The Hat-Speak of Panamá

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Rattan, acorn and pita are the fibres needed: I didn't know. But there's no point pretending a short visit will lead to any level of enlightenment: a few days or weeks in any country is barely a starting point for questions.

There's a little town in Veraguas Province, in Panamá, called Santa Fe. To get there, turn inland from the Panamerican Highway at Santiago de Veraguas and follow the meandering road up into the hills.

The leaves of the chisna plant provide the colour: new to me. It'd seemed so obvious, while in Panamá, to buy one of those famous Panamá hats. Surely owning a Panamá hat could make a life marginally more complete. Santa Fe is a pretty place and tranquil, suitable not least for considering a minor life issue such as the lack of a Panamá hat.

And yet, when it comes to a people, their character, culture and endemic wisdom, it takes a long while to gather any of it. It's not a simple matter of plucking leaves and stems and working them together, and even if all the fibres were available, there'd be no artisan how-to for the assembling. Nor can you simply buy it. To knowledge there aren't any short cuts, there's no voilà!

Which is why when it came to the hat buying, I had no idea.

And yet, from a short sojourn it might be possible to offer some cursory observations. Weave and weft, the fibres of a few weeks' experience may be sufficient to make more out of Panamá than the of-course-impressive canal. One of the simplest observations, from the border but especially towards the heartland, was that the Panamanians were indeed a well-hatted public, especially the men in rural towns. It wasn't unexpected. Hats are practical because of the sun.

It's from the chisna leaves the dye comes, boiled together with the fibres to make the fashionable designs of dark stripes. It's an old, well-known recipe, I believe. It's a trick of the Panamanians, the ones that weave.

Santa Fe is surrounded by the green hillsides of a large national park. There are waterfalls, brightly spotted frogs and tropical looking butterflies in attendance, though it's cooler in the hills. There are just a few small shops in the casual town centre; it's not a commercial place, and the worn, modest houses of the town clearly hold for their owners the attachment of a much-loved pair of jeans. The churches in the area are cosy and from the football field the molar-shaped mountaintop, Cerro Tute, bites the sky.



My hat-of-Panama, modelled by a Sydney table lamp, with a Bangladeshi something on the wall.

Santa Fe also has a craft market. It was there that I negotiated for said hat, and managed to find one that fit nicely. It had that shitolpati cool feeling of woven fibre, the flexibility that's always the secret to strength, and a soft brim so useful in shade provision. The mildly amusing thought of coming to Panamá to buy a hat made me smile; but it was a foolish smile.

Unfortunate fact: Panamá hats are not from Panamá. In equal measure, the hat-of-Panamá is not a Panamá hat.

Wake up call: Panamá hats are from Ecuador, where their manufacture dates back to the seventeenth century. In the centuries that followed, the Panamanian isthmus grew to be a busy transit point, for both goods and passengers travelling the short distance overland between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, on the way between Asia and Europe, within the Americas too. Even to go from New York to California, a suitable option was to take a ship south to Panama and join a north going ship again on the Pacific side. It was before the construction of the canal.

Meanwhile, Ecuador was a much quieter place, so by tradition the locally produced hats were