

CROSSING THE DARIEN GAP

A Daring Journey Through a
Forbidding and Enchanting and
Roadless Jungle That Is the
Only Link by Land
Between North America and South America

Andrew Niall Egan

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Andrew Niall Egan

has explored isolated Canadian forests, endured Central American jungles, and survived African war zones. Born in 1970 in Dublin, Ireland, he grew up in Toronto, Canada. Andrew has diplomas in radio and television broadcasting and print journalism. He has worked as a newspaper features writer, a television reporter and a book publisher. After traveling on a sailboat for a year, he settled in Florida. He is now a real estate broker and manager of a real estate investment company.

About the Cover Photos:

The large background photo is a Central American rainforest in Costa Rica. The back cover shows the author in the Darien Rainforest near the border of Panama and Colombia. (The photos were taken by Andrew Egan except for the photo of the author which was taken by an unknown person with the author's camera.)

If you ever plan to travel between North America and South America, you must consider that there is no road.

Ten hours southeast of the Panama Canal, the Pan-American Highway penetrates the jungle, shrivels into a footpath and dies. The highway resurrects in Colombia, another continent. But the land between the two countries is a vast and primitive realm. On a map the two ends of the highway appear as two slivers of life, separated by the unknown.

Filling this void is a rugged wilderness known as the Darien Rainforest. Because the Darien hinders all contact by land between North America and South America, it has earned the name "Darien Gap."

Yet most travelers never encounter the Darien Gap. When they go to South America they fly or perhaps take a boat. I decided to cross the Darien overland, traversing from Panama to Colombia by foot and riverboat.

I made this decision four months earlier while home in Canada. At that time I was preparing for a three-month journey through Latin America to experience life in the third world and to collect information for a book. Originally, I was intending to travel only from Mexico down to Costa Rica. But, while planning my trip, I read about eight adventurers who had tried to cross from Panama to Colombia overland through the Darien Rainforest. In their excursion only two made it out the other side. Their exploit intrigued me. Besides, I had already planned to visit Colombia — hiking through the jungle would save the airfare.

So I flew from Toronto to Acapulco and began my Latin American journey. I lived in urban slums and mountain war zones as I rambled through central and southern Mexico then on through Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua.

Now I'm in Costa Rica. Three months of rugged travel have hardened me for the Darien expedition. Considering the challenge, many doubts cross my mind. Nevertheless, I'm determined to conquer the Darien Gap.

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

At 4:20 a.m. my mini alarm clock shrills. I silence it and sit up. Then I hoist my backpack, stand up, and walk out the door into the starlit Costa Rican night.

San José is asleep. Aside from the hum of the streetlights I hear only my footsteps. I pause to adjust my pack, and I draw a lungful of the tranquil air. It is late March — the end of the dry season. Within weeks the summer rains will burst forth.

A block ahead two figures emerge from a side street, cross the boulevard, then disappear into the darkness. The Swedes — they always hurry. But at least they're on time for our pre-dawn rendezvous.

Like the Swedes, I'm heading for the Tica bus terminal a few blocks away. Before the 1980s the Tica buses traveled throughout Central America. Then revolutions erupted in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua, forcing the Ticas to relegate their routes to Costa Rica, and down into Panama until peace would prevail. This will be my only run on the Tica line: a 20-hour passage from San José to Panama City, which I reckon will be uneventful.

Yet I've learned to distrust the buses of Latin America. In Honduras, for instance, I noticed the newspaper headlines like "SECOND BUS TRAGEDY THIS WEEK — MECHANICAL PROBLEM SUSPECTED — NUMEROUS DEATHS." In Guatemala, one bus I was riding blew two tires within ten minutes. When we borrowed a spare tire from a passing bus it blew as well.

I recall most vividly, however, one bus journey in northeast Honduras, through the lowlands by the Caribbean. We were motoring full speed down the highway when several passengers noticed a vibration rumbling through the floor. Someone mentioned this to the husky driver, who ground the bus to a halt, then crawled underneath to examine it. After emerging and squeezing into his seat, he bellows, "There's a problem with the wheel. They'll check it in San Pedro." And with that he clunks us into gear and pulls onto the road.

Minutes later a metallic snap jolts our seats. The women shriek; and the men look to heaven and howl, "Please dear Jesus, don't take us now." The driver wrangles the velvet-covered steering wheel — but with no response. We careen down the highway at 60 miles an hour with no steering.

The driver slams the brakes and a squeal rivets the undercarriage. We surge toward the rocky ditch and, a second later, back onto the highway. No steering and now no brakes! Then suddenly the undercarriage plows into the shoulder, and we grind to a halt.

The women fumble out with their chickens. The men follow — now they are swearing instead of praying. Thirty feet from the road, among the palm trees, our front right wheel lies solemnly, spewing a column of smoke. Thirty feet farther the trees give way to a gorge.

Yet I made it through Honduras and eventually into Nicaragua, where I met the Swedes. They told me they were also planning to cross the Darien Gap. Two days ago we inadvertently met once more on a San José

street corner. Since we were planning to travel to the Darien at the same time, we decided to travel there together.

* * * *

It is now 4:30 a.m. as I reach the darkened Tica Bus office, obscured on an avenue behind the restaurants and the short, glass office buildings of the downtown boulevard. The Swedes are crouching on the sidewalk, fidgeting with their backpacks. Both are in their early 20s and have been traveling together through Central America for about three months. Peering through the darkness, one of the Swedes glances up and grins. "So you made it!" he greets.

"Of course. Did you think I'd sleep in?"

He chuckles and leans against the wall to wait for the bus. In Swedish his name is Urban, but in Spanish he calls himself Urbano, which, to me, sounds like a Spanish term for a city bus route.

The other is called Matts, in both Swedish and Spanish. He complains often. "There's not even someone in the office," he grumbles. "They had better come soon. We're supposed to leave in 30 minutes."

I ease my pack to the ground. It's laden heavy with oatmeal and sardines — my provisions for the jungle expedition. Soon a dozen others gather. We three are the only gringos (white-skinned foreigners).

After a few minutes someone opens the office door and I amble inside to validate my ticket. As I walk back outside, a bus roars down from the boulevard, sweeps around in front of us and halts by the curb.

To someone like me who has spent much of the last year in isolated mountain villages, the bus seems mammoth. I learn that there are two drivers, with staggered shifts for the 20-hour ride to Panama City. One driver opens the expansive baggage compartments, revealing one compartment for the luggage, and another compartment with a bed inside for the resting driver. The interior is posh (at least compared to Nicaraguan transport). An austere notice proclaims "Only Cigarette Smoking" and the seats actually have assigned numbers.

At 5:10 a.m. a few stragglers board just as the bus roars to life. I recline in my seat. We cruise out of San José and ascend the mountains. By midday we'll hit the Panama border. Tonight I'll be sleeping by the Panama Canal.

The woman beside me soothes her sniffling infant, while my stomach churns as I recall once again that I have no onward ticket to show Panamanian immigration to prove that I will leave their country. But I got into El Salvador — I reckon I can get into Panama.

Tomorrow the Swedes and I will make our way to Yaviza, the last settlement on the Pan-American Highway. From there until Colombia I won't see another road, car or rusty bus — just rivers, footpaths and rainforest — endless, ominous rainforest.

I have some sketchy hiking directions from my Lonely Planet guidebook, and an even sketchier map, dotted with names of native villages I'll encounter on the journey. One village named Paya, in deepest

isolation, was once the capital of the vast Kuna kingdom, long before anyone conceived of Colombia.

The trek from the last road in Panama to the first road in Colombia will take several weeks, if conditions are reasonable. I should make it out before "the rains," which transform the trails into mud-traps and the rivers into raging torrents.

A fiery dawn now paints the eastern horizon, illuminating the mist hanging over the mountainside. A small airplane emerges from the haze and soars into the clear sky. The sniffling infant beside me falls asleep. Soon I also close my eyes and slumber.

Meanwhile the mammoth bus rumbles through the mountains, heading south, toward the Darien Rainforest.