

namaste

November 2004

Vol 1, Issue 8



**The Darien Gap
The Galapagos Islands
Orchids of Central America**

**Plus...
Conservation in Costa Rica
Namaste Global Expedition Update
...and more**

Namaste!

Welcome to the November 2004 edition of Namaste News!

The Expedition explored the Caribbean coast of south-eastern Costa Rica and the nearby delightful islands of Bocas del Toro in Panama. Then through the volcanic mountains of western Panama and the remote jungle of Parque Nacional Corcovado in Costa Rica before touring along beautiful unspoilt Pacific beaches en route to Panama City and the engineering wonder of the Panama Canal. After organising

shipping logistics in Panama, the Expedition crossed to Ecuador to explore the cities of Guayaquil and Quito before heading out to the wonderful volcanic Galápagos Islands, a natural wildlife haven and underwater paradise.

Packed full of features this month as well as the regular updates, feel free to send me an email with your suggestions and ideas for future issues.

Cheers, Chris

Contents

Expedition Highlights	1
Expedition Update	2
Orchids of Central America	4
Conservation in Costa Rica	4
The Galápagos Islands	4
The Darien Gap...	5
People, Letters & Emails	5
Website Update & In the news	5

Global Expedition Highlights

1/11/04 Day 211
Manzanillo Mile 22740



3/11/04 Day 213
Bocas del Toro Mile 22820



5/11/04 Day 215
Almirante Mile 22850



6/11/04 Day 216
Boquete Mile 22955



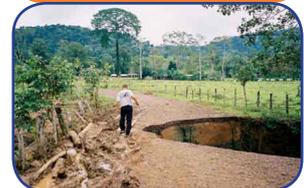
7/11/04 Day 217
Guadalupe Mile 23030



30/11/04 Day 240
Galapagos Mile 24055



9/11/04 Day 219
P.N. Corcovado Mile 23195



29/11/04 Day 239
Galapagos Mile 24055



11/11/04 Day 221
Playa las Lajas Mile 23360



28/11/04 Day 238
Galapagos Mile 24055



26/11/04 Day 236
Quito Mile 24050



23/11/04 Day 233
Guayaquil Mile 23700



18/11/04 Day 228
Panama City Mile 23590



13/11/04 Day 223
Panama Canal Mile 23590



Expedition Trivia...

- # of Days (overall): 30 (240)
- Miles in month (overall): 1430 (24055)
- Avg miles/day (overall): 48 (100)
- Longest day (overall): 304 (527)
- # countries (overall): 4 (13)
- # of police stops (overall): 7 (40)

Top Tips this month...

- Top Tip: Boquete, Panama
- Favourite City: Quito, Ecuador
- Adventure Spot: Galapagos Islands
- Place to Stay: Playa las Lajas, Panama
- Night Spot: Next, Panama City
- Wilderness: P.N. Corcovado, Costa Rica

Features...

On page 4, discover the diversity of beautiful orchids flowering in Panama; unique conservation projects in Costa Rica; and explore the fauna and flora of the Galapagos Islands of Ecuador...
On page 5, find out about the realities of the Darien Gap, an area of dense jungle in the border region of Panama and Colombia...

Global Expedition Update

Having re-stocked the fridge, we headed east out of San Jose to Puerto Limon on the Caribbean Coast, stopping to enjoy a colourful carnival celebration in a hill-top town.

After a great night at a campsite overlooking the jungle, we made our way to a fascinating sloth sanctuary before reaching the end of the road at Manzanillo and a beautiful beach site for the night.



We crossed into Panama over a notably dodgy bridge, completing the necessary paperwork with the help of a very friendly local. After a lovely drive along the coast we

arrived in Almirante late in the afternoon, hoping to catch the last ferry to the islands. No such luck, however, so we camped out of town in the rainforest before hopping on the early morning boat. Luckily for us, there was a boat because there was some uncertainty at first as it was Panama Day, the celebration of independence from Colombia.

The Archipelago de Bocas del Toro, in the Laguna de Chiriqui, just 32km from the Costa Rican border, is a slow-paced community made up of mostly English- and patois-speaking people of West Indian ancestry. After the short boat trip to Isla Colon, it was a great place to hang out for a few days.

Returning from this beautiful Caribbean island, we decided to head south into the mountains of Chiriqui. Nestled in a craggy, mountain valley at 1060m, with the sparkling Rio Caldera running through it, Boquete is known throughout Panama for its cool, fresh climate and pristine natural setting. Flowers, vegetables and citrus fruits flourish in the rich soil, and the coffee is considered the country's finest. We opted for a bit of a splurge, staying the night at a beautiful hotel, set amidst delightful gardens and with a roaring fire, fantastic food and a fine selection of Scotch whiskeys, we spent the evening chatting to an entertaining bunch of English tropical fish experts!

The next day we toured around the volcano, shrouded in mist, to Volcan, then 3km beyond Cerro Punta, we



reached the village of Guadalupe, the end of the road. It is a beautiful area with meticulously tended farms and gardens, and its crisp air is ideal for walks among

the lush vegetation. The little community is full of flowers, and fertile agricultural plots curl up the steep hillsides. At one end of the village is the Jardin Botanico Dracula, which was wonderfully picturesque and home to a wonderful orchid sanctuary (see article on page 4).

Still in need of a spot of pampering, we enjoyed the comforts of Los Quetzales Lodge, including sauna & massage no less, ahhh...

After some research on how I was to get my vehicle to Ecuador (my chosen entry point for South America, largely for reasons of safety), I was surprised to learn it was not going to be that easy and it was infrequently done. The border region between Panama and Colombia is known as the Darien Gap and there are no roads so shipping the Land Rover was going to be the only way (see article on page 5).



Back over the border into Costa Rica at Rio Serena, we enjoyed a beautiful drive in the mountains, winding past coffee plantations, cloud forest and great views of the Pacific Ocean.

Through several police stops, we turned off the Pan-American highway, destination Parque Nacional de Corcovado. The road was possibly the worst I had experienced in Central America, but it offered access to the magnificent wilderness on the Peninsular de Osa, which has the best remaining strands of Central America's Pacific coast rain forest. This unspoiled national park is home to Costa Rica's largest population of scarlet macaws as well as countless animal and plant species, including jaguars, coatis, toucans, and snakes. Its great biological diversity has long attracted the attention of tropical ecologists.

On route, we camped on the beach, in front of a small bar, where we simply had to drink and dance the night away with the locals and one of the guys there had to put ZZ Top to shame with the length of his beard!

The next leg of this off-road adventure took us through mud pits, over mountain passes and precarious wooden bridges; past small hamlets and numerous landslides until we could go no further for the road had entirely collapsed into the subterranean stream below. On our return, we did stop in to visit the Neotropica Foundation, one of Costa Rica's many unique and enterprising conservation projects (see article on page 4).



We re-entered Panama on the Pacific side, making this our third Costa

Rica / Panama border crossing. We made our way to Playa las Lajas, 63km east of David, Panama's second city, and 13km south of the Pan-American Highway, it is one of several long, palm-lined beaches along this stretch of the Pacific coast. Staying at Las Lajas Beach Cabins, simple bamboo affairs set right on the beach, we enjoyed a spot

of surfing, and a drive along the fabulous deserted beach with our cabana neighbours, finishing with a magnificent sunset and a campfire on the beach.

Heading east after two days on the beach on 12 November, we finally pulled into Panama City. As Maud was to fly home to London the next day, we decided to head straight out to the Miraflores Locks of the famous Panama Canal.



In 1878, the Colombian government awarded a contract to build a canal to Lucien Wise, who later sold the concession to the French diplomat, Ferdinand de

Lesseps, who was at the time basking in the success of completing the Suez Canal.

Lessep's company began work in 1881, the plan being to build a sea-level canal alongside the interoceanic railway, but the project proved much more difficult than anyone had expected, not least that malaria and yellow fever killed 22,000 workers. Eventually, insurmountable construction problems and financial mismanagement drove Lessep's company bankrupt in 1889.

The French, unable to complete the canal, agreed to sell the concession to the USA. However, when the Colombian government refused to allow the transfer of the canal treaty, Bunau-Varilla, once one of Lessep's chief engineers, asked the USA to back a bid for Panamanian independence.

A revolutionary junta declared Panama independent on November 3, 1903, with the support of the USA, which immediately recognised the new government. Colombia sent troops by sea to try to regain control of the province, but US battleships prevented them from reaching land.

Construction began again on the canal in 1904 and took 10 years and more than 75,000 workers. The project remains one of the greatest engineering achievements of the 20th century, completed despite disease, landslides and many other difficulties. The first ship sailed through the canal on August 15, 1914.



Stretching 80km from Panama City on the Pacific side to Colon on the Atlantic side, the Canal cuts right through the Continental Divide.

Nearly 14,000 ships now pass through the canal each year; and many ship dimensions are designed to fit the Canal's locks: 305m long and 35.5m wide.

The Canal has three sets of double locks, and between them ships pass through a huge artificial lake, Lago Gatun, created by the Gatun Dam across the Rio Chagres (when created they were the largest of their kind in the world). A staggering 52 million gallons of fresh water is released to the ocean with the passage of each ship.

As Panama commemorated the 101-year anniversary of its independence, the country had a great deal on which to reflect. With the ousting of Noriega, then the historic handover of the Canal from the USA back to Panama in 1999 and the

continued on page 3...

Coming Up...to find out how to join, click below

December 2004

Returning from the Galapagos, travelling broadly south through Ecuador & Peru, horse-riding in the Cordillera Blanca and rainforest of Parque Nacional Manu; and trekking to Macchu Picchu before crossing into Bolivia for Christmas and New Year on the shores of Lake Titicaca, then onto La Paz...

January 2005

Explore the highlights of Bolivia including Lake Titicaca, La Paz, the Valley of the Moon and Salar de Uyuni, then south through Chile to Santiago and across to Mendoza in Argentina ready to climb Aconcagua, at nearly 7,000m, South America's highest mountain...

Global Expedition Update cont...

subsequent closure of American military bases, Panama was finally in charge of its own destiny.

Many were skeptical about Panama's ability to run the canal, yet Panama defied expectations, wracking up impressive safety records and decreasing transit time for ships passing through the canal by more than 10%.

Along the narrow isthmus bridging the Americas, the wildlife and terrain of two continents meld to form the striking contrasts of Panama. From oceans to forests, mountains to jungle, the diversity doesn't end in the countryside. With immigrants from Europe, Asia, the middle East and all over the Americas, Panama City encapsulates the 'melting pot' ideal better than any other city in Central America. You can sample cuisine from across the globe then dance till dawn at one of dozens of nightclubs - Central America's best.

After Maud had returned to London, I focused on the immediate challenge - getting me and my vehicle quickly, safely and as inexpensively as possible to Ecuador. I was also up against the clock as I had only 2 weeks to get everything organised, completed and be in Quito with the vehicle in order to meet a friend flying in from Canada on the 25th.

After many phone calls, trips backwards and forwards to police, customs' & agents' offices, I finally had a plan. The vehicle would depart Panama in a container bound for Guayaquil, Ecuador on 20th November. After negotiating the complex port procedures, complex mostly for reasons of inefficiency and uncertain bureaucracy, the container was loaded and my fingers were firmly crossed.

With the Land Rover under way and my flight booked, I had some time to relax a bit and enjoy the Panama City nightlife with Brandon, who was staying at the same hotel and working in Panama on a resort development on one of the islands of



Bocas del Torro; and many of the friendly people of Panama City.

I did still have one lingering issue to resolve though - something known as a Carnet de Passages. This is a

document that essentially says that you will not sell your vehicle when you temporarily import it into a country in South America. This is not required in North and Central America. Generally issued by automobile associations throughout the world, there is still much controversy in that no one is really 100% sure whether or not it is actually required. Of course the automobile clubs say it is as they are making money from it. But will border officials even know what it is, given that there is no international standard for what one looks like?

I had done some research back in the UK, and discovered that the RAC, the UK automobile club, could issue one. But get this, to acquire a Carnet for one year in South America, it costs £90, but in addition you have to pay an insurance indemnity. The premium is calculated as 10% the value of your car times the relevant country multiplier. In South America, the multiplier is 200% (the highest

multiplier for a country is 500%). In sum, the cost of this bit of paper would be £7,000, of which half is returned at the end of the year. Outrageous!

So I decided to investigate alternatives, with a little help from my native Spanish-speaking amigo, Francis. I discovered that you can purchase one in Venezuela, for the relatively modest sum of \$300. Great, I thought. But you had to physically be in Venezuela with your vehicle, so this was not an option. So I checked the Ecuador automobile club, but they only issue Carnets to Ecuador vehicles. Finally, I tried the Panama club, but they were only going to be members of AAT, which allows them to issue Carnets, in Feb 2005. So, I gave up and thought I'll see what happens and test the theory that it may not even be required. After all, I did have an International Certificate of Motor Vehicles and many other bits of official paper that I felt I could persuade the relevant border and customs officials with. In reality, they simply need to be convinced the vehicle is not stolen and you plan to exit the country with the vehicle...hmmm!

With all this in mind, on 22 November I flew to Guayaquil, Ecuador's largest city and port to await the arrival of the Land Rover, which was due on the 24th. I spent my waiting time exploring the city, including the fabulous new 2.5km waterfront development known as the Malecon; and a fascinating walk to the lighthouse at the summit of Las Penas, climbing 450 steps past brightly coloured houses, bars, restaurants and shops. From the top, you gain a magnificent 360 degree view of the city, particularly when the sun is setting.

Evidence of Ecuador's liberator from the Spanish, Simon Bolivar, is everywhere. Bolivar, from Venezuela, marched southward from Caracas, freed Colombia in 1819 and supported the people of Guayaquil when they claimed independence on October 9, 1820.

Conscious of my need to reach Quito by midnight on the 25th, a 9-hour drive from Guayaquil, I set about the swathe of paperwork involved in collecting and clearing your vehicle. First to the agent's office to collect the original bill of lading, then to the port to visit customs. Hugely disappointed

that the agent did not seem to understand my sense of urgency, I found my own way there and began steering through the multiplicity of offices, departments and contradictory advice from each official I met. Requiring over 8 separate pieces of paper, numerous signatures from officials who all seemed to work only part of the day or were at lunch, I realised that I could not get my Land Rover released until the next day. Now I was really running out of time...

Fortunately, my Spanish had improved to the point I could at least discuss the issues with officials, and at 4pm on the 25th, I finally drove out of the port with all papers stamped and signed (notably without requiring a Carnet). I was drained after 8 hours of struggle, at one point shouting at an armed policeman for being a pain in the arse (perhaps not so wise in hindsight)! I then had to

drive to Quito to be there for midnight!

And an epic drive it was, navigating through towns and negotiating challenging roads in the dark. The last leg of the journey takes you right up into the Andes over 10,000 feet in elevation before dropping down into Quito. The endurance was really wearing thin at this point as I was faced with a traffic jam of over 500 lorries all climbing this steep and treacherous pass, with some close shaves on the overtaking front! Not something you really expect late at night in the mountains.

Fuelled by red bull, chocolate and water, I pulled into Quito airport after 8 1/2 hours non-stop on the road to meet Odessa, who thankfully, had only been waiting 30 minutes.

After a night of much needed rest, we toured the city. Perched at 2850m above sea level, Quito is a beautifully preserved colonial capital, with many interesting places to explore. The contrast between the old town and new town is stark, and both have much to offer the traveller.

Like Panama during recent times, Ecuador's economic crisis has led it to replace its unstable national currency with the dollar. This was great for me as at the time of writing the weakness of the dollar made for a great exchange rate with sterling when booking our trip to the Galapagos Islands, something I had been looking forward to all month. As it was supposedly peak season, there were few options available, but we lucked out, joining a fabulous boat with a great crew and only 6 other tourists, all our own age and good fun.

The unique wildlife of the Galapagos is simply astounding. Although the number of species on the islands is relatively small compared to that of the mainland, nowhere else in the world can you see such wild animals at such close range. Because of their lack of natural predators, most animals are literally fearless of human visitors. Not only has the wildlife of this spectacular, barren archipelago been astounding tourists for years, it has also shaped the course of human history by contributing significantly to Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, which he unfolded during his stay on the islands [see article on page 4.]

Cruising around the many islands of the Galapagos was fabulous, mixing island walks with snorkelling adventures, wildlife exploration with games of pool at the bar of an evening.

Of all the animals we saw, my favourites were the eagle rays, white tip sharks, giant tortoises, the marine iguanas and the numerous playful sea lions. We were also lucky to see a Galapagos hawk happily seated on a branch posing for photos. And for scenery, tiny Isla Bartolome and Pinnacle Rock, surrounded by white sand beaches and turquoise waters were spectacular.

On route to Peru, I look forward to exploring the rest of Ecuador, the most diminutive of Andean countries, yet offering more physical and cultural diversity than most countries on the planet...

by Chris Charlton



Orchids...

Orchids, orchids, my favourite of all the flowers, are worldwide in distribution, but the greatest diversity of species occurs in tropical regions. Estimates of the number of orchid species vary from 15,000 to 25,000, including a vast array of intricate and beautiful colours and shapes.

Nestled in the western mountains of Panama, close to the border of Costa Rica, is the "Funclia Dracula", an award-winning orchid sanctuary that is home to a fabulous display of orchids, indigenous to Central & South America, and a great place to learn more about these beautiful flowers...

Orchids are distinguished from other flowering plants by a combination of floral characteristics rather than by a single characteristic unique to the group. For example, orchid flowers are borne on stalks called pedicels, as are other flowers. During the growth and development of the flower,



however, the pedicel rotates 180°, so that the mature orchid flower is borne upside down. One of the petals called the labellum, or lip, is always distinct from the others; it is usually larger and different in colour and shape, often being lobed or cupped, and often acts a landing platform for pollinators.

Orchid flowers are pollinated by a great variety of flying animals, and their great diversity in floral structure has resulted from adaptations to various pollinators. About half the orchid species are pollinated by bees; moths, butterflies, flies, birds, and other agents pollinate the rest. Many orchid flowers are adapted for pollination by a single species of insect and in extreme cases by one sex of that insect.

Orchid pollen is not granular, as it is in most flowering plants, but is aggregated in a number of masses, or sacs, that vary in texture from mealy to horny. As many as 2 million seeds may be produced from a single orchid seedpod.

Orchids do not vary as much vegetatively as they do in floral structure, but a great variety of forms exists, reflecting the wide range of habitats they occupy. About half are epiphytes, growing on other plants for support only, but some are parasites and others saprophytes (living on decaying vegetation). Apart from their phenomenal popularity among horticulturists, orchids have little economic importance, although vanilla flavouring is obtained from fruits of one species, the Mexican vanilla, widely grown in tropical areas. Growers, such as Funclia Dracula, have also produced thousands of new forms of orchids through hybridization.

But best of all, they are simply great to see and smell. If you want more info, two good websites include: www.orchidweb.org & www.orchid.org.uk

Conservation in Costa Rica...

The Central American country of Costa Rica, despite its small size, has incredible biodiversity with some 9000 species of plants, 1239 species of butterflies, 850 species of birds, 350 species of reptiles and amphibians, and 205 species of mammals. It also has an ambitious conservation programme, perhaps one of the most developed in the world for a country with rainforests.

Begun in the 1960s, the Costa Rican national park system now encompasses some three dozen parks and protected areas - about 14% of the country's area. In addition, various buffer zones and forest reserves boost the total area of protected land to about 27%.

The national system of conservation areas (Sinac - Sistema Nacional de Areas de Conservacion) is developing ways to link geographically close groups of parks and preserves, of which there are now 11. One unique strip of forest runs uninterrupted for 40 miles through nine ecological zones from sea level to 12,500 feet.

While the government of Costa Rica has been more attuned to conservation than its Central American counterparts, much remains to be done.

Rainforest conservation, you may ask, why all the fuss? Well, roughly half the earth's 1.7 million known species inhabit the tropical rainforests, and deforestation can only lead to countless extinctions. Medicines ranging from anaesthetics to antibiotics, from contraceptives to cures for heart disease, all emanate from rainforest flora. Worldwide climatic patterns are moderated by rainforests and their destruction is a major contributing factor to global warming. The survival of the tropical rainforests is also vital to the



indigenous cultures who live within them.

These and many other reasons mean the survival of the rainforest is imperative to planet Earth, and the more mechanisms to protect and enhance them, the better. Local populations have also benefited economically from developing eco-tourism, designed to protect and conserve the environment, whilst stimulating an army of rainforest goodwill ambassadors amongst visiting tourists. Eco-tourism is now Costa Rica's second largest industry behind bananas adding US\$700 million to GDP, although in some areas this source of revenue appears to have been overexploited. Some developers are building huge resorts that not only spoil the environment but fail to attract those interested in saving Costa Rica's environment.

The beautiful tropical dry forest of northwest Costa Rica, with its highly seasonal rainfall and diversely vegetated landscape, is also disappearing even more rapidly than Costa Rica's better-known rain forest, primarily because it has been easier to convert to agriculture.



However, there are many other varied conservation projects dotted around the country. One interesting example of conservation in action is the NeoTropica Foundation (www.neotropica.org). Nestled just north of the amazing Corcovado National Park, this centre offers numerous research and educational programmes. Some of the staff spend a lot of time teaching local children and adults ways and means of living that is consistent with conservation. Volunteers can also come here to lend a helping hand and learn about the local conservation issues...

The Galápagos Islands...

Requiring little introduction, the Galápagos Islands lie about 1,050 km (650 mi) off the western coast of Ecuador in the Pacific Ocean. The archipelago consists of 15 large and several hundred small islands lying on or near the equator.

In 1535 Spaniards were the first Europeans to set foot on the islands, but the Galapagos are believed to have been inhabited by the Inca long before the Spaniards' arrival. During the 17th and 18th centuries they were used as a rendezvous by pirates and buccaneers. British and US warships and whaling vessels landed frequently at the Galápagos in the 19th century; most recently used as a backdrop for the Russell Crowe film, "Master & Commander".



islands' name). Other reptiles on the islands include two species of large lizards in the iguana family: a burrowing land iguana and an unusual marine iguana that dives into the ocean for seaweed. The islands contain as many as 85 different species of bird, including albatrosses, flamingos, flightless cormorants, boobies, frigatebirds, finches, and penguins.

The underwater world of the Galapagos is equally entrancing, including several species of rays, marine turtle, sharks and an abundant array of tropical fish. Sea lions are numerous and frequently like to play with snorkellers.

The classic view of the Galapagos can be found at a striking formation known as Pinnacle Rock, which stands like a sentinel at the tip of tiny Isla Bartolomé, used as a nesting spot by Galápagos penguins and marine turtles.



The landscape of the rest of the Galápagos Islands is generally hilly, and mainly treeless, indicating their volcanic origin. The islands were formed from molten lava bubbling up through a crack in the Pacific Ocean sea floor along the Galápagos Rift Zone. Volcanic activity in the archipelago is frequent—the most recent eruption took place on Fernandina Island in early 1995.

To protect this unique habitat and its vast array of flora and fauna, Ecuador has designated the islands a national park. For sailors, wildlife lovers and scuba-divers, in particular, this is real paradise on the equator...

People

Fellow Adventurers...



Maud Gerritsen, 32, from Holland and living in London, completed her journey from San Jose, Costa Rica to Panama City on 13 November. From jungle camps to exploring both the beautiful Caribbean and Pacific coasts, Maud covered a total of 1,090 miles.



Odessa Shuquaya, 30, from Vancouver, Canada, joined the expedition again on 25 November, this time in Quito, Ecuador, for an amazing 5-day tour of the Galapagos islands, an off-road adventure to 12,000 feet in the high Andes, and a day in the famous craft market of Otavalo.



Along the way...

A big thank you to all those people who we've met along the way in November, including:



Jed & Chris (Manzanillo), Loretto & Philippe, Norm & friends, Colombia dude (Bocas), Brian & the fish gang (Boquete), Ingrid, Abel (Guadalupe), Paola, Marlin, Rex (Corcovado),

Julisse (Drake), Candido, Lisa & Kevin (Playa Las Lajas), Marlisse & Sergio, Suelle, Carlino, Veronica, Andrea, Juan, Manissa, Brandon, Arleth & friends, Lizbeth, Sophia, Isabella, Alexei, Benilda, Javel & friends, Claudia (Panama City), Antonio, Gilberto (Guayaquil), Diego, Ernesto, Phil & Cheryl, Jo & Paige, Jen, Rodolfo (Galapagos)...

In the News

In the News

A feature on the Expedition Vehicle will appear in Land Rover Owner International magazine in December or January... see www.namaste.co.uk/news

In-Country News

November was a month of celebration in Panama: On November 3, 4 and 5 Panama celebrated its independence from Colombia, and November 28 was the anniversary of Panama's independence from Spain...

And on Nov 18, world football champions Brazil crashed to a shock 1-0 defeat in Ecuador while home wins for Peru, Colombia and Uruguay kept the South American World Cup qualifying group wide open...

Previous Newsletters

Previous issues of Namaste News are also available at www.namaste.co.uk/news or click the links below if online:

[April 2004](#)
[June 2004](#)
[Aug 2004](#)
[Oct 2004](#)

[May 2004](#)
[July 2004](#)
[Sep 2004](#)

Letters & Emails

Thank you for all your letters, emails and faxes. Each month, a few excerpts will be printed here...

"Hey Chris, Good to hear from you. Sounds like you're having an amazing time - am loving your web updates so please keep sending me the link. Yep - job change - now doing Marcoms for Ciena for Europe - all very exciting. In Puerto Rico at the mo for a conference with them - and can't believe it as it's raining!!! Take care.", Lou, London, England

"Hey Chris! It's me Byron from Gaviota beach in California. Wishin ya a happy Thanksgiving. My kids, Markey and Ren, say Hi and wanted me to tell you to stay away from places with terrorists and war. Hope all is going well take care," Byron, USA

"Hi Chris, Hope all is well in Panama. As for newsletter suggestions, I think the more photos the better, but, no matter how many you post it wouldn't be enough! The newsletter does well in balancing personal anecdotes with descriptions of the local people and landscape, etc. Glad you enjoyed the garden pix. A very peaceful place. Things are well in Guad - busy, as we try to get ahead for the two extra large issues we'll print at Christmas and New Years. The Christmas season has already arrived here, and I'm enjoying favorites like the Philharmonic Orchestra and of course some great shopping. =-) Anyway, I'm supposed to be at a photo shoot in a few. Better get to it!", Tarah, Guadalajara, Mexico

"Hi Chris! Nice to hear from you - I had a good look around your website which is fantastic!!! How much management (vs. travel) do you actually manage to squeeze in????????? I am in the business consulting game, just starting out so if you have any advice let me know! Also, a friend of ours is thinking about setting up a travel company - any top tips there too???? Cheers & keep in touch, PS - hope to see you when you hit OZ", Jon, Sydney, Australia

"Hey chris, this is Nazy. I'm decided on my trip to south america and i'm hoping we can meet up. i'm buying a ticket to Lima, Peru, departure date Nov. 14. i think you said you would be in the country around then so if we could work something out that would be awesome. I would like to show you around a bit or something. I dont know what your plans are for the Inca Trail and Machu Pichu but I'll be going there again for sure. Write me back and tell me what you think. The ticket hasn't been purchased yet so I'll wait till I here from you", Nazy, Nelson, BC, Canada

Website Update

Stage 2 Development

The first Namaste Management Guides (Project Management Series; Leadership & Management Series) and Namaste Fun Films (Climbing Denali; A Taste of North America) are now in production; and should become available from January 2005.

Statistics

November 2004

Hits: 34,903
Countries: 35
Downloads: 1,468 Mb

October 2004

Hits: 29,844
Countries: 32
Downloads: 1,903Mb

The Darien Gap...

Travelling overland from Central to South America would be easy, you might think. Think again...

The Pan-American Highway that runs all the way from Alaska to Patagonia stops in eastern Panama in the middle of the jungle near a town called Yaviza, and starts again some 150km further south in Colombia. No other roads exist. This transportation break between Central and South America is known as the Darien Gap. It's literally the end of the road. To cross it, you either have to go around by boat or plane, or plan for a trek into this vast wilderness on foot...

90% of the border between Panama and Colombia is covered by the Parque Nacional Darien. Unesco has declared this region of pristine tropical rain forest a World Heritage Site and biosphere reserve. A bridge between continents, this region is as naturally diverse as anywhere in the world, rich in all types of flora and fauna. The indigenous population that inhabit this region, drawn from the Embera, Wounaan and Kuna peoples, live in traditional villages, mostly along the rivers.

Despite occasional announcements by international authorities eager to improve transportation and trade between continents, it is unlikely that the Gap will be bridged anytime soon. Aside from the engineering challenge of bridging hundreds of rivers, Panamanians (and the US) are concerned that a road could help both Colombia's civil war spill over into Panama; and a road could increase illegal immigration and drug traffic, and help spread foot-and-mouth disease in cattle, which is presently limited to South America. There are also fears that a road would make logging easier thereby adding to the deforestation issue.

There are basically two ways through the Darien Gap. The first skirts the Caribbean coast via the San Blas archipelago, Puerto Obaldia and Capurgana, making use of boat services and involving a minimum of walking. The second goes through the jungle from Yaviza to the Rio Atrato in Los Katios national park, and you have to walk most of the way. For both, allow up to 2 weeks.

In addition to the natural dangers inherent in this wild region, the human threats are also numerous. Roaming bandits, narcotraffickers and guerillas all combine to make independent travel very risky. Particularly treacherous is the traditional footpath through the Darien Gap between Boca del Cupe and Colombia.

With a vehicle, it is necessary to transport it by boat or by plane (which is quite reasonable for motorbikes) from Panama to either Colombia, Venezuela or Ecuador. The easiest route used to be via the Crucero Express, a car ferry between Colon in Panama and Cartagena in Colombia. However, at the time of writing, this service had been discontinued.

Containers for vehicles are easy to obtain in Panama - contact your embassy or consulate in Panama for a reputable contact; then prepare for a mass of bureaucracy & paperwork, especially on the receiving end...

