



## The Kuna World, May 2006

David and I left the Guatemalan mountains more than two months ago to discover the hot and humid Caribbean world of Central America. That's a choc to leave the quietness of the high lands for the craziness of the coast, as it is to go down from 3000 meters to sea level.

We are now in Cartagena, beautiful city on the northern coast of Colombia. To get here, we just had to follow the path: Guatemala, Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. This last country, which is quite unknown from foreigners, is full of interest though. One of the nicest places is Granada on the western coast of Lake Nicaragua. The city was so rich a

San Juan River and then crossing the huge lake. This route inspired engineers of the 19th and 20th century who were searching for the good place to built a canal which would have linked the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

We took the pirates' opposite route, crossing the lake where two "twin" volcanoes come out from the water in the middle: it's a good way for spring water sailors not to get lost. In fact, those two volcanoes are linked by a narrow isthmus, creating the Ometepe Island. After a four hours trip in the second class of a tub, we decided we would never do it again. At least, travelling with local people has an advan-

two, and "tepetl", hills) inhabit 35000 people who live on agriculture. They grow all kinds of fruits and vegetables thanks to the healthy volcanic soil: bananas, papayas, mangos, melons, watermelons, oranges, lemons, coffee, tobacco, cachou, vanilla, cacao, rice, wheat, etc. There are no roads but a dirt road around the two volcanoes which culminate at 1394 and 1610 meters. A few buses go around the island everyday: we can expect to cover 15 km in one hour if no iguana decided to have a nap in the middle of the road!

Before the Spaniards and pirates came to Ometepe, the island was inhabited by the Niquirino Indians who progressively left the coast to live on the edges of the volcanoes to escape the invasion. Current people of Ometepe, who are mostly mixed-blood, are supposed to be descendants of the former occupants of the island who finally disappeared, victims of diseases and bad treatments. But the different tribes who occupied the place for more than 4000 years left a great heritage of their tradition and science: a series of old petroglyphs has been found all over the island. Some archaeologists tried to explain their meaning, but most of it



few centuries ago that pirates used to pillage it, coming up from the Atlantic by sailing on the

tage: we will remember this trip for a long time! On the Ometepe Island (from the Aztec "Ome",

On peut espérer faire 15 km en une heure, si un iguane n'a pas eu la bonne idée de s'arrêter pour la sieste au milieu du chemin.



remains mysterious. The political instability of the country in the 70s and 80s didn't allow many researchers. Most of the stones remain at their original location. In the small town of Altigracia, on the northern coast, visitors can admire beautiful human-wolf and eagle statues in the catholic church courtyard. The man in charge of the collect!

ion even told us that the Louvre Museum curator in Paris asked him to lend the statues for a special exhibition. "The priest never allowed this because he was afraid that the Museum wouldn't give back the collection!"

Nicaragua is the biggest country of Central America, but it has very few roads, mostly because the Northern part is made of swamps and rivers. After our visit to Ometepe, we decided to visit the Caribbean Coast and had to travel three days by bus and

mostly by boat to get to the city of Bluefield. This place seems to belong to another country. First, people are mostly black and mestizos. Secondly, they hardly speak Spanish in the street: the native tongue is Creole and they all know English very well (they are descendants of slaves who immigrated from Jamaica and the Caribbean islands). Not only the climate is hot, but people too. Women wear very minimalist clothes and men call "baby" each woman from 10 to 80. As a women, it's hard to get information from a man: he will answer to your question by asking you how old you are, if you're married and who is the guy with you, your brother or you cousin?

People really enjoy listening to music so loud that the whole town knows it. Even parrots like it: they're taught to dance reggae!

After a month in Nicaragua, we decided to cross Costa Rica, in spite of all its charms, to get to Panama. Our best memory of San Jose, the Costa Rican capital, is the one of a taxi driver who told us that we smelled very bad. Maybe it was true, maybe this guy was offended because we refused to pay him more than his taxi meter displayed. It's often the case in Latin America: as a foreigner, you're expected to pay more than local people (bus, food, hotel rooms and even public bathrooms!).

Following the Pan-American road, we arrived in Panama City, the wealthiest place of Central America. The country's story is slightly different from the one of its neighbours. Panama was part of Colombia until 1903 as a dependant province. The French started to build a canal in 1881 but the project was harder than expected. Within 8 years of construction, 22.000 men died victims of tropical diseases and fatigue. The French company led by Lesseps went through bankruptcy. One of his engineers had the idea to sell the concession of the canal to the Americans who were thinking about building one in Nicaragua. The engineer asked Colombia if he could organize the sale but the Colombian government refused. According to the small province of Panama as for the United States, it would have been a great loss if the canal had not been built. The American decided to "help" Panama to get its independence, which occurred in 1903, partly thanks to the American army which defended the!

new born country.

During almost a century (until 1999), the American

were present in Panama because of the canal the finally built and even intervened a few times in the country's politics. Panama City's way of life has been adapted to their needs: it's

manian police. Today, it seems complicated to enter their land as a foreigner. You just need patience and money! To cross the "border", you need to register at the police station, to

(chief) sings the ancestral mythological songs of the Kunas and where meetings are held up at least 3 times a week to discuss the problems of the village. This democratic way of governing existed much before the Spaniard invasion 500 years ago.

Yantupu is a very quiet village all made in vegetal material. Each morning, Aurelio's son goes to school with his mum in a cayuco (local embarkation carved in a sole tree trunk). At the same moment, dozens of other cayucos cross the sea to go to Suitupu Island, the biggest of the four islands archipelago of Carti. Women in their traditional shirt and skirt paddle silently and softly.

The Kuna people remain hermetic to the outside world: most of the men fish and work in the communitarian fields of their village. Until a few years ago, money didn't have utility in Kuna Yala. The traditional exchange currency is the coconut (Today, one coconut = 12 cents), which grows in huge quantity on the 350 virgin islands of the Comarca. Colombian commercial boats still exchange clothes, manufactured food, and other products against coconuts that they bring back to Columbia. But today, dollars are used more and more, partly because of Panamanian administrations and school who bring money to the Comarca. However, there are no such jobs in Yantupu. That's why the chief (saila) refuses to get generators and running water from the government: who will pay for the gas? Who will pay for the conservation of the water pipes? There is no money in the village to buy "modernity". So Horacio, the saila, prefers not to create new needs to get



Notre cher Gauguin fit même un saut au Panama, où il réussit à se prendre une amende pour avoir uriné sur la voie publique.

one of the only places in Central America where tap water is drinkable. Squares, streets and malls have American names. Big buildings have been built in the new business centre. And, of course, the official currency is the Dollar.

However, the old city remains very authentic with beautiful colonial architecture and colourful atmosphere.

We left Panama City for a place very different called Kuna Yala, the land of the Kuna people. Their Comarca (autonomous region), a 220 km strip of land, is situated on the eastern Atlantic coast and is mostly composed of rain forest and white sand islands.

Kuna people are the first people of the Americas who obtained their independence and auto-government in 1925 after rebelling against the Pana-

pay a fee and then wait a boat to go on one of the 56 inhabited islands of the 400 islands archipelago. Thanks to helpful friends who live in Panama, we managed to meet Aurelio, a Kuna whose family live on Carti Yantupu Island. He brought us in his house made of bamboos and palm tree leaves. Two hammocks were balancing under the main beams: they became our "bed" the time of our stay. Aurelio told us about the laws we had to respect on his island: we could not walk in the village wearing a swimming suit; we could not go out of the house at night and could not take pictures of the inhabitants without asking them the authorization. Most of them would a!

sk a one-dollar fee per picture. Last thing: it's forbidden to take pictures inside the Congress House (casa del Congreso), which is a sacred place where the saila

away from new problems...

When they need water, men paddle to the shore which is not far and sail up the river to fill their water tanks. It's forbidden to use a motor on that river and to throw garbage to avoid pollution of the water. People in Yantupu don't have electricity: some of them use petrol lamps, some other candles. Anyway, everybody goes to bed early!

Very early in the morning, men cross the sea to the fields where they have to work for the community. They don't get paid with money, but with the food they bring back: yuccas, bananas, plantains, avocados, mangos, etc. Nobody needs money to eat. Those who can't or don't want to fill their communitarian duty have to pay a fine: Dollars are required!

When men work in the field, women stay at home and sew. Before the Spaniards came, Kuna people, who were still living on the coast in the rain forest, painted their body with geometrical designs inspired from nature. Today, the designs are still represented on their cloths. Women sew molas, rectangular pieces of cloths whose traditional colours are red, orange and blue. Designs are cut and sewed with ability. Molas are always made by couple because they will be sewed together to make the colourful women shirt.

Kuna women also wear beads jewellery (wini) around their arms and legs, a blue and yellow skirt around their waist, a gold nose ring and a red scarf on their head. The most conservative ones paint a thin black line from their forehead to the tip of their nose. Thanks to Aurelio's cousin Siabibi, I had the chance to wear this tradi-

tional dress. It took a few hours to make a wini around my left arm, so I just wore this one!

Siabibi is a traditional medium called Nele: when she was born, her mother died. So she's said to have great powers because her mum could not survive to giving birth to her. Siabibi receives patients who are sick: they tell her their symptoms, paying her one dollar for the consultation. The following night, Siabibi burns cacao beans in front of the Nuchu, the small wooden statuettes in which live the spirits of the ancestors. She asks them to give her the answer in her dreams. During that same night, she dreams of a man who comes to talk to her, answering her about her patient's disease. Then the patient goes to the traditional doctor who gives him a treatment made of plants.

We stayed more than 15 days in the village, enough to make people trust us. Aurelio and Horacio, the chief, asked us to take pictures of their family, without paying the one-dollar fee. Horacio wants his grand-children to remember him when things will have changed in a few years. He's worry to see the young generation denying more and more their culture. Girls wear occidental clothes and don't even know to sew a mola, the symbol of their nation. Boys only think about leaving to Panama City to make money and live differently. With the introduction of dollars, individualism is becoming dangerous for the communitarian way of like of the Kuna. Young Kuna people are not prepared enough to jump into the liberal world without control.

Seuls quelques villages isolés sont restés sur la terre ferme, le reste des terres étant recouvert par une jungle épaisse.



As foreign visitors, we are bringing with us values that are completely different from the Kunas' ones. That's why meeting indigenous people must be done with extreme care. We can't just come to their land, spending a lot of money without thinking about the consequences of our acts. There are too many places in the world where poor people think that the Occidentals don't have consideration for hard job and money because there are all rich!

We have the chance to be able to travel: we should not abuse of our money to



buy everything we want because that kind of behaviour can change the perception that some indigenous people have about the "modern" and liberal world. Thinking that everything is easier in the city or in rich countries make them forget about their culture and values and lose their stability. The future of the world depends on each human being. We should not let ignorance lead to irremediable consequences.



To all our Kuna, Panamanean, Spanish and Franch friends, Nuedi, Gracias, Merci!

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