept. Had these been the stages of the motorbikers? Essentially it consisted of 4 sticks about shoulder high on each corner of a rectangle. Two slightly higher sticks stood in the middle of the shorter sides and were connected with a stick-on top. There were several such arrangements on each camp. When people want to sleep there a tarp is placed over the connecting stick and the corners are tied to the 4 corner sticks, resulting in a great roofing. These places were all full of rubbish and I didn't want to sleep on the trail. By the time it got dark I stopped in a dryer area on the ridge and went a few metres off the trail. There I cleared an area just big enough to fit my tent and made camp. I was not only soaked in sweat but also pretty dirty. I could'nt afford to use water to rinse my leggs and feet but I also didn't want to soak my sleeping gear in salty sweat and mudd. I try to keep my gear in good conditions, so they last longer. Thinking it would be warm enough I placed the insulation matt on the tents floor and my big multiuse plastik sheet (really just an enormous heavy-duty garbage bag) over the tents floor and matt. No matter how dirty I was and how much I sweated it would all just stay on the bag. I drunk about 1,5 litres of water, remaining with about 1 for the next day. What I brought was way too little. I surely underestimated how much liquid I would loose in my sweat. And I wasn't in any mood to cook either. I just ate two squishy bananas and a packet of salty crackers while trying to catch a few mosquitoes that always slipp into the tent. This less as food, but just to sleep in peace. Once allone I lay flat and tried to cool down by staying still. Whenever I do this after normal days on the saddle I pretty much fall asleep on the spot. Not this time. My heart was still running crazy and I kept sweating for a while to go. When I finally dried I felt some strange itchyness on my leggs. Ticks! I searched wherever I could get them off and squeezed them between the ballpen ball and a hard plastik. There were docents, mostly still searching for a good spot to digg in, so I would feel them crawling about. It kept me busy for quite a while until I thought I had them all. This would become my routine on any stop for the next days, perfectioning the squeezing part from ballpen to round plastik stick to simply teeth, which was fastest and most effective: none of those crawled back to life.

Except for a few birds I had seen no animals, but this day finished with a deepening concert of insects and birds which after dark slowly come to an end as well. What about those Jaguars and wild pigs then?

There were a lot of animal sounds nearby rattling in the leaves and cracking branches. People have often asked me if I wasn't afraid of snakes or large animals to come to the tent. The truth is: No! Simply because for most animals we are a reason to escape. Why would a snake come and attack a human? Of course there are exceptions but with no Bears or Elephants around I felt pretty relaxed and eventually fell asleep. Along my travels I have had some wild encounters though. Most had been with ants invading my tent or bikebags so here I had taken care by searching the ground for ant routes. If you place your tent on one of them you might end up changing location later on. They simply do outnumber us and will win, although they usually are more of a nuisance rather than a threat. The worse animal encounter I ever had was in a most memorable occasion in the mountains of Kirgystan. I had found this beautiful site on a grassy riverside with a stunning mountain backdrop. The noise of the stream was hypnotical, and I was sleeping when I woke at something banging into the side of the tent. There was a deepening shriek sound and something large scratching on the tent trying to get in. I gave it a strong kick. Gee this was heavy! It bounced back, slipping in between the two layers of the tent and getting across to the other side within this gap. What is this? The sound was neither cat nor dog and the kicking seemed to infuriate it even more. As it had crossed it essentially crawled over me, leaving a wet trail. I screamed to scare it off, kicked... Nothing. The thing continued scratching and trying to enter from all sides, until it found the space at the entrance where I had kept shoes and water and food under the awning. In Canada one should never do that to avoid attracting bears, but here? With my headtorch I looked through the screen of the entrance door and a little extremely cute pointy white face was looking back. At first, I thought of a porcupine, but so big? Then it went on to scratch the tent's fabric. It wasn't afraid of me or the light or the noise. I gave it another kick and it fell onto my 5 liter pet water container. To my surprise it started wrestling that bottle in the most obsessive way, making shrill noises, scratching, biting. Oh wow. I don't like pet bottles either, but this guy took it to a whole new level. I took the chance and slipped out passed it but soon it saw me and attacked. It was a large black feline animal with some white stripes and a small head, totally out of proportion to the body. The pointy feline teeth were scary and the claws dangerously sharp. The bottle was in pieces and everyone knows how tough those pet bottles are. As a last resort I took my bicycle shoes, which have

a metal bit, and started hitting its little head as it would try to get closer. Bang, bang, left, right. After about 10 strong blows I finally knocked him out. What now? I grabbed it by the back digging both hands into a beautiful soft fur, took a few steps to the water's edge and tossed it into the river, about half way in. I guessed it to be about 20 or 30kg! As it hit the water with a big splash it woke and swam back to my shore about 50m downstream running back towards me. What? Luckily it hit another pet bottle which he wrestled and shredded. "If I just stay put it may go the other way", I thought and eventually went back into the tent. It was quiet for about 15 minutes. My adrenaline had gone down when it bumped back onto the tent, this time scratching and ripping the outer screen. I kicked it again and it got tangled in some tent ropes. It wrestled with one tent corner, scratching, biting, screaming as I resumed my shoe hitting business, knocking him out again. I gave it a few extra hits and this time threw it into a much narrower section of the creek, hoping it would emerge on the opposite side. It didn't come back, but I had my problems to relax and sleep much more. Next morning, as I was packing my stuff, wondering where I would carry my water now, this farmer walks by with a huge gilded grin on his face. "How did you sleep?" I don't speak Russian, so I made a little pantomime about the night's events. He pointed to his head, mimicking a hat of soft fur. It had been a badger, most vicious creature I have come across!

I woke to another birds' concert, without actually seeing any, packed and moved on. My plan was to reach the border marker and have a rest there. Needless to say, that I felt sore, not the legs, not even the shoulders or arms. They had been sore the morning in Paya, but my hands and fingers. They were cramped and stiff and I wondered how I would get hold to the bike at all. But after a while it was all back to normal. It never stops to amaze me how fast our body gets back to functioning order.

The trail went up and down and there were several dry gorges to scramble in and out, until totally out of the blue I stood in front of this old Chevrolet carcass. Had it been an UFO it would not have been any more out of place. I was surprised even when I had been expecting to find it. Interestingly it is actually pointing towards Panamá, even when that expedition had been from Panamá to Colombia...

A few minutes later I reached a small clearing around the frontier stone Palo de las letras. This was it! Colombia, I made it! I took the obligatory pictures of this memorable occasion, happy but knowing that there were still challenges ahead. I took a rest in the shade nearby, drinking almost all the remaining water and resorting to some energy gue

a friend had given me about 6 months earlier. I don't like those things: they taste artificial, well, it can't get much more processed than that..., and they are expensive. So back then I took them reluctantly and had them buried deep in my bags. But now, they worked magic, probably because they turn out to be a caffeine bomb! I swallowed one and was rolling downhill on Colombian soil. You would need to be dead if that didn't give you a boost.

And at first the path was wider. The first few 100m were more of an extended camp, with those shelter sticks everywhere. There were many empty 20 Liter barrels and lots of rubbish scattered around, mostly of energy drinks. The trail followed the top of the ridge for a while and passed several such camp areas through a much dryer forest type than it had been on the Panamá side. Soon it went steadily downhill into denser forest until with relieve I reached a creek in a bendy gorge. Having run out of water long before, reaching a running stream, even a small one like this, was a big event. As I drunk kneeling in the water and gulping down several mouthfull I realized that with water I pretty much was again able to go for several days if nessesary. I had made it to the other side; I just needed to get through it all the way now. I sat there for some time, drinking, rinsing my muddy shoes and socks, when a noise came rushing closer. It wasn't from a specific spot but like a wall closing in. First came a cold wave, surprisingly chilly and then heavy rain, making a deaphening sound on the leaves above. It was pure pleasure to sit there for several minutes until the heavy shower passed. I filled my bottles and went out of the creek again following the trail which soon decended into the same creek. Hm!?. The trail wasn't clear now: there was a steep track going up from the gorge and I followed it for a while without the bike, thinking it would be very hard to go through there. And what if it just cuts across and leads to the same creek further downstream? I went through all my map material and realized that none had this creek mentioned. One panamá map, until then pretty useless, made me think that, whichever this creek was, it had to flow into the Cacaricas. It can not go back to panamá, surely, and the archshaped mountainrange of the Palo de las letras made sure it would hit the Cacaricas eventually. Besides, that lane in the sand, was it not made by a motorbike? It could have been, or not..., who knows. I know that I was seeing what I wanted to see. Here the lane in the sand, almost at waterlevel, there clear remains of recent flush-floods...!?!? So really the only important indicator was the direction the water flowed, here just a trickle, there a huge deep pool, here narrow between rocks, there wide and sandy. There was no rubbish at all, which made me wonder more than once if it was a good idea after all. The course was extremely sinuous. On a map it would have

been like standing on a spot, but I was overall sure it would get me where I wanted, eventually.

And it did. All of a sudden, behind a last right bent there was a much larger river, shallow and rocky and cristal clear water and beyond a large neat pile of red woodloggs. Immediately downriver, also on the oposite side was a small clearing and a shelter made out of a black tarp spanned over some sticks! I couldn't hear any noise and there seemed no fire. As I crowled up to the camp leaving the bike down at the water I called out loud so not to surprise or scare anyone. That's when I see this young man sitting there and when he saw me. I am not sure what his first thought was, but it might have been "What on earth is that?" Judged by his googled eyes he might have been entirely unable to think anything.

For me on the other hand, I was very happy to see him and more so when he said that this was Tulé and the river I had crossed indeed the Cacarica!

I told him who I was and my story and then we went to bring the bike up togethe. It took a while for him to process it all, as we sat there overlooking the river and camp.

Later a coupple came along carying a rifle which had a once sawn-off run welded back on. They wanted to go hunting but then stayed chatting and expected rain too.

I immediately was allowed to stay the night. The camp was empty but for these three people. The man and the boy worked in the forest and the woman, the boys antie, cooked. They slept in a basic camp a bit further in the forest while I would be allone at the river. As we talked I kept removing ticks from my leggs. It was ridiculous... specially when I noticed that they had none. "What's the trick? How come they bite only me?". "I don't know. That is so weird", the boy said. "We never have them!"

I had a refreshing bath in the river with soap and all. And then I went to put the tent up. Usually I do that first thing, but today everything was different. And I was very tired, so with all the chitchat I had actually forgotten. By the time I got onto it the buggs were out, and they were many. When I slipped into the tent I was all bitten over, and had not eaten anything, but there was no way to cook either. On the other hand, I was very happy to be on the Cacaricas and eager to go on in the morning. As I snoozed off it started to rain quite heavily so I felt good about the tarp above my tent. I also couldn't be bothered to worry about a muddy track in the morning. "I'm in Tulé! That's all what counts."

I got out early and started to sort my cooking stuff, heating water for a much-anticipated coffee. My cooking and food bag had been completely flooded, who knows when, and my bottle of Molasse was cracked, all resulting in a black brew. I salvaged the upper,

dryer half of the spaghetti and had to throw the black, mildewy bottom half away. The rice was mostly black too. I made a huge soup of everything still edible, with lots of salt and condiments and washed the panierback as well as I could, packed and said good by to the three temporary inhabitants of Tulé. They stood back, and waved farewell as I crossed the river and took the trail a few metres downstream from the creek I had arrived, apparently called Tulé. The Tulé were a tribe that once inhabited the area upriver from here. They are believed to be the ancestors of today's Kuna and Wounaan Indians. There are no Tulé here or anywhere else today. Some may have been assimilated by the Wounaan of the Pueblo de Indios (Indian village), the settlement I was hoping to arrive now. The people in the camp had told me that the trail was clear, and I just had to follow the mule footprints. Mules were used to haul the woodlogs down to the river and thus were brought in and out often. The logs are then carried as rafts on the river, whenever there was enough water. I had myself contemplated that option, but there was too much water to walk down and too many rocks, so I followed their advice, even when the trail was said to be hilly and made a big bow away from the river.

Although pretty clear and well used the mules' footprints in the hardened mud made it actually harder to roll and walk on the track. So I had my head down, pushing along when suddenly behind a bend I came to a stop and looked into this huge wet snout and curious globy eyes. The mules' enormous ears turned towards me like satellite dishes screening the air. I know little about horses or mules, but I know to recognize their mood: ears moving around: attention, something is unusual; ears pointing backwards, flat: not good, don't like it, might bite or kick. This mule was curious, on guard but mostly intrigued of what I and the bike were. She was enormous, with very long legs, so that the black man sitting on top in a bright yellow t-shirt was way above me. He too was staring at me with large surprised, yellowish eyeballs with a scary red undertone. I could see he was nervous, more than me perhaps, even when he had the rifle, across his legs, touching the mules' neck unconsciously pointing towards my feet. It was one of those images that burn into one's memory. They say that our entire life passes in a flash of images when we pass away. Not sure how they know that..., but I know that if this is true, this particular picture will be among them. It was the mule who broke the long silence venting her nostrils in a loud blow. I think cows and horses and apparently mules too, do that to get the scent bouncing back at them. It was me who spoke first. "Oh, hello". Actually, in English!!! And you need to imagine this in the strongest British accent possible, as far as possible for a German, that is! Perhaps I once watched too much Monty Python. It would fit well

into a silly sketch, and I guess it didn't matter what I said. The man started to stotter in appology: "I don't belong to any of them!", he said. "I just want to make a living on my own and don't want to be a burden to anyone. I am not with any of them, so I need to do my best."

"Yes, and I just got out of Tulé and want to reach the indian village later today." We both were trying to explain to each other what we were doing. I think we both relaxed and then talked for a bit. He was heading to the camp himself and was to return to Bijao (!!!) later that morning. "So how are you going to find the trail?" he asked. "Suppose I just follow your footsteps", I said thinking this to be a genuinely smart plan. "Be carefull. There are many trails. I come back soon and will be watching out!"

As I continued I remembered the warnings about Bijao. "Avoid at all cost!", they had said. Those redish eyes and serious look... I wasn't sure if I really wanted him to be "watching out". So, I walked extra fast in an ever denser jounge with many short ups and downs through muddy creeks, until there were many trails into all directions. I checked them all out and opted for the widest and most used. At some point it looked as if there were two paralell trails: had there been a car here? They soon disappeared as I scrambled up a very steep incline each bag at a time, for several 100mts. Up there I continued for an hour or so, along recently fallen Balsam trees. These enormous trees have a very dark red colored wood. When the tree has been felled they are cut into standard sized loggs, by chainsaw and people carry them out by mule, one logg dragging on each side leaving two paralell lanes on the ground. Not a car after all! As I passed many of such logging sites all trails ended in nothing. I tried many and besides being shocked about the amount of balsam I was also quite lost again. I had an idea of where the right trail might have gone off, so I pushed back further and further when I hear this man shouting. What to do now? Do I shout back? Do I hide? I didn't do anything and just walked on when out of the blue this man in bright yellow shirt stands on the trail. It was the muleman, who, without the mule was a head shorter than me. "I thought you are lost and followed your trail. The mule refused to come!" We loughed about the mule and about me and the fact that I had lost the trail shortly after we had met earlier. I couldn't believe it: all those steep bits, for nothing!?

We got back to the mule who, I think was annoyed after all the waiting. To make matters worse for her, the man, I will call him Gabriel, offered to put some of my load on the animal. I would perhaps be able to keep up with them and avoid getting lost again. It was a difficult choice. He could just run off with my stuff! Was he not from Bijao? And where

was the gun? He had left it and some foodstuffs for the people of the camp, who actually worked for him. "I will not robb you. I am not paramilitary or narco. I don't join them, so I work in the forest to not depend on the government." Now I understood his earlier appologies. "Although, I like your bags very much!" he added as he strapped the heavier backpaniers onto the beast. The mule was not amused, pointing her ears backwards as I tried to touch her. "Better don't do that. She is angry now!" "What's her name?", I asked, immediately wondering if that was a stupid question. It was! "Name? We don't give names to animals. Besides, she is just borrowed from a friend. She only wants to go home!". I remained with the smaller and lighter front bags only, attached to the bikes rear rack; at first it was so much easier. And we went fast. "If I ever do this again", I thought, "its going to be with a mule". But I would give her a name. May be Fasty, for that animal just went!, up and down over stones and loggs, as if nothing was there, while I was soon puffing to keep up. Gabriel, leading the way in his gumboots must habe been jogging but would regularly stop and wait for me. Wherever possible we talked, although, mostly it was me asking him stuff: "What did you mean by you are not part of any of them?", "Why do you cut only those red trees and leave these other big once standing?" We were passing another enormous Cuipo tree, of which I had seen so many on both sides of the border. "Why has everyone warned me about Bijao. What is the problem there?", and "Where are we going anyway? For all I know, you could be taking me to China. I wouldn't have a clue!"

Communication was difficult, walking in a row with a mule between us. And he would talk to the front so I could'nt hear well. "China? I don't think I could take you to China!" Did he get that I was speaking methaphorically? "I am going back to Bijao, but it will be late then". "Bijao is not so bad. If you don't mess with the paramilitaries or the cartel they don't have a reason to bother you". Could they still bother me? "Probably not. You are going out. They may check your papers."

"You do have papers!?"

"Who are 'they' anyway?" The paramilitaries had arrived in the area many years ago and had build what could be called an alternative government there. They would demand payment from people who had some sort of business as a form of revolution tax to cover their expenses. "But what businesses are there?" I never got an answer, but later I put things together. They had a huge cut in the migrants' transfers and all the businesses associated with that time: river transport up the Cacaricas, overnight fees, those who sold them food and those who guided them through the jounge to the border. Since the

migrants have moved further east due to safety concerns and to costly transfer so seem to have most paramilitaries. It seems to good a business to let it go. And in recent times it seems tourists are asked passage fees... "So, do they live in Bajío then?" "Yes, off course. Many join them to avoid problems". But he hadn't. Instead he would work in the forest, which really ment he would cut balsam, the only valuable tree there. It payed for his family and he could send his children to schools in town, as far as Turbo. That seemed important to him "so later they can leave if they want!".

And what about the giant trees, those with no leaves? "That wood is useless and will rot in a matter of months. Its soft like cardboard".

I had been told that the walk would take some 4 hours from Tulé. It was already afternoon and I might have lost 2 hours on my little sidetrip. And now I felt as if I had run a few marathons and was still jogging. "Are we there yet?" I kept falling back, specially at the steep bits. It had been raining and some areas were muddy washouts too narrow to push the bike through. The bloody mule just walked through this at a constant speed. My backtire was flat but I didn't dare stopping to fix it. I was afraid Gabriel would be gone or would get tired of waiting and leave me with my stuff there. I just went on. I still wonder how I even managed. I was totally exhausted soaked in sweat and rain and mudd. It must have been sheer desperation that kept me going. And more often would I not see the mule or the yellow shirt. "So now they are gone!" But soon enough I cought up to the mule standing on the trail while Gabriel was somewhere in the bushes. While I would catch my breath, he would come back and resume the lead. In one such occasion he sais: "I have got the shits. Very bad!" "I probably would too, but I am too tired!". I think it was the first time he smiled. "Are we there yet?" We were still 3 hours from Bijao. "So we are going to China!"

As we walked along there was noice of helicopters somewhere in the distance. Its hard to know how far and where but it went on for a while.

There had been a turnoff earlier that lead to a place called Embarcadero. The motorbikes had been placed on boats there and continued on the water. According to Gabriel no one was around now so we went on and on and on. The muddy steep uphill were terrible. I fell several times and the bike would follow. How long could I still keep up with these two? The trail got actually smaller as the forest dissapeared and was replaced by very dense bush. This certainly had been a clearcut and the regrowth had swallowed the trail. I could see nothing but a narrow trail which then opened into a recent cutting side. Trees and branches were all over the place, so much so that even the mule couldn't pass. "You

try to go straight ahead" said Gabriel pointing to an area beyond the cutting. "I'll see you over there." And off he went in a totally different direction. "Oh well, there go my bags", I thought to myself, almost relieved. I went under, over and in between trees and branches of all sizes. Looking at this mess I realized that the damage made by the Balsamo cutters was minimal. Yes, there were no large Balsamo trees left, but the forest and its species remained largely the same. And who was cutting here? Was this not supposed to be a reserve or even a national park? Back in the forest the mule joined and close behind Gabriel caught up too. "You could go from here to the indian village in about 10 minutes or we go on to Bijao. It will take another hour, perhaps more." By then it would be dark, and I knew I could not keep up any longer. We went off the trail a bit, passed some Banana plants and then we saw the huts down below next to the river. Gabriel stopped at a spot out of sight from the village and unpacked the mule. "There will be boats going downstream in the morning" he said. "Don't show your money. The indians get crazy when they see money." "If you can't get a boat get to Bijao early. I have a boat and can take you downriver for the price of the petrol". He pointed to a trail above the indian village that would lead to Bijao in a few hours, more straight forward than the one he would follow. "Good!" As he got ready to go on we drank the last water and ate the last saltcrackers I had. I really wanted to pay him, knowing that nothing really could pay for his help on this very long trek. I was well aware that I would never have picked the right trails among the many we passed. But how much was appropriate? The eternal dilemma: How much shows the appreciation without spoiling the moment and trust that was built? Is it even o.k. to pay, to reduce it all to money? And what did US \$ mean out here anyway? I mumbled about all this to him as he said again, that he didn't expect anything at all since it had been his way, regardless. In the end I offered what I had at hand, 20\$, of which he reluctantly, genuinely uneasy took 10\$, and left backtracking to the trail with the nameless mule behind.

My trail went along a ridge. To the left was grassland with grazing Zebu cattle above which the forest was being cleared. That's where I had scrambled between logs earlier. To the right it went steep down to the river which made a bent around the large village that went up the hill on the opposite side of the river. As I walked along I caught the attention of the people below and everyone who wasn't already in or near the river gathered near the water, waving and making signs to come down.

The crowd was extatic but not overwhelming and I was led to a roofed sitting area passing topless women and naked kids at the muddy rivers edge. The gathering area

seemed male only and I answered the usual questions as I sunk, exhausted onto a sitting bench. The atmosphere was friendly and appreciative of the effort they all well knew I had made. "Yes, you could get a piragua to go downriver to Puente Amerika", where the Cacaricas joins the mighty Atrato. "As a passenger, rather than express?" Suddenly there was no boat likely to depart for days! "Its easter!"

I could pitch the tent, probably, but in any case, I had to report with the tribes' head, the Cacique. I left the bike at the shelter while we walked among the open huts to the top of the village. The hut style was much the same as in Unión the Chocó, large flat open areas on stilts, although all in square rather than the traditional round shape and mostly metal roofs. There was a large water tank next to every hut mostly decorated with some drawing and an inscription saying, "Donated by Oxfam!". There had been the exact same ones in Paya village back in Panamá, and, also like there, these were all empty. Few people had remained in their huts, but now most would look and great as I passed. Many huts were accessed by ladders carved of single tree trunks, something that I have encountered pretty much everywhere in the world where I have gone. Certain things seem universal. Among them would also be alcoholic beverages. Humans everywhere tend to ferment what is at hand to get pissed. But the scale of this village's booze operation was quite something: it took a central spot between the bulk of huts and the hillside leading up to the wooden school house that overlooks the village. It was a large roofed area, perhaps 5 or 8 times the size of a normal hut. There were presses and collection pools and fermentor tanks, and a sweet-sour smell. Of what I saw I assume they used sugarcane water as the main ingredient, but it seemed to be off season for whatever brew they produced. And then again: perhaps I am just making this up and in reality, they made Panela, a caramelized sugar cake typical for the mountains of Colombia's central region.

At the last huts leading up the trail I was introduced to the Cacique, a short man with a fake smile and dark colored hair with white hair roots and another member of the council who happened to live in the hut opposite to the Caciques'. The man who had brought me was the secretary. Apparently, each village had such a council, and, like in all other villages it soon came down to the money. "Usually..." I was told, "...we have the custom here that tourists rent the entire canoe to come up river or go down." "What do you mean? Do you get a lot of people around here?", I asked. "Well, you might have heard of the motorbike expedition. We organized their way out downriver. Now there will come many more!" "Just this morning two hikers left for Panamá, one from Spain." "You must have

seen them, they left early today." I was surprised. Had they been hiding as I passed? Had they been on another trail, or were they lost? Or was this guy just making up the story?

"It may well be a custom here to provide such special service to visitors," I said in the friendliest of tones, "but I assume it also comes at a very special price, which I am unlikely to be able to afford!" "But its no problem Sir, I shall go on tomorrow by trocha towards Bijao hoping there will be someone willing to take me as a passenger."

I knew it would be tough to go on even after a night's rest. I was close to collaps and could already hardly walk, never mind dragging the bike along. I was still secretly hoping that I could go by boat as passenger from here. "It is also custom here that visitors pay 30US \$ per night to stay in the village..." Shit! "They all do!" "Oh, that's a real shame" I said looking at the darkening sky. "I will have to go on then and pitch the tent somewhere outside the village! I am quite tired, but what can we do. Customs are customs!" They all seemed surprised, staring me over in my dirty clothes and shredded shoes. "Since you are leaving tomorrow you can pitch the tent in the village, perhaps under those stilts of the unfinnished hut!" They refered to the one near where I had left the bike, and soon I was pitching the tent under the watchfull eyes of a huge crowd of bystanders. I have never managed to get used to crowds even though I understand their curiosity. For some of them this might be the best entertainment for months to come. As the tent stood there the inevitable question came: "How much does it cost?" It keeps surprising me that those with the least material possessions are the ones who reduce everything to money. How much is the stove, how much the bike, the bags, how much did my trip cost so far. What does a number mean about its real value, emotional or practical? No one had ever asked me about the price of my supersized extrastrong garbage bag. It was priceless to me, like everything else I had dragged across the Darién. So, I somehow answered vaguely like "I have had it for a very long time", or, "that was a gift", or "I found it", which was mostly true. Eventually they lost interest and after a refreshing bath in the murky river I crawled into the tent to escape the mosquitoes. I had asked a jounge man for water since the riverwater was undrinkable. He filled the bottle with cleared and boiled riverwater and I wondered why those tanks were not being used.

Sleeping was hard here since people, specially youth, would walk passed pointing their torches towards the tent. Many would talk loudly, shout across the village and talk for hours under that roofed meeting place. I wonder why none of the elder said anything. The talk was about fights among them and about girls in the village. I kept wondering if they

actually wanted to draw my attention because they spoke spanish instead of their usual tribal language.

Long before sunrise I woke to some silly screams towards my tent: "Express to Panamá. We are leaving now to Bijao, boat to Panamá..." among loughs. "Are you going to Panamá? Ha, ha, ha." The only good thing about this was that I got up at once and packed my stuff. A man with black hair (he had forgotten to die his eyebrows) and a white shawl around his neck came up to me to announce that he would be going downriver after breakfast. He had space for me and the bike. Excellent I thought and proceeded to finally repair the flat tire, surprised that neither tire nor tube were shredded. "It will cost you only 150US \$" he said, genuinely thinking he was announcing some great news. From Gabriel, whom after all I had learned to trust, I knew that the total cost would be around 30US \$, this still being a grossly inflated extra price. "You know as well as I that this is not a fair price. You could have had the fair money in your pocket, now it will stay in mine." Other people had come, and I think the man was embarrassed. Actually, I was looking forward to another tough day on the trail. Another battle to be won, another test to overcome. In a strange way I was all smiles as I rolled off, uphill saying goodbye to a perplexed crowd. Finally, I thanked the Cacique as I passed his hut, ignoring him asking whether I had any breakfast. I doubted he was going to invite me.

Another man popped up at my side, a copy of the Cacique, just with naturally white hair who said he would take me up to the intersection, the only possible spot where I could lose the track. Earlier I had noticed large letters on a house near the gathering spot. It said: 'No a las minas en tierra Ancestral!' "What does that mean? Is there a mining project?", I asked the Caciques twin brother. "No, that's referring to antipersonal landmines! There used to be many here, placed by the paramilitaries." "Where?" "Like on the trail you came yesterday...", he said. "But there won't be any around here. Yesterday I walked the trail to Bijao and back!" Although called by everyone 'pueblo de indios' (indian village), they referred to it as 'Pueblo Ancestral' and their land, including the wast area I had passed that was beeing cleared is called 'tierra Ancestral'.

The trail starts as a ridiculously steep incline. Where other people would put some sort of switchbacks here it went strait up and I never understood why the trails would not just go around the summits. No! Just straight up and down the other side. Bag by bag I scrambled with all my stuff (the man helped me with a bag as he went up) and soon he pointed towards a narrow, trail roughly following the ridge. "Keep high, don't go either way down or you will not get to Bijao." The walk was supposed to take 2 hours. After some 4 to 5

long hours I was descending fast and soon reached a river with a hut in a bent and a black lady sweeping and burning leaves on a sandy riverbank.

"Is this Bijao?" I asked from the edge of the water. Her response, in India, would have been a headwaggle where you never know the real meaning of the answer. I didn't know but I was also not going to climb back up the hill. It had to be! I checked the depth of the water and remembered that I had hardly taken fotos, much less of me. So, I asked the lady who knew better than me how to operate the phonecamera. She took a video which shows a hunched wreck of myself with a huge smile. It also shows a shining clean bicycle floating and rolling along. We made it!!

A few more people came to the waters edge as they learned who I was, and I learned that Bijao was some 20minutes away. But on this side of the river it was flat all the way to Bijao and the edge of the big Atrato swamps. The people were curious and genuinely appreciative of my effort. With big eyes they went over my bike nodding in approval. Besides the friendly lady whom I had seen first and her son there was a young busty and lightly clad lady doing things in the hut and a man with crippled feet who had come wobbling to where I stood. While his leggs were fine his feet didn't point forward but were somehow twisted. It wasn't polio but some freak accident. He would easily tip if he didn't have a tree or a stick as support. Next to the large wooden hut was an enormous pile of beercases with empty bottles. It was the mans ranch, but obviously also a place to drink and party, judged by two large loudspeaker boxes next to a veranda on the backside. Considering the skimpy garments of the younger lady, the place might have been much more than all that.

I enquired to the man about the track to Bijao and told him about my plans to further get to the Atrato. "You could easily ride to Bijao and there are many boats going from there. But if you are not in a hurry we can ask a man who will go down from here later today. He will be dragging wood, so it will take much longer." "How much are you willing to pay?" I told him that time wasn't an issue as long as I arrived and that 30US \$ would probably be a very good offer. A man shouldering a boatsengine came and after the usual chit chat the man asked him on my behalf. We converted into colombian pesos, resulting in slightly more than 80.000. "If you really have no timerestriction then I take you!". We agreed and would start a few hours later because there was another lady heading out. As I spread my wet stuff on a grazy spot to dry I unpacked my cooker to prepare a last soup I had kept. "How much did that cooker cost?" among astonished comments of its good flame. The young lady observed the situation as she walked passed from the river and

came back with a bowl of beans and a large cup of limonade. Those beans, cooked to perfection with a creamy cheesy sauce were, no doubt, the most delicious beans I ever ate. And probably ever will eat. You need to be hungry, have felt miserable for a bit and be in exactly this spot and mood to taste that. To feel that. I remembered that terrible Senafront man in Paya and his question of why I wanted to go my way. In a way it is so that things taste like this, so that a shower becomes something special, a dry safe spot to sleep really can be appreciated. And never mind a soft bed: that's just heaven!

As I sat there very happy with myself a large canoe roared down the river and stopped at the hut. A small group of people came up, among them the man with the white scarf. He was surprised and came to see what I was doing. "I take you now, for 30\$. We go immediately" he said. The rancher looked and smiled as I replied in the most exaggerated friendliness I could fake: "Sir. I would rather swim through the swamp and drown before I do business with you. Up in Pueblo Ancestral you were ready to bleed me thinking that I had no options." I didn't blame him for trying, one just needs to know when and when not. And perhaps keep a certain balance in your demands.

I think the rancher liked the fact that I had kept to my agreement with his friend, so we spend the remaining time on his veranda speaking about different things. Other men had joined, and the ladies would come and go in between shores to listen in. We talked about the trail and the fact that few, if any people were using it now. "They now all go across the gulf of Urabá and straight onto the trocha." Why? What was true about the terrible stories I had heard? Of people being robbed, even killed? "Those were crazy times. There would be 50 or more people per day trying to get across to Panamá." He would accommodate the smaller groups in this hut until a larger one was built.

He admitted of actually locking them inside the 10m square room in order to hide them. From whom?? Then, with a guide, they would go in large groups to the border. "Ah, we would charge them for everything!" He would make a million just for sitting in his hammock "connecting" people. "We knew they were carrying a lot of money and we took it all. Everyone here was having a Bonanza." The paramilitaries had fixed prices for a right to pass. Many had to go back, who knows how, and would return with more money. As he told this he was all smiles and not a hint of remorse. "Those people are escaping from misery, leaving their families and homes for an uncertain future." I told him that many had entire clans or villages chipping in, hoping they would make it to a better life and perhaps pay something back. "People are enslaving themselves, literally selling family members to collect that money that you took from them!". He didn't agree: "Oh no! Those

were well trained people: professionals, cultivated, rich people. They just had to go to Turbo and have money wired to them. They would come back with more money each time." I was at a loss. People see what they want to see. It got so much that people would be heading out in bad shape. And many didn't do it. "These were no bush people, but from cities. They just payed without a clue of where to go or what to do out here." Now it was over. The word had spread and the Cacaricas was a no-go zone, so that even the paramilitaries had mostly left. It occurred to me that when it came to being a parasite these people had not learned even the very basics: keep your host alive!! Even ticks knew that! It was a strange coincidence that while we talked there came a news message in the radio reporting that one of the heads of the gulf cartel (clan del golfo) had been killed in an earlier raid just across the Katios National Park. Wow. That must have been the helicopter noise we had heard with Gabriel the previous day! There seemed to be a whole array of operating criminal groups east of here and I was told that the gulf cartel had now specialized on migrants collecting large sums of money. Nowadays there was reports of migrants being used as drugmules across the border. They would be caught and made an "offer": Equipped with GPS they had to carry a certain load across the border to a predetermined spot where they would be held accountable for the merchandise. Failing to deliver would mean certain death; so did refusing the offer.

I kept wondering why, if everyone appeared to know, refugees were still taking the panama-colombia route. Could their reasons to leave home really outweigh this?

With migrants avoiding the Cacaricas, and the paras moving location there was hope tourists would provide a new source of money. According to this man the motorbike expedition had shown that. "Those guys payed a lot to get out of here." he said. According to him, as many as 80 people had been clearing the trail and helped bringing the bikes down from the border and to the Embarcadero point. "80? Are there so many people in Pueblo Ancestral?", I asked. "Make it 50, whatever. They all got a daily salary at the end. Hundreds of dollars each." According to him here too they were told that the trail would attract more people and ensure further income in order to stop further demands of money. The motorbike story ended in a huge drinkout. Apparently within days the money was gone. I remain shocked about this. Yes, at this stage I too just wanted to get out, but with all the planning and preparation of that expedition would it not have been possible to leave a meaningful legacy? Could that money not have been used to build, say a medical post? Or a pool to clear riverwater and a watertower to provide it through those tanks? There were endless projects, all better than just handing out money for a drinking orgie.

We loaded the boat and left without the lady in the hope she would be waiting somewhere downriver.

Although deep the going was slow due to many narrow bents and lots of logs and trees and driftwood blocking the river. There must be huge floods here to carry all that debris downriver. We often scraped over logs acting like a fulcrum as the boat moved like a lever swing.

As the lady and her daughters came on board the canoe was fast filling with water. It was more of a floating pool than a boat. The boatsman took a rag and pressed it into some of the biggest gaps stopping the water rushing in somehow. We went on passing a number of people high above on the banks, walking or on horses. They were very black, shining in the sun. I must say they all were very impressive, very tall and muscular with beautiful features. Women all had very elaborate headdresses with long, thin braids, that were again building elaborate arrangements. Some, especially young girls had shiny appendices attached to the braids. This was a headdressers dreamworld.

From the rivers perspective Bijao is very small but with a lot of canoes, many of them fine dugouts. I didn't really venture out that much as I tried to keep low to avoid the paramilitaries attention while our boatsman went in search of another boat to go. "I really would like to leave this one here and have it repaired", he said.

Meanwhile I noticed a small hut across the river that sold fresh sweet bread. People would come to the opposite watersedge and place their order. Then the bread would be passed across the water by a lady submerged at shoulderheight. At 1000 pesos per piece I asked if she would sell me two for a Dollar, the only type of money I carried. "What can we do with one dollar? Even 5 would still be useless to change anywhere!" The lady in my boat bought herself 4 and gave me half. It was delicious!

We resumed our journey in the pool boat as the boatman and one of the girls would take turns scooping water out. At the last hut, under a shelter, a white man with long hair sat in a prime observation spot. Among the black people of Bijao he was totally out of place. Somehow, I thought him to be a paramilitary keeping control over the river.

Compared to panamá this river ride was much slower, inspite of much more water there was simply too much drift wood. Occasionally I had to use a long pole to force the boat into a sharp bent. Everyone in the boat seemed to know exactly when to push and from which spot, except me.

The narrow deep riverflow gave way to the swamp. It was one of the more bizzar things I have come across. There was so much driftwood accumulated that an elevated canal had

formed while water would also rush through the logs away from the canal and down to the swamps waterlevel, perhaps 30cm below. Eventually the levels were the same and we dragged on ground more than once. In one occasion I jumped out of the boat to help pushing but sunk beyond my hips into the mudd. And the pole was useless too. This swamp must be the least hospitable place I have come across. There was a lot of green around, yes, but one could not move properly, even on a boat. There were a number of buggs bothering us, specially a type of marshfly large and black that wouldn't hurt when stinging but took a lot of blood and started itching soon after. Everyone was busy catching those for the entire trip. We met a few other canoes coming upriver, either full of supplies or people. And then we reached a number of logs joined to a snake-like raft that followed the sinuous river through the swamp in between spiky palms. Men, deep in the mudd would push them along sometimes climbing onto the logs pushing with poles. We passed one large wood-snake just to bump into the next and the next. There was so much wood flowing down this river I was unable to count or even estimate. Balsam wood is so dense, it doesn't float, so between the red balsam, other lighter logs were placed as floaties, and apparently only for that purpose since I saw many of these whitewood logs floating around without anyone to care much.

There came a spot where the narrow flow widened and the spiky palms dissapeared, giving way to low bushland, still swampy. Although with more water space, we came to a hold since the area was completely packed with those logg-rafts. Mostly young men were prepairing them for the lagoon and the opening river by joining the logs with crosswood and large nails and ropes that would be attached to canoes and motors. There were several independent groups doing this and more "snakes" rushing in. Our boatsman was surprised by how many he was to dragg so after a lengthy and hefty discussion with his 4 associates they desided to build a double-decker and put one snake on top of another, by submerging one and pushing it under the other. Then a long rope was tied to the sections on all its lenght and finally attached to the canoe.

There was a lot going on at this spot. It seemed everyone had desided to transport wood downriver at the same time. Had it anything to do with the easter holidays? Among the people, I spotted Gabriel, checking his load from a large duggout canoe. He jumped onto another double snake and walked inspecting the rope. I too went on top to greet him with a handshake. I think he too was happy to see me, well on my way downriver.

Our double snake would have been 200metres long, perhaps more. It was enormous. How will we drag this with 15HP? Well, with lots of noise and very slowly! The men would stand on the logs and keep water hyacinths off as the wooden snake followed the boat on its still bendy trail. Before we reached the so-called lagoon, we had to pass several "tapones", with so many hyacinths that the canoe repeatedly came to a total stop. It took lots of effort to get through those sections but by late afternoon we were beyond swamp and hyacinths flowing slowly but steadily through the lagoon.

A canoe rushed up to us from further down the river: "They are all there! They are looking for a body near the cementery and the marine infantry is there too...", the man said before rushing further up to the lagoon. A hefty discussion started. "I don't risk my load" said one of the men. "Yeah. Let's tie them here and look first. We can always come back or take them at night."

We tied both ends of our long raft to some branches at the shore and rushed at full speed passed a large cabaña belonging to the Katios National Park towards a speed boat of the marines with several armed soldiers keeping watch. Not far from them were two boats with several people poking sticks and long hooks into the water. They also seemed to be dragging a long net along. We passed by and some 500m later finally arrived at the mighty Atrato which is several 100m wide. Along the riverside is a long row of neatly packed piles of woodlogs. Its a lot of wood! The illegal logs of the rafts have to arrive here. This is where they sell them to a merchant, apparently nicknamed "Chainsaw", who will then produce false logging permit papers in order to sell it on to Turbo and beyond. East of the Cacarcas, what would be the Katios National Park, logging is illegal, while west of it it might be allowed. But it all comes down through the same river and lagoon and arrives here. Together, and there is no way to tell it apart. I doubt anyone would dare moving upriver from here to control logging or enforce any restrictions. The controls take place here, by the same people we had seen looking for something in the river and who had in fact specially come here from their usual offices in Turbo. To believe illegal logging could be controlled this way would be so naive, if it wasn't clear that there might be no real interest in it. If there was, all that wood shouldn't be there, regardless of permits. Just a few 100m up the Atrato from the wood piles is a small riverside settlement called Puente America. Locals say that this would be the spot where a bridge might be built if the panamericana was ever to bridge the Darién Gap. Other officials I asked later laughed at such an idea but couldn't tell me any better reasons for the name. There used to be a small settlement called Cacarcas near by once but today only P. America remains. It

consists of a long single row of wooden huts on stilts, many in a very bad shape, a small store at the woodpile end and a boatlanding upriver. There is a large snooker venue, a cantine and several beer dispensaries, just to call it that way. And its a busy place. People travelling up or down the Cacaricas mostly must spend a night here if they are lucky to get a ride onwards. If not, one might be in for a long wait. Large speedboats stop on their way towards Turbo or heading to the many communities upriver but often are full. Whichever way, they all stop at a Marine Infantry rivercontroll point on the opposite river side.

My first impression of this place wasn't good. Just too many people hanging out, lots of loud music and way too many cases of beer everywhere. As we landed I asked the boatsman if he could not bring me across to the control point. "No way! I don't go there!!", so I took all my stuff on land. I payed, the agreed amount, feeling good because it would surely help to repair the boat on his return to Bijao. So naive! I recognized many people from the river ride, many had passed us in other canoes, others had been on other rafts and had also left the load tied somewhere. I think they had speculated that the Park employees would be going home for the easterholidays. Unfortunately, the day before the fish-inspector had fallen off the canoe and was missing. This promptet many parkemployees, usually based in Turbo, to come upriver to asist with the search causing a scare among the woodguys. There was a lot of dodgy business going on in that place.

There was little certainty about the actual circumstances, but it soon emerged that the old inspector had left with a boatsman towards the cabaña of the park. Roaring up the Cacaricas the boat had hit a log floating loose and the impact had send the old man overboat, without a swimming west. In all the confusion the boatsman didn't notice the loss straight away. And when he did he couldn't find him. So now the search was on, also to clarify the exact circumstances of the accident, if it had been one.

The people of my boat and the raftguys all had reserved rooms somewhere. I went off with the bike searching for a spot to pitch the tent. Someone came to offer a boat transfer to Turbo for 200US \$. "You will not be able to leave otherwise! There will be no speedboats during the holidays!".

Most people looked dodgy, many were drunk and apatic. I thought of heading to the woodpiles, but I was warned to stay near the huts. Finally, a drunk fisherman allowed to pitch the tent behind his hut, out of sight from the riverfront where people would walk. Even though there is a small supplystore one would need Colombian Pesos to buy anything. The friendly owner actually gave me a large bag of drinking water since the

riverwater is really not suitable. There was loud musik from at least three different drinking dens through the night, but I still slept surprisingly well.

I got up early, packed and left, thanking the fisherman who was already drunk. I had been told that the speedboats would pass early, and I would need to be ready to go from early on. The music continued and so did the drinking. Most had not stopped since the previous evening. I learned that the wood people had brought their logs to land during the night and were now all drunk. My boatsman had been beaten up in a fight and was all over with scares. As I waited for a speedboat I saw Gabriel peaking through a window of the cantine making signs to come over. As I entered he pointed to the table where a plate with eggs, fried bananas and hot Arepas, a type of cornbread, was set for me: "have breakfast, please". I was soo hungry! "Is this guy some sort of angel?", I thought as he went out. It was the last time I saw him.

The number one subject among the people around was the incident of the fish inspector. I overheard many times that he and the boatsman had been heavily drunk on their departure. No wonder he didn't notice him going overboard and so the search area wasn't very specific either.

It was a few hours later, still no speedboat had passed, when the Marines rushed in with several civilians on board and saw me standing there. Preemptively I approached them and told them where I had come from and that I intended to get to Turbo to clear immigration. The seargent took it all very seriously but had no network to call the pertinent authorities. He wanted to go across the river to their station with my passport, to which I didn't agree. "I won't agree with that!" I said. "Feel free to take me and the bike along. That would be great!" So, we went and at least I was out of that terrible place.

The controllpost is a large floating station with a section for living quarters and an area where boats dock and passengers can be documented and searched. No one goes up or down the river without reporting here! There were about 10 soldiers on duty at any time for this purpose. This morning had been boring but as we arrived the first speedboat rushed in. It was full, luggage stuck in front, passengers squeezed in the middle and two huge 150HP engines in the back. All passengers had to go out, identify their luggage, surrender their ID cards and wait for their belongings to be inspected. The young soldiers had very specific tasks: two made the paperwork on a desk, four observed from a distance with their mashine guns ready while others assisted with the luggage. Two went through them under the annoyed eyes of the passengers. One of the soldiers was considered the "expert finder". He was a very short fellow with a pointy face and John Lennon glasses

which he constantly readjusted. Fittingly, to me he looked like a sausage dog and he loved his job. I have never seen a guy going so meticulously through any bags: "He is great. He always finds stuff!" his comrade said, even when this time it wasn't the case. As the boat rushed across to Puente America the guy was clearly dissatisfied "I know he had something!!! Damn it. Did you see how he shivered?" But what are they actually looking for? "Its mostly for guns and drugs", they said, "...and we want to know who is moving in and out of the area". Looking at a map all that seems quite impossible. The upper Atrato is huge and clandestine activities should be extremely easy in such an area. The Sargeant agreed: "We do what we can". In a way, this is the problem of Colombia. Looking at a map goes a long way to understand this countries' struggles. There is simply no way to totally control even a fraction of it.

As the Sargeant went off to the radio I learned that all these young men were absolving a voluntary military service. They came from all over the country and had enrolled hoping to increase their job opportunities afterwards. On this first round they would be on duty for 3 straight months. After only 1 month several were already regretting it. "I am not learning anything here!" The night watches were the worst. To protect against mosquitoes, they would wear gloves and balacava masks, a real torture in this heat. Otherwise it was mostly boredom to deal with. Today four boats would pass, otherwise it was just sitting around. Occasionally someone would drop his gun as they snoozed away and punish themselves with some pushups. Today's highlight would be the one guy going up a staircase between the control station and the ship with the quarters. The ladder broke and he rushed into the river, machine gun in hand. It took a while to get him out and there was much debate whether he had acted correctly by taking his gun into the water.

Consensus was that yes, never drop or leave the gun! For me it was a quiet day. I was treated well and the young soldiers seemed to enjoy some distraction. The Sargeant managed to communicate to who knows where and apparently someone knew of my coming. The most frustrating thing, here, as in Panamá, was that they would never tell me what was going on. Who knew? What exactly had they said? "You need to get to Turbo and report to immigration!" But how to get there, was the question. All boats had passed fully packed and it was said that upriver where already many people lined up to get to Turbo. I was in for a long wait. I think primarily out of boredom the Sargeant was suddenly very interested in my luggage. "What do you carry in there?" "Lot of junk", I said, thinking that I could just talk me out of it. But he wanted to see. Bag by bag we went

through all my stuff. I mean all of it. Over the years there have been many occasions when all my luggage had been taken appart, sometimes down to the spare parts and extra nuts and bolts or the emergency sewing kit. One chinese secret police guy had once wondered at these and looking at some canvas I carried as patches wondered: "Why so much?". "Big hole, big patch!" Earlier he had looked at a pair of socks: "Why two?". Pointing at my feed I answered "One, two!" These situations can be strangely funny at times. Mostly however they are annoying. To have someone, often many, look into all your private stuff. One of the worse incidents I had was somewhere in Baja California, Mexico. As I came to a hold at a random road checkpoint the young soldier started to put hands onto my bags. I can't have that, so I told him to back off. We had a discussion which prompted his supervisor to step closer: "He won't let me search him", the soldier said. Visibly angry the commander barked at me: "I decide who is searched and who not! We will find it! Show your bags!". "You surely can look at everything you please, but you do NOT touch my stuff! Which bag you want to see?" "All of them", he barked back.

Lacking a tree or post to lean the bike against I dropped it on the dusty desert floor, asked them to step back and proceeded to take the stuff out of the first bag. By now there were 4 of them asking me to open each and every little container. The commander wanted to sniff at everything. One ziplock bag cought his attention. It had some suspicious looking crumbles. He was already smiling to himself until he sniffed. "Sorry, chocolate bisquits. Just had the last one!", I said. The young soldier bent and cought another one of my little tin containers and tryed to open it. This time I yelled at him: "Are you mental? Which part of 'don't touch' don't you understand, son?" The search took quite some time, it was hot and dusty and the noon sun fierce. In the end I was let to go on: "Tell the others we will catch them!", the commander barked as I rolled off. "You obviously have issues of your own. I suggest you train this boy to keep his fingers to himself. I need to keep people like you off my bags. It wouldn't be the first time something is planted and then we have a real problem."

Surprisingly the search here on the Atrato river didn't burst any of my wires. For the contrary. I was quite keen to take all out, give it a good shake and took some items out to dry. I had time too and this was a great oportunity to sort all my things.

Besides, they treated me well, gave me food, twice, and I could relax. Much better than across the river among the drunks and hookers. "What happened to your leggs?", he suddenly sais. Indeed, they were all inflamed, huge. I hadn't noticed. The Seargeant was also keen to learn about my experience upriver towards the border and I was happy to

share some "intel", like coordinates of certain points and look at a few pictures which he asked to download. I gave him all, except those with people on them. Its quite incredible that they really know nothing at all of the world out there.

By late afternoon no dead body had been found and I was still stuck. I would have to go across the river again for another night. I didn't like that at all. Luckily, I had befriended the captain of the marines' speedboat, a huge man, very friendly and informed, who convinced the Seargeant to take be along as he had to go downriver about halfway to Turbo. "From there its going to be easier to get to town than from here." Luckily, he agreed, we stored all the bags inside some boxes under the seats, tied the bike to the side and went off, two 200HP engines under our arse, roaring at full speed. Oh gee!

I had come across the Amatique Bay from Belize to Puerto Barrios in Guatemala a few months earlier. With just 200HP I had wondered if a flight would not have been a better option. Basically, we had been mostly airborne anyway. But now, this ride was simply ridiculous: the speed was nothing short of an airplane, except for the constant crunching hits on waves. "What about the loose loggs, Sir?" "What? Can't hear you!" We roared along this incredible sunset over a widening river, swamps and small hills to the north. It got dark and off coarse we hit two loggs along the way. Except for the huge bang an inspection of the rotorblades revealed no damage, but we went much slower from then on and I got off at Boca, a small fishing comunity where the Atrato finally flows into the gulf of Urabá.

A lady who had come with us after being out searching for the corpse took me to her mothers' place. I had thought of pitching my tent, but she insisted in me taking a bed in the house. Turned out the village is flooded at high tight and there was a huge rain during the night too. The lady turned out to be another saviour along the way. Not only did she take me to her mothers' house and gave me dinner. Next morning, we went together across to Turbo for 10US \$ for the two of us as passengers and the bike and she suggested I stay at her place in Turbo after I cleared my paperwork. Turbo is across the bay from Boca, about 1,5 hours in a speedy boat, which can be a rough ride, specially in the afternoon. We went off very early, everyone crawling under a large plastic tarp to stay dry and as Turbo came into sight we passed a few Islands and mangroves perhaps 10 minutes from the small boatlanding. We noticed several people on these Islands, with some luggage, half submerged in the water, clearly distressed waving at us as a coastguard boat was closing in from Turbo. "What is going on?" Turns out these people had been victims of the newest scam towards migrants: now that the main route across to Panamá

was north of the Katios National Park, migrants need to get across the gulf as the first of many hurdles. Apparently, they would hire boats which after taking their money would let them out on those islands making them believe they had crossed all the way. Now, at first daylight they would be picked up by coastguards... I am just out of words at this stage!

I went trying to sort my papers and later caught up with the lady who took me to her house where I stayed for a night, relaxing. She and her current partner both originally came from Bijao but had been forced to leave in the mid 90th like all civilians in the Cacarcas. The colombian government had started a big operation, called "Genesis" against the guerrilla in the area and there had been many victims among the civilian population forcing them to leave. Only as recently as 2005 had people returned, actually ignoring government warnings. I was surprised to learn that the people from pueblo ancestral had actually come from other areas all together and their settlement was encouraged by the authorities.

The ladys first husband had been killed in Puente America many years ago, and her current partner was a birding guide in the Park who was out in the search. He arrived late that afternoon with the latest news: the body had finally surfaced in the morning: apparently it takes about 2 to 3 days for a dead body to float. His head was fractured, most likely by the impact of rotor blades. Private cellphone videos had appeared that showed both man celebrating, dancing and drinking heavily just minutes before boarding the boat to the fatal ride. At least that was clarified then.

So, my story, slightly blown up, I admit would end here. I had indeed crossed the Darián gap proper and had dragged my trusty bicycle along. I would have been happy to close it there and release you to some more exciting literature. But, actually, this wasn't the end of it. For a few more days I would pick the occasional tick and my feed only slowly got back to normal size and scratches healed. But all that was a predictable part of the adventure. What I had not predicted however, was the hassle it would be to finally clear my immigration status in Colombia, something any would be Darién crosser should consider.

As agreed as soon as I reached tierra firme in Turbo I went to the immigration office which is about two blocks from the central square. After convincing the guard that leaving the bike on the street was to risky I was let into a small empty office and attended by a young official. For some reason I assumed he had been informed by the Marines. But instead he was very negative about it all: "Why did you come through there. This is an illegal crossing. I can not clear your immigration. You will have to go to Montería, some 300km away, to have this sorted." He refused to call the consul in panamá even after I insisted repeatedly. "No, that would be a breach in protocol". There was no way to persuade him, so after about an hour I left with a citation letter to be presented in Montería where I arrived on the first monday after easter weekend. The office is on the central square and I left the fully loaded bike on the wall outside, thinking this would be a straight foreward affair. "Oh, no!!! You need to go to Turbo to sort this out. We have nothing to do with this case!", said the officer behind his desk as he returned the citation letter and passport back to me. "What do you mean? I have been sent here by your office in Turbo. Its like 300km! and two days waiting just for you to send me back?" "Yes! You should have insisted, kicked and screamed! This is not our case!" "If I was to go back, they might say the same, so what about I kick and scream and insist here instead?" I did do all that for an entire hour insisting that the consul would have to be contacted to clarify all this. The man refused and blocked, repeating the same things over and over again: "I can not help you! You need to go back to Turbo if you want to solve this!" I didn't move. "This issue will require a lengthy legal process that may take three months. You will need an appointment to 'innitiate the legal process' and the next possible date would be in 2 weeks. We are very busy here." Then, in a conspirative, confidential tone, he sais: "I recommend you to just go on with your travels. Once you want to leave colombia you report at the border and sort it out then". He was suggesting I should just remain illegal? "We call it irregular..." "Well good, whatever. Can I have that in writing and what is your name and ID again?" Suddenly he wasn't so forward anymore. I think it got unpleasant for him because after all this he called his supervisor who was in holidays and asked me to wait. Besides the security guard who would write down IDs and names of the four persons who came during the 5 hours I was in that office, there were two persons behind desks looking at computer screens and a lady responsible to bring coffee. A very busy office indeed! Unbelievable. Everyone had to go through the same as me and hear that this office was not responsible for the case. A man in casual clothes rushed in and soon I sat with him in a small cubicle office, listening again to the same story. "I heard all that from your colegue

already but going back to Turbo is not an option. Would you be so kind to contact the consul to clarify all this?" Same thing, and it went on and on in circles. About half an hour later the man, probably fearing I would spoil the remainder of his holidays, took his private phone and called. Something was wrong with the number, he said. I had tried to contact the consul by e-mail repeatedly but never got a response. Could it be that he would not stick to his word after all? I was starting to emotionally prepare for that. So, what are the options? "If you want to clear your irregular status we will have to go through a legal process that may take several weeks or months. You will be fined with anything between 500.000 and 1mill colombian pesos, after which you may return to colombia as you please. The other option is not to pay, in which case a process of expulsion will be initiated. You will have to leave the country and can not return within a set time, usually several years. It was clear to me that I would not pay 200\$, ever!

Eventually he managed to send a Whatsup message through to the consul and after a few minutes his phone rang. The consul was finally in it! Thank goodness. He sent his congratulations to me and tried to clarify, but the man on this side of the phone insisted on his inability to solve the issue: "We don't even have the required seals here. Even if we wanted we can't stamp the passport!" I was told to wait until the consul could find a way around it. From the beginning I wondered about the man in front of me. Unlike his co-worker he was not the typical penpusher. His hairstyle and ways were more of an army type. Indeed, he told me that he had originally worked for the DAS, some sort of secret intelligence agency, mostly fighting the cartels. He knew about the Darién too. Perhaps due to all this he had gone out of the protocol to begin with. A few years back the DAS had been closed and split into different agencies, including the immigration department. As I would see over the coming week many had just slipped into jobs they were simply not made for. By 14.00pm I was informed that I would have to proceed to Cartagena, some 500km further along the caribbean coast and report at the immigration department there.

The consul had contacted his counterparts at the immigration ministry in Bogota and they had contacted the regional Director of the caribbean in Cartagena. "Go there and we will help you to sort this out" was the consuls message to me. It had been my original plan anyway, so happily I took off towards Cartagena and arrived there a few days later. At 8:15am I entered the beautiful, chateau like former DAS building that now serves as regional immigration headquarters. I registered and got a number in a still short lane. Twenty minutes later I was explaining the case to a young lady who went next door to

consult with her coordinator. I could overhear his phonecall with the station boss in Montería. Turns out these former DAS guys all knew each other personally and actually had all once worked together here in Cartagena. I was lucky because he seemed to have explained the case and agreements to the coordinator and soon the lady was slowly typing the essentials into her keyboard. "Does it make you nervous if I look at your screen?" I asked. "Actually, yes!", so I just sat there as she told me that a legal process was being initiated. "Initiating a legal process" was the ever recurring phrase during each of my visit. And everyone else was told that as well. It was The Thing, that needed to be done, hadn't been done, couldn't be done but definitely should be done; since it would require so much time everyone was persuaded not to do it. I heard that so many times I wondered if it meant something entirely different to what I thought. At about 9:30am the lady took me across the corridor, full of people by now, and my papers and passport were handed over to a busy looking fellow in the far corner of three offices with 4 desks each. "Please wait outside!" So I did. The hours passed as many people passed by into that office. They were all pregnant women, mostly from Venezuela needing some immigration related documents in order to get medical assistance during delivery. At 13:00, that's over 3hours sitting there I went in and to that desk where my passport was laying: "Sorry, but did you forget about me? I am starting to grow roots out there", I said to the man looking back at me for a few seconds to long. Then, as if remembering that the passport on his desk was mine, he said: "There has been a mistake. You should have resolved all this in Montería. This case can not be handled by us!" I was considering whether to go for his neck or just punch him on his nose... when he continues: "Please come back tomorrow. It's lunchtime now and I don't attend this afternoon!". "I have been in this office for the last 5hours, mostly waiting while you attend to other people arriving after me. I have been quiet following your orders. I will NOT go away until this process is on its way." "Pregnant women do have preference, sir" "What are you suggesting? Do you want me to get impregnated before coming back?" "In any case, we will have to 'initiate a legal process' and it will take a lot of time and you need to come back tomorrow!" "I told you that I will not leave and let you treat me like a dog. You may not know it yet, but there are internal agreements regarding this case and you might want to ask some of your superiors in order to get straight to the matter." "No, I don't know of any such thing. You need to listen to me! This should have been handled elsewhere. Why did you not get your passport stamped when you entered Colombia? This is clearly your fault. Sorry, can't help you." I stood up from the chair I had taken the liberty to sit on and leaned over the desk, strongly

tapping the index finger on my documents. "The one who is not listening is you! The one who doesn't know the case is you! You will have to get over to your supervisor or someone higher up in the hierarchy, a position you will never get to, in order to learn what to do here. I urge you, I begg you to go or I will be your shadow for a long and unpleasant time." The clerks on the other desks stopped pretending being busy and looked concerned. Luckily, they did not interfere. Finally, after more than half an hour trying to push it from his table he walked out and into the directors' office, like a child who had been send into the classroom corner. Ten minutes later he shaffeld back in, shoulders deep, face down, sat on his desk and while typing something mumbled to himself. "What did they say?" Without looking at me he said: "Yes, yes... But we still need to 'initiate a legal process'!" "Did the director know and did he tell you what to do?" "Yes, yes... but we still..." "See you tomorrow at 8 then!" I just needed to know that the circle of the internal agreement had closed and returned the next morning.

As I waited for 8 o'clock I recognized familiar faces from the previous day. Everyone was struggling with the exact same culture of procrastination, "this is not my case", "this case should have been handled elsewhere" and "come back tomorrow". Over the accumulated 18hours I would spend in those offices, in three different regions that took me some 800km to connect, it was always the same system. Where these people trained to do this? I wondered. It was such a waste of resources and time. With every customer having to spend 30minutes discussing wheather the case was on the right desk (which in the end it always was) no wonder the waiting area was packed. And what about those who where just sitting at their desks not even pretending to be busy? If it wasn't for the chance to observe them and the entire office, it would have been like eternity. But then someone would peek through the door. "Oh, look everyone! What are you doing here? We thought you were in holiday!" Entering she replied: "Yes, I know, but I desided to leave next week." Shmuack, shmuack, kisses to everyone on each desk. A little circle would build... "But were you not going with such and such..." "They left this week..." "Ah, that's why they haven't been in!" and it would go on. This was interrupted by a fruitsalad seller and most would purchase a plastic cup with fresh fruit, then by the milkshake seller and later by a guy taking lunch orders. To his defence, the only guy who actually did something there was my man: A.d.A.. This morning he was all mine and even pregnant women had to go out and wait. I felt sorry but was happy something seemed to move in my case, even if slowly. And this morning he was friendly too. "We will have to 'innitiate a legal process'", he informed me as if this was some special announcement. "I thought the lady

yesterday had done that already..., before you announced that as well..." He mumbled about some procedures and protocols. At around 9:30 we went into the office of the director. The day before, as I had been trying to establish what the internal agreement actually meant they had repeatedly refused me entry. Now I finally met the man who I hoped, would clear the way. A rather young guy, military type as well, sat on a generous desk in a large office. A.d.A. stood by, shoulders and head down as I shook hands with the friendly director who wanted to know about my "Darién adventure", as he put it. "I have never been there, but isn't it supposed to be very difficult and dangerous there?" "That is all relative and really depends on whom you ask. I was lucky, and I am stubborn and really wanted to try." "But now I face the biggest challenge which is to regularise my immigration status."

He was personally interested in learning more about my entire trip and repeatedly turned to A.d.A. wondering what he thought about cycling and travelling in such a way. Finally, he informed us both about the procedures to be followed: "First, we will need to 'initiate a legal process'..." I could have guessed that! Apparently there were legal deadlines required but if all went well we could get the documents signed by monday (it was friday) and the passport stamped by tuesday, wednesday at the latest. He gave some instructions to the man and then told me: "We will sort this out. You have crossed illegally into Colombia and usually you would be required to pay the fine or, if you chose not to, be expelled. But since you tried to sort your immigration status in Turbo, as agreed with the consulate in Panamá, we have decided to waive the fine. In Turbo they should have sorted the issue or have send you to Capurganá to get the stamp. They made a mistake, so I will personally respond to this case. Unfortunately, there are legal issues which don't allow us to sort it out on the spot. I hope you understand! Now let me see that bicycle!" "I left it in my accomodation. You know how bad it is here in Cartagena..." He was visibly dissapointed and agreed that some areas of the city were really bad. When I told him where I was staying he suggested to move soon. Indeed, the only safe place seems to be the old touristic part of town, usually called the walled city. Outside of there can be really bad. During my week there I met three persons who were robbed, one russian dude twice within his first three days in Cartagena. The first time he was coming from the airport and had been stabbed 5 times with a knife, one deep one missing his lungs by sheer luck. They took everything he carried. The next day his passport was handed back to him. Huh??? Two days after that first assault he was robbed again at gunpoint. "I don't have anything!

You guys already robbed it all!" he exclaimed. That second time they took his shoes! Welcome to Cartagena!

That friday I finally left the migration headquarters at around noon. I had signed a number of documents, some mistakes had to be corrected ("sorry, it says here that I am colombian citizen...") and photocopies had been taken, all amounting to a decent little stack of papers. This would now be handed over to the next stage. "See you on monday!"

I arrived, greeted the familiar guards and went straight into A.d.A.'s office. As usual he had a radio playing colombian dancing tunes in the background. It filled the office. There were several personal items on his desk like a little Eifel tower and an empty winebottle with some decorations. The wall next to him was full of family pictures and several artefacts of the religious type. While on friday he had been friendly, today he seemed back to the original of my first day. "Wait", so I set there for a few minutes watching the circus in the next door. Someone had returned from holidays and three ladies greeted with kisses. One purposely left a kissmouth mark of red lipstick on his forehead and he pretended not to notice, among much amusement of everyone around. "You need to come back on friday. You are very lucky that we will waver the fine, even when you broke the law and crossed an illegal border. Come back on thursday or friday and we see." In disbelief I replied: "This must be a joke, right? Didn't you say it would be tuesday or wednesday at most? If you say thursday or friday, you really mean next week, right?" "You committed a mistake crossing there. You are very lucky..." "Can we talk to the director? I don't know what takes that long. You finished the papers on friday, where are they now. Can I talk to the person who has the case now?" He paused, looked me deep into the eyes as if saying 'pay attention to what I am going to say now', and said: "We need to 'initiate a legal process'..." "What is wrong with you? I know that you are the only one who does anything around here, but what is it good for?" It's not that I had any friends to lose anyway. And then he takes a stack of papers, actually my papers which had been on his desk, still, and walks out of the office, with me in tow, saying: "I have done my part and the next step is the coordinators signature!" After that it would be the directors signature and then the stamp could be considered. I went after him, in spite of protest but the coordinator was out of the house, supposedly in a meeting. No one wanted to know when he would return. So, I went to the directors' office, three doors down the hall and introduced myself to his personal assistant who was flirting with the dude who had the lipstick on his head. "Can I help you?", she enquired giggling to the other man standing behind her chair. I told her my name and the situation and if it was possible to see the director. "He is not here but

away in a meeting." Hm, I know what that means! Then, to my surprise she says: "You are very lucky that we waive your fine, since usually you would have to pay for such a breach!" It seemed universally known! I enquired when the director was expected to return. "I don't know!" while again lecturing me of my luck, of the fact that there were many more cases being handled beside mine and that normally this process would take months. While she was rattling along the other dude also started to tell me all sort of things, so that I couldn't follow either of them. "Sorry brother. She is the one I am talking to. I am sure it is very interesting what you have to say but I already have problems to follow what she says! Besides, you have a lip stick mark on your head that looks ridiculous." The lady was angry now: "He is a migration officer too!" "Well then, since you don't seem to know much at all, does he know when the director returns?" At this point I lost them both! They rolled their eyes and simply ignored me. I left, calling them a bunch of useless imbeciles. I had lost it. I knew it was wrong to react like that and that it would surely not help my cause.

Frustrated I wasn't sure what to do. Next day I felt the same. Shall I go to that office again? I didn't. I didn't want to contact the good Consul again. I felt he had done all in his hands and gone out of his way to keep his word. What was going on now was an entirely different issue. By afternoon I receive an e-mail from him: "What is the situation? Should it be necessary to contact the director again?"

I returned the next morning and found a very busy A.d.A. hacking into his keyboard. The radio was off. I thought there was more running around than usual. At some point it seemed everyone was heading at once into the directors' office.

As they left a tall guy with handcuffs I had not seen before walks up to me and says: "There has been a mistake in the paperwork which is being fixed by A.d.A. now." "Sorry, who are you?" I don't actually remember now, but he seemed informed and to the point: "The signatures should be fast, but you have to wait until 2 o'clock." And that was true. At 14:00 I was asked into the coordinators office, the guy who on my first day had called the office in Montería and show my passport. Almost ceremoniously he went to a small safe on the floor and took one of several stamps. He was about to put the seal in my passport when it occurred to him to first check it. It was the wrong one! "Where is the entrance stamp?" The secretary came in and eventually they found the large squareshaped stamp in the safe. After a test and date adjustments he was about to put it on an empty page in my pass. "Ah, sorry. Would you be so kind to fill in the previous page first?" I don't know what I was thinking really. It comes automatic. Some borderguys just put it

on the first random page they find and then fill the passport way to fast. I suggested that space next to the panamá entrance stamp. "There is no exit stamp!" "There is no exit stamp?????" he asked. "No sir, that's the whole point here. There was no official border crossing!" "Ah, that's right." Finally, after what, 18 days of irregular status? the stamp pushed the ink onto the passport and it was finally over. Although I crossed the border on March the 24th. the seal says 11. April, the date of the stamp. It says that port of entry was Capurganá, the closest official bordercrossing to the Darién Gap. Holy those who believe that stamping a passport is just a matter of stamping it. Before I finally left the building, I went back to A.d.A. to inform him that everything was finished. Radio was back on and the chitchat among the ladies was as ever. We had a good handshake and I appologysed for being such a pain in the butt and pointed out that I really wanted to move on. It was all good. As I left I overheard the guy on the next desk informing a pregnant venezuelan lady that he was very sorry, but this case was not his and that there was a mistake...

As for me, I was finally free to go and have since ventured deeper into the coffee growing areas of colombias Antioquia region. It is hilly, often challenging but very rewarding indeed. I am loving it! And wandering which way to head from here. It's probably going to be east towards the Orinocco, or los llanos as the region is known in Venezuela; going to be raining season... For a long time, I have wanted to cross the grand Savannah leading into the Amazonas and perhaps get to climb a Tepui (likely without the bike?). A boat up to Iquitos in the peruvian amazon should close the circle towards the Andes cordillera again.

Some of you might now be considering a Darién crossing of your own, inspite of legal and immigration issues. I am not the one to encourage or stop you, but personally I would go somewhere else instead unless, like me, its part of a much bigger journey. If you are travelling by bicycle, you will rarely push a pedal. Between Paya and Turbo I never did. What I want to say is that you could as well carry two bags of cement along, or perhaps a large wooden cross!?

But I could think of cooler ways to go about the Darién! What about a Kajak instead of a bike? One of those sturdy plastik shells could be dragged from its tip behind you wearing a harness; all your stuff inside its howl. You would be indifferent to weather and mudd and, best of all, independent of any local help, while you could really enjoy their contact

without any hassles. Just imagine Mr Martinez' look as you paddle along. I would love to be a mosquito watching that scene! If you want to avoid immigration trouble you could just turn around from Puente America or -if northbound- Boca de Cupe and go back to square one. And, if that is important to you, you would probably be the first! Sorry, with a bicycle that's now definitely not going to be the case anymore!

Acknowledgement

Even the most independent and stubborn loner would'nt get far if it wasn't for people who give a hand, show and give support even if it often seems trivial at the time. There were many during this short stage, too many to list, but even the smallest gesture helped me to finally get through. Sincere thanks go to:

the unnamed french-guatemalan, the only person who knew what he was talking about, and to team Sweeney (www.zerotocruising.com) for nursing that seedling which became what you just read. It would have been fun to cross together, but there will be other opportunities.

I want to thank Captain P., who, even though he might never get to see this may object my spelling out his full name, for keeping through to the agreement. I hope he now enjoys his retirement next to his wonderful partner in Boca de Cupe.

To the Kuna boys from Púcuro around "Idol". You guys rock!

To my black angel Gabriel from Bijao. Sir, you (and the mule) saved me in many ways those days. I wish you and your family only the very best! You are the true hero of this story!

To Doña Lucia, Don Edgar and their big family in Boca and Turbo, who made me feel welcome in Colombia and send me on my way, strengthened and tickfree, mostly.

To the Colombian Infantry Marines of the Atrato Riosucio outpost for finally taking me out into the world again and to the friendly elements of the Senafront in Panamá, for there were those too.

And what would have been without all the naysayers and hinderers, chiefly the Senafront platoon stationed at Paya at the time? In a twisted way, you too drove me further and beyond.

Perhaps my biggest gratitude goes to the Honorable Consul of Colombia in Panamá: even when you may have had doubts you gave me the chance to try. I wish more people in your position were likeminded and more people had the backbone to keep a given word like you did! Although I am no Lawrence of Arabia, you surely were my Sherif Ali!

Panama city. Lets go to the Darien



Welcome to Darien Province. The Arch.



Yaviza Boatlanding. The Hubb of the Gap.



Kids of Yaviza.



The The Bridge to New Yaviza, looking backtowards the Harbor.



Dry season trail from Yaviza to Boca de Cupe



Union de Choco



River near Capeti



Giant trees of the Darien



Final stretch to Boca de Cupe



Boca de Cupe



Boca deCupe



Rio Tuira from Boca de Cupe.



Towards Pucuro.



Towards Pucuro.



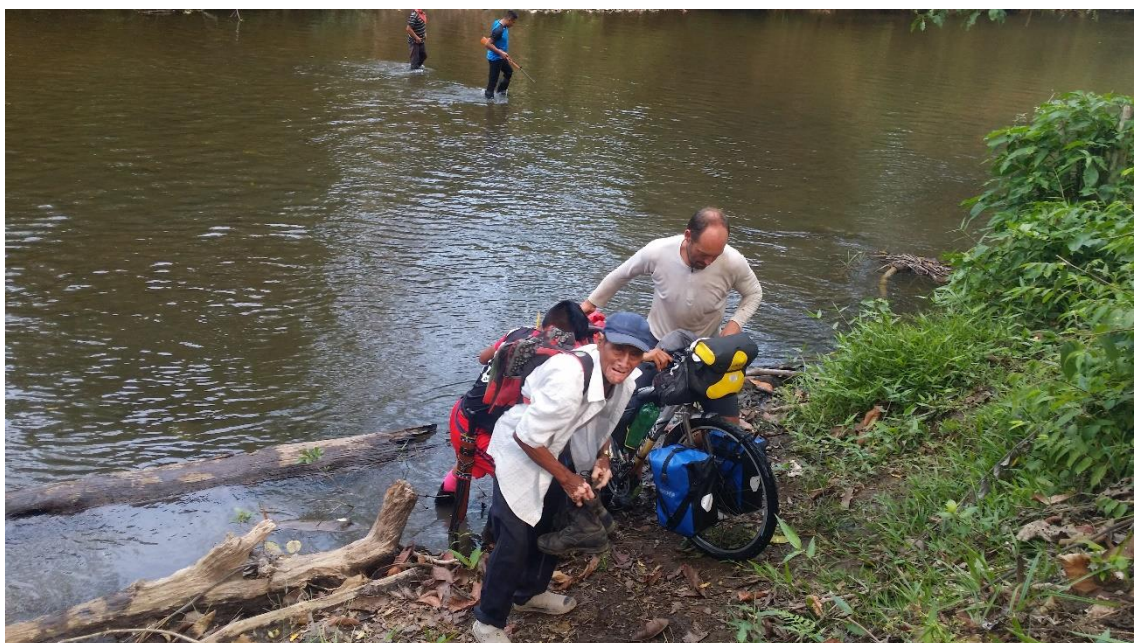
Out of Pucuro



”Idol and the boys”



El Chino giving a hand.



Trail Pucuro to Yaviza



Crossing the Tupalisa.







Trail to Paya



Schoolkids of Paya



Former Airstip of Paya



Camping out





Chevrolet in the bush.



Frontierstone of Palo de las Letras



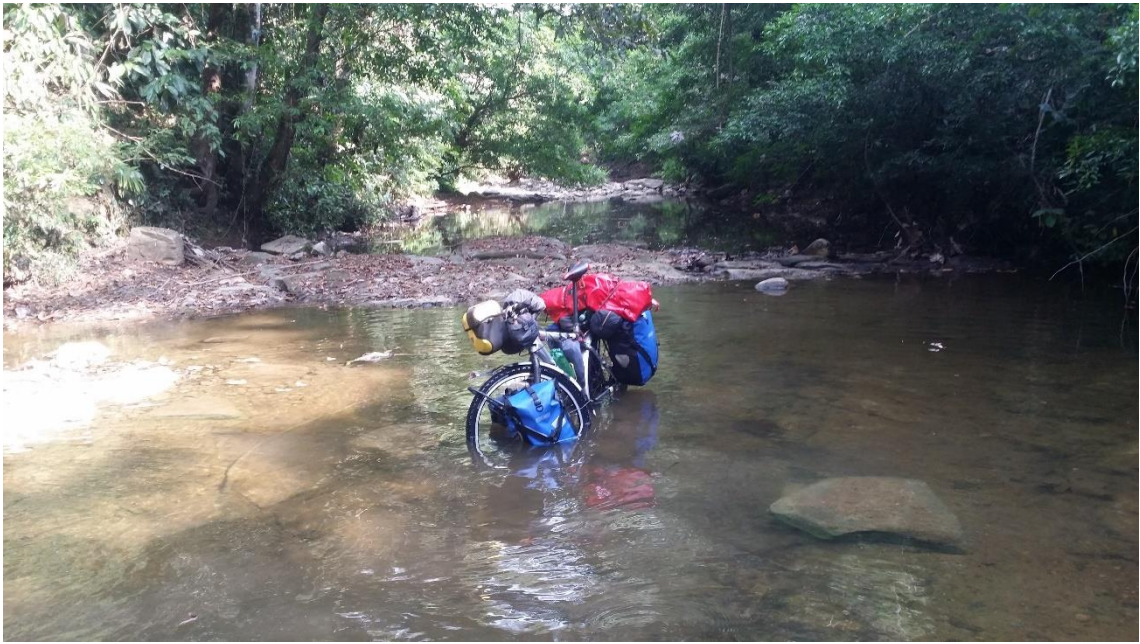
Camp on colombian site.



Water!! Tule creek.



Following the Tule. Better slow than lost!



Flowing into the Cacaricas.



Camping at Tule camp.



Tule camp



Following mule tracks to Bijao.



"Sag mir wo der Balsam ist!". Balsamo cuttingsite.



A mule with no name.



Pueblo ancestral. Pueblo de Indios.



Pueblo Ancestral to Bijao.



Back on the Cacaricas.” Is this Bijao?”



Out of the trail. Last bath in the Cacaricas.



Bijao.





Bijao with a green Pool-canoe

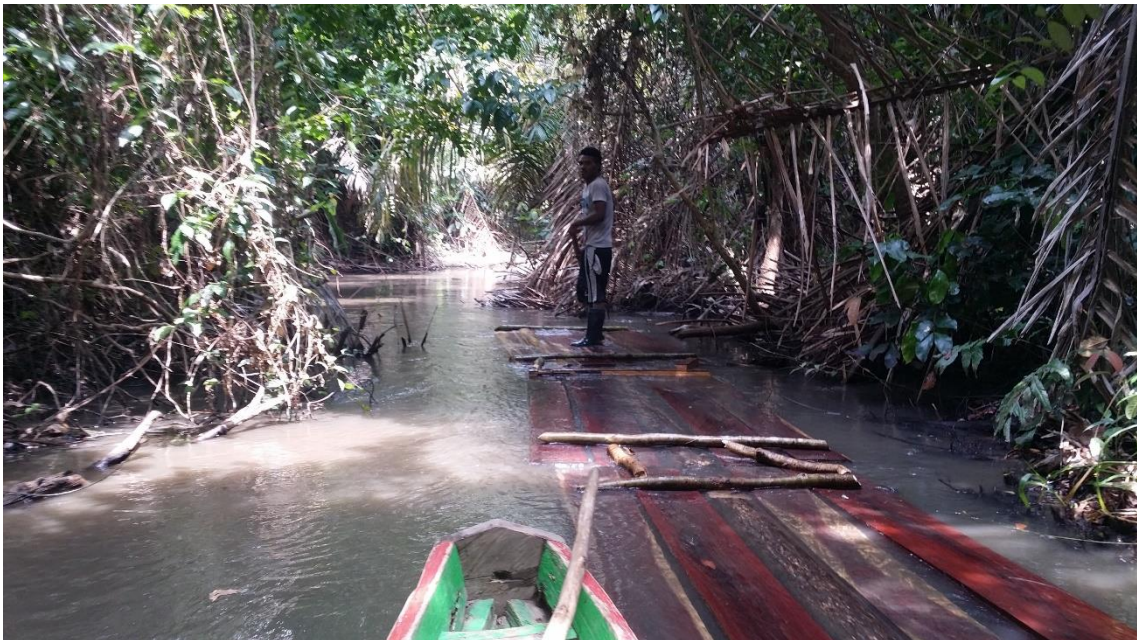


Next:

Atrato swamp.



Atrato swamp and balsamo raft.



Balsamo Raft



Tapon del Cacaricas with balsmo in tow.



River Checkpoint at Aguasucia on the mighty Atrato river.



Boca in the morning. Lets go to Turbo!



Cartagena de Indias!



Next Page: The Map! The original rough map was taken from the internet from an old edition of some travel guide. Dates indicate the night I slept there.

