



Plants and Healers

Panama Life with the Forcinellis

January 22, 2009--from my journal

So the U.S. has a new president and Americans wait to see what will come with it. I wonder whether the speeches were as inspiring or is the honeymoon over?

I travelled into Panama yesterday from a sweet little nook down in Caribbean-side CR [Costa Rica] lower corner--lots going on in that region. Very different than over the other side. Let me know if you want contacts down that way. I crossed smoothly over the border across a dilapidated bridge and then jumped in a group taxi for an hour down to the boat launch at Almirante, where an exciting high-speed boat carried us out to the island town of Bocas famous for its surfing beaches.

Several members of the Forcinelli family showed up in their boat and whooshed me off to the southern islands and around to the Caribbean Sea to the island of Bastimentos. This was a memorable journey securing us so the waves would not swamp us then into a shallow coral reef zone inside the breakers and onward to a buoy that we tied off on and waded into shore with our provisions.

The Forcinellis are a little village with nine members. I had not seen them for nearly four years. They had a couple more children to meet but quickly it felt very outside of time and space to be together again.

Day 5--- January 25th---Wow so much has happened with the family over the last few days. Exciting to be here on the island. More soon.

Day 9---January 29th---Remarkably we will be heading over the border to Costa Rica today and tonight I will be giving a talk on transition culture at Miraflores in CR traveling with the nine members of the Forcinelli tribe. Very exciting. Two days ago Frank F and I headed out at first light to walk the length of Bastimentos Island. What an adventure! Ten hours later we entered the town of the same name and spent a little time with Bruce Hill who had created an edible forest-aquaculture paradise over the previous five years.

It is hard to capture in only a few sentences the adventure through the wilds of the coast with the ocean crashing up against the coral reefs of yesteryears, then inland through swamps and dense groves of Diffenbachias. We trotted down the Playa Larga for a few kilometers, feeling the sensation of an isolated island and our bodies working. I was taken back to my athletic days as a long distance runner. We were reasonably lost for several hours when we headed inland to go around a point. Yes, we knew we were in the middle of an island only a few miles wide and 13 miles long, but when every direction is thick with jungle it is easy to get fatigued and discouraged. We kept our act together and made it back to the coast ironically reappearing through the back of a Christian retreat center climbing in over their garbage dump. Coconut water never tasted so good on the pristine beaches that day.



Plants and Healers

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That night I slept very well, my body fatigued from the exertion. But from living the good life with this family I noticed how little I suffered the next day. I was thankful, though for a day of rest and spent it entirely focused on writing mushroom chapters for a book written by my friend, the philosopher Alan "Mushroom" Muskat.

Sea Adventure

The next day Frank F, his daughter, Frankie Jane, and I headed out on a fun adventure around the island by boat to fill it up with plants from the plant man Bruce Hill. Though it was a beautiful day, the waves were high and acting strangely. Frank F was uncertain about how hard it would be to traverse the seas, but off we went and after a little while he said, "Looks like we are through the worst of it." So I relaxed a little bit, but soon he was saying, "I can't see the point. What do you see Frankie?"

Frankie was at the bow looking for coral and giving direction. Moments later we were hitting coral. "We're too close to shore," she said, "We need to head out deeper."

It was an unusual day in a world of unusual days, and the narrow channel that led us out between the coral beds which normally had a characteristic look of the water acting in a choppy way was nowhere to be seen. Frank F. turned the boat out to sea with the big engine still biting coral, seeking deeper water. Just then a freak wave two feet higher than the others appeared and I saw it looming to my left.

I had been hit by a wave one foot over the boat on my first day and it hit hard. I knew this would be like a wall and was steeling myself for it. But that is not what happened.

The wave began to break before reaching the boat, and in a second it picked the whole boat up and flipped us eight feet in the air completely over. It all happened so fast and the next thing I knew I was under water, under the boat, completely disoriented. My body was relaxed and I kept waiting for a blow to come from somewhere. Fortunately it never did. It felt as if my dreads were stuck (which I found out later was Frank F pulling on them to get me out!) and quickly I realized I needed to get to the surface and away from the boat. I popped up on the surface 50 yards from shore with stuff strewn bobbing about.

I was not in a lifejacket and I could feel my shoes dragging me down so I kicked them off. I grabbed some floating items and heard Frank F. yelling for me to get away from the boat. More waves hit upon me as I made my way to shore. The water was embarrassingly shallow but it was also full of sharp, biting coral. I could feel my legs and feet had already taken a beating. I could see a whole indigenous family standing on the shore and two young guys in kayukas coming out towards us, picking wreckage. My legs and feet were cut up some from the coral but otherwise I felt fine.

I kicked into shore and dragged what I had brought above the shoreline. I walked the beach a bit and picked up other items and watched as Frank F. with a number of others joining in flipped the boat back over. I put on a life preserver and floated back out there and helped guide the boat full of water back to shore. The motor had some damage, at least externally, and the boat was scrapped up with its awning ripped off. One rescuer



Plants and Healers

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jumped in the boat and began bailing away and Frank F. pointed out that the bilge pump was still working.

As we approached the shore, the boat got lighter from the effort of man and machine and soon we caught a small wave and began moving the boat higher and higher from the reach of the waves. Then Frank F. and a couple of others went snorkeling for several items denser than water like the anchor, finding a badly damaged snorkel mask which I realized could have been my head. After a while of reflection and gathering everything together the three of us walked the half an hour to home telling the native people we would be back in the next few hours. It seemed like a long walk and as the shock began to wear off we each dealt differently with the reality of what had happened. We kept mentioning all we had to be thankful for.

After a while we got back to the house and explained the story to a surprised family. We decided to pack up the house and head out then, a day early on our trip to Costa Rica together. I had been contacted by Pamela at Miraflores and asked to come and do a weekend of teaching. The family needed to cross the border to renew their visa. So we spent an hour packing everything up and off we hiked, slowly, along the beach back towards the boat. Once there, we loaded some things into it, and Frank F and two of the villagers paddled the boat along the shore while the rest of us walked. They easily maneuvered over the coral with the engine up and met us at the dock around the point.

We made arrangements for a high-speed boat to tow us to Bocas and just like that we were all sitting in the towboat with Frank F riding his boat in tow zooming along. Unbelievable.

The boat repair people were very sympathetic. We stayed the night catching up on internet and doing laundry. Then caught the morning boat to the mainland where I repeated my journey in reverse back to Costa Rica in the company of the nine Forcinellis. Many little adventures occurred along the way, but all in all it was smooth and we arrived in the late afternoon.

That night I gave my talk to a dozen people. The next day we woke up early and went to the local market and then we had a big group of 35+ people show up for a plant walk and in the afternoon with a lot of help by the Forcinelli tribe, we harvested wild foods and combined them with local foods to make a feast together. It was a great success.

Punta Mona

The next day I and the family headed back to the 20-year-old Finca La Isla's Botanical Gardens just north of Puerto Viejo (www.greencoast.com) and were conducted on a stellar walk by Kiawe, who had grown up there and knew the plants well. The next day the Forcinellis headed home to Panama and I stayed on a few more days, having some wonderful time with my host Pamela. We accompanied a group of people out to the well-known permaculture project called Punta Mona (www.puntamona.org) and I gave a couple of plant walks and a talk on Walking the Green Path. They have done a wonderful



Plants and Healers

job creating a food forest around them and have lots of people showing up each day to learn from their experiences.

We headed back to the eco-lodge the next day by boat in high seas and then it really began to rain all through the night. The next day at the Gaia Permaculture Center, run by charismatic and knowledgeable Silvio, I witnessed some incredible flooding and wondered if I would be able to leave the next day. Luckily, I caught a ride with a friendly French couple back to San Jose, seeing lots of flooded areas until we got up in the mountains. I knew I was on the right path when we were immersed in a huge triple rainbow as we entered into the high valley around San Jose. I stayed another day with my friends at the Ark Herb Farm then caught a plane the next day toward Bogota. Unfortunately I was delayed a day in Panama City due to engine problems and was put up for the night at the Sheraton Hotel. Talk about feeling like a stranger in a strange land. I did my best to relax and go with the flow.

Colombia

The next day I got on a morning flight and flew to Bogota. My hosts Mauro and Carolina came to greet me at the airport and took me home to their cozy home in the university district.

The first couple of days were wonderful, checking out the area and working on my many projects. I had looked forward to slowing down to get some work done during my time in Colombia before the intensity of the group trip in Peru. I certainly did slow down, but not as I imagined. Instead of getting work done, I got sick with fever and no energy or appetite.

The pollution of the city was intense and over five days I spent a lot of time sleeping. I rode the experience as best I could and was thankful for the stable, calm space of C and M's home. I also grew to a new level of appreciation for Calendula--which I made poultices of for a staph infection on my foot. What an incredible healer! All my plans and work were put to the side as I danced with my dis-ease. I will remember most the street people who keep showing up each day finding creative ways to live. I had some quality time with C and M and did get some work done. I learned some good lessons in not pushing the river...

Leticia

After several different healing approaches over the week, I turned the corner toward health. None-too-soon I was saying goodbye to that high country world and boarded a plane for the jungle town of Leticia. It is perhaps a tenth the size of Iquitos, but with much the same flair. It is located on the Amazon River across from Peru and next to Brazil. I actually had a little time in the border town in Brazil buying and launching on my trip to Peru. But most of my time was around Leticia.

It was a challenge to find my hostel. It was listed online and I had some directions to it. I landed back into the sea level humid tropics and walked the two kilometers into town.



Plants and Healers

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The town is laid on a grid and I figured, how hard can it be to find this hostel?

Well, two hours later, exhausted, I was finally taken directly to the hostel which was unmarked and deserted. My guide was a taxi driver, Rudolf, a worldly elder man who'd traveled the world for 12 years before settling in Leticia 28 years ago. He affirmed my faith in angels. I would have liked to have heard more of his stories but once he left, I never found him again, despite my efforts.

He called the phone number on the door and soon the owner, Gustavo, showed up and I was granted a room. It was a minimal place, very rainbow, and the owner was a character. The walls were adorned with all sorts of maps and stuffed animals from the jungle. Memorable. But it had a kitchen and a steady flow of foreigners, as it was pretty much the only place for backpackers in town. The owner had a "mi casa, tu casa" attitude which I appreciated, though he was temperamental and complex.

Soon I hooked up with my buddy, Justin, whom I know from Schumacher. He was on a three-month Churchill scholarship learning from indigenous peoples and studying third world farming practices. We had a wonderful few days together sharing stories and having some adventures.

Our most memorable outing was a visit to a Witoto village outside of town and spending the day with elder 72-year-old, Fernando. He was wonderful to be with. His bare feet, wrinkled hands and his deep strong voice revealed his connection to the earth. With grace and ease he took us on a wonderful plant walk around the village seeing many plants I knew and some I did not, including the palm [chambera (*Astrocarya*)] used to make the wonderful woven bags and mats. What an arduous process to remove the inner fiber of the young branches and convert them into useful material.

I really enjoyed seeing Fernando work with the fiber. He explained, "To cure somebody, you have to pray... We believe in these things." We also got a first-hand account of how they process coca leaves inside the maloka, the central meetinghouse: toasting them and mixing them with the ash of *Cerecropsia* leaves. They do not ferment the leaves as the literature reports is done. Is this a lost tradition, misinformation, or a regional difference? Ongoing research...

Coca use is being discouraged by the government, but as Fernando says, "We need it to walk and talk. It is part of who we are." The day was full of memorable stories of rubber barons, sacred plants, and human relations told by this elder and translated by Justin.

One night out to dinner the rains came and dumped so much water. I really enjoyed the drink called Copaozu, which is made from the pulp of a relative of cocoa, *Theobroma grandiflora*. During a break in the rain we made a dash for home, having to take shelter along the way for lots more rain to come down. We squatted dry, telling stories and watching people try to navigate home through the flooded streets. Eventually we headed out, going our own ways and I got lost for a second time for half an hour, but finally made it back to my bed, wet and tired, and fell asleep. I rode on the back of a motorcycle



Plants and Healers

a couple of times, which was probably the first time in twenty or more years. Fun though dangerous.

My journey up the Amazon to Iquitos was memorable. I arranged a taxi to pick me up at 4:15 am and take me over the border to Brazil, where I crossed onto a floating dock in the pre-dawn. From there I climbed into a little boat which held four at a time and was motored out into the dark river for a 10-minute crossing in the dark and rain to a bigger speed boat docked on the Peruvian island, Santa Rosa.

There, a border guard stamped my passport and I climbed onto the bullet-shaped boat and got my seat. The boat held 50 of us and at dawn we took off, zooming fast up the river at 30-40 mph. I did what I could to sleep -- covering my eyes from the light and my ears from the noise of the powerful motor. I did manage to sleep a while and awoke to videos playing of some European James Bond who fights like Bruce Lee. I think called "The Translator" -- no recommendations here. The journey was scheduled to be twelve hours but we had a couple of breakdowns. Humbling to be tied to some small thorn-covered island while the mechanic clanked and banged for a couple of hours. But somehow he got it together and off we were again.

The videos never stopped and when we did, villagers would come on with fresh fruits and such that the passengers gobbled up. They served a couple of meals that I had no interest in, but I had brought supplies and plenty of work to do. Somehow the time passed and before dark I arrived in the big jungle town of Iquitos. This was my fifth time there, first time in 2 ½ years. Fortunately I had a few days to recuperate and prepare for the group that was arriving.

FC March 2009