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Backpacking in Mexico and Central America
By Hilary & George Bradt

EL CAMINO TRES DE NOVIEMBRE

by Dr Peter Sterling

Peter Sterling is an Associate Professor of neurobiology at the University of Pennsylvania.

He was drawn to the jungles of Panama by his admiration for primitive people and their simple life, and by his interest in ornithology. Professional curiosity kept intruding and when the Indians killed an iguana for the pot Peter couldn't resist dissecting its eye and taking the retina back to Philadelphia.

We met him on his return from a visit to a remote Choco Indian village where he'd worked side by side with his hosts clearing jungle for agriculture. Not surprising that someone who prepared for the trip by packing rocks around Philadelphia, and who would work to the point of exhaustion to be one with the Indians, would describe this strenuous hike with such enthusiasm and observation.

The trail across the Cordillera in Northwest Panama from the province of Chiriquí to Bocas de Toro on the Caribbean side is a rugged three-day hike. El Camino Tres de Noviembre is a beautiful walk, and as I looked back at the mountain range from the lagoon at Chiriquí Grande from the plane flying back to David, I couldn't believe I'd walked through such rugged terrain.

We started from the pueblo of Caldera, about ten miles south of the city of Boquete. The trail is at first a rough dirt road, negotiable for a few miles by a four-wheel vehicle. It begins at about 400 m. (altitude) and runs parallel to the Rio Chiriquí, a large, rapidly flowing river full of white water. The views of the river below as the trail ascends are magnificent, and I kept stopping to take pictures, only to find the view at the next bend even more spectacular. On the first day the trail crossed the Rio Los Valles, Quebrada Mariposa, Quebrada Cupe, and the Quebrada Algarrobos. At this point the 'road' ends and the trail becomes narrow and rocky, ascending (with many sharp ups and downs) to 1000 m. at the Rio Zarsiadero. We stopped here at 4:00 for the night.

Here one has just left the dry, windy region and entered true cloud forest, full of mists which become indistinguishable from rain. With the sun out, there are many brilliant rainbows (arcoides) that descend into valleys below, leaving no doubt as to where the pot of gold must be. The trees here are gigantic, covered with moss, spectacular bromeliads, lianas; full of chattering birds, and if one stops to watch, monkeys. My guide killed a snake (1.5 m. long) on the trail and claimed that it was the feared boca racá (Fer-de-lance) "Muy venimosa! Mata la gente!" I am doubtful, however, because I was unable to see the characteristic 'pit' between the eyes and the nostrils.

We stopped for the night at the finca of Perfecto Samudio, a gentleman of about 45 with ten children, six under the age of ten. His house, a three-room shack, with a cooking shed, at first seemed incredibly poor. It is of rough, hand-sawn board with great spaces where the cold wind blows through. Chicks feeding on the 'living room' floor. Piles of yucca root on the dirty floor, sacks of coffee, rice, maize strewn around. Kerosene lantern, rifle, machete, hammer, saw were about the only items that distinguished the household (at first appearance) from the Stone Age. Though raggedly dressed, the children were healthy-looking, shy, and well-behaved. Perfecto chatted with Ladís, our guide, awhile, then reached up in the rafters and brought out a dog-eared Spanish-to-English dictionary. He explained that he is taking a correspondence course in

English, but can't get the pronunciation from the book, and asked my help. I worked with him for almost an hour - after which his daughter served the best coffee I've ever tasted: grown, roasted, and ground right there. Perfecto then took a crude guitar, of which he was very proud, and began to play and sing sweet, melancholy tunes while the wind howled and mist-rain poured off the rattling, galvanized roof. All the while the late sun illuminated the poinsettias and roses that surrounded this house of unutterable squalor. I asked jokingly if he had also learned guitar by correspondence, and was astonished to be answered affirmatively. His daughter (about nine-years-old, I'd guess) cooked dinner over the fire in the shed - our dried soup, mixed with their rice and vegetables, and shrimps, which I'd guess they collect from the river. I was given a bed (a board with two grain sacks for a pillow), while my guides slept on the floor, and the family, all eight, slept in the main bedroom on one big bed. After breakfast the next morning, I gave him a 'regalo' of $2.00, which he tried to refuse, till I made it clear it was a present and not payment. He gave us a package of home-grown sugar, fresh ground coffee, and grapefruits, and we were off.

We left at 8:00 a.m. in the sun-rain. I tried wearing my poncho, but we had to cross many, extremely swift rivers, and the poncho caught the wind like a sail, almost sweeping me downstream. Besides, when you're up to your thighs in cold water, keeping your shoulders dry at considerable energy expenditure made little sense.

We crossed the Rio Zarsiadero and climbed sharply all morning, reaching Pinola (Cerro Pinola, on the map) at 10:00. Here there is another small finca, and it is an alternative stopping place. Just before Pinola, Juanito pointed out the place where one of their horses had died from exhaustion on the last trip over the mountains. That will give you some idea of the kind of walk it is. As it turned out, we moved faster without pack animals. We stopped at noon in a small shed to cram food into our mouths, but could not pause for long because the wind was howling through our wet clothes and we were bitterly cold unless moving. At 1:00 we reached the top (about 2000 m.), the continental divide, and began our descent into the Province of Bocas del Toro. The afternoon, though raining, was warmer because there is no wind on the Caribbean side and the trail leads through dense rain forest. No fincas here, and we didn't see a soul for the next twenty-four hours. Giant plants of the kind that grow in dark, Boston living rooms; 'elephant ear' leaves as big as I am, great buttressed trees, covered with moss; bright red and yellow fungi. At two places along the trail, Juanito stopped to point out tracks in the mud of 'el tigre' (jaguar) and there could be no doubt about it.

By 4:00 I was tiring and beginning to stumble, but trying to be careful because the trail is rocky and 'rooty', and a broken leg here would be a disaster. At 6:00 we reached a meadow of waist-high grass, the greenest, lushest meadow I've ever seen, shrouded in clouds, with coconut palms and flowers, flocks of parrots and parakeets. This place (altitude, 500 m.) is called "Buena Vista", and when it cleared in the morning, we could see the Caribbean on the horizon. After drinking the sweet milk of green coconuts ('pipas') we cooked dinner. At Buena Vista there are two small bohios' with floors and walls of split cane, with thatched palm roofs of which we chose the largest in which to spend the night. In the dusk the fireflies glowed throughout the valley and the frogs croaked loudly outside the hut. We all passed out by 7:30; it had been ten hours of strenuous walking. I was wakened at 3:00 a.m. by a sharp bite on my eyelid, then on my arm, and repeated bites

virtually everywhere on my body - I was writhing in a swarm of 'carniceros,' or butcher ants. My flashlight revealed a virtual carpet of them on the cane floor, and in a minute my companions were up slapping and stamping the floor to drive the ants back up into the thatch overhead. Unconvinced of the efficiency of the stamping, I moved to the other hut where I finished the night in peace.

Dawn at Buena Vista began with grey mists drifting across the valley and shrouding the huge trees of the surrounding hills. By 8:00, the weather had cleared, revealing the Caribbean to the north.

We started our descent, through lush jungle, up and down rocky streams, knee-deep in mud at times, crossing several waist-deep rivers that were cool and rapid, with rocky bottoms and gravel beaches. The river banks are lined by huge, vine- and bromeliad-covered trees. In one of these river beds, a friend had found a stone carving, obviously a phallus (circumcised), an artifact of the Guaymi civilization. My own search for such a prize was unsuccessful.

We stopped at 1:00 for lunch after crossing the last large river, the Rio Pasa Coñasa. By 2:00 we were in Punta Peña. This is a small pueblo with a 'boarding school'. Almost no one was in town when we arrived, but we were fed lunch by the three men who were working on the school. Again, as throughout the trip, no one waited for us to ask for food or lodging - it was supplied as a matter of course, with great generosity and obvious pleasure.

Normally, it is possible to travel the last ten kilometers from Punta Peña to Chiriquí Grande by 'mesilla', a small flatcar pulled on ramshackle railroad tracks by a horse. Unfortunately for us, the mesilla, as well as the people, was attending a festival at the other end of the line. So we walked the track to Chiriquí Grande. It was a painful, hot, three-hour walk, for the ties are not spaced regularly, making it impossible to establish a stride. The countryside is beautiful, however: stands of rice and platano; dark groves of cacao trees, the fruit of which is attached by a tough stem to rather stout branches - almost as though they had been stuck on by epoxy glue. The cacao trees are covered with moss and bromeliads and thick with birds: parrots and several large colonies of Oropendola with their magnificent scrotal nests.

After seven hours of walking, encountering the Caribbean shore was like entering paradise. I discounted my guide's warning of "muchos lagartos" (crocodiles) in the water, stripped, and dove in. Great to rinse off three days of sweat and change into clean clothes. From a distance Chiriquí Grande looks like a town out of an ad for the Club Med: one street right along the beach, green hills rising steeply just behind the street, no more than 10 m. from the water. Coconut palms grow right up to the water's edge and shade the houses. There are hibiscus everywhere. The only ominous elements are the black vultures that soar in large numbers overhead, stalk the beaches and wharves, and perch in the palms over the water. They are to Chiriquí Grande as are seagulls to Cape Cod. Pelicans and frigate birds cruise overhead and, as dusk fell, the fireflies' and frogs' croaking dominated the town.

Looking back on my experience in Darien and on this trip, I would enlarge on the theme that if you wish to gain knowledge in travelling, you must bring it with you. If you want to get to understand the lives of the people you must bring something of yourself. I did this with partial success, by working with the people and giving gifts where I could find something appropriate. But what people really wanted was to know about me and my life. I spent one evening describing Philadelphia to my guide, Juanito. I told him of houses where 1000 people lived (which astounded him); he

could hardly believe it when I told him that there were no cows or horses in Philadelphia, and when I told him that there were no chickens, he rolled on the bed in mirth.

IF YOU GO . . .

The trail is often indistinct and passes through such rugged terrain that a guide is recommended. Peter's guides were Ladis Miranda and Juan Manuel, his seventeen-year-old son. Juan has now made the trip three times, is bright and resourceful, and would be perfectly capable of being a solo guide. Either man can be found by asking around in Boquete or Caldera. Peter paid them $20 plus expenses for their services. Price Peterson, a gringo friend of his, and well known in Boquete, would probably help any non-Spanish-speaking traveller to arrange the trip.

If you decide to go it alone without guides you should be an experienced trail finder and map reader. "Tommy Guardia" puts out an adequate map of the area which shows the trail.

If you follow Peter's itinerary, shelter is available on the way so a tent is unnecessary. Even in the dry season the weather is cold and wet so dress accordingly. Bring a complete change of clothing. Since your wet clothes never dry out you sleep in your dry ones, and put the damp ones on again the next morning. Lovely! Plenty of wool socks are a must. Your boots are always soaking wet, so canvas basket-ball boots, or better still Jungle Boots (see page) are more suitable than leather ones.

Be on your guard against hypothermia. A waterproof jacket would give you better protection than a fly-away poncho.

Once in Chiriqui Grande, you must get a boat (or rather a 'cayuco', dugout canoe) to Bocas del Toro. From Bocas you can fly back to David, or take the ferry to Almirante and then the train to Changuinola. This is the Caribbean route into Costa Rica.

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Small boys often scurry up to your train or bus as you disembark. They know their way around town, and usually what the hotels are charging. Tell them how much you want to pay for a hotel and let one guide you to the appropriate place. If he's done his job well, a small tip will be expected.