THE SUNDAY TIMES
TRAVEL
21 AUGUST 1988

SECTION F

WHERE TO GO
A weekly section to keep you in touch with all that's new and best in the world of travel

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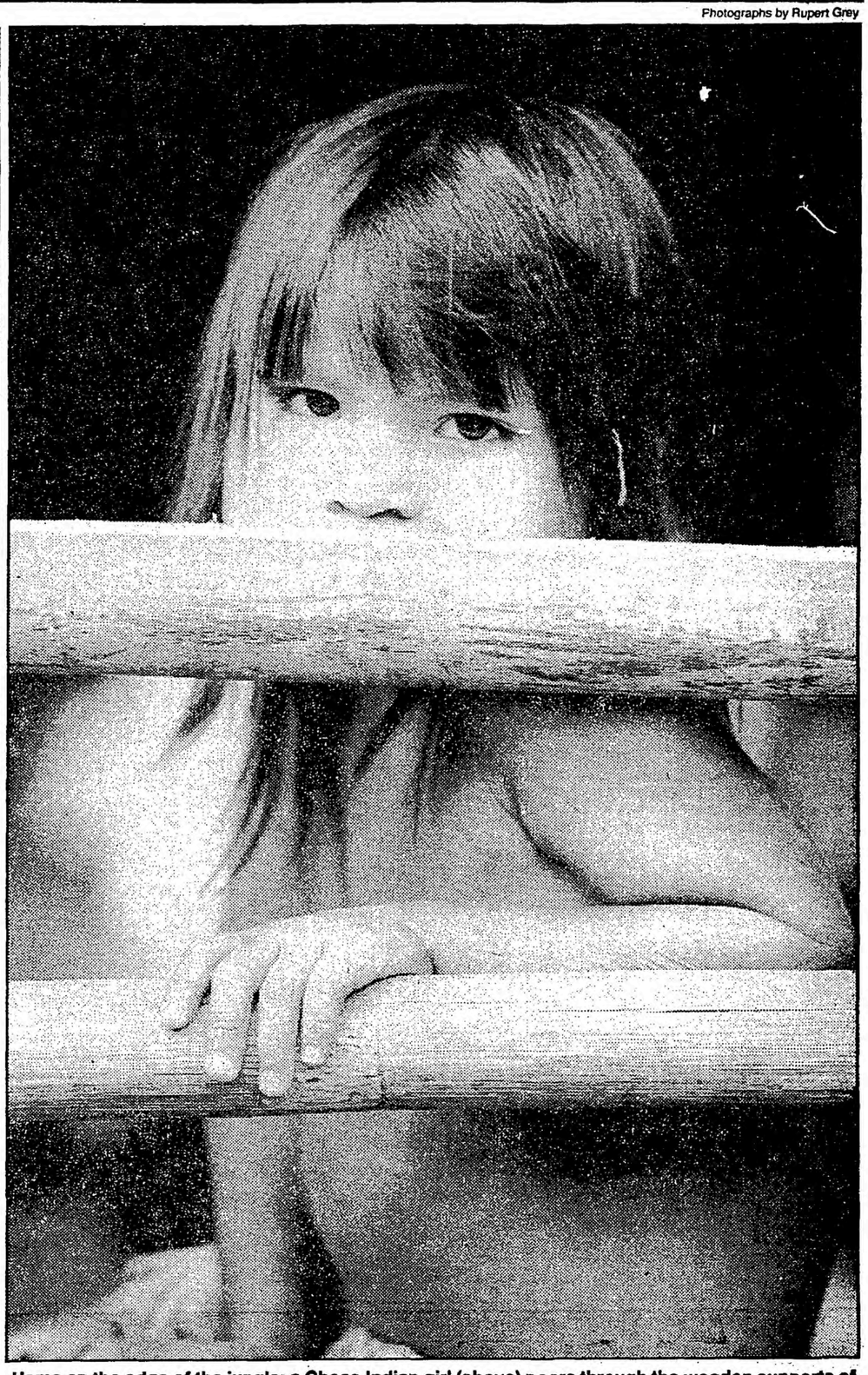
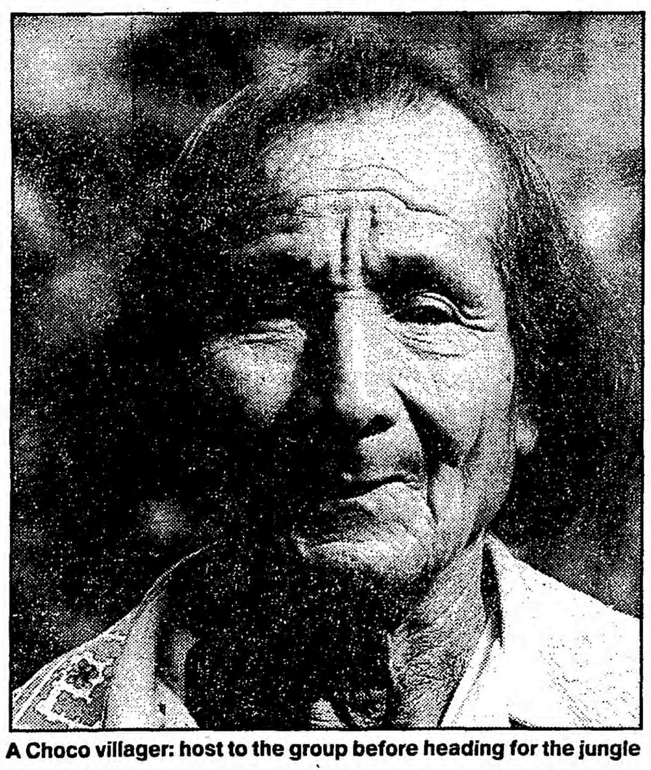
Photographs by Rupert Grey



Home on the edge of the jungle: a Choco Indian girl (above) peers through the wooden supports of her house on stilts (top left) in Yavisa, the village where the trekkers stopped for Christmas

Daring the Darien

MARK WALLINGTON sets off through the Darien Gap on canoe and foot, braving the jungles of Panama and Colombia in the company of seven intrepid fellow adventurers. On a diet of tinned fish, they survived scorpions, tarantulas, mosquitoes — and even each other



A Choco villager: host to the group before heading for the jungle

"IT'S a good idea to keep your machete handy on this stretch," said Allardes, as always leading us from the front. It was Christmas Eve. Our eight-man expedition had just set off on its jungle trek through the Darien Gap from Panama to Colombia. Ahead of us lay three weeks of tarantulas, scorpions, vampire bats, jaguars, snakes and impenetrable vegetation, but it was this first section that was proving to be one of the most dangerous: the walk through Panama City to the central bus station.

A killer bus with Jingle Bells blaring from twin speakers on its wing mirrors jumped some traffic lights and made a lunge for the Austrian member of our group. One of the Canadians grabbed her just in time. "You owe me one," he said, and five minutes later she paid him back with a well-timed scream as two muggers on their way to school sized him up from an alleyway.

At the halfway stage we took a rest. The fumes were thick and our packs were heavy. I'd been with Allardes the day before to a supermarket and bought our provisions: 144 tins of fish and assorted dehydrated foodstuffs: "What, no greens?" asked the fellow Brit in the party (the lad who would later crack and accuse everyone of having a secret supply of Brussels). "What no grog?" asked Bob McDermott (the loudest of the three Aussies), "I'll be dry as a possum's bum" (and the wittiest).

We ended up with 20 kilos each to carry. I was all for scoffing the lot the first evening and walking with just a wash-bag and a jar of Marmite, but with the bus station not yet in sight and vultures already circling overhead, I was beginning to realise that this was the sort of trip on which rash decisions could prove costly, and that we should expect the unexpected. As we boarded the bus to Yavisa — the Choco Indian village on the edge of the jungle — I sat next to the driver. He looked about 12 years old and was breaking the speed limit before we had left the terminus.

"The jungle trek of a lifetime," is how this trip is billed by Encounter Overland, a company which caters for people who wouldn't normally take a hair-dryer on holiday with them. Ever since 1501 when Vasco de Balboa became the first man to see both Atlantic and Pacific oceans, the Darien has been labelled "inhospitable to man", and remained largely uncharted Indian territory, its gap the one low point between the two impassable mountain ranges that run down either side of the isthmus keeping South and Central America apart. People have passed through here before of course — some bull-dozing their way in jeeps, some on roller-skates as a stunt, most on foot — but this is still classic jungle, and the only break in the whole PanAmerican Highway; the point where all the computer programmers from Basingstoke who have set off to cycle from Tierra del Fuego to Anchorage have to get off and push.

I met such a character on the first night in Yavisa (Ed Sismey was his name, and I can report back to all his friends in Basing-stoke that apart from a puncture in Chile and a stiff chain-link in Ecuador, he's doing fine and isn't missing any of you one bit). We had a sardine Christmas dinner together and he told me his journey through the gap had been difficult, largely because his bike wasn't designed to fit into a traditional Choco canoe.

You could have said the same about our party the next morning as we tried to arrange ourselves for the trip up the Rio Tuira in a sleek mahogany dugout, a craft fashioned for speed, powered by one Indian on the bow with a paddle, and one at the stern with a 90-horse power Evinrude outboard. They, of course, thought we were all mad. We sat in the bottom of the boat dressed in gatered boots, bush hats and combat trousers stuffed with RNLI matches, water purification tablets and Swiss Army knives, while they wore flip-flops and shorts and drank a handful of the river whenever they were thirsty.

But these canoes were our transport for the first two days as we wound our way along the rivers that are the veins of the jungle, the lifelines that carry the banana crop and sustain the Choco villages where we spent the nights. These were irresistible and idyllic communities, cooled by the river and with a peace only a village with no roads could manage. In one, Basal — with a population of 150, and surely favourite for the Best Kept Choco Village Award, 1988 — we were welcomed by the village chief Eduardo, a man with an "I Love NY" T-shirt who told us we could make camp in the bandstand. It was the last day before we entered the jungle proper and the villagers looked after us well. They supplied us with oranges and coconuts. We swam in the river and played football against the local under-13s team (we lost 9-0, but they did have an extra man and the seventh goal was off-side), then early the next morning, after a bowl of porridge, we waded across the river, and marched into the undergrowth.

The first thing that struck me was the sudden darkness and then a flash of blue as an iridescent butterfly with a six-inch wing-span landed on the path ahead: "I'll just stun it for you," said McDermott, and he grabbed it and shook it up in his hands until it couldn't stand up. "There, you can take a photo now."

All around were giant Balsa trees, grotesque buttress-like root formations and a wealth of epiphytes, and we were walking in a daze. But after the initial shock, it gradually became clear that almost every form of life in the jungle is straining to reach the canopy in a constant quest for food and light, and any successful plant or animal is going to be living in the trees at a much higher level. The jungle floor where we spent our time is, by comparison, unsensational, just the odd fallen flower, the undergrowth and, of course, the insects.

However, if you're into insects, then this is the holiday for you, particularly if ants are your favourites. They were ubiquitous, day and night. At regular intervals a six-inch wide trail of the little fellows would emerge from the undergrowth and cross our path, each ant carrying a sawn-off leaf aloft like a green flag. And, whereas our mosquito nets were fairly effective against flying insects, ants posed a different problem. The tiny ones could crawl through a pinhole. The next size up, the worker ants, could squeeze through the mesh. The biggest, the solitary Conger ant — the ones that looked like a JCB earth-mover and had a "bite like a bear trap", according to McDermott — just lifted up the net and marched under.

Walking conditions were good . . . far better than they ought to have been. The previous trip had had rain for the duration and they all came back with trench foot. We had just one wet afternoon and so the path was firm and turned out to be far less arduous and far better defined than we had imagined. We walked steadily and by New Year's Eve we were out of Choco country and among the Cuna Indians, a tribe "completely different socially and culturally from the Chocos", or so said the group of American evangelical missionaries we met working among them. "Can you be more specific?" I asked. "Er . . . yes," said one called Pete, "the Cunas are generally taller".

Actually, the Cunas are generally more wily as well. They charged Holiday Inn rates to stay in their village and so we saw the New Year in on a nearby military outpost on the Colombian border. While the soldiers roasted a pig and fired rifles like crackers, we had tins of mackerel followed by an hour or two picking ticks off each other and then an early night. Understandably, morale was beginning to deteriorate. Diet was the main contention. Everything we ate seemed to have the consistency of gruel. But now the mosquitoes were beginning to get bad as well. By eight o'clock most nights we were under our nets, lying in the 95% humidity with collars and cuffs buttoned and trousers tucked into socks, wallowing in a miasma of insect repellent and sardines.

Spirits were revitalised though, the following day, as we crossed into Colombia through the gap itself, walking from one continent to another, and celebrating the occasion with a tin of pink salmon for lunch. And slowly we were all becoming familiar with this jungle business, complacent even. To begin with, we watched every footstep we took; everyone jostled to sleep as close to Allardes as possible; if anything heavier than a leaf landed on my head I immediately thought it was a jaguar. But now we wandered off on solo night walks and strolled around the camp in stocking feet, brushing scorpions aside. Snakes we regarded as potential protein rather than deadly nasties. Spiders found in the corners of mosquito nets were kept as pets. When McDermott found a baby crocodile he instantly leapt in the river after it. "I'll just stun it so you can take a photo," he said, although

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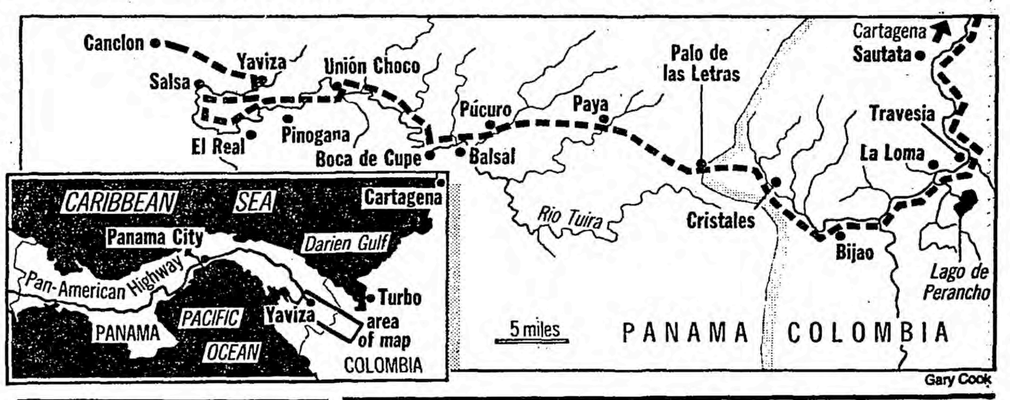

Gary Cook

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Daring the Darien

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the rest of us were frantically looking around for the mother.

Only one member of the expedition seemed at odds with the fauna, not that you could really blame him. He tried to count his insect bites one afternoon and stopped at 500 when it got dark. We all took pictures of him. Then one morning he finally cracked. I remember waking and seeing the sun rise over the spectacular Tulipo waterfalls, and caught in silhouette was the middle-aged hulk of a six-foot Canadian giggling and jumping up and down on the three-millimetre ant he had found in his sleeping bag.

Once we were in Columbia's Los Katios National Park, our nights were spent in the relative comfort of ranger stations. Strangely, though, the plants on this side of the border were less interesting, the abundance of rare orchids and bromeliads replaced by species easily recognisable from living-rooms at home. But the park was a fine undisturbed habitat and the views from the high ground were the ones you always associated with South American rainforests: a sea of vegetation and a black river snaking through to the pale horizon. We saw fish eagles, macaw, egrets, cockatoo, toucans, osprey, hummingbirds, all sorts of parrots and another bird which I'd gladly tell you the name of, but a mosquito the size of a Messerschmitt landed on my notebook and I splattered it all over the page. In fact, so bad were the mosquitoes that first night in the national park, that we were under our nets before dark, squadrons of the things clinging to the mesh. If they had all lifted at once they could have flown off with any one of us. I smeared myself with repellent, but it was a formality. I was convinced by this time the only way to I'd ever deal with a mosquito with the special jungle formula concoction I'd brought along pints of, was by mashing one with of the bottom of the bottle.

And, of course, that night had to be the night my bowels finally got their own back. From dark until dawn I was running in a crouching position between my net and the bushes. By the morning the mosquitoes had left what felt like messages in braille on my backside.

With 134 cans of fish behind us and only 10 to go, we were travelling through swamp towards the Rio Altrato. For more than two weeks we'd been wading through rivers at 7 each morning. We'd not seen our reflection, heard a telephone, or had a beer once during that time: the pressure was beginning to tell. The Canadian girl found comfort by reading the recipe for flapjacks on the back of the Quaker Oats tin. The Australians discussed the one-way traffic system in Sidney. I began to annoy everyone by repeatedly singing Brotherhood of Man's 1976 Eurovision Song Contest entry Save Your Kisses For Me.

Only Allardes seemed unaffected. I remember being woken on the last morning by a toad as big as a Volkswagen croaking in my ear. "I'll just stun it so you can take a photo," said McDermott, putting his boot on it. Allardes was standing on the river bank calmly negotiating with some Indians for a canoe to take us across the Golfo de Uraba to Turbo and from there a four-wheel drive to the Caribbean coast. He was a fine leader of men: resourceful and with an instinctive feel for the jungle, and it was a shame he had to go and spoil it all by tripping over the Hotel Bellavista steps when we finally reached Cartegena and the journey's end.

We stayed at the hotel for a few days, waiting for flights home, passing the time planning trips through even more hostile and remote environments, saying how close we'd become over the past four weeks, and how we must keep in touch and perhaps tackle Papua New Guinea the following year. Needless to say, I've not heard from any of them since.

Sunday Times Travel Brief

DARIEN GAP

How to get there: the Encounter Overland expedition through the Darien Gap costs £580 and includes all expenses during the trip. Although the trip itself lasts only 16 days, you'll want to spend a day or two at either end acclimatising and then recovering. So you can count on being away for about another two weeks at your own expense. You can do the trip either way between Cartagena or Panama City. In Cartagena there'll be a beach outside your hotel, in Panama there'll be a traffic jam. Choose where you want to end the trip. Encounter Overland will arrange return flights with BA to Paris and onwards with Avianca. In December the trip costs £580; otherwise £620.

When to go: the Darien Gap can only be crossed during the dry season, between December and March. It is hot and humid all year.

What to expect: nasties in the Darien include scorpions, tarantulas and river snakes but they're friendly compared with the mosquitoes, sandflies and ants. Take insect repellant and bite lotion.

Equipment: Encounter Overland will give you all sorts of pre-departure information and a suggested clothing and equipment list. There are air-freight facilities to forward anything you want between Cartagena and Panama City, or vice versa, but don't want to carry on the expedition.

Before you go: UK passport-holders do not require visas to enter Panama or Colombia; many nationalities, however, do. Yellow Fever vaccinations are required and those against tetanus, typhoid, polio booster and gamma globulin (for hepatitis) are recommended. The Darien is a high-risk malarial area. A course of tablets must be started a week before departure and continued for six weeks after return.

Can I drink the water: no. Take a supply of purifying tablets since you will be living off river water for two weeks.

Currency: carry US dollars.

Shopping: there are no shops in the Darien Gap.

Reading: don't do any, it'll just put you off.

Further information: details of this and many other spectacular itineraries short and long from Encounter Overland Ltd, 267 Old Brompton Road, London SW5 (tel: 01-370 6845).