

The Cloud Garden

Tom Hart Dyke, Paul Winder



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The Darién 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 Darién 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 café along his route, rumours abounded of the Darién 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 Darién: 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 ...



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