

# The first rule of hitchhiking

If a ride sounds too good to be true, it probably is, says Nick Dall

It was the 23rd of December and I had spent two weeks exploring the incredible Jesuit churches of parasite-infested Chiquitania, in south-eastern Bolivia. My visit had coincided with widespread political protests (nothing to do with me!), and getting around had been difficult, to say the least. So, when Jorge offered to give me a lift back to Santa Cruz, I jumped at the offer. It had taken me 10 days to make it as far as San Rafael, so making the return trip in one easy, air-conditioned bakkie ride was a no-brainer.

On the way out of town, we popped into the (illegal, tropical hardwood) timber mill Jorge owned to – so I thought – say end-of-year goodbyes. I thought wrong. Instead, we jettisoned the bakkie and changed to a 15m pantechicon with a load of factory workers, who had not been home since February, as well as their luggage – including an entire car and industrial quantities of beer.

After about four hours, the truck started to shudder and groan; one of the supports that held the driveshaft in place had sheared. We stopped off at a shack that doubled as a welder's workshop and drank beer while we waited for things to be patched up.

No sooner had we got going than it started to rain. Real, big, tropical rain that flooded the soya fields, streamed down the ruts in the road, and bent the palm trees double. The wipers didn't work and I was designated Chief Windscreen Swabber.

We stopped for supper in some two-horse backwater and ate skewers of beef and cold cubes of cassava from a lady with a braai at the side of the road. We washed it all down with a few beers and got back into the truck.

The rest of the night is a blur of beer, mosquitoes, firecrackers, sweat, and intermittent sleep. When we eventually stopped for breakfast at 4:30 am, I managed to find myself a cup of coffee, a deep-fried cheese puff and a public toilet. Everyone else got their fix by peeing against the wheels of the truck and devouring huge bowls of chunky beef, peanut and noodle soup.

After 643 km and 27 hours, we finally pulled into Jorge's house – like it or not, I was joining his family for Christmas. I was desperate for a hot shower and a clean bed, but Jorge's grandmother roped me into slaughtering the pig we would be eating for lunch the next day. But that's a story for another time... ✨

PHOTOGRAPHY: NICK DALL

