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The Cloud Garden



Synopsis

The Dari n Gap is a place of legend. The only break in the Pan-American highway, which runs from Alaska to the tip of South America, it is an almost impregnable strip of swamp, jungle and cloud forest between the vast landmasses of North and South America. Stories of abduction and murder there are rife and in recent years more people have successfully climbed Everest or trekked to the South Pole than have crossed the Dari n Gap. In 2000, Tom Hart Dyke, a young botanist, set off to Central America with one thing on his mind: orchids. He knew that in order to find the rare and beautiful species he so fervently admired, he would have to visit some of the most inhospitable places on earth. Unbeknown to Tom, another young explorer, Paul Winder, was backpacking through the area at the same time. Though he sometimes worked freelance in the City of London, Paul was a fearless and intrepid traveller, happier scaling volcanoes than lounging on beaches. In every bar and caf  along his route, rumours abounded of the Dari n Gap - and the more he heard, the greater became his desire to make the journey. Pure chance brought Paul and Tom together in northern Mexico; they formed an instant bond and their fate was sealed. Ignoring a final, succinct warning from the Lonely Planet guide - 'Don't even think about it!' - Tom and Paul set off into the Dari n: Tom in search of orchids, Paul in search of adventure. They would find plenty of each. For six days they made good progress. Then, just hours away from Colombia, the dream ended and the horror began. Paul and Tom were ambushed by FARC guerrillas who were to hold them hostage for the next nine months. From that day on, their survival was a matter of extraordinary endurance, incredible ingenuity and not a little good luck ...

Book Information

File Size: 1129 KB

Print Length: 402 pages

Publisher: Transworld Digital; New edition edition (March 30, 2011)

Publication Date: March 30, 2011

Sold by:   Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B004SOYWSU

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #959,943 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #66

in [Kindle Books > History > Americas > Central America > Panama](#) #95 in [Kindle Books > Travel >](#)

[South America > Colombia](#) #150 in [Kindle Books > History > Americas > South America > Colombia](#)

Customer Reviews

This was a good book, a bit overlong in some descriptions/scenes that were of questionable relevance to the overall narrative, but a still an enjoyable read.

Enjoyable read

Fascinating and very interesting

I enjoyed the story of the two guys trekking through the most dangerous jungle and cloud forest in South America.

This is the true story of two world travelers [Jeff & Tom](#) • one an adventure junkie, the other obsessed with orchids, who came from different areas of England but by chance meet up in a restaurant in Central America. Falling into easy conversation, Paul mentions his desire to travel the Darien Gap, the only untraveled portion of the Pan-American Highway. Numerous travel guides urge travelers to avoid this area at all costs. It falls right smack in the middle of jungle terrain full of guerilla & paramilitary camps. There are endless stories of people entering the area but never being seen again. Paul & Tom decided to risk it anyway. Tom had visions of all the rare orchid varieties he was bound to discover in the lush, wild jungle while Tom was drawn to the thrill of successfully traveling an area that put off so many. So they set out in March of 2000 with a couple of hired guides, figuring the trek [Jeff & Tom](#) • starting in Panama, traveling through the Gap and ending up in Colombia [Jeff & Tom](#) • would only be a few days, and they figured the local guides could help them avoid the more dangerous portions of the the Gap. Paul & Tom were a couple of the lucky ones. Yeah, spoiler here [Jeff & Tom](#) • they made it out! :-p But not before they were held captive by a group of guerilla soldiers for 9 months in various camps throughout the jungle. When they came out, they were told by a member of the British Embassy that it was assumed they had been killed because no one survives in that area for that long. Tom & Paul [Jeff & Tom](#) •

kidnappers demand 3 million dollars for their release. Both men try to explain that no one has that kind of ransom money to pony up for them so they are kept hostage for months while the guerillas try to figure out a way to get their money. Meanwhile, Tom & Paul try not to go nuts from the stress and boredom of the waiting game. They try to find levity in the situation • they make a deck of cards from a camera manual, cricket equipment from sturdy jungle plants, Tom sets up orchid gardens in the various camps, and they keep their spirits up by repeatedly singing

“Always Look On The Bright Side Of Life”

• stuck in your head now? You’re welcome! XD

For being in a hostage situation, the story here is not as brutal as you’d expect. The men were provided food and shelter, though near the end of their captivity some days they were not given food. They were not beaten or tortured for information. At times Tom & Paul even seem jovial, borderline Stockholm with these guerillas! Actually, the part that made me cringe most was Paul’s description of when he got parasites in his foot. The descriptions of the infection were awful in visuals, and then he describes his captors trying to rub this Icy-Hot like stuff in the open wounds because they didn’t have anything else medicine-like on hand. OMG I tightened up so bad reading that part! Miraculously, Paul somehow managed to keep his foot.

Their story makes for an interesting read • note to self: do not do not do not travel through Darien Gap!!

• and I was impressed that these guys decided to write their own story rather than hiring a ghost writer. That in mind, there were parts of this that I thought could have used a better editor, but I liked hearing the story “straight from the horse’s mouth”.

One tough thing about reading this though is you can’t help thinking that the whole mess was SO avoidable! Everyone and their brother was telling these two that only someone with a death wish would enter that area. Glad they made it out to tell their story, but I just couldn’t get around that part.

One thing that kept me turning the pages on this one is the humor of these two guys! There’s the story of Tom’s mom trying to hack into his email and then discovering what his email password was; the guerillas finally releasing them (but in the middle of the jungle) • they get lost and have to go back to the bad guys to ask for directions! And then there’s Tom coming back to civilization to hear about a new show called Big Brother that everyone seemed so obsessed with: “Chris told us about a new television programme called Big Brother. It had gripped the country, so he said, though from his explanation I failed to see why.” “What? They just sit there doing nothing?” “It sounded a bit like our experience over the past nine months.” “Just watch it,” he told me. “Yeah, I never got that show either. :-)

I absolutely love this book ! While it is a serious and dangerous topic, it is full of Monty Python type gallows humor (especially one unforgettable scene). I read it on a long flight, and I annoyed the other passengers because I often pretty much fell out of my seat laughing. It is informative, entertaining, and engrossing. These two men are also heroes in my book. OK, they did something stupid, but they then showed amazing resilience and capability to come through it as they did.

This book fell into my possession while I was backpacking around South America, no less. It is, at the very least, a cautionary tale about the foolishness of attempting to cross the Darien Gap. As a middle class white male westerner I could relate to the boredom with conventional travel and recklessness which motivated the writers to try and cross the Gap. The book itself is an insight into a part of the world outside conventional view. It is a window into the life and experiences of Guerillas who own this strip of no-mans land. I enjoyed the authors style and story, I loved Columbia on my visit and this book reminded me why - the natural beauty, the lawlessness, the adventure. Of course, the authors experience is overlayed with the sense of possible death which they live under. But it is treated with typical English gallows humour. A great read.

Captivating (sorry, fellas) read! Honestly, I am a bit jealous. I have been fascinated with the Darien for some time and it is my hope to someday cross it on foot. This book has given me serious pause--which, I realize sounds crazy. Why go at all? Paul knows why. But, to the book: loved it. Recommend to anyone craving a vicarious jungle adventure!

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