shipped up to Panamá where sales, with all the transit passengers, were understandably more brisk. They proved to be popular. The only downside to the trade for the Ecuadorians was that their beautiful hats, internationally, adopted the name of Panamá.

So what was it so many Panamanians were wearing? What did I actually buy? I mean, I still like the hat: it's comfortable and stylish; and I've never had a hat patterned with chisna leaf dye before.

Wake up call: the hat-of-Panamá descended long ago from the square-edged, flat-round topped sombreros of Cordoba in Spain, and sombrero is not a reference to anything Mexican-shaped but means not more than "hat". The hat-of-Panamá is properly called the sombrero pintado, or painted hat, and evolved under the weave of Panamanian culture and the weft of flora species found on the isthmus. The hats are not painted, but woven with design by the darker, chisna-dyed stems. Over the centuries, the sombrero pintado became a veritable cultural symbol of Panamá. So I had managed

pintado sends social signals depending on how it's worn. Should I be embarrassed now, in retrospect – did I wear it foolishly back in Panamá? Because, if you fold the brim up at front and back, it signifies success, masculine charm and skill in fighting; because, if the brim is folded up at the back only, the wearer is an intellectual; because, if the brim is folded only at the front, the wearer is a lady's man ready for conquest! Tilt it forward on the head and the wearer is upset, disappointed or going through a duel. Meanwhile, if the brim is not turned up at all, the hat is being used to shade from the sun. So how exactly did I fashion it? What signal, what hat-talk did I push out into the Panamanian universe, to whom and when? Was there any chance I was hat-rude?

But perhaps the Panamanians know: the foreigner is hat-foolish, doesn't have a hat-clue about his hat-speak – he hat-says he's a fighter but maybe he's not; he's hat-telling he's unhappy, so why is he smiling?

And that's the warning: while in the weave of a



At a festival, a boy sports a Panamanian painted hat.

PHOTOS COURTESY MARNIX VAN SUYLEKOM, HOTEL ANACHOREO



Street scene in Santa Fe.

to collect a little artefact of the spirit of the people of the republic of the isthmus; and there are certainly worse things to do than that.

And yet, I remain greatly unenlightened about that hat. Wake up call: there are many kinds of sombrero pintado. In the central provinces they specialise in white; while Veraguan hats are generally cream; while the ñopito is completely white unless it features a little black design on one side; while the Guatemalan is fashioned by weaving black acorn among the white; while under the brim, there can be a black spotty design known as a mosquito brim. There is even a style endemic to Santa Fe, but whether or not my hat is of the classic Santafeño style I couldn't say: because understanding cultures is not a simple matter of plucking leaves and stems, even if you knew which ones were worth plucking.

Wake up call: worse than that, the sombrero

Panamá hat might be a little of the modern engineering marvel of the Panamá Canal, and before that, the convenience to transport of the geography of the isthmus, it's really all about Ecuador; while in the weave of a hat-of-Panamá is the spirit of the Panamanians, a culture that's strong and flexible, a foldable-brim-form of expression, and just possibly a little of the verdant landscape of Santa Fe, and that hat can also, as a bonus, protect the humble head from the everyday harshness of a tropical sun.

Here's the hat-lesson: the act of leaving doesn't make attachment broken; it doesn't make the Panamanian learning of one simple foreigner ended.

With special thanks to www.visitpanama.com for enlightening one foreigner on the sombrero pintado, and to the good people of Santa Fe and Panamá for sharing their photos, as this writer's camera was sadly in its death throes when he was there.