

2016

Sin Cilantro circuit



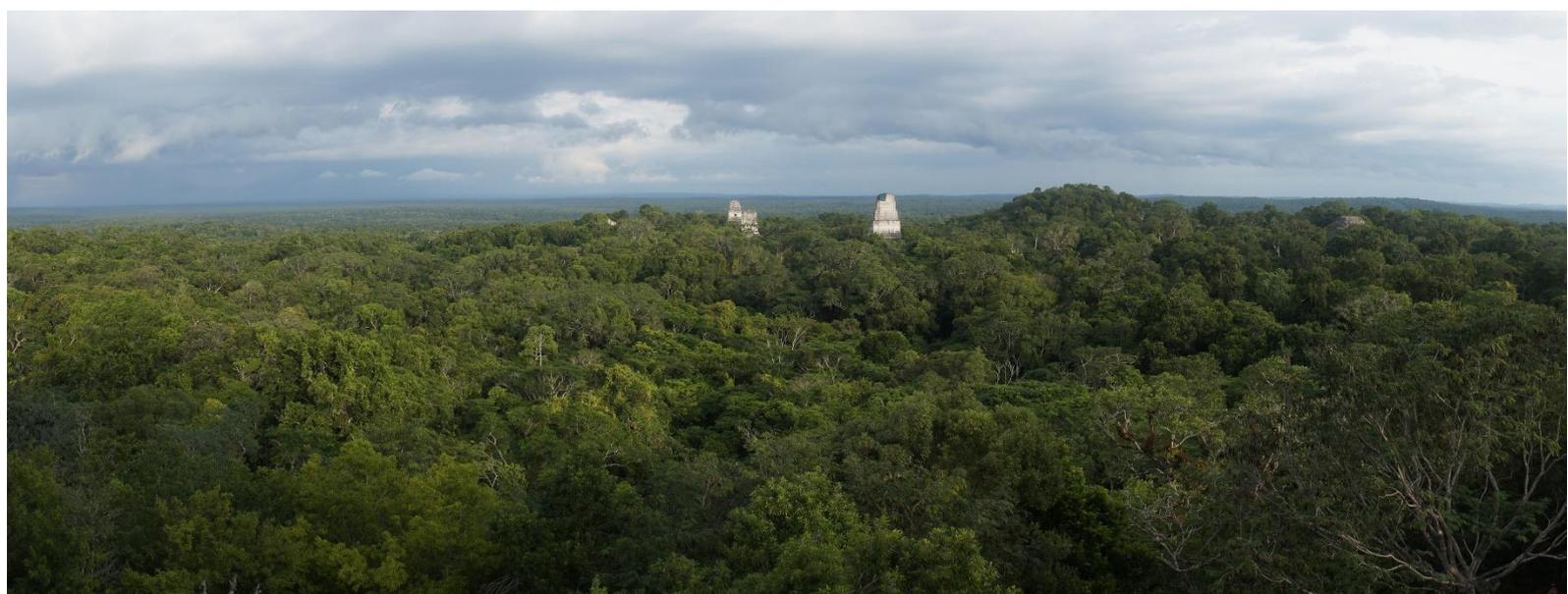
Martin Smedendahl
Yet again another traveller's journal

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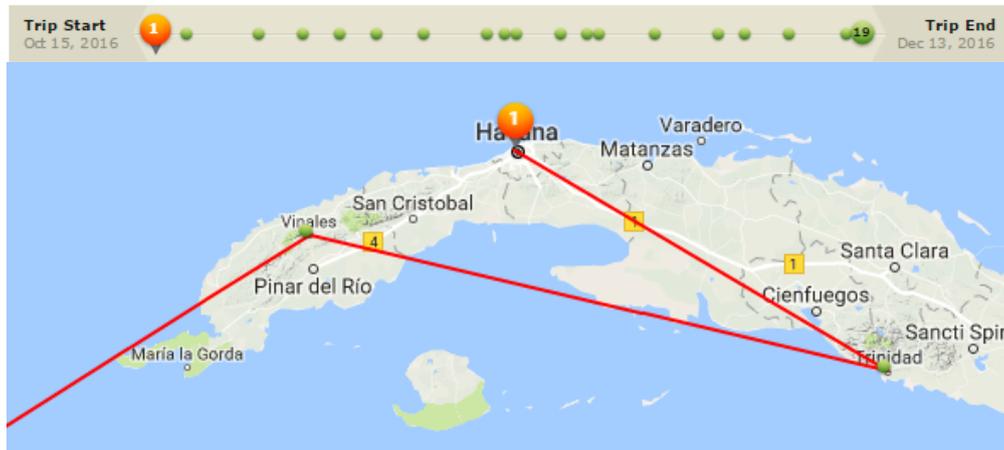
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A city to revisit



Havana, Cuba
Sunday, October 16, 2016

It's been a long long time since last I odysseyed. Too long, even. 21 months I dwelled in Europe, never seeing different shores than those regulated by the EU. Don't get me wrong, Europe is one of my favourite continents, and probably the best for dwelling over a length of time. But faraway lies unexperienced experiences, and weird and different food, and all manner of adventures Europe seldom provides outside of doing so in well-organised and ordered fashion. And so it was with great anticipation I had a final local IPA at my pub of choice and went to bed early as the proverbial bird. For at 4 o'clock, when most people are still up, I got up. Long before my local breakfasteria had opened, I arranged for my ass (and the rest of me, and my stuff) to be hauled to the nearest international airport. And with no hassle* and only one immaculately timed lay-over, the flight towards the home of rum, revolution and really old cars took off. And the old-timey automobiles really are plenty; on the way from the airport to the city centre, I estimated that every other car was from the 1960's or earlier.



Cars, mostly pink. Mostly.

I also noted what will surely be a staple aspect of Cuba, namely its stark contrast between old and new, between run-down and renovated, between intricate and simplistic.



View from Malecón

It had been a long day, but after I had checked in at my casa particular, I took a stroll around the differently-coloured neighbourhood and found myself having dinner at the often fully booked and from the pictures (Strawberries and chocolate, Cuba's hitherto only Oscar nominated movie) famous La Guarida. And that's where I had the first rum of this trip: Santiago de Cuba 12 años.

Sunday proved to be the day when Hoff took off, and left Hassle in charge. I was to switch to a different casa, which was only a short stroll away. So off I trotted, and found it easy enough. However, the staff were nowhere to be found, and even though I travel light, I wasn't keen on exploring the city with a 15 kg backpack tagging along. Instead I found some shade and tried to keep up with my reading of travel books until noon. And as I now have come to believe, by pure chance, someone was there to let me in and get me to my room.



Castillo De Los Tres Reyes Del Morro

Despite the casa conundrum, I managed to take in quite a bit of the Cuban capital, painfully getting my feet used to my flip-flops (there where blisters after some 6 km of walking) in the process.

Castillo San Salvador de la Punta, a small but efficient fortress at the mouth of the harbour lay just at the end of el Malecón, the oceanside promenade.



Locals fishing in Havana



Sculpture

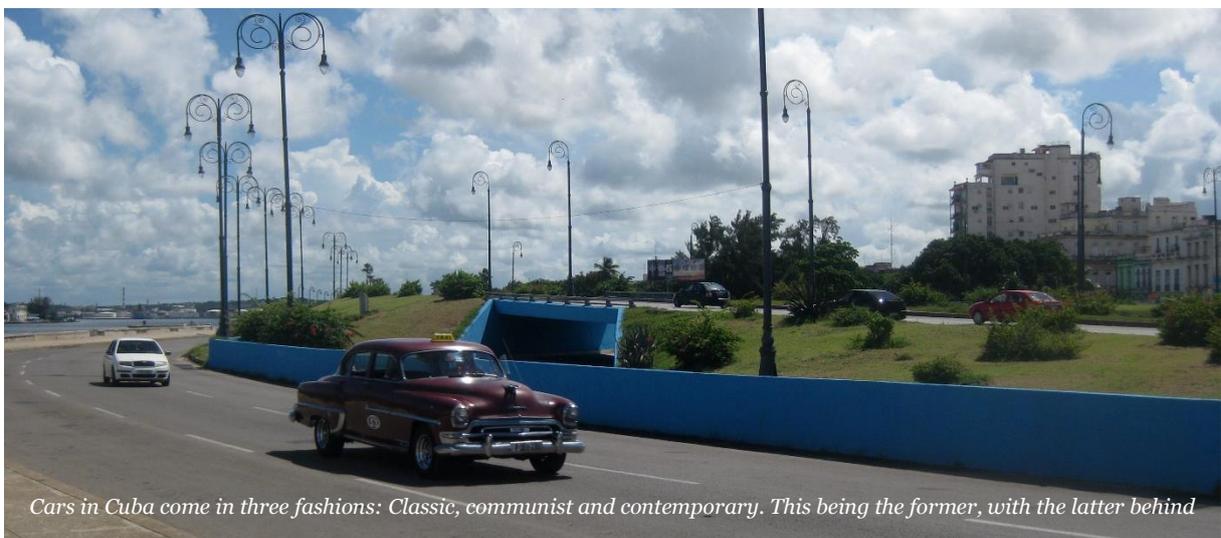
After a visit to Castillo de la Real Forza, I ventured into Habana Vieja (the Old Town) for a view of Plaza de la Catedral and its, you know, cathedral.

Capitolio, very similar to its namesake in DC, and Capitolio Nacional, not in the least similar, were located quite close to Gran Teatro de la Habana. Unfortunately, Museo Nacional des Bellas Artes was closed, and so was Museo de la Revolucion.

I'll have a chance to revisit those museums, and other stuff that I might have missed, upon returning to Habana. But first, it was time to meet my co-travellers for the next week or, more. An oddly international little group gathered in the cab, and subsequently the cosy little restaurant in Habana Vieja, consisting of a couple from England and one from Israel, two friends from the US, a Philippina, a Dutch girl, a Cuban tour leader and me, Martin, from Sweden.

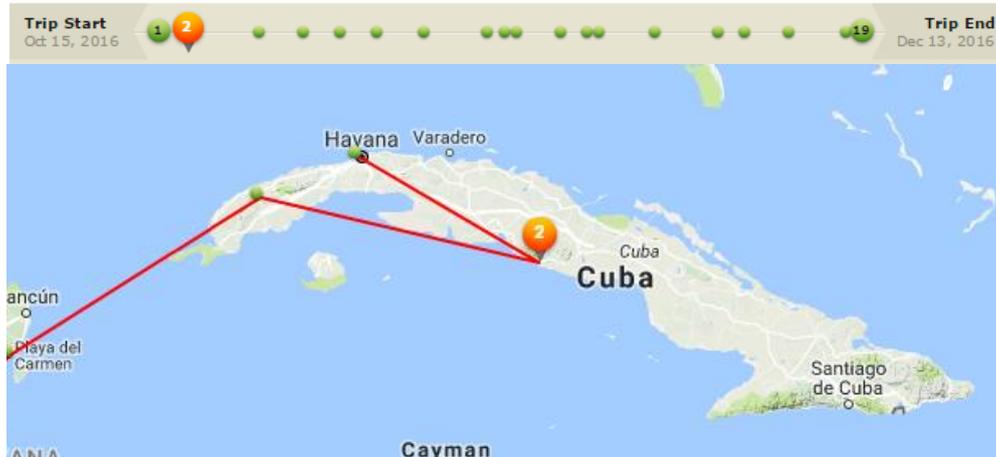
As the morning came, as did a mini bus, all AC:ed and roomy, and ready to whisk us off to the South Coast.

*) Just Hoff



Cars in Cuba come in three fashions: Classic, communist and contemporary. This being the former, with the latter behind

Bailar? No, blisters.



Trinidad, Cuba
Wednesday, October 19, 2016

Bay of Pigs might be best known for the failed invasion that the CIA attempted back in 1961. Nowadays, however, it's probably better known for its fine snorkeling. I wouldn't let the fact that I was currently on blood thinners stop me from hitting that crystal clear water, though. I'll be diving soon enough, and in the meanwhile, I don't mind just snorkeling. The site was similar to what one would find in Eilat, with sandy bottom interspersed with little hills of corals of faded palette and loads of fish in the more colourful fashion. It wasn't a proper beach, though, so my premiere endeavour to a genuine Caribbean beach, complete with palms, sun chairs, sand bloody everywhere and piña coladas would have to wait a while.



Snorkelling in Bay of Pigs

Cienfuegos was the destination of the day, though. A colonial town, founded by the French back in the 19th century, its unique architecture welcomed us, and another casa opened their doors. It's a tradition, or an old charter, or something, for me to visit the tomb of a communist leader, if one happens to be nearby



Complejo Monumental Ernesto Che Guevara



As Fidel is yet living, the goto guy is of course Ernesto "Che" Guevara. Che, being a national hero of the revolution, was born and raised in Argentina, and after meeting Fidel Castro in Mexico 1955 helped instigating the Cuban revolution. His job done, he travelled the world, spreading the communist word, including some time in Africa, until he was captured and shot in Bolivia in 1967. The location of his body was unknown until 1995, and after the Russians had confirmed that it indeed was him, his remains were exhumed and brought to Cuba, where a mausoleum and a memorial (Complejo Monumental Ernesto

Che Guevara) was built in his honour in Santa Clara, close to the site of one of the revolutionaries' most pivotal victories.

Well worth a visit, we left Che and headed south towards another Unesco World Heritage site: Trinidad.



Trinidad sin Tobago



Trinidad

No relation to the one with Tobago, though; Trinidad is simply Spanish for trinity, as in the holy one in christian mythology. Its colonial architecture and cobbled streets makes it one of the cosiest town in the Caribbean, as well as the trickiest to walk in with blisters on the feet.

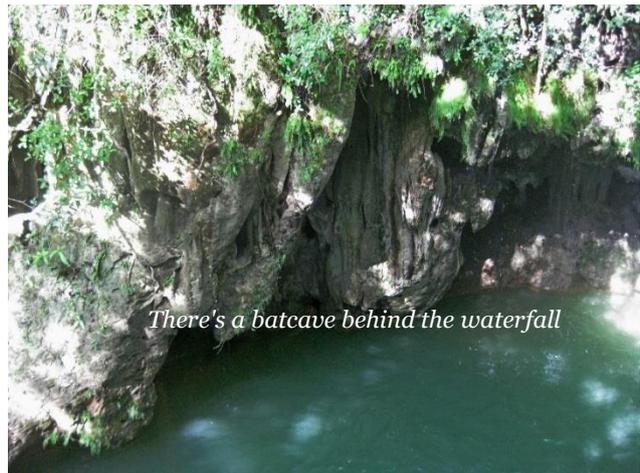
Other than cigars, revolutions and old cars, salsa is probably what most people think when they hear 'Cuba'. A short introductory course in the noble art of moving one's feet in a certain pattern was included in the tour, and Trinidad was the place for it. Unfortunately, my blisters stopped me from participating Darn. Yep, that's why. Blisters. The others seemed to have fun, though.

Next morning, as my feet were magically better, we drove off early to a nearby waterfall. A nice hour-long hike through the jungle, past rivers and streams and the destination was reached. Below the fall, there was a natural pool, and the steep rocks surrounding it made for jumping spots of various levels. I choose the highest point, and splashed into the refreshing water. Swimming against the current was nigh impossible close to the turbulent zone of the fall, but by swimming close to the rock walls, it was possible to get past the curtain of water and to the cave that lay beyond. A cave

with bats, no less. Holy guano, Batman!

After strolling the town and climbing the tower of Museo Historico Municipal for an excellent view of Trinidad and its surroundings, we grabbed our towels and trunks and travelled to the beach, where I had my first Caribbean beach experience, for there were palms, sun chairs, sand bloody everywhere and piña coladas.

The day was far from over. After dinner at a jazz club we found ourselves at the bottom of the stairs to La Casa Musica, where locals and visitors alike gather with mojitos and cuba libres in hand, purchased from any of the many hole-in-the-wall handouts in the vicinity. Many of them bide their time before the clock strikes eleven, which is when Disco Ayala opens. Located high up in the hills, a fair bit of a walk from the last town house, this nightclub housed in a big cave complex is the happeningest place for yards around. Conveniently, my blisters kicked in just when it was time to hit the dance floor. Oh shoot.



There's a batcave behind the waterfall



Obligatory toes-at-the-beach pic, only reversed



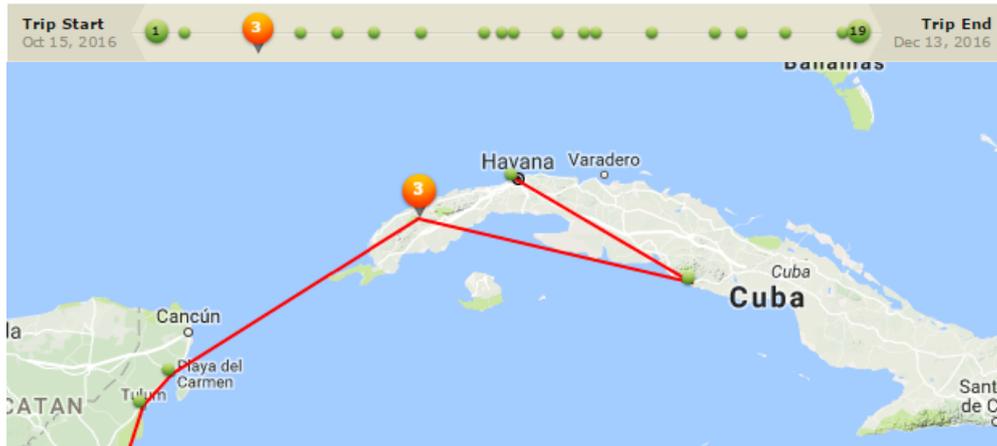
Many caves; this being a night club



Sunset over the rooftops of Trinidad

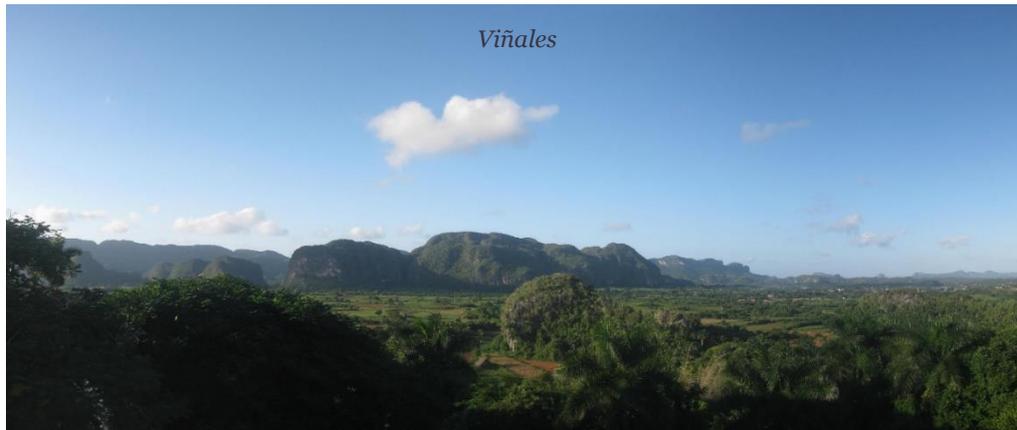
The stars were out that night, but Orion was all tilted, and none of the dippers where to be found.

Close, but one cigar



Viñales, Pinar del Río, Cuba
Tuesday, October 25, 2016

A hard day's drive took us from the southern coast in the middle, past Havana and further west, into the rural province of Viñales, and the town with the same name. The landscape is quite spectacular; the slightly hilly base comes richly served with sprinkles of mogotes, high-rising steep rocks of tougher material than the sandstone that has eroded down to the flattish surface below.



A great way of taking in the scenery is from the back of a horse. As every one else opted for the walking tour, I had more or less a private tour of the region. I say more or less, because occasionally my calm, but strong and fast, ride Paloma would catch up with other bands of horses wearing tourists.

Not only did I get a scenic ride through the fields and forests of Viñales, but I made some interesting stops as well. A tobacco farmer showed me how it's done, and I even tried a few puffs.

At the coffee and guava plantation I got a taste of the local rum, flavoured with guava, and in one of the many limestone caves I got to practice my pareidolia, spotting gorillas, dinosaurs, elephant trunks and Fidel's nose among the stalactites and stalagmites.



One puff



Zuban cigars

The caving wasn't over for the day, though. Cueva Indios is supposed to be a cave system once populated by the indigenous people of the area, but that might just be a selling point or a trick, as no bones or cave paintings have been found. It's still an impressive cave, and you get to take a boat ride on the underground river.

No visit to the countryside is complete without a drop-in at a local farm. This one was totally organic (or, to put it correctly, ecological. All food is organic, no matter how much additives, fertilisers or pesticides you put in the process. It's just that the English speakers of the world don't seem comprehend and thus say 'organic' when they really mean 'ecological'). Every thing put on the table was locally grown, except for the snapper and the various sodas for the cocktails. Incidentally, those were probably the best parts of the generous, and absolutely delicious buffet served. Definitely the snapper, at least.

The happeningest place for locals and visitors alike to go to for a Friday of fun in Viñales would be the local dance park. A live band performed on stage, and occasionally the dance floor would be emptied in favour of a dance troupe showing their skills in elaborate, samba-esque costumes.

The place ran out of beer pretty much from the get-go, and the combo of too much salsa and too little beer made the decision easy for me. I sauntered on for a quiet beer and a book at the casa. Before Cuba, I had no opinion on salsa one way or the other. I've since grown weary of the dance, I find the music boring and repetitive (and often littered with rapping and/or auto-tuning which is sure-fire way of destroying otherwise acceptable music), but I still love the sauce. And I'll have plenty of that at my next destination. But first, the rest of Havana. Though most of the city puts pedestrians second or third (walkways wide enough for almost 1 person, cracked and littered with rubbish, garbage and dogs' leftovers, streets filled with cars from way way before any efficient exhaust cleaning was devised), Habana Vieja is all sorts of cosy. Our local guide and tour leader appeared upon his name being called three times (this happened frequently throughout the tour, thus earning him the epithet of Beetlejuice), and we took a city walk. Some I had already seen, some I hadn't, all was with a new insight. Amongst the sights tried and seen were La Bodeguita del Medio and



New and old. View from La Casa Particular in Havana.

La Floridita, made famous by Hemingway for its mojitos and daiquiris, respectively. I tried the mojito, but not the daiquiri.

Guided walking tours are almost always essential for getting to know a city, and this one was no exception. Part of Havana's charm (and of its obvious pollution problem) and certainly one of the most iconic aspects of the the city, and indeed Cuba as a whole, is the brightly coloured old classic cars. As is a must, we took a ride in the pinks and purples, checking out the vast



Riding around Havana in style

were quite old). The part where they asked the audience where they were from and then



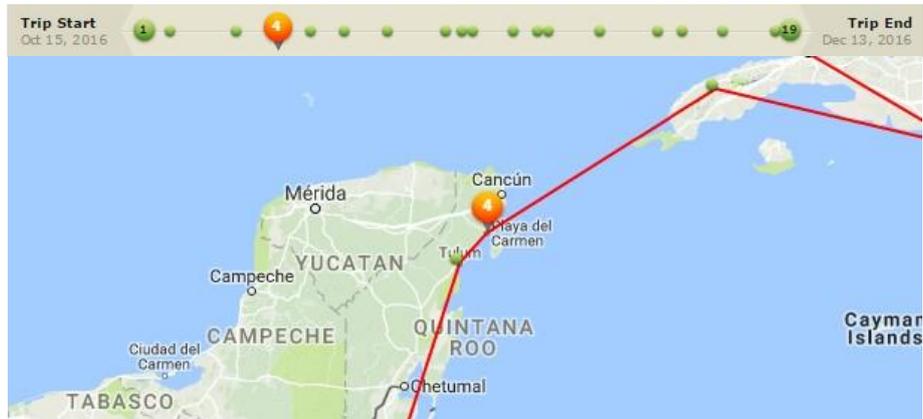
Buena Vista Social Club

immediately performed a song- and/or dance number accordingly (for instance doing a river dance upon finding out some in the audience were from Ireland) was good fun. All good things must come to an end, and after visiting the rum museum (interesting, knowledgeable guide), the cigar factory (unnecessary, if you have been to an actual tobacco farm, but still worth it, seeing all the rollers sitting at their desks as in stuck in the 60's), Morro Castle (quite a hike if you go by the 2 cuc boat rather than the 20 cuc cab), Museo de la Revolución (educational, though a teeny weeny bit biased) and the surprise of the day: Callejón de Hamel (an art community which had all flavours of contemporary art, most of which was made from recycled materials), the Cuban section of the odyssey was over.



So very Cuban

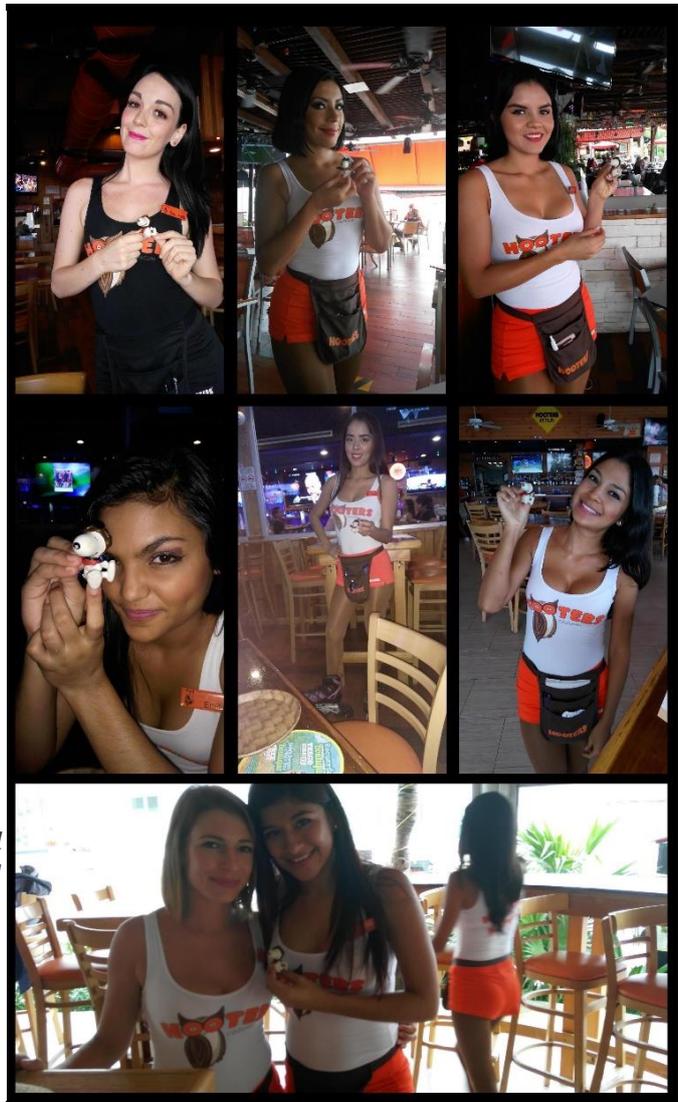
Doing the wonders



Playa del Carmen, Quintana Roo, Mexico
Saturday, October 29, 2016

Early morning, 7 AM, I took another ride in an old-timey car, but this time, not just for shits and giggles and sightseeing. My plane left for Cancun in the morning, and I arrived at the airport in style. Sometimes the difference between two neighbouring nations can be obvious. I mean, look at how weird they are in Norway once you cross over from Sweden: The lines of their roads are yellow rather than white! What is up with that? And even though Cuba and the Yucatan part of Mexico are fairly similar in climate, and on good days you could probably see the shores of the other land. Whilst neither of them are exactly poor, the difference is striking. Especially in Cancun. A Las Vegas strip by the Caribbean, high rise all-inclusive hotels, fancy private beaches, neon signs, golf courses, restaurants, night clubs and tacky souvenir shops line the narrow peninsula. It's a market's market, tourism is the product and tourists are the clients.

*In Mexico,
Snoops had
many curly
fries*



Although, there are similarities. In Cuba, especially in the cities, you could hardly walk a metre without someone calling you *amigo* and urge you to purchase something. Only, in Cuba, it was mostly taxis, cigars, genuine local handicrafts and rum they peddled; in Cancun, they try to sell you Jet Ski tours, women, genuine local handicrafts and nightclub limo rides. When, oh when, will the merchants of the world realise that if I need a product or a service I, and everybody else, am perfectly capable of seeking it out myself?

At ridiculous o'clock the bell rang. Some four hours drive from Cancun lies one of the current Seven Wonders of the world: Chichen Itza. Drawing tourists from near and far, this former Mayan capital is a destination best reached before the crowds. Said and true, the bus hit the highway at 7:00 after a round of picking up passengers from 5, starting with me. As such, we were indeed the second bus to arrive, and could therefore beat the crowds and, to a lesser



Chichen Itza: Kukulcan, the restored sides

extent, the heat.

The main attraction, the Kukulcan Pyramid, was a little bit smaller than what I had expected, but not less impressive. It is well known, for those who know it well, that the pyramid is built in such a way that, given the right time of day and year, shadows will work in mysterious and, for the uneducated, divine ways. Our local guide was very entertaining and knowledgeable, and he told the tale of the Mayans. Knowledge is power, and hiding that knowledge from the people while claiming divine communication is essential for any religion. The brightest and best architects, engineers, astronomers and acoustic scientists knew how to build structures to appear as though in direct contact with the gods, and the brightest and best leaders knew how to utilise this in order to dupe the masses. So, pretty much the same as today, in many places. I knew about the shadows (though I didn't know the specifics, that being that during the equinox they would appear as a serpent slithering down the pyramid), but I did not know about the acoustic phenomena. Clap your hands, and at a certain angle the echo sounds like a bird calling. Clap your hands, and at a certain other angle it sounds like a rattle snake.

At most there were about 100,000 people in Chichen Itza. 5000 were the elite; the priests, the nobles, the astronomers, the ball players. They lived inside the sacred city, the rest could well and true live outside.

The well put-on shows every six months, with astonishing displays of communicating with the gods (through means of shadowplay and acoustic trickery) kept the population in check. When

the rulers needed firewood for the mortar, the people happily cut down the surrounding trees. When they needed more, they cut down more trees, and eventually an area consisting of present Yucatan, Belize, Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala were deforested. Without jungle, no persistent water, and no life. The hunger for power by the Mayan rulers eventually led to the downfall of the Mayan civilisation. Well, maybe the Spanish helped.

In the sacred city there is also a ballpark. A ball game, not unlike a mixture of basketball, baseball and quidditch, was the national sport.



I gather the goal is for the chasers to get the quaffle pass the keeper and through the hoops, while simultaneously watch out for the bludgers hit at them from the opposite team's beaters

Every two years or so, the cup final was played in Chichen Itza. Each team consisted of 7 players, but the lucky number was not 7, or 14, but 13. Therefore, after the game, one player would have to be sacrificed in order to please the gods. So who? The goalie who let that fatal ball in? The striker that missed an open goal towards the end of the game? The Gary Sundgren of the era? No, being sacrificed was a great honour, and that honour went to the captain of the winning team. Swinging the actual sword was also a great honour, bestowed upon the captain of the losing team. And you thought our contemporary football games are matters of life and death!

The camera went warm, as did the air. A bit past noon we had managed to take in the whole city, and it was time to head on back. By this time, the parking lot was jam packed with buses, and the early bird special had really payed off!

Cancun is an underwater paradise. Coral reefs, turtles, sharks, dolphins and schools of colourful fish awaits in the turquoise blue waters. However, my blood thinners were still in my system, so Scuba diving was out of the question. I can do that wherever, after the effects have worn off. One thing they have in Cancun and no place else is the underwater museum. Lots of statues and sculptures placed on the ocean floor make for a spectacular sight, as well as artificial reefs. Shallow enough to be seen via snorkeling, I booked a tour and set off early in the morning. Unfortunately, the sea was angry that day, my friends, and they had to cancel the trip. And since I had to leave for Cozumel, I had no choice but to take the refund rather than wait another day to see if the seas would calm down. Maybe that was just as well; Now I have a reason to come back, and that time do it all properly, with flasks and BCD:s.

The day was instead spent going for a walk (past the crocodile warning signs), contemplating whether or not to do the aquarium (opting not to), relaxing by the (IMNSHO calm sea) and not having to stress to reach my next port of call before sundown. I took the local bus from the hotel peninsula to the bus station downtown and jumped on the cheap coach to Playa del Carmen. From there the ferry was ready to take me across the the increasingly wavy water to the island of Cozumel.



Crossin' the chapel

The heavens were angry that day, my friends! Heavy rain fell from dawn till dusk, and I ventured out in between the showers for some shopping for a cheaparse mask+snorkel and a Splash guard, but otherwise it was just me and my hotel pool and my reading.

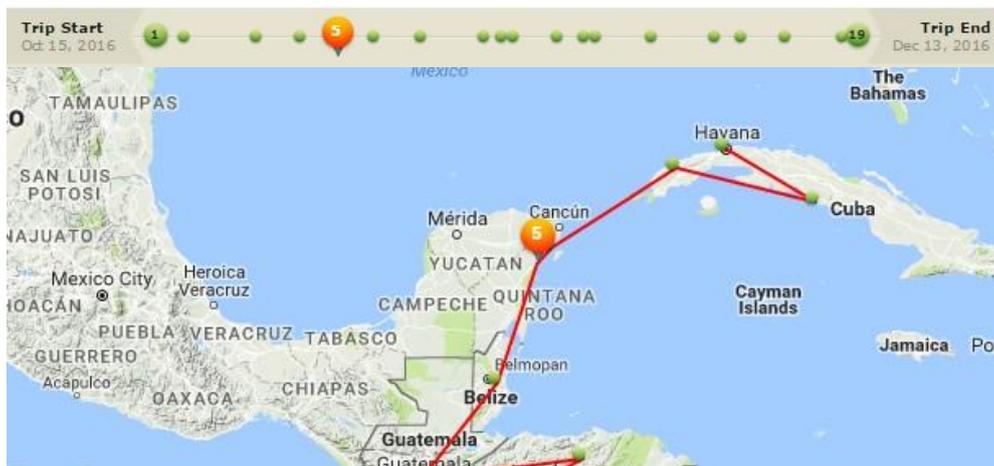
The weather looked more promising the next day, though, so I went for a guided tour of the island. The waves, having been built up from travelling the Atlantic, broke majestically on the sparsely populated and seldom toured eastern side. A catholic church had been built right next to an old mayan temple. The sky started to look a bit more threatening, and before late I put on a mask and flippers and snorkelled around the local reef.

The half-day ended with a visit to an organic and artisanal tequila factory, where focus lay less on the making-of process (though that was an essential part as well) and more on tasting the different flavours. Four straight kinds, each more barrel aged than the last, and some five or so seasoned with fruits, coffee and more. Most of them were fine, with the añeja being the tastiest and the almond being quite horrible.

Soon enough I caught the ferry to the mainland, sought out my hotel in Playa del Carmen and got ready

for the pre dep meeting.

Even more mayan ruins



Tulum, Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico
Tuesday, November 1, 2016

The surprising lack of Aussies in my last tour group came back with a vengeance. A few Brits, even fewer Kiwis and the rest came from Down Under. Our constantly enthusiastic tour leader, from Costa Rica, explained the layout of the upcoming few weeks and we went for dinner by the beach.

Smaller than Chichen Itza, but less crowded and more more jungly, is the ancient Mayan city of Cobá. The weather was the good ole h'n'h (hot and humid), and the shade of the trees made little effort to rectify that fact. To be honest, our decision to race on the dirt roads on rented bikes and then climb the steep steps of the tallest pyramid probably helped putting sweat on our backs.

The sweatier you are, the sweeter the relief of jumping in the cool water, and few waters are cooler than those in the cenotes. The jump was a bit over 10 metres at the highest platform, and luckily life vests were not mandatory. Yay Mexico, and take heed, other Latin American countries (I'm looking at you, Brazil)!

This cenote was completely sealed in, with nothing but a 2x3 m hole to enter through. The ceiling, 25 metres above water level, was covered with stalactites and the occasional bat, and its bottom lay equally far from the water level. Cool, said Bill. Chilling, said Bull.

A town with even more Mayan ruins (less impressive, but right by the sea) is Tulum, our next destination.



En Sol-öl, tack!

Some of us decided to rent some bikes and head towards the beach, and, time permitting, those very ruins. Unfortunately, the supposed left turn was missed, and the bike journey took us further than expected. Along a long stretch of road, lined with bars and restaurants and private beach resorts we pedaled until we reached the entrance to Sian Ka'an nature reserve and was told that the public beach was just 3 km away. Easy enough, and 4,5 km later we hit the waves, having the whole beach to ourselves.

On the way back I turned my GPS watch on, and we decided to stop every 3 km for a few cold ones. And there it was: Akumal, a local APA. I hadn't had ale in a long time. A long time.

Upon returning to the bike rental, the distance covered showed that we had spent around 30 km riding our slightly unadjustable fixies in the heat.

Dias de las Muertas, and/or Halloween was that day, and we got our faces painted, Mexican style, and hit the bars.

A few short days in Mexico was nearing an end. I am not even close to having experienced it though, so I'm coming back in the future; during the dry season and when no medical conditions stops me from diving.



Celebrating Dias de las Muertas, post face-paint

Fins, mask and ATM



San Ignacio , Belize
Saturday, November 5, 2016

Latin America consists of all countries in the Americas where the main language is based on Latin (most often Spanish, but also French and Portuguese), so basically Mexico and southwards. But one little country stands out from the rest: In Belize English is the official language, and that's where we were heading next.



A short drive from the border lies Belize City (curiously neither the capital, nor the largest city) and from there we jumped on board the water taxi to Caye Caulker. A relaxed little island in the Caribbean with many lobster restaurants and no bitumen, this is a haven for backpackers all year round, but especially during high season. This was low season, though, and the local motto 'Go slow' was heeded. Next morning the others went away in the morning to go snorkeling, but I had deeper thoughts. I perused the local dive shops in search of a refresher dive (it's been almost two years since last I dived (dove?)) that day as well as a full day to Belize's famous Blue Hole the following day.

The sea was angry that day, my friends! As were the heavens. Rain and wind stopped the dive tours, and I had to hope for better conditions for the day after. And indeed, the sun was smiling, and I finally got into the blue. The first was simply doing the basics, including finding the regulator and the mask, at no depth and little wildlife. The second was a proper dive at the local reef, although only down to 7 metres. As this was the last day on the island, there was unfortunately no time

to go to the Blue Hole (or to pay the USD250 it would have cost), but at least I will be immediately ready to go into the deep the next time opportunity knocks.



Pouring rain in Caye Caulker

In the pouring rain, the boat brought us back to the mainland, and from there, San Ignacio.

The town itself has little to offer (though cosy) other than the shop where three of us bought Jenny brand raincoats, but SI is where many tours to the surrounding jungles, rivers, ruins and mountains start.

I had heard, from many different people and sources, that THE thing to do in Belize is the Actun Tunichil Muknal caves, more commonly known as the ATM caves.

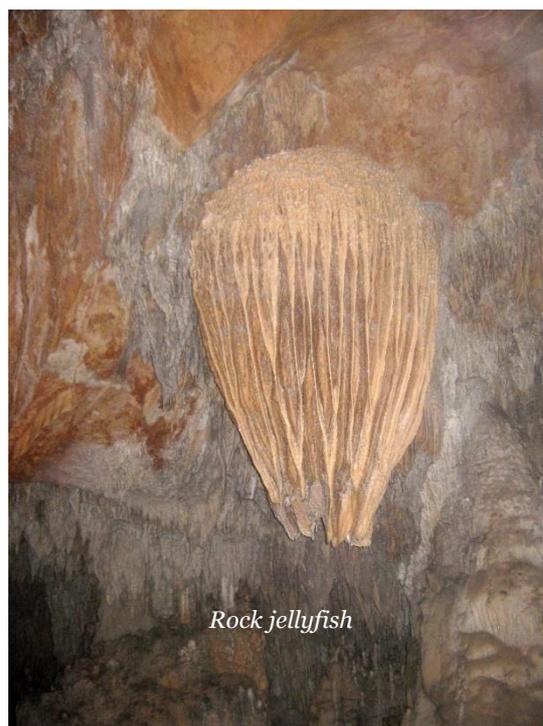
Once more the weather stopped me

from doing what I intended: The rain had fallen heavily in the mountains, and the river that flows in the cave system was 50 cm too high, and so the trip was cancelled.

That might actually have been a good thing, though: Instead of ATM, four of us signed up for the strenuous caving option. A small group, consisting of us four and a couple we picked up along the way herded by two local guides, started hiking through the jungle, across rivers of ants, slippery mud and treacherous roots. Eventually we reached the entrance to Crystal Cave, and the real adventure could begin.

This was proper caving. There were no concrete footpath, no lights, no exit signs. Just us, the guide, our helmet mounted torches and the spectacularity of the cave. Sometimes squeezing through narrow openings, sometimes climbing sheer walls, always struggling to find footing, often sliding on mud covered rocks.

The cave system was well worth the effort in and of itself. Beautiful stalactites and stalagmites, curtains of lime stone, shiny crystals, glittering specks of quartz. Neither words, nor photos can describe the otherworldliness of the underground kingdom. Yet, in addition, we also got to see ancient artifacts and human bones, just as we would have at the ATM caves. As we were three persons per guide, we had the whole cave complex to ourselves. The guide informed us of all the morbid and creepifying rituals that used to take place in this, for the Mayans, representation of the Underworld. With sore and aching muscles, and clothes covered in mud and sweat, it was a relief to jump in the underground river after the hike back to cool down and wash the mud away.



Rock jellyfish

Basically, we got to do and see all we would have at ATM, we didn't have to rush, explanations took the time they needed, and we were allowed to take photos. So, I honestly think that the caving option actually is the better choice.

Back in town, the shaky and slow internet informed me that Radiohead will be playing in Sweden next summer. Unable to fix tickets myself (buying concert tickets online usually needs high speed and an actual computer), I asked a friend back home who were also keen on going to pretty please buy one for me as well. The good news of next year's concert was celebrated by me grabbing the mike at the local karaoke bar and performing, to the others' cheers and applause, Creep. Explicit lyrics.

Guatemala



Rio Dulce , Guatemala
Wednesday, November 9, 2016

Waving good bye to Belize, it was now time to once more brush off the old Espanol. A reasonably smooth border crossing later and we were in Guatemala.



Tikal

A fair bit larger and a lot more undulating than its northeastern neighbour, Guatemala boasts an interesting landscape. Hills and mountains covered in jungle alternating with flatter patches of semi-open fields with cattle and vast swats of banana, guava and oil palm fields.

Our minibus steered on stochastically paved roads towards the wilderness, and came to a halt at Tikal, which is both another ancient Mayan city and a nature reserve. The howler monkeys started to howl, the coatis sneaked around and the spider monkey peed from a tree as we were guided amongst the ruins and the jungle.

After a growing number of Mayan ruins, one tends to be a bit blasé, but Tikal offers something extra, besides the jaguar filled forest and the tallest pyramid towering above the canopy: The geek in me reacted when I overheard a Spanish speaking guide mentioning Nueva Esperanza. And indeed, Tikal was where they filmed the outdoors scenes of the rebel base on Yavin IV, from where the rebel fleet launched its attack on the Death Star and its exhaust port in Star Wars ep 4: A new hope. There might be some photo editing on some of the scenic pictures when I get back home.

After witnessing the setting sun hit the Jaguar Pyramid, we mixed the rum punch and lighted the bonfire, as this was camping in the wilderness.



I might have photoshopped the squadron of T-65B:s entering the rebel base here in Tikal

At sunrise, or indeed earlier, I woke up, either from the itching from a billion mozzie bites or from the ruckus of the howlers, grabbed a traditional Guatemalan brekkie (refried beans, nachos, scrambled eggs and fried plantain) and set off towards Rio Dulce.

The town itself is rather avoidable, being just a street with no sidewalk and lots of fumes, but from its docks one can take a short boat ride and enter a whole different world. Bungalows, marinas, villas and laid back hotels intersperse the jungle that grows all the way to the riverbanks. Thatched roofs and pillars rather than walls create open air accommodation and a closeness to the surrounding jungle and river. Of course, that also creates a closeness to the more bitey and buzzy of its inhabitants, so I had to put long trousers and bug repellent on, and making sure that the bed was completely covered by the mosquito net.

The nearby hot springs, including the hot water fall, was well worth a visit, as was a half day tour to the nearby town of Livingston. Only accessible by boat, the town is more about the fact that it's mostly populated by Garifunas (African Caribbean) and therefore culturally unique to the area, than the town itself. The boat ride to get there was actually more interesting, with lots of wildlife spotting on the riverbanks, in the mangroves and on the wee little islands.

As the resort was open air, there was, again, a curfew at 22 in the afternoon. The early bedtime didn't bother me too much, though; they provided free kayaks in the early morning, and so I got to do a bit of sunrise paddling every morning, in the tranquillity of the flat river.



The coveted hot springs are atop the waterfall, so certain climbing was involved

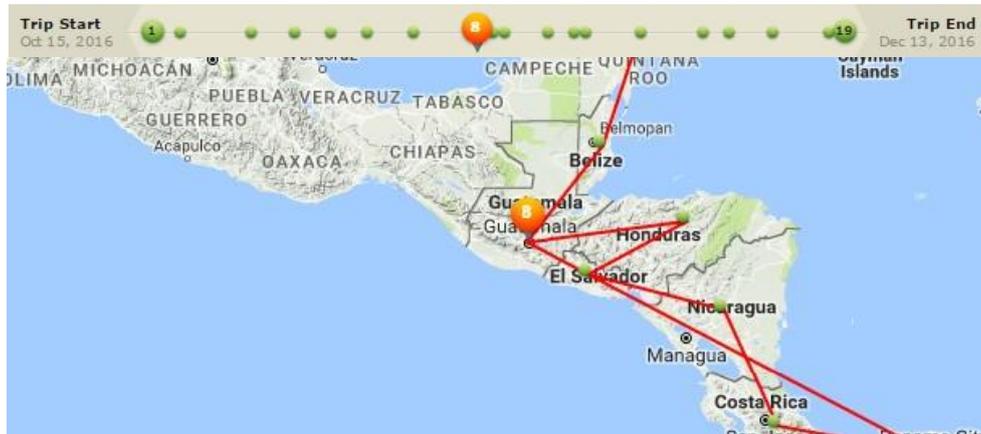


Pelicans and the odd egret guarding the outskirts of Livingston



Early kayaking tour in Rio Dulce

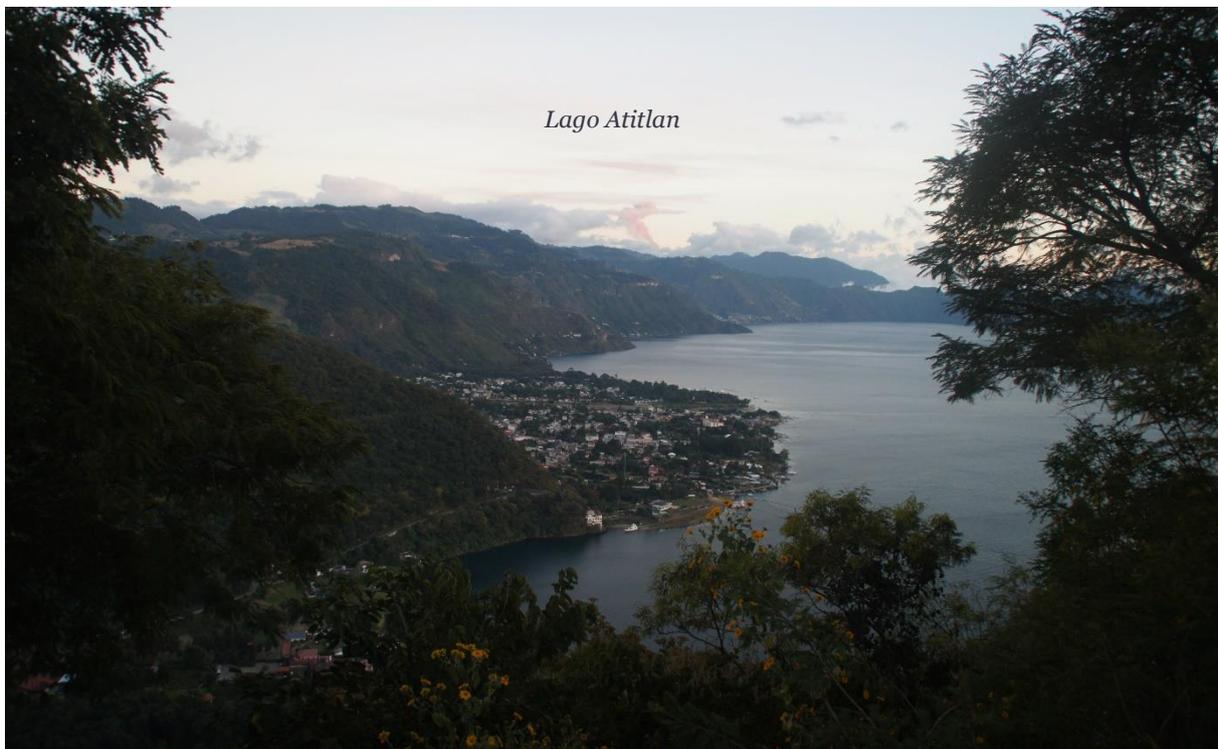
High and dry



Antigua, Guatemala Monday, November 14, 2016

There's a long way to Antigua from Rio Dulce. Well, not that long in kilometres, but the roads are winding and often in a state of disrepair. Accidents, road works and at one point a landslide kept the queues going for hours, and getting through Guatemala City, the largest city in Central America, was a nightmare. The rush hour traffic there makes the rush hour traffic in Sweden look, you know, rushy.

But eventually, after 12 hours on the road (and to a lesser extent, water) we reached the supposedly cosy town of Antigua. I say supposedly, because we basically just checked in, had dinner, went to sleep, leaving next morning. The little I saw looked nice, with low colonial buildings and cobbled streets, and I did have the possibly best baconless brekkie ever. We'll return to Antigua in a few days for proper exploration, though.



Upwards the journey went, and the surroundings became less tropical and more temperate, with terrace fields of corn, potato and beetroot rather than banana and papaya. The air got thinner and colder, and soon we passed the 2000 m mark.

The goal of the day was to get to San Jorge de Laguna, but not after a stop in Chichicastenango and its huge market. Handicrafts, art, cloths, junk and other of similar lined the stalls along the veritable labyrinth* of peddlers. Hardly a step could be taken before another salesperson started hassling, and it was crowded, and full of smells. Markets such as this can be a continuous source of excitement for those who love shopping, spending hours and money and returning with a need for an extra bag. I am not one of those people. I got in there, bought some bits and bobs for a 2 year old girl, an 8 year old boy and a teenaged girl, and then got out as quickly as possible. Why buying those items, though? Well, in San Jorge de Laguna, where we stayed with different local families in their actual homes, our host family had exactly that constellation of kids, and we thanked them with gifts for the children and wine for the grownups. Language barriers notwithstanding, we managed to play cards, watch telenovelas and play hangman, in which we ingeniously used the same word in both Spanish and English, thus improving the language skills of hosts and guests alike.

After a home cooked dinner in typical Guatemalan fashion, a night's sleep and an equally home cooked and typical breakfast, we waved goodbye to our host families and set off to the nearby lakeside town of Panajachel.

Unforts, that's when my man cold hit, and I stayed at the hotel and rested while the others went on a tour of lake Atitlan and its surrounding towns and villages.

Back in Antigua, I went on a fruitless search for a laundrette. For reasons probably traced to christian mythology, all laundry places were closed the next day (Sunday) and I had an early start on Monday. Well, seek, and you shall look. No laundry done, but on the other hand we stumbled into a hole-in-the-wall sausage place that served imported beer. American IPA, to be



precise.

The next day the nearby volcanoes beckoned. A hike up Pacaya took us through a lush jungle and to the almost extraterrestrial desolate landscape of the lava fields of Pacaya's latest eruption, that of March 2014. The sharp rocks will soon erode to sand, and in a hundred years or so, the mineral rich soil will be host to another jungle, as lush as the one we have now. Until the next eruption. Which might be any day; it was orange alert.



Seen from Pacaya, and from the roof of the hotel in town, is Fuego. Fuego has considerably milder eruptions than its brother, but instead way more often. In fact, it had two eruptions that day and two that night. At daytime a pillar of smoke and ash could be seen, and at night its slopes went orange from the erupting lava. A sight to behold.

As this was the end station for some and the start for others, we partly swapped the people of the group, and wholly the tour leader, and said our goodbyes, both to each other and to Guatemala.

*) or possibly maze

Intrepid gang and the Honduran stopover



Copan ruins, Honduras
Wednesday, November 16, 2016

A few weeks before I left I went to the clinic to get my vaccinations and profylaxes up to date. Of all the places, only Honduras had a slight risk of Malaria. I didn't know my itinerary by heart and guessed a week with risk, and got the medication for it. Turned out, the Honduras stay was just a single day. Had I known, I wouldn't have bothered, but here we are. The doctor never specifically ordered the brand name, so it was dirt cheap anyway. And so, we left Guatemala in the easiest border crossing ever and into Honduras.

Copán is, like so many other places in Northern Central America, the site of ancient Mayan ruins. A plus among these particular piles of rocks, though, is that the thermal activity of the area makes for natural hot springs, and the Mayans used that to build pools of varying warmth. Luna Jaguar Hot Springs continues that tradition, and you can soak in hot, warm, tepid and cool water, having a warm, forceful waterfall massage your neck and back, all while the slightly sulphur smelling pools are lined with lit candles.

We arrived after sunset, and it was low season. As such, we had the place to ourselves. We brought the eskie* in and enjoyed some cold ones in the hot, and were treated to an excellent barbecue dinner afterwards. The eskie went in the bus back with us, and as the songs on the stereo got more sing-alongy, the party mode increased. Finishing at the roof top with bluetooth speakers and rum punch, the one and only day in Honduras finished on a high note.

*) Eskie, cooler, chilly-bin, ice box, call it whatever



Jiquilite



Suchitoto , El Salvador
Thursday, November 17, 2016

Getting in to El Salvador is way easier from Guatemala than from Honduras, and getting from Honduras to Guatemala is easy as. Natch, we went back to Guatemala and went to El Salvador from there, to yet another colonial town with cobbled streets: Suchitoto. A late arrival gave time for little more than a taste of the local speciality: poposas, two tortillas with stuffing such as beans, pork and vegetables in between. Cheap and tasty. The next days were packed with activities, though. In the 80's, a civil war raged in El Salvador. Peasants, and later students, rose up against an oppressive regime, forming a number of guerilla troops all over the country. Of course the US backed the government against their valiant fight against the nasty commies, and even though Fidel Castro eventually came to the rebels' aid, the odds were greatly in favour of the army. However, the ingenuity and local know-how of the guerrilla, with extra tips and tricks from the Viet Cong, brought to El Salvador by way of, ironically, American veterans, combined with



Basalt and pillar of the earth, Los Tercios Waterfall



Tirogoz (aka the turquoise-bowed motmot), the national bird of El Salvador and a symbol of a violence free household

pleads from the UN, eventually led to victory for the people. Suchitoto was the only colonial city in the province that survived the bombings, much thanks to the city's proudest son: Alejandro Cotto, a well respected musician and film director. He got word of the government planning an airstrike a few days later, and promptly approached the National Philharmonic Orchestra for a gig, and then invited a number of ambassadors to the event. The bombing was cancelled, and before they got to reschedule, Cotto had convinced the president to spare the only remaining colonial city.

That, and more, we learnt on a guided city tour, and later, as we climbed the mountains in which the guerilla hid. In those days,

the mountains were mostly covered by farm fields, with barely any forest to hide in. However, the climate and fertile soil help the trees to grow fast and tall, so it doesn't take many years for the fields to become jungle. The view from the top is quite stunning. We got to meet one of the guerilla leaders, who now works as a local guide and ranger, telling stories about his perils during the war.



98 yo cigarmaker, still in action!

But Suchitoto is not just guerrillas and bombs. Once, the leading export of El Salvador was indigo, with Suchitoto being perfectly suited for growing indigo plants, or jiquilite. After the invention of artificial blue colouring, the indigo industry effectively died, its last users reduced to handicraft rather than industry.

As indigo disappeared, new forms of employment were needed, especially for the women, and so cigars appeared. We got to meet a third generation cigar maker, a spry 98 year old lady, who got us to try our cigar rolling skills, to various degrees of success.

As the so called macho culture is strong in El Salvador, campaigns and education are made for the embiggenment of women's rights and the importance of mutual consent. Many homes are emblazoned with a Tirogoz (aka the

turquoise-bowed motmot), the national bird, as a symbol of a violence free household, and Sister Peggy runs an activity centre slash museum. There, children can come for lessons in art and music and skateboarding, or to play football or basketball, or take in the history of influential women throughout the ages and the world.

Suchitoto lies by the shores of Suchitlan, an artificial lake, created for the hydroelectric dam that provides power for the whole area. Suchitlan means bird lake, and therefore we took off before sunrise to go kayaking on the still waters. Many a bird could be watched, along with a plane wreck on Hermit Island.

Spending a couple of hours in a kayak boosts the hunger, and after a bagel breakfast we set off towards the Pacific coast.



The plane crashed in the lake, but was salvaged and put on Hermit's Island

Kournikova



Flores, El Salvador
Sunday, November 20, 2016

Hang loose, dudes and dudettes! We left the hills and jungles of Embalse Cerro Grande and steered south-west towards the Pacific coast. Here, there are few islands and fewer reefs. They have fish, but not the classic sport catches such as tuna, dorado or marlin. Therefore, they don't have the classic seaboard specialities such as snorkeling, diving and fishing. They do however have endless sandy beaches and waves that break just a decent distance from the shore. And therefore, surf's up, dude!



El Tunco was the first of the two similarly named beach destinations where dreads and boarders ruled. A small village with pebbly beaches, surf shops and restaurants, El Tunco is named after a colloquial term for pig. According to our tour leader, the waves were too big to be swimming in. Challenge accepted! said I and dove into the blue wearing my brand new boarders.

Since we arrived at lunch time and were set to leave in the morning, there was no time for optional activities, so we made our own: bar crawl, having a few drinks, having a few laughs, playing with the toroflux (a set of steel rings, formable to an orb, that can roll along your arms like a massage-y slinky) and meeting the locals.



*You can call me Al.
Or possibly Reuben.*

But alas, the engine lacked a propeller, and since the engine was of a rare type, parts were difficult to obtain. They found one, but the car that was transporting it had an accident and I think Lemony Snicket was somehow involved at some point in this series of unfortunate events. Eventually the propeller arrived, but the boat trip was considerably shorter, involving a rollercoasterly ride on the waves and an expedition up the mangrove lined river, searching for birds, crocodiles and possibly turtles.

The more or less cancelled day trip meant that most of the day was spent relalalaxing and getting to know Al and Reuben, the two domesticated pelicans La Tortuga had taken in. Both of them had only one full wing, and they were not shy around people.

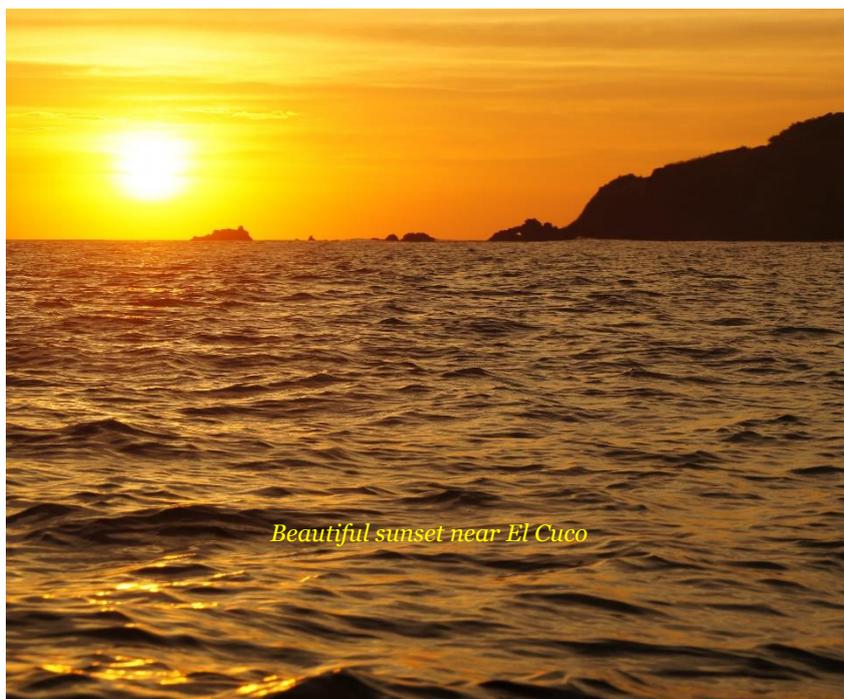
With bonfires, seafood, beer pong, and beautiful sunsets, El Cuco was very relaxing, even to the point of me almost disregarding all the bloody sand everywhere, but soon enough it was time to hit the hay for an extremely early getaway. Back locker 4:45, wheels rolling 5:00. And indeed they were.

More (or for those so inclined, less) to do was on the menu for El Cuco. A beach rather than even a village, with our resort being secluded enough, and offering most of one would need, we could easily stay there the whole time. The most popular pastimes were massage, yoga, chilling on the beach, chilling in a hammock, chilling in a hammock on the beach and surfing.

I made the same decision I made all those years ago in Australia: to not try to surf. Not for fear of failing, nor for fear of falling. Well, actually, for fear of falling... in love with a sport I frustratingly can't do back home.

A sport I indeed can do back home is poker. La Tortuga Verde (the name of our resort) hosts people from all over the world, and often have a few foreign volunteers working. They set up a game of poker. I was not so little ring rusty, and busted as second man in the first tournament, choosing to push my bleeding stack in on an ace-king offsuit. The hand is known as the Anna Kournikova (same initials, they both look really good, but they never win anything). The next tournament went considerably better, partly thanks to my own personal cheerleader (and better play). That time I reached the heads-up, but once again I went all-in with an Anna Kournikova, and the curse struck again.

Those of us not in the need for facials, massage or surf lessons signed up for a full day boat trip around the area.



Beautiful sunset near El Cuco

Lava



Granada, Nicaragua

Wednesday, November 23, 2016

The night was still on when we rose, all sandy-eyed (both literally and figuratively) and yawning at ridiculous o'clock. A long day of driving, boating and driving some more would eventually bring us to Granada. The boat ride across the Golfo de Fonseca, the bay shared by El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua, was somewhat wetter than expected: a low boat carrying 16 passengers and their luggage in significantly rougher seas than usual, so there was splashing from the waves.

The border crossing into Nicaragua was a unique one. Landing on the shore, we disembarked with wet feet and carried our backpacks and suitcases a short bit to an all but abandoned border control. No money exchangers, no little stores to buy bits and bobs, no fuming lines of lorries and cars. Just a rundown toilet, an abandoned barn and a place to stamp the passports.

And so we arrived in Granada, yet another colonial town with cobbled streets, the first in Central America, and the biggest in Nicaragua. And the one with the highest crime rate. But that is not to say that it's not a nice town, because it certainly is.



There are a few things to do in and around Granada, not the least of which is lazily being driven to the summit of a Masaya, a very active volcano. Deep down from the summit, a river of lava can clearly be seen. That, and a few visits to the central station, a recoleta style cemetery, the touristy market (mind you, I never actually entered, I stayed at the corner for a bao (traditional Nicaraguan dish from yucca) and a beer), a boat trip to Monkey Island and a very nice and relaxing afternoon spent at a crater lake resort constituted a package deal with the best of Granada.

But wait, there's more! Masaya and its river of lava is awesome enough during the day, but at night time it's a different pilsner altogether. The orange glow coming up from the underworld is a spectacular sight to behold, and the splashing and spluttering of the molten rock can be clearly seen. The whole crater is lit by the fiery orange of the lava stream, and it certainly earns its epithet as one of the Gates to Hell. A 30 minute drive to get there, a 45-60 minute wait in



My preciuossss....

the car queue to get up to the volcano and 30 minutes to get back, all for 15 minutes of lava goodness: totally worth it!

Granada had more to offer, though. A city walk took us to places you probably wouldn't find if you just wandered around on your own. A visit to a stylish yet affordable apartment housing in colonial style, a trip to the local market (full of smells and sound and people and an odd avocado) and a community centre. There, juveniles could learn arts and crafts and a trade, for free. The world's largest hammock was there, made from recycled plastic bags, the blenders were powered by bicycles and the bathroom walls were covered with rolls upon rolls of toilet paper.

The walk itself ended with a visit to the chocolate museum, where we got a crash course in the history and makings of chocolate and got to try their theremade flavoured rum. The chocolate and mint was probably the best.

The walking tour had a bonus feature, though: the local guide, though born and bred in Nicaragua, had spent some years in Texas during the war. Therefore we got some groceries from the local market and others from the supermarket and borrowed the hotel kitchen to cook a delicious chili con carne.

That chili lunch marked the end of the Granada stay, and after a bus ride we boarded the ferry to take us over the waves of Lake Nicaragua and its one-of-a-kind freshwater sharks, to the double volcano island of Isla Ometepe.



Blender 'Blending' Rodriguez



Bogrolls

Hurricane Matthew had raged the Caribbean, including Cuba, just before I left home. Supposedly, another hurricane known as a girl's name starting with 'L' had been around. But now, hurricane Otto was blowing cross the lands, and this time it found its way across the mainland rather than the Caribbean. Nicaragua was affected as well, and that meant that the national park in which Concepcion is located would need to close earlier, and that meant that the hike would have to be faster or shorter than usual. Shorter wasn't really an option, because then we wouldn't reach the peak, which is kind of the whole point. So, faster it was.



At the peak of Concepcion

Starting out flattish and with reasonably solid ground, the path soon got narrower, more uneven and steeper as we got deeper into the jungle. Howlers and white-faced monkeys chatted in the canopy, but I had deliberately left my big-ass camera (the less weight to drag uphill the better) and had only brought my compact, so no photos of the loud simians, unfortch.

Under trees and branches, over roots and rocks, and through vines and vegetation the avid adventurers struggled. Uphill doesn't even begin to describe it, and I sweated more because of the tiresome effort than the heat (which actually wasn't that bad) and the humidity (which was).

Soon enough (that is to say some two or more hours of continuous exercise) the vegetation cleared up, making way for the grassland and occasional shrubbery above the tree line.

And that was when Otto, or at least his little brother, was lurking. At altitude 900 and no protection from the trees, the wind hit us like a punch in the face, from the left. Luckily, the path led us partly behind a ridge, so we didn't have to fight against the wind in addition to climbing the steep volcano and focusing on each step to find sure footing on the increasingly loose ground. Well, not much.

This was where our hopes started to sink a bit. We still had some 450 metres to scale, and time was quickly turning. Now when even the grass had more or less given up, the ground was loose soil and rock, and it was getting even steeper. And we were up in the clouds.

A decision had to be made. We could stay at a certain level, rest a while and then go back down, or we could keep on trekking until noon, and see how far we would get. Our guide gave us little chance to reach the top, so we exclaimed 'Challenge accepted!' and set forth, ever upwards. The patches of loose rock were interspersed with patches of really loose rock, and now and again, solid rock. The volcano was venting, mixing the air and the clouds with sulphur vapour, and the rocks were warm to the touch, hot even. We heaved, struggled, climbed, all Gollum-style, and there it was:

The goal of the day, the very summit of the active volcano Concepcion. To have climbed that far and then having to turn around just as the peak was within reach would have been devastating, making the cheers of joy and victory even more powerful, and making the due to clouds and sulphuric smoke non-existent view not matter. We made it to the top, with ten minutes to spare, and the day was complete!

Well, not entirely. If not as strenuous, getting down was, as it often is, more difficult and dangerous. The rocks loosens more easily, the centre of balance is out of whack and overconfidence can creep in. It took us 5 hours to get to the top. With reasonable slope and ground conditions, it would have been a roughly two hour walk back, but it took us some three and a half. It was certainly no walk in the park. Other than the literal meaning, I suppose. I see now why one does not simply walk in to Mordor.

As hurricane Otto had the entire nation on edge, there were no absolute information on whether or not the ports around Lake Nicaragua or Isla Ometepe would be open the next day or not, so we would just have to wait and see.

I suppose I could summarise the whole Ometepe part as:

We climbed an active volcano. To its summit. In a hurricane. With frigging lasers.

No fear, no bravery



La Fortuna, Costa Rica
Tuesday, November 29, 2016



Hurricane Otto had moved on, and the risk of keeping the ports closed was lessened. Therefore, we could leave Ometepe on schedule and head for this journey's penultimate border crossing, that into Costa Rica.

Quite immediately, the roads got better and the prices got higher. As Costa Rica is one of the countries of the area that didn't have civil wars in the 80-90's, it's a bit more western than its neighbours, and with that, more expensive.

Monteverde is one of the adventure towns of Costa Rica. Otto, in combination with the frequent rain, had somewhat dampened (figuratively and literally) the spirit, and upon arrival we were told that pretty much all of the optional activities were closed, by presidential decree. Bad news, for sure, so we set our minds to spending the next day and a half playing board games,

drinking, playing drinking games and singing karaoke, while the rain poured down outside. However, one should never lose hope; we got up at reasonable o'clock next morning to check the weather, to see if anything had changed during the night, and if not, just to put our rain gear on and take a walk in the nearby cloud forest. But lo, and indeed behold: the rain had stopped and many of the activities were back on track!

Easy choice: Monteverde hosts the world's.... America's.... Costa Rica's.... a really really long superman zip line, so claro we decided to gear up, get our harness done and do a half day of canopy zip lining, including two supermen and a Tarzan swing. Oh how we laughed!

Monteverde is not even a one horse town. One pony town, maybe. Or donkey foal. A short walk away, though, is the two horses town of Santa Elena. The walk may be short, but it's very steep up and down, and the strenuous hike up the volcano had taken its toll on the legs. Stiff as two boards, every downhill and every flight of stairs was agony on the legs. In Santa Elena, I got to try the local dish (chifrijo, a type of ceviche with rice and beans, chopped tomatoes and pork) as well as the local drink (chiliguaro, sort of like a spicier and stronger Bloody Mary in shot form). They also had some micro brews, so that was a nice addition to the experience.

As the two-and-a-half-horse towns are located in the cloud forest, there is a chance to see some wildlife. Some of that wildlife comes out at dusk, and for the reasonable price of 25 bucks you could get on a night walk in the jungle, to spot the elusive animals, such as monkeys, jaguars, coaties and sloths.

But alas, everybody had apparently forgot rules number one and two when it comes to spotting wildlife, and that went twice for the guide:

Rule number one about wildlife spotting: You do not talk during wildlife spotting.

Rule number two about wildlife spotting: You do NOT talk during wildlife spotting.

As there were quite a lot of people out, not just our little band, and all chatting on like it was quiz night at the pub, the animals could hear us a mile away and had taken to the hills long before our arrival. Even the not-fast-as-lightning sloths had all but vanished. We did see some green snakes and a glow-in-the-dark scorpion, though, so it wasn't a complete waste of time and money.

Next morning we managed to squeeze in a very nice walk in the canopy of the cloud forest on the conveniently placed suspension bridges. Unfortunately, they were of aluminium and steel, with

railings and steel wires, rather than the rickety, wooden, planks-amissing, Indiana Jonesey number I was hoping against hope for. Nevertheless, without a guide and with not many other people around, we could take our time and make the most of it, so it was a great experience.

Leaving one adventure town, we set forth for another: La Fortuna.

One could easily spend a fortune in La Fortuna. You can partake in white water rafting, mountain biking, horse back riding, ziplining, bungee jumping and every other kind of adrenaline-y activity. Or you could visit the natural hotsprings or the monkey sanctuary or any of the nature reserves. The list goes on and on, and so do the prices.

A few of us opted for the canyoning/horseback riding combo. I have been waiting for a chance to try it ever since I was in Ecuador and was ill when everyone else went canyoning, so the choice was an easy one.



Green viper

We even convinced our fearless leader to join us for the combo, and set out, feet clad in newly bought water shoes. Canyoning was great, but I still don't know why they call it rappelling in the Americas and abseiling in the rest of the world.

The horseback riding included a visit to the La Fortuna waterfall. I was told that, since the horses couldn't reach all the way, we would have to walk 500 metres to get there and then back. Little did I realise that it was 500 metres straight down and 500 metres straight back up. Well, maybe I got the angle a little off, but still. It was more of a waterfall hike with hints of sitting on a horse than horseback riding. The horses were great, though. In good health, well-fed and strong, calm but not slow (mine was very keen to trot, and even a slight canter before I reined her in).

The Guatemala to Costa Rica leg of the tour was drawing to an end, and we left La Fortuna for the sprawling city of San José, the final destination for some of us. After the farewell dinner, our tour leader took a few moments to give a little speech to each one of the passengers, thanking us for however each one had contributed to the general experience of the trip. It was an excellent idea, and she got everyone's mini speech just right. Nailed it!

A few post dinner drinks and a lot of hugs and goodbyes (some of which were more tearful than others), and book three of this four book trilogy was over.

On the bus, on the bike, on the beach



Puerto Viejo de Talamanca, Costa Rica
Sunday, December 4, 2016

There was a partly new constellation. A new tour leader, a few losses, fewer gains. For the first time since the 2,5 hour ride from Cancun to Playa del Carmen it was time to go by public transport. The bus was packed, lacked restroom and didn't intend to stop along the way. It had both legroom and aircon, though, so it was still a comfy ride to the Caribbean coast.



Mr Le

Puerto Viejo de Talamanca is a laid back little town where the surf's up and reggae rules. I was hoping to get in the water, and promptly contacted the only diveshop in town, as well as the one the next village over. The local one had closed earlier in the autumn, so their auto reply told me. The more distant one informed me that the recent heavy rain fall had dragged a lot of silt into the sea, and therefore visibility was crap. So yet again, I missed an opportunity for diving due to funky weather.

There was no reason to put on the frowny face, though. The cozy little coastal town offered other objectives as well. We went to the nature reserve by the beach, spotting iguanas, sloths and millions of centipedes, then to a cocoa place, doing archery, putting natural makeup on, making chocolate, and finally going to the waterfall for a swim in the swirly water. The lack of diving the next day also meant that I could, with a reasonably clean conscience, have a big night out, as the following day were a relaxing day by the beach.

Well, relaxing might be to stress it a little; the beach some 10 km away was supposedly better than the one in town, and therefore we rented bikes and set off under the beaming sun. We managed to overshoot the exit by a couple of k:s, though, so the bike ride got slightly longer than expected. It's a tradition, or an old charter, or something.

It was a very nice beach, in fairness. There

were a lot of dogs around, and at least one of them were very keen on taking our newly bought communal frisbee. It was not as keen on returning it.

The last night in Costa Rica was a quiet one, and that turned out to be a good thing. The border crossing was a bit of a struggle, for a man from my latitude.

A short enough drive to the border was followed by a series of standing in line in a frighteningly inefficient process of, you know, checking a passport and stamping it.

So, in 40 degrees, humidity closing in on the 90's and no shade whatsoever (seriously, how hard or expensive can it be to just raise a bit of cover?) we stood in line. And again. After two hours of saunaesque (with the major difference that with the sauna one can leave whenever to cool down, or even jump in the lake through a hole in the ice) red tape, I was finally in the last country of this odyssey. I might count some countries that others don't, and I may have forgotten some that should be counted, but by my reckoning, Panama is my country #60.

Panama: More than a hat and a canal



Bocas del Toro, Chiriqui, Panama
Tuesday, December 6, 2016

Seldom has an air conditioned minibus been so welcome! Soon enough I had cooled down enough to regain functionality, and by the time we entered the watertaxi in Almirante I was ready to go!

The goal of the day, and indeed for the next three nights, was the group of islands known as Bocas del Torros, and Isla de Bastimentos in particular.

Located on the north coast of Panama, this cosy archipelago is every bit as caribbean as one could hope for: relaxed atmosphere, wooden, colourful houses on stilts by the water, people speaking creole, turquoise water, chicken and pork and seafood. Celebrating the significantly lower prices compared to Costa Rica, my new roomie and I ordered a lobster to share. And good thing too, for when it arrived it turned out to be of humongous proportions. Finishable, yes, but just barely. Judge my surprise when it turned out that that was just one serving, and they soon brought out a second lobster, even bigger than the last. Through dedication and struggle we eventually managed to finish the kraken-sized crustaceans. It was decidedly delicious (above Belize, but still below Maine), and needless to say, the chips remained untouched. And the price tag matched the physical size: 35 dollars!



On the islands, it's all about the water. Mostly. With two full days, I could be social AND do my own thing. Said and done, the first day was spent snorkeling with the gang. We gathered at the given time of 9:00, and about that time, the captain arrived, and then promptly disappeared to get fuel. About 40 minutes after agreed upon time, we left for the first destination, Dolphin Bay. No cetaceans could be found in the still waters, though, and instead we set course for a secluded,

paradise-y beach island. While others caught some rays on the beach or took a stroll around the island, I jumped in the water with mask, snorkel and a total lack of flippers and swam out to the nearby reef. Lots of colourful fish, including whatever species Dory is (I suppose I could just google it. Oh, I just did, it's Blue Tang).



The next stop was a dedicated snorkeling site, and lo, and indeed behold, lying at the bottom was a nurse shark! Unfortunately, my camera had stopped working some time during the last few days, so the snapshot had to be purely mental.

After a pre-ordered lunch (including some macaw spotting), a nap in the hammock and some more snorkeling, we circled the island known as Sloth Island. Contrary to Dolphin Bay, this place actually had quite a few of the animals it was named after.

One should never lose hope, though; on the way back, what was that splashing straight forward? Well, wouldn't you know, a small pod of dolphins were sighted, and all that we could have expected from this day trip was fulfilled. Well, other than flippers, of course. Well, unless one of the dolphins was named Flipper, of course.



And so the day finally arrived! After blood thinners, hurricanes, silt pollution, rain and whatever obstacles the universe could throw, I sat down for a combined breakfast and dive briefing. The dive guide, an older Canadian lady, was extremely passionate about marine biology and explained in minute details the eating, sex changing and the filtering habits of the underwater inhabitants. And that passion certainly followed her into the blue, as she could be as excited about seeing a centimetre long prawn as others are about seeing sharks or Donald Duck-y wrecks.



The dives themselves were cool as. Shallow (13 and 11 metres, respectively) and not the best visibility, but with a lot of wildlife and colours. Fortunately, a co-traveller had lent me his underwater camera, so I could photograph the subaquatic subjects. Schools of fish, a huge-ass

lobster (almost as big as the one we had for dinner), a catamaran wreck, sunken 40 years ago, the nearly extinct staghorn coral and a big barracuda were amongst the sights seen and snapshot during these two dives. All in all an excellent day, so great, indeed, that I wasn't completely devastated upon finding out that I had lost my jade fish hook necklace to the waves. I had worn it every day for almost ten years, ever since I got it in New Zealand, but now it's gone. I guess it wanted to go to the ocean, to fulfill its supposed destiny, being all fish hooky and such.

The relaxed days by the Caribbean drew to an end, and we steered once more inland.

Quality burgers, popcorn and dives



Santa Catalina , Panama
Saturday, December 10, 2016

Leaving sea level behind, we quickly gained altitude entering the highlands. The clear blue sky of the seas turned grey as the clouds gathered by the mountains, as they are wont to do. The rain and the streams make for creeks and rivers, and, with a helping hand from engineers, lakes, such as that of La Fortuna hydro dam.

High up in the mountains, the temperature drops to manageable numbers. Of course, some of the non-northern passengers found it cold rather than nice, and conjured up jumpers, knitted sweaters and blankets from their obviously overpacked luggage. In fairness, Boquete gives off a slightly alpine vibe, cloudforests and monkeys notwithstanding, and the resort we stayed at, 4 km straight up from town, was more or less a ski lodge.

Of course, this is still the tropics, and at only 1500-1900 metres the snow is forever lacking. Rock climbing can be done, as well as horseback riding, coffee tasting, ziplining and hiking. I had done plenty of some, I'm not accomplished enough for others and I'm not too keen on some. However, a hike in the cloud forest to some supposedly hidden waterfalls sounded nice, and since the mercury hardly had passed 17 in the morning I had high hopes that I could do this admittedly up-and-downey trek without melting away. And I actually did! The waterfalls were not really hidden, though. Even if you missed the signs pointing the way, the falls were plainly there to see, and indeed photograph. Along the way, humming birds, lizards and butterflies scurried about.

After a goldilocksily strenuous hike, hunger and thirst drove us to town. Unfortunately the local brewery wouldn't open until after the last shuttle to our ski lodge had left, but at least we could buy some samples in bottles. They were litre bottles, though, and with a recycling fee of 10 dollars each, we only settled for two kinds: the single-malt/single-hops and the coffee stout.



Humming a tune

At Señor Gyros, an inconspicuous looking little diner on a side street, they serve the best burger in town. Well, in Panama. Well, in Central America. In fact, they probably serve the best burger in the Americas, and exactly to your liking. It's often a marker of quality when the burger comes without chips, as it indicates that the focus is on the actual main rather than on the sides.

The mountain slopes of the area are covered in either coffee plantation, cloud forest or mixed vegetation for grazing cattle, which explains the fine beef. In fact, the steak with mash I had for dinner at the ski lodge were the best I've had in the New World outside of Argentina.

As the Caribbean gave way to the mountainous highlands, the alpine area gave way to the Pacific coast. We loaded the private bus and set course for Santa Catalina. A long day's drive ahead, we stopped for some snack shopping at a surprisingly well stocked supermarket. I was just perusing the crisp stalls for some nice Salt & vinegar when my eyes fell upon a sight I had not seen since my trip to USA and Canada seven years ago: The best popcorn in the world, or in fact in the known universes. White Cheddar Popcorn from Smartfoods. Oh what a joy and a surprise!



America's? Try the World's!

Santa Catalina itself is not a town, and hardly even a village. A hamlet, perhaps, with basically just two streets. Surfing is up, for those so inclined, or horseback riding. The main activity, though, is taking the boat to the island of Coiba and its surroundings and get into the water to see the aquatic wildlife.

Diving at Coiba is expensive, mainly due to the fuel costs to get there (it's about an hour's boat ride) and the fact that it's a national park, with a not insignificant park fee. But after the two dives I had, it turned out to be money well spent.

The Pacific is in many ways different from the Caribbean. There are few corals, fewer colours and the visibility is often lower due to the high levels of plankton in the water. On the other hand, those plankton provide the basic food source for a variety of animals, and as such the fish tend to be larger and the schools as well.

We had hardly finished descending to the rocky bottom below before the first sharks could be seen. A couple of white-tipped reef sharks glided gently across the bottom, and in midwater hung the biggest

grouper you ever did see. A local celebrity, that one, and Mr Big-ass-grouper followed us for a while, completely fearless.

Schools of fish were all around, and the feeling of hanging weightless, completely surrounded by a dense school of big-eyed jacks (of the tuna family) was otherworldly. Moorish idols (made famous by Willem Dafoe in Finding Nemo), moray eels, parrot fish, and more were everywhere to be found.

The second dive was in parts similar to the first. Fewer sharks, no big-ass grouper and no dense school of jacks, but on the other hand: dolphins! I have swum with dolphins before, by chance in Monkey Mia and by tour in New Zealand, but this was my first time diving with the cheerful cetaceans. My camera was still no-go, but fortunately teh interwebs had pictures of both the sharks and the dolphins, exactly as I saw them.

More than pleased with my two dives, we waved goodbye to a subset of our group who had opted for a snorkeling tour, and headed back to the mainland. No sooner had we arrived at the hostel before the heaven's gates poured open. Arriving a bit later, the snorkelers were completely soaked.

Early seafood dinner followed by early bedtime, for the plan was to have wheels rolling at 5:00 the next morning in order to reach Panama City at a reasonable hour. Rumour has it that there's some sort of ditch or suchlike there that's worth having a look at.



Two ships at once, with a third approaching the newly opened next canal. Panamá, natch.

Return of the Hobbit



Panama City, Panama
Thursday, December 15, 2016

Everybody pulled their weight, and despite the fact that the hostel had turned off the water (meaning that flushing would have to be made by means of buckets of rainwater) everyone was up and ready to go before 5.

Hitting the Pan-American highway, we made good speed and managed to cross Puente de las Américas before noon, and thereby entering South America in time for lunch. A point-and-choose buffet place offered what turned out to be the driest, least yummy lasagne ever. The chicken they had used, rather than pork-and-beef mince might have been a deciding factor.

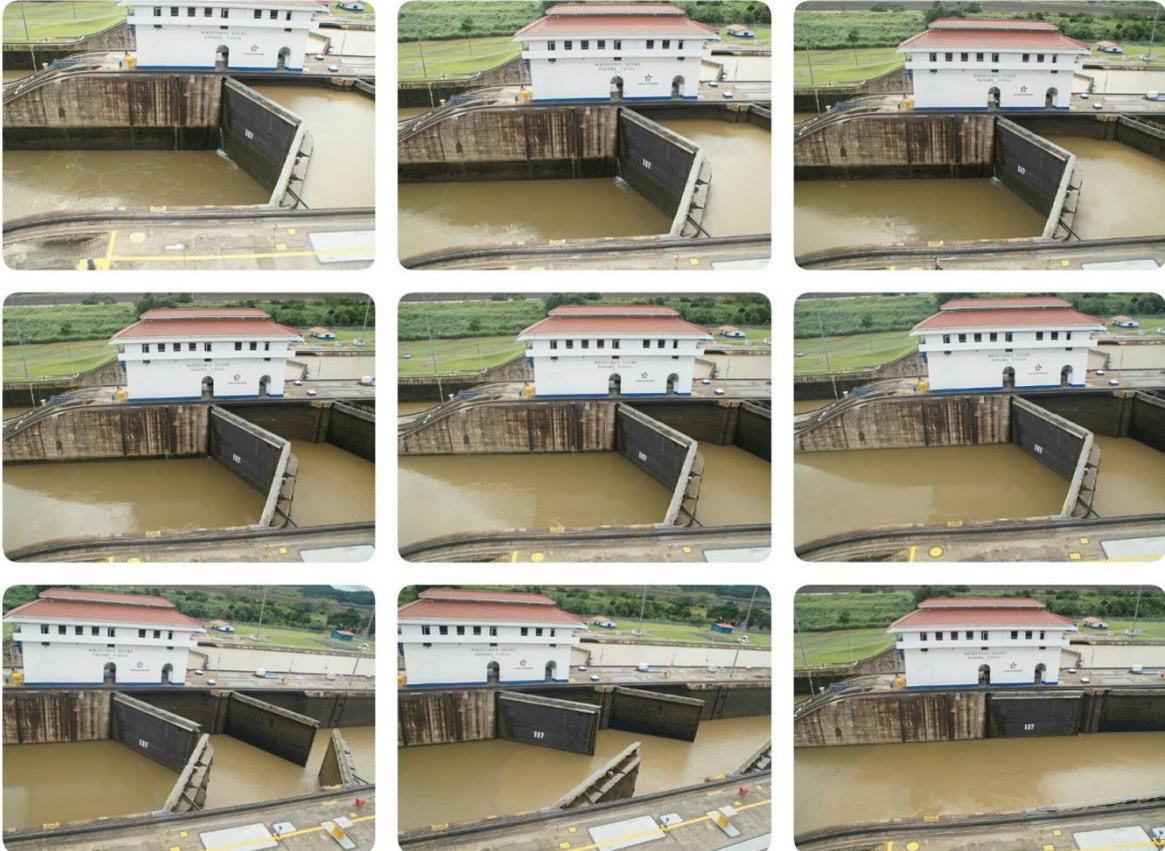
The early arrival to Panama City meant that we had time to go to the canal, and time it with a ship passing through. A timing that was welcomed by all, and pretty much necessary for those of us who planned on flying out the next day.

The Panama isthmus marks the shortest distance between the Pacific and the Atlantic oceans (other than where they actually meet, such as Cape Horn) and in the late 19th century came the idea of connecting Lake Miraflores with the Pacific, construct lake Gatun and connect it with the Caribbean and connect the two lakes with each other. Said and done, and in 1904 construction began of the Panama Canal. Workers from many countries gathered, many of whom were from other parts of Latin America. The workers from Ecuador sported their favourite type of hat, a delicately weaved straw number in light colours, designed to give protection from the sun. Workers from other countries soon followed suit, and that's how we got the famous Panama hat. From Ecuador. The technical difficulties were of no to little concern, as the engineering solutions used were clever and effective, even by today's standards. The finance and politics of the construction were a different story, though. Technically finished in 1914, the official inauguration of the canal was postponed to 1920 due to the Great War. Frenchman Philippe Bunau-Varilla, acting as Panama's ambassador to the United States, struck a rather terrible deal with the USA. Well, not terrible for Bunau-Varilla, nor for USA, but for Panama and its people. USA had control over the canal and its banks for a long time. Discontent arose in the sixties, and in 1977 then president Carter finally released US control of the canal, effective as of 1999.

The cheapest fare anybody has paid to use the canal was 36 cents, paid by swimmer, adventurer and travel writer Richard Halliburton, as he swam the stretch. Nowadays, and for, you know, actual ships, the fare is slightly bigger. Much revenue is made from passing ships, but the canal also provides income through tourism.

As the canal system included two lakes, at 16 and 26 metres above sea level, a set of locks has to be used to deal with the difference in the elevations. The lock on the Pacific side is called

Miraflores, and we got to see it in action as a big freighter, as well as a tourist vessel and a private sail boat passed through from the lakes towards the Pacific, in a process spanning more than an hour and a half. The civil engineer in me squeed internally at the sight of the



Timelapse at the Miraflores locks, Panamá Canal

technological marvel. An experience highly recommended. The biggest box of the Panama checklist already ticked, we arrived at the hotel at our very final destination of this long trip. Some had been travelling together for eight weeks, some for two, but either way, it was a night for farewell. After a short stroll along the coastline, taking in the sights of the surprisingly futuristic skyline of the city and a farewell dinner, we went into the cosy Casco Viejo (Old Town) for drinks. At La Rana Dorada they both serve and brew the beer with the same name, and upon sitting down, the staff promptly brought out a boat-shaped tray with samples of their selection. The IPA and their *Selleccion Limitada* stood out, and the music played was excellent.



Panamá City

As nice as Casco Viejo is, I had to leave in a reasonable hour in order to get to the airport for my morning flight. It's not often that I sway widely from my planned itinerary, but one place in particular that I hadn't explored enough stood out in this odyssey: Antigua in Guatemala, to which it's easy enough to fly via.

High up in the mountains, with the best view of the area and most of the volcanoes, two crafty people has built what is known as Hobbitenango, which translates as 'Place of the hobbits'.



Hobbitenango, Guatemala.

It's an eco village, with a restaurant, a camp site, some cabins, a few allotments, all in the rustic style of the Shire. The names of the food and drinks served are inspired by Lord of the rings (to the fullest extent of copyright law), there are geeky boardgames and archery, and they serve craft beer from two local microbreweries. In addition, it's located at such an altitude that the temperature is quite cool, and the view is

spectacular. So yes, quite a place for a Northern geek such as myself. There was also enough time to revisit the cobbled streets of the town itself, with the now, I assume, world famous Panqueques Andrés (the best baconless brekkie ever) at Café Condesa and the delicious middle eastern taste of Zoola.

But all good things must come to an end, and after a couple of relaxing days, I found myself again waiting for a shuttle to the airport, and this time to go back to the midwinterness of Sweden, and to my apartment, and my work, and my everyday life. Oh, and Rogue One.



View of the mountains surrounding Antigua, from Hobbitenango

Summation



Antigua, Guatemala
Friday, December 16, 2016

My little detour back to Guatemala meant not only a little bit more expensive and a little bit longer vacation, but also that I could not check in online in advance. Which meant longer time spent at the airport, and more importantly, that I couldn't choose my seat on the long flight across the Atlantic. Randomly assigned, I realised I wouldn't have the preferred aisle seat, nor the acceptable window seat. Nope, I hit the 40% risk of getting a seat between two people, and in the middle row no less. Hope was steadily rising though, as the staff called out the always-awaited 'boarding completed' and my seat to the right was still empty.

Hardly had I stretched out, sillily hoping that I might have a little space, when what turned out to be my seat neighbour approached. If they had had time to serve me my water, a certain scene from Jurassic Park would have come to mind. Now, I'm no Twiggy, and the guy to my left wasn't exactly Calista Flockhart either, but with the addition of the latecomer, my social claustrophobia acted up. I thought airlines had policies about that, but I suppose he was just thin enough not to need to buy two seats.

So, with the most uncomfortable flight ever, followed by an unremarkable (other than the obligatory screaming baby, natch) flight back to Gothenburg, this my 9:th odyssey was ready to summarise.

So basically, here's the trip's....

....most inquisitive traveller: Batman

....worst guide: The night walk guide in Monteverde

....keenest eyesight: Our italiana/german spotted more sloths than any guide

....fish: Mr Big-ass-groupa

....bird: Quetzal (pronounced Coo-et-zaahl)

....mammal: The elusive Avocado bat

....energizer bunny: Mao

....colour: Many flags went with blue-and-white, of which I strongly approve

....head wear: More and more, and then less and less pimped out straw hat

....foot wear: Thongs (or flipflops, if you will)

....look-alikes: Vladimir Putin and Ricky Gervais at the poker table

....territorial marking: in an active volcano

....dance: salsa

....sauce: salsa

....most humble: you would think that it would be me, but it was actually our fearless leader

....significant sayings: 'Nailed it!', 'Sin cilantro, por favor', 'Excuse-Mao', '... with frigging lasers'



And the Backpack Awards for 2016 go to:

The Cotton Backpack (for best accomodation)

- Casa Particular in Trinidad

The Plush Backpack (for best transport)

- Our own minivan on Cuba, complete with rum in the eskie

The Glass Backpack (for best hang)

- La Tortuga Verde in El Cuco

The Rubber Backpack (for best adventure experience)

- Hiking up an active volcano. In a hurricane. With frigging lasers. (other nominee: Caving Crystal Cave)

The Copper Backpack (for most price-worthy experience)

- Two tank dives with plenty of briefing and debriefing for 80 dollars is quite alright

The Brick Backpack (for best city)

- Antigua (other nominee: La Habana)

The Granite Backpack (for best landscape)

- Viñales area

The Terry Backpack (for best swim)

- Cenote in Cobá

The Neoprene Backpack (for best dive)

- La Iglesia, Coiba, with sharks, Mr Big-ass-groupa and the school of jacks

The Fur Backpack (for best nature experience)

- Close encounter with the dolphins, Coiba

The Khaki Backpack (for best local guide)

- Rrrrrrrramon (especially with his rum punch and chili)

The Silver Backpack (for best eating)

- Burger at Señor Gyros, Boquete

The Malt Backpack (for best drink)

- Flor de Caña (yes, Zacapa is objectively better, but I've had that before, and Flor de Caña has special connotations)

The Celluloid Backpack (for best photo)

- Old dude in Old Town, Havana

The Jade Backpack (for best cultural experience)

- City walk, Granada

The Velour Backpack (for softest experience)

- El Cuco was mostly chilling in the hammock, drinking beer, chilling, playing poker and watching sunsets

The Calico Backpack (for best surprise)

- That there's a hobbit village in Guatemala, and that I actually went back to go to there

The Magma Backpack (for best-looking person)

- The moral support at the poker table

The Triangular Backpack (for best Mayan ruins)

- Tikal

The Strombolian Backpack (for best volcano)

- Masaya, with the river of lava (other nominees: Concepcion and Fuego)

The Vinyl Backpack (for song of the tour)

- Creep

and last, but not least:

The Gold Backpack (for best experience in total)

- With so many cool (though not literally, quite the opposite, in fact) volcanoes and so many picturesque colonial towns, with so many impressive Mayan cities and so many relaxed Caribbean villages, with so many awesome people and so many fine rums, to single one thing out is difficult. Yet, what with finally doing what I missed out on many moons ago, and combining it with an activity I enjoy more and more every time, and on top of that doing it with some of my favourite friends from this trip, I shall award the Gold Backpack of 2016 to the Canyoning and horseback riding combo in La Fortuna, Costa Rica. Nailed it!



I got to stay in a hobbit hole!

**SIN CIL-
ANTRO
CIRCUIT**



