

Darien Gap Adventure - Panama/Colombia 2017

Day 0, Friday, June 2, 2017

I had a hard week at work. In order to get the time off work for my flight I went to work early every day. My original flight was due to leave at 9:00 PM and I had planned my vacation time base on working all day Friday. A week before I left the airlines changed my departure time to 4:35 PM. The changed was due to the fact that I really did not have time to make my connection flight at LAX. With the departure time change I had to leave work around noon on Friday. My boss was OK with that. On that Friday I went into work around 5:30 AM and left by about 11:15 AM, I cycled the long way home. I finished packing and closed up my house, I walked to the max at about 12:30 PM and took the max to the airport. I was still about 3 hours early for my 4:35 PM departure to Panama. I first flew to LAX, in Portland I was told I had to get my boarding pass at LAX for Panama and would not need to leave the security area. When I arrived at LAX, I was told I had to leave the security area and go to another terminal to get my boarding pass. The first person I asked was not very helpful and the second person I talked with gave me a detailed description of how to get to Terminal 3 (where I would get my boarding pass) for terminal 6 (where I landed at LAX). I had to ask a couple more times before finding the place where I got my boarding pass for my flight to Borgata and Panama City, I still had a couple hours, so I walked around the airport.

Day 1, Saturday, June 3, 2017

The flight from LAX to Borgata was in a seat that would not recline, I slept fair on the flight. Then I had more than a 5-hour layover in Bogota, so I walked around a lot, exchanged some money and started this log. It seemed to take forever to get through the long layover in Bogotá, Colombia. I keep feeling like my planning was bad for getting the ride to the start of my San Blas Adventures tour, I started thinking I should have stayed at the hostel with the tour guides, not the hostel with the trip meeting area. I don't really like staying in hostel at my age, but it seemed to be the best choice to make sure I got on the San Blas Adventures tour. The tour seemed a little uncertain, they wanted cash and it said if your drive to the boat fails, it is your responsibility. Overall, the trip sounded like it was run poorly, but considering what we did it worked out fine. Once in Panama it was easy getting a cab to the hostel and I walked around for a long time and then went back to hostel. I was hope everything would work out the next day for my Darien Gap trip. The hostel was a very nice location and a lot of attractive young ladies. However, at my age I felt very out of place, but it was all fine.

Day 2, Sunday, June 4, 2017

I woke up around 7:30 AM and walked around until about 10:30 AM. I saw all the sights on the tourist map that I had found in the Hostel. I walked back to the hostel and after a short wait I was able to join the San Blas Adventure pre trip meeting and after meeting the other people I felt a lot more like the trip would go smooth. The accommodations in the youth hostel were not great for me. I would have like the youth hostel a lot 30 years prior to this trip. Almost everyone except me and this one lady that did not talk looked as if they were under 30 years old. After the meeting I used one of the free bikes from the hostel and cycled the Panama City waterfront trails. That was very fun to me. Then I went back to the hostel. After that I walked around until the rain started. Then I put my trip plans on Facebook. I posted on Facebook that I had arrived in Panama City the previous day and was headed to the Darien Gap the next day. I figured that would interest people and have them research the Darien Gap. I was very excited about crossing the Darien gap and had wanted to do that for about the past 20 years. When I returned to Portland, I found that no one else was that impressed. Oh well, I thought it was an excellent adventure! (Biked 17.8 miles; Walked 11.2 miles)

Day 3, Monday, June 5, 2017

I woke up around 3:30 AM and was afraid I might not wake up again. My 4 X 4 Jeep ride to the start of my San Blas Adventures trip left the hostel at 5:00 AM. The jeep would take me to Carti and they would not wait for me if I was not ready. I hung out in the lobby of the Luna Castle and tried sleeping on the couches (I really did not get any sleep), the other 3 people on the tour that were also staying at the Luna Castle Hostel were not down stairs as early as I myself. They probably had alarm clocks or some way to wake up, I only had my bike clock and no alarm. The 2 guys from London showed up downstairs closer to 4:00 AM, the lady showed up downstairs around 4:45 AM. She seemed more organized. I think I was the least organized. The 4x4 showed up at close to the correct 5:00 AM time and we drove to a grocery store to meet with the other 4x4 headed to Carti with our San Blas Adventures tour group. There were 27 people on the tour, plus 7 guides (4 of them running the 2 boats). Once at Carti it took a long time to load the boats, then they could not start one of the outboard motors. They ended up talking all except 7 people off the boat that had the broken outboard motor. Other people gladly jumped on the other boat thinking our boat would not leave. We ended up taking off with only one of the two outboard motors working on the boat. The others boat was faster, but kept waiting for us. I felt lucky I stayed on the less crowded boat with the broken second outboard motor. At one point you could see we were headed into a storm. When we got to the storm area it rained really hard and they gave us plastic. The rain was so heavy that even with the tarped boat and plastic I got soaked. The boat was small so they quickly made it to an island when the storm hit. The other boat was already at the island and we hung out at

the small island with drinks available for about 30 minutes. The storm mostly passed by and we reloaded the boats and headed onward. Then we continued and stayed on a very small one family private island. I met a lot of my co travelers. The others people were from Germany, Australia, Netherlands, London, Vancouver BC, Colorado and New Hampshire. There may have been people from other locations, but these were the places I remember. I heard 6 of them were medical doctors in training (MD interns) and I met 2 engineers (a petroleum engineer from Colorado and an electrical engineer from New Hampshire that was moving to California for a fellowship in some sort of computer data systems program). One of our leaders was a nice lady from Bogota, Colombia and another of the leaders was a very neat man from Switzerland. We also had Kuna locals as guides and boat operators on our trip. From what they said it was required to have a Kuna guide to take this trip and stay on the Kuna villages of the San Blas Islands. The 4 boat operators also had to be Kuna Indians. From the small island we swam to a nearby island and snorkeled at the reef. The reef was small and did not have any big fish. Some people saw sting rays and/or manta rays. I did not see anything that exciting. I walked back and forth on the small island several times, the island where we stayed that night was only about 100 feet in diameter. A little boring after a while, I do not see how people could live there. It would have been too boring for most people. I was about ready to sleep while everyone else partied. Then they ended out having a great late-night meal with shrimp and more. Then at about 11:00 PM the Kuna Family built us a fire. I stayed up for a couple of marshmallows near the fire and most of the group was drinking heavily into the morning. Most people were under 30 years old, I think even the doctors were in their 20s. One of them was 27 years old and was in something like an internship and was from London. It seemed like a lot of the people stayed up until well past midnight. I felt old for the group, but everyone respected me and they were very friendly. I should have drank with them and that would have make me fit in better, but I was afraid I would feel bad and get the runs, too much drinking does that to me. I went to sleep about 11:00 PM, the rest of group stayed up making noise, I can sleep through noise, but the Hammock was not comfortable and that made it hard to sleep. Also, it was a hot sticky night. I definitely never needed the coat and long pants recommended on the San Blas Adventure's web site trip preparation list. It would have been nice to carry less stuff.

Day 4, Tuesday, June 6, 2017

I woke up around 6:30 AM after a poor night of sleep, but it was half way good. Most people said they did not sleep great in the Hammock, some people in our tour drank enough alcohol to pass out and that made them sleep better. The Kuna Indians loaded our stuff in the boats and we traveled for a few hours. They claimed to have fixed the broken outboard motor that night, but they still had trouble starting it. We traveled for a few hours in the motor boats and then unloaded some of our stuff on the island we would stay the night on. Then we went to this beach island, my foot slipped on the

boat and I smashed my toe on a paddle that was on the floor of the boat. The toe turned purple during the day and was sore for months after that. I do not think it was broken. I snorkeled a lot from the beach, most of our young group played games. Some water football, bounce the ball of the head game, Frisbee, jump on the duck, etc. I did not want to join them, I was afraid of getting hurt if I tried to keep up with the young team members, the first time I went snorkeling I scraped my knee on some coral, but not too bad, just a slight sting, another lady in our group rubbed up hard on the coral and her knee looked very bad (swollen and red), I was lucky. The Indians rubbed cactus juice on her leg to stop the swelling, seemed to work very well. The coral reef was nicer than the first beach where we snorkeled near the single-family island, but not as many fish. Back at the island a few of us walked across the island. It was nice, and then we had to walk across coral to get back to the beach on the side of the island we had gathered as a group. Since we were barefoot and I did not have tough feet bottoms, it took extra time for me to get over the coral reef ground layer. One (Matt) of the people I checked out the island with saw an eagle, but I did not see it. Then we went back to the island where we would spend the night and they took us for a walk around the Kuna village. It was very neat and all the people, especially the kids enjoyed seeing us. They told us about Kuna culture and how it is not uncommon for a girl as young as 12 to mother her first child. They also provided a cultural dance for us, but first told us we could not take photos of the dance. The island was interesting in the fact that all the land was utilized for the village. Most of the islands had a lot of empty land. They said when more people want to move to this island, they would add more sand so more homes can be added. Seemed like on a bad storm they would lose some land and straw houses (They mostly lived in straw/ Palm houses. Some framed and stucco houses, but not many). I really do not feel like I fit in with the young group and did not drink again. I worked on my journal and some people talked to me while I worked on the journal. No matter what it was a great experience and people definitely treated me great, if I would have tried harder to fit in, it would have worked. I am generally not that great with new groups of people, but I was much better with my bike Africa group trip 19 years ago. Maybe I am just getting old! Oh well at least I am still doing it. The trip had been a great experience so far. I think working on the journal helps. My toe was hurting quite a bit, my coral sting was fine by that night, but I felt like I have gotten some bad bug stings and my feet were very itchy (itchy feet is normal for me, although this trip they were more itched than normal). A native Kuna kid commented that he thought I was about 35 years old. They also thought this other lady was 15 years old. My guess they go with a much younger than actual guess for ages to be polite or funny!

Day 5, Wednesday, June 7, 2017

In the night the toilet was clogged and I had to take a dump, I held back. In the morning I noticed someone else had used it anyway for a dump, so I did the same. I

still felt overfull, at some point it finally was working better and I was able to complete my dump. It was very tough to hold back. Otherwise, that night was not too bad, in the morning it started to rain and you could feel the rain though the straw roof. The roofs are ok, but with the very heavy rain storm a small amount of the water made it through, overall fine. I walked around the village in the morning before breakfast, it was very wet, puddles of water throughout the village. It rained so hard the some of the drops made it through the 6 inches of palm leaves on the roof of the straw hut where we slept that night. We left the islands in the boats to the biggest island. We left our stuff where we would stay for the night and then went to a beach on the island. We spend a long time at that beach on the biggest island, not doing much. Then we walked to the small village where we stayed while picking up trash, the island shorelines and water had a lot of trash. The small village was nice, but not much to do. That night I had trouble getting to sleep, but once I was a sleep, I slept fine. It was not easy sleeping in hammocks, not used to sleeping in them and therefore they are not that comfortable. Most of the other people in the tour were young and partied until all hours of the night. It seemed a little loud, but that normally does not bother me, so I think my sleeping problem was the hammocks. Besides I was asleep before they quit making noise and I never heard people return to the sleeping area that night.

Day 6, Thursday, June 8, 2017

We ate breakfast at about 7:00 AM, after my best night of hammock sleeping, must be getting used to it! When we left the island, I forgot to turn on my GPS, therefore I did not record my first 15 miles of the journey for that day. The water was calm and nice on the way to the Panama boarder check. When we arrived at the leaving Panama boarder check, we had to get off the boat and take our shoes off to walk barefoot across a foam pad while the border patrol watched us. Not sure if that was to clean the feet or what. Then we went to a store away from our boat and sat around the store for a while. Then most of us walked to a basketball court and laid around waiting to clear customs. From the time we arrived at the boarder to when they let us continue was about 3 hours and 15 minutes. Supposedly they call your name into Panama City to make sure it is OK for you to leave Panama. They said there was a problem with the system (the network went down) that contacts Panama City and once it was working they were able to release us. Normally it only takes about 45 minutes to clear customs even that seems long to me for leaving a country. Our group was 27 people and 6 leaders, even at that it does not seem like it should take that long to clear the exit customs of a country. After leaving the Panama border patrol we continued to our first stop in Colombia (Sapzurro, Colombia). One of the motors was not working again for about half the trip from leaving the Panama border to arriving in Sapzurro, Colombia. Throughout the trip one of the outboards motors was very hard for them to start and we often had to run on half power for that boat (they normally run with 2 motors).

Once in Colombia we changed boats and gave our boat drivers and guide tips. Then we took a third-party boat to Capurganá, Colombia to conclude our San Blas Adventures trip. The entire day was without rain, when I talked to the guy at the Hostel in Capurganá, he said it was rainy there all day. We lucked out with the weather and we were only about 30 miles from the rainy Capurganá. When we arrive in Capurganá we all went to the Colombia customs to get our passports stamped. It took a long time, while waiting I found a great hostel with a private room. Then I went back to the customs line and I was still at the same place in line, at the end of the line and they had only processed a couple of people. The yellow fever card was checked and a couple people in our group did not have appropriate yellow fever cards and were told they would need to return to Panama to get yellow fever shots. I saw them later, so I guess the border patrol finally let them in without a proper yellow fever card. After getting settled into my room I went hiking towards La Coquerita (not that I knew where I was going) and I saw several green and black poison frogs. I made it most of the way to the pools and was turned back by the person that managed the pools. Then I went back to the hostel and looked up the hike I wanted to go on the next day on the Internet. I could not find good information and the man that ran the hostel asked how it was going. I told him about the hike I wanted to do and he gave me great directions for the hike. He showed me the trail on an aerial map and then he even walked me to the field where the trail starts. Without his help it would have been hard to figure out where I needed to go for the trail to Panama. Also, I told the guy at the hostel about the hike I had done and how I was turned back. He said that I was headed to La Coquerita and was not sure why I was turned back. The next day we went there and I recognized that the guy that ran the area was the man that turned me back. I guess he was closing the area when he turned me back, which was good, since it was getting dark. We had our group lasagna dinner at 8:30 PM and then went to a salsa bar for a while. I had one drink and dance a couple times before heading back to my hostel room. It was my first night in a bed for 4 nights (previous night I had slept in uncomfortable hammocks on the tour). I ended up getting to sleep at about 12:30 AM and slept great!!!

Day 7, Friday, June 9, 2017

I woke up around 6:30 AM and got ready for my hike. I left the hostel at a little before 7:00 AM and crossed paths with part of my San Blas adventure team returning to the hostel from the previous night. They stayed up with locals until the sun came up, I would have done the same if I was 30 years younger and not interested in doing an early morning hike. I hike up the hill towards Sapzurro, there was at least 6 inches of heavy mud on the uphill trail from the previous day's rain. Once at the top the trail down was a lot less muddy. I made pretty good time to Sapzurro and continued to La Miel, Panama. On the border between Panama and Colombia was a border check with Militants behind sand bags. I arrived at La Miel at about 9:20 AM and walked to the

beach. It was a very nice beach, the area was crawling with militants, there was a medium sized Panama military base at La Miel and it looked like they were preparing for an awards ceremony. I spent about 30 minutes there and then hiked back to Sapzurro, arriving at about 10:30 AM. I left Sapzurro around 10:45 AM and hiked to a water fall. Then I hiked back over the hill to Capurganá, the mud was still bad on the other side of the hill, but better than earlier. That was the only part of the trail with lots of mud. I was back in Sapzurro at about 1:00 PM. I found Matt that was on a scuba trip and then walked towards the airport. When I came to the second stream crossing (the first one was very shallow, the second one was deeper) I turned back and hiked back to Capurganá. I walked back to the hostel and was able to get on the Internet, some others were going to lunch and I wanted to go with them, but decided to stay put, so I could post something on Facebook. I got my posting ready and the Internet went down, so I lost my posting and went to find the others. I wanted to order food, but the restaurant was closing after lunch. I think they reopened for dinner, they would not let me order lunch, so I skipped lunch. I went and bought my boat ticket to Necocli, Colombia for the next day. Once back at the Hostel Andrew and Matt decided to get their boat tickets and bus tickets to Medellin. I then decided to get my bus tickets to Medellin as well and travel with them on the next day's bus to Medellin. Then we returned to the hostel and found other people from our San Blas Adventures and we hiked to La Coquerita. The hike was very nice and we only went a very slight bit further than I had gone the previous day. The pool was a cool fresh water pond (with a small manmade dam). We did not see the green and black poisonous frogs on the way to the pond, on the way back we did see a few of the poisonous frogs (Not near as many as I saw the previous day). When we returned to the hostel the internet was working and I was able to post my first Facebook entry since leaving Panama City. I figured people back home would have been curious, but it seemed like no one back home cared about my Darien Gap adventure! That evening eight of the people that stayed in Capurganá from the San Blas trip had a seafood dinner, I had a lobster, not as good as a Maine lobster, but it was Ok and the coconut sauce was very good. I had a beer with dinner; it is not great beer in that part of the world, no IPA, just Budweiser quality beers. In total I hiked about 14 miles that day and I went to sleep around midnight.

Day 8, Saturday, June 10, 2017

It was a rainy morning, I could hear the rain hit the roof as I was sleep. I slept until about 7:00 AM. By the time I left my room it was a slight drizzle. Then I had breakfast and it stopped raining. I made sure everything was ready to go, packed and ready for the boat water. Then I walked around town one last time from 8:30 AM to 9:00 AM. I got my stuff, paid my bill and walked with others from the San Blas adventures trip to the boat dock. There were 7 of us from the trip on the boat. The German and Australian couple headed towards Cartagena and I headed with Matt (23

years old) and Andrew (22 years old) to Medellin. Matt and Andrew are US transplants living in Canada and we hung out together in Nicolie. We had a 10 hour wait for the bus in Nicolie. We walked around a lot and stopped for a beer a couple of times. Andrews Spanish helped a lot, normally I do not try going out to eat.

Day 9, Sunday, June 11, 2017

We spent the night on a 9-hour bus from Necocli to Medellin. It was a comfortable bus with air conditioning. The guy next to me was a seat hog, his elbow was on my side, I decided to live with it and slept fine for most of the bus ride. I had trouble waking up as we got closer to Medellin, I wanted to see thing I remembered from my previous trip, but mostly slept through it. I did wake up for long enough to see where I had stayed in Santa Fe, Colombia. When we arrived in Medellin Matt ordered an Uber car to pick us up at the bus station, we only waited a few minutes and the Uber guy took all 3 of us (Matt, Andrew and me) with our gear to the Casa Kiwi hostel. Once at the hostel they let me put my stuff in my room and then I wanted to rent a bike but could not easily find the place that rented bikes. The lady at the hostel suggested that I go to Park Arvi and explained which stop I would need to get off of from the train that was not far from the hostel. Since I speak little English and I could not explain that I wanted to start from close to the hostel I was not positive where to start and how the train worked. The way I assumed it worked was correct, her explanation of the map the hostel gave me made it easy. I just had to fill in some very small details. I left the hostel and had trouble figuring which direction to go, the map did not appear to show all the roads and some roads did not have names posted. I looked for busy roads and eventually found my spot on the map. When I found Carrera 43 the road was half closed for bikes and walkers. We noticed the road closed to car and used by bikes while in the Uber ride to Casa kiwi and the driver said they close the road on Sunday from 8:00 AM to 1:00 PM. I really wanted to join the bike ride on the closed road, but did not have a bike and could not figure out where to rent one. I walked a distance on the closed to traffic road route, there were lots of people walking and biking on the road. It looked like it would normally been a very busy road for car traffic. Then I went to the train station, so I could go to Park Arvi. I took the train to station Acevedo and from there you could take the tram to Santo Domingo stop using the same ticket. To go to park Arvi you had to change trams at Santa Domingo and pay another fee. The second tram turned up the mountain and along the top of the hill. By then you could no longer see the city of Medellin. It was like you were in the wilderness, just very close to the city of Medellin. Then I walked around park Arvi, the person at the visitor center told me about the only trail I could hike on (there were other trail you could go on with guides or with more time), it was hard to find the trail, but I managed to accidentally find the trail. Then I hiked over the hill to where I thought I was hiking to, but was stopped at a police road block and told I could not continue hiking to the lake (I saw the lake on the trail map signs). So, I walked back to the

tram, hung out for a while and then paid to take the tram back to Santa Domingo. Then I paid to take the tram/train back to near my hostel. The train was very crowded, originally, I was thinking about getting off at the city center (San Antonio station), but changed my mind. I got groceries and then went back to Casa Kiwi I was planning on staying up, but quickly fell asleep.

Day 10, Monday, June 12, 2017

I woke up around 6:30 AM and walked around the streets near hostel. I did not see much of interest. I then took the train to universidad (first went to wrong stop and asked the man told me to go back one stop). I then walked around the campus. It was surrounded by a tall fence with barbed wired on the top. There was security at all the entrances and I could not walk into the campus fenced area since I did not have a student ID. It looked like a good campus from outside the fence. Then I walked around north park, I found it was an amusement park that was not opened yet for the day. When I found it was an amusement park, I did not have interest in going there (from my map I thought it was interesting and more of a wilderness park). Then I went to the botanical garden, it was free to enter on this day. I walked all over the garden; there was a small butterfly enclosure, iguanas and turtles in a pond. There were also a lot of neat plants and wild butterflies. Then I took the train to the historic part of Medellin. I walked around the markets in the historic area for hours. Then I was thinking about taking the train back towards the hostel, but it was too crowded so I walked back to the hostel. I found that several of the people from the San Blas adventures were gathered on the rooftop social area of the hostel. I ended out going to a taco restaurant with a few of the other guys. Then we had a couple of beers and a shot of tequila at a brew pub. We went back to the hostel and several people of the group went to a jazz bar. I did not want to go. I still needed to pack and did not want to get a hangover for my next day's flight.

Day 11, Tuesday, June 13, 2017

I woke up around 5:50 AM, I was not feeling perfect. I probably had a little too much to drinking the previous night. By the time I left the hostel at 7:00 AM I was feeling a lot better. I took a taxi to the airport and arrived at about 8:20 AM, the line to check my baggage in and get my boarding pass was very long. The process was very slow. It took about 45 minutes to get checked in and they put me on a slightly earlier flight. I did not notice, but they changed my seat, on the long flight I had a window seat, then they changed it to an aisle seat. I prefer window seat for sleeping. The security at Medellin domestic airport was very relaxed, they had a simple X-ray, no shoes off and you could take in bottled water. The international security at Bogota was more stringent. When I arrived at Bogota, I had trouble figuring out if my baggage was checked through and finding the gate for my next flight. I had to leave the domestic terminal, go through customs and then I was able to go to the international terminal. I

had about 1.5 hours to walk around at the Borgata airport and then I boarder my long flight. I had to go through international security at Los Angeles and I accidentally answered a question wrong (I put no for is everything correct in the previous questions) on the immigration form at Los Angeles and was placed in the reject line. The reject line took about an hour, instead of about 10 minutes.

Day 13, Wednesday, June 14, 2017

I took a cab home from PDX and the guy felt insulted by the fact that I only gave him a rounded-up amount of cash for the ride. So, I gave him an extra \$2.00, I have not tipped a taxi driver in the past (I think they charge too much already)! It was about 2:30 AM when I returned home and I went to work at 8:00 AM.