

Colombian episodes

COLOMBIA IS ONE of South America's most verdant, beautiful countries. It's a pity that she is held hostage by the drug lords who have an unrelenting stranglehold on her people. Colombia, of course, was also the source of many incredible fishing adventures for visiting sportsmen.

I first heard about Colombia's fishing potential through Kjell (pronounced "shell") von Sneidern. He emigrated to Colombia from Sweden back in the 1920s, and became the country's leading ecologist and ornithologist. Kjell offered mostly fishing trips. He particularly loved the La Raya region: pure, clean waters, exotic fishing, even some tarpon. It was, in fact, environmentally perfect.

"We waded the waters of La Raya, and it was really a sensual expe-

rience to be in these transparent waters,” said John W. “The fishing was a little disappointing, but the beauty of the area made up for it.”

Unfortunately, Sam, a member of his party, slipped on a rock while wading and smashed his knee cap. He was in intolerable pain and was immediately taken to camp where Kjell administered a medicine to relieve the tremendous pain.

The charter plane that had brought the party into La Raya was not scheduled to return for several days, so Kjell initiated a “May Day” call on the two-way radio that he kept at camp for emergencies but never had to use before. He called for assistance over and over again, citing the location of the camp. He begged for help. A doctor. A plane. Anything. Did anyone hear his plea? Did the radio work?

Everyone gathered around Sam to comfort him, but his agony persisted and Kjell administered an even stronger medicine that he saved for such emergencies. He sat at bedside and held Sam’s hand throughout the entire night.

The next day two men paddling frantically in a big cayuga, or dug-out, approached the camp. Would one of them be a doctor? As they paddled closer and closer, everyone was confident that the men in the cayuga were answering the emergency call. Surely the man in the bow, who was less skillful as a paddler, must be a doctor.

And he was.

A witch doctor.

He explained that they had traveled a long distance. The doctor was old, not colorfully painted, and asked to see the patient immediately.

The doctor removed a small doll-like item from his bag, mumbled a few phrases, and kept passing it over the smashed knee cap. He obviously was trying to obliterate the bad spirits. It was jungle exorcism.

When the doctor finished his “medical treatment,” he and Kjell argued briefly in hushed tones before Kjell pulled out some money from his pocket, crumbled it up angrily and gave it to the witch doctor.

“What was that all about?” John asked.

“The doctor said that he removed the evil spirits that caused the pain and that Sam would be fine in a few days. Then he wanted the equiva-

lent of 30 U.S. dollars,” Kjell explained. “I told him that it was too much money, and he said that normally his fee is \$10 if you go to him, but since this was a ‘house call’ he was charging \$30!” Kjell had no confidence in the witch doctor’s treatment, but since he was the only one to respond and had traveled a long distance he paid him and even waved to him as he and the other man paddled away.

“If it weren’t for Sam’s agony, we would have all burst out laughing,” John W. confessed later. “Even Sam smiled when he heard about the house call fee. Even in the jungles, they’re learning.”

Thankfully, a light plane landed a couple of hours later and taxied up the crude airstrip. Somehow the message had been transmitted to the pilot and he made an emergency landing. Sam and the rest of the party were flown to Bogota, Colombia where substantially better medical procedures could be administered.

“The plane was old and more suited for cargo,” John W. recalls. “No seats. They were removed for the cargo. We were sitting on big bags of what we thought was flour, or some other pulverized food product, and then it dawned on me! We were sitting on 100-pound bags of cocaine and other drugs! And here I was on the President’s antidrug committee! But what can you do? You are up in the air . . . our buddy was in pain . . . but it was so embarrassing.”

After some medical attention in Bogota, Colombia, Sam was flown back to New York, where his knee cap was surgically repaired. Come to think of it, the witch doctor was right when he predicted that Sam’s leg would be fine in a few days!

The La Raya camp was soon closed because locals, upon hearing of this great fishery, began to fish it with nets.

“They destroyed one of Colombia’s most beautiful places,” Kjell lamented. “At times it’s difficult to explain to locals the importance of fish conservation and the irreparable damage done by overharvesting. Many places are destroyed because locals feel that the supply of fish in a river, lake or ocean is endless. It is not!”

ERLAND, ONE OF KJELL'S TWO SONS, was very interested in hunting and fishing. He had read about the fabulous peacock bass in neighboring Venezuela in *The PanAngler*. At that time, it was very difficult to get permission to fish the interior waters of Venezuela and only A. J. McClane and a few others were able to do so. A. J. described his great peacock bass fishing adventures in *Field & Stream* and in some of his books. Here's what he wrote me:

"The trip to Amazon Territory was fantastic! Caught 1,000 fish (honest estimate) with an average seven to nine pounds and top 18 pounds. All fly fishing with bugs and streamers. Nothing like it . . . I leave tomorrow for Europe. Be back in July. Still planning on Mozambique—Regards, Al."

The only peacock bass camp in Colombia at the time was E. L. "Buck" Rogers' El Dorado Lodge near Miraflores, Colombia. It was attracting a fair number of American fishermen, as reports of the fabulous peacock bass filtered back to the United States. Buck vigorously promoted South American fishing, but his tremendous efforts were never sufficiently recognized.

Erland was searching for something spectacular in Colombia; he was looking for an incredible fishing place, removed from any traces of civilization. His dad suggested the Rio Inirida and Matavani watersheds.

"That's where Colombia's largest peacock bass are to be found," Kjell told him.

Erland found out that his dad was right. The logistics were very difficult (close to impossible), but Erland inherited his dad's adventurous spirit and soon announced his Orinoco Ark's fishing trips in 1981.

The Orinoco Ark, which would house clients and staff, was built on a big barge and was actually fairly comfortable. It had six "cabins," a shower-and-toilet bathroom, dining area, and some sort of water filtering unit. The boat was moored against a rocky island on the Matavani near the Orinoco. While the Ark listed to one side, occupants adjusted to the slant after a couple of days and it never bothered anyone.

Getting to the "Ark" was not easy. Guests would fly to Bogota, overnight there, and the next morning they would be transferred to an air-

port for the four-hour flight to Puerto Inirida, on the Venezuelan side of the Orinoco. Then there was the five-hour boat trip to the Ark, that is, if there were no breakdowns en route.

Puerto Inirida was similar to the “Old West” frontier town: the bars, the honky-tonk places, the shootings, the characters with fuzzy pasts. Erland arranged it so that clients would be transferred quickly between the plane and the dock where the boats and guides would be waiting.

The flights between Bogota and Puerto Inirida were usually white-knuckle adventures. The Satena planes carried bicycles, chickens, fruits, vegetables, and, oh yes, passengers. Today, Dennis Wolters, a former American Airlines pilot and a fishing client, just shakes his head. Here’s his report on his experience:

My flights between Bogota and Puerto Inirida proved to be very “interesting.” As you may recall, the crews on those Satena flights were Colombian military officers and the flight attendants were sergeants. Before takeoff, I asked the captain about our route and told him that I was an American Airlines captain. We were in the air for about an hour, when one of the sergeants told me that the captain wanted to see me and escorted me to the cockpit.

The captain asked me if I had ever flown a DC-4 before. The plane was ancient, and I told him that I had never even been in one before. At this point, he got out of his seat, pointed to it and invited me to sit there. I did so, noticing that there was no autopilot but that the copilot in the right seat was flying the plane. The captain told me to fly the plane. I was reluctant to do so, but the copilot removed his hands from the controls, pointed to me, and said, “You’ve got it.”

I grabbed the yoke and started flying. The captain watched me for about five minutes, then pointed to a large river, winding through the jungle, on the left side of the airplane.

“Fly this heading and make sure you keep the river in sight,” he instructed and left the cockpit. The copilot followed him. I turned around and saw that a large lunch, complete with wine, had been set up on a table in the radio operator’s compartment, which was right behind the cockpit. The two pilots and crew sat down and dined in style.

I was not comfortable with the situation but there was nothing I

could do, as I had to concentrate to fly this ancient machine. The navigation instruments were so primitive I didn't even recognize most of them.

I flew about two hours, but every 20 minutes or so the captain checked the compass and made sure that the river was on the left.

"*Bueno!*" He'd say, patting me on the shoulder, and then return to his companions. Later he pointed out a runway a few miles ahead, carved out of the jungle, and told me to start letting down for a straight in approach. At about 1500 feet he motioned for me to get out of his seat, he climbed in and landed the plane. I guess having me for their autopilot was a real treat.

We had a week of wonderful fishing while living aboard the Orinoco Ark. Several times we were playing small peacocks of a few pounds, when all of a sudden a huge peacock would appear, attack and try to gobble up the hooked fish. These experiences indicated to us the necessity for using much larger lures.

At the end of our week, our guide brought us back to the airstrip by boat, and said he had to return to the Ark at once so that he could make it before dark. It's a long boat ride with huge boulders in the river.

We waited for the plane at the airstrip. And waited some more.

No plane. No flight.

Dick Winders, my fishing partner, and I seemed to be the only concerned people. Everyone else was getting drunk. Finally, I found an official-looking person in a brown uniform. Between his poor English and my few Spanish words, we learned that the flight was not coming in that day. He said the weather between Bogota and Puerto Inirida was bad, because this was the beginning of the rainy season, and it might be one day or ten days before the plane could come in.

There was no hotel in Puerto Inirida.

Dick and I had no idea of what to do since our guide had left. Finally we found some missionaries from the United States and they made arrangements with some local school teachers to put us up at their homes. We were grateful to all concerned.

After several days we were notified that the Satena flight would be arriving shortly. Soon we were flying out of Puerto Inirida but with the

number two engine sputtering and backfiring until power was reduced on it.

About an hour later we landed at a small strip in the middle of the jungle. We were told to get off, and line up alongside the airplane. Several military types with weapons looked us over, grabbed a young couple and hauled them away. No one argued or commented on this event.

We boarded the plane once more. But after 20 minutes we were told to disembark again. Dick, my fishing partner, exited from the plane, while I waited for the others to go by first as I wanted to retrieve my camera from an overhead bin. I headed for the front exit door, but just before I got there, the sergeant told me to wait and closed the door. I told him that I was a pilot. He ushered me to the cockpit and told the captain who I was. The captain told me that the starter for the number two engine wouldn't work and they needed all four engines for take off, so we were going to do a windmill start. I had been flying most of my life and had never heard of this procedure before.

He then proceeded to start the two outboard engines and headed for the dirt runway. Once there, he added full power and started accelerating down the runway. The air passing through the number two propeller made it spin, and when it reached a predetermined RPM, we added fuel and ignition and got it started.

The jungle at the end of the runway rushed to meet us; I was positive we were going to crash into it. Suddenly the captain applied full brakes, and we came to a stop about a hundred feet from the end of the runway. He calmly turned the aircraft around, taxied back to the area where he had left all of the people and luggage. They reboarded, the baggage was reloaded and soon the plane was airborne with all four engines running.

I can't tell you how relieved Dick and I were when we heard that "sweet" screech of the tires and felt the bump as we touched down in Bogota.

Satena airlines definitely did things differently than what I was accustomed to—at least in those years!—*Dennis Wolters.*

More Orinoco Ark stories

GEORGE GREY MISSED a connecting flight in Miami, arrived in Bogota a day late, and was informed that there would not be another flight to Puerto Inirida for a couple of days. The other members of his party were already fishing in camp. He found out that there was a small military Cessna plane going to Puerto Inirida, but it would cost him 300 U.S. dollars. Cash. Did he want to go? Of course, he did!

What he didn't know was that, in addition to the pilot, there would be a guard and his prisoner aboard the small plane. The information concerning the prisoner was very vague, but apparently he was to be delivered to the Venezuelan border authorities.

"Don't worry about the prisoner. He will be handcuffed and the guard has a gun," he was told as he boarded the craft. *Good grief!*

The prisoner and his guard sat in the back while George sat next to the pilot. About halfway there, while George and the guard had dozed off, the prisoner evidently decided to hijack the plane. He reached for the guard's gun, which woke up the guard. There was a struggle. **BANG!!!** The gun discharged. Or more accurately, the guard shot the prisoner in the heart. Blood gushed out from his chest like a water fountain at first but then only in spurts, and finally only in dribbles. The prisoner was dead. There was blood all over the back of the plane.

"No problema! El es morte . . . " And the guard went back to sleep.

When they arrived at the air strip, the Orinoco Ark representative was there to meet the plane.

"How was your flight?" he asked, as George prepared to unsqueeze himself from the tight confines of the Cessna. Then the rep noticed the blood and the dead prisoner in the back. He recovered nicely: "Oh well, the fishing is terrific at the Ark!"

JAMES "BUD" WALTON, one of the Wal-Mart billionaire brothers, was among the Ark's first guests. Bud had a fine trip, except that he lost about a half-days' fishing because of a motor breakdown. Upon his return to the States, he wrote me and requested a refund of about \$120.

As per PanAngling's usual procedure, I asked Erland von Sneidern, the outfitter, about this refund. Erland said he couldn't make refunds for minor boat breakdowns. After all, he was operating in a frontier region where there was little or no control over constant problems.

"Just about every week someone could have a complaint. If you make a refund to one, you should make them to all the others who lost fishing times," he said.

Bud was very disappointed when I reported this to him. I must confess, that back then I thought of Wal-Mart as a glorified regional variety chain—which it was at one time. I believe the letter requesting the refund was typed with a cloth-ribbon typewriter. The letterhead was not impressive—it looked like it was produced by a quick print shop.

I wish I'd saved that letter.

Bud Walton never returned to the Ark because he was peeved that PanAngling or Erland did not make a partial refund. After a few years, he resumed booking trips with PanAngling to other destinations. He even perused and recommended a fishing marketing plan that I conceived for Wal-Mart. I was to fly to headquarters at Bentonville, Arkansas to discuss it further, but his brother Sam passed away. Bud, who had severe leg problems, died soon thereafter.

LIVING CONDITIONS on the Ark were not that bad, except for the first week or two of its maiden season when the generator malfunctioned. There's nothing worse than not having ice or refrigeration in the tropics.

The fishing reports filtering back from the Ark were spectacular: many peacocks of more than 18 pounds were landed on a consistent basis. Later, Dr. Rod Neubert caught his 26½-pound world record from these waters. The peacock bass was suddenly becoming a highly-coveted species and the Orinoco Ark a popular place. Popular? It was the only facility at that time where big peacocks could be caught with any regularity.

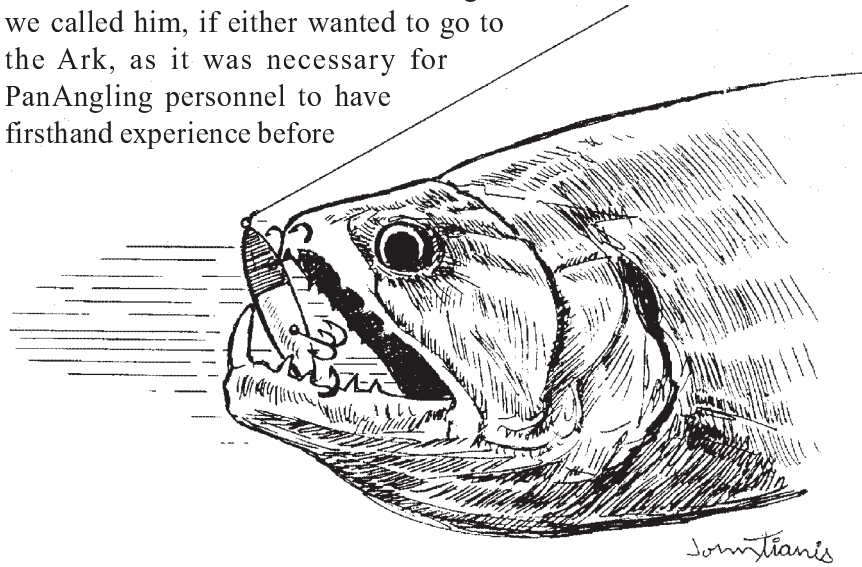
Meanwhile, Homer Circle, the charismatic *Sports Afield* writer, was publicizing another tropical species available on an Orinoco Ark fish-

ing trip: the payara! This species has the body configuration of a steelhead and is easily recognized by its two long saber teeth that protrude from the bottom jaw and neatly fit into two cavities in the upper jaw.

Caught in slow waters, the payara is a fairly good species. When caught in fast rivers or rapids, the payara is perhaps South America's second best freshwater fighting species, just a notch or two below the golden dorado.

One of the fabulous payara places in Colombia is called "Rapids of Death," and it was here that Papa Kjell von Sneidern set a world record with his 31½-pound payara. Also, it was here where the aging Kjell slipped from the rocks into the fast current which swept him downstream. The strong undertow prevented him from surfacing. Two anglers fishing from a boat downstream noticed a casting rod tip cutting across the surface. One of them quickly grabbed it and was startled to discover a half-drowned Kjell at the other end! Kjell was still fighting the fish underwater.

Because I was involved with some projects, I asked my "lieutenants" Paul Melchior and Al Schaefer, the Legend, as we called him, if either wanted to go to the Ark, as it was necessary for PanAngling personnel to have firsthand experience before



we could publicize and market the trip successfully. They had other commitments so I went in 1981 (the Ark's first year of operation).

I had a number of favorable surprises when I arrived at the Ark. First, I was pleasantly surprised that at least the creature comforts were there. I thought the Ark meals were marvelous and the cook was superb. I later found out that she had been the family cook at the von Sneidern home in Cali. She was not a happy camper on the Ark, easily preferring the luxuries and comforts of the Cali residence to the tropics where "savages" such as jaguar, anacondas and alligators lurked and stalked victims. But she cooked up a storm with the few appliances and ingredients that she had at hand.

It was one of the most memorable trips I've ever had. One day, while fishing at a distant lagoon, I hooked a huge peacock bass that made one of the most spectacular leaps I've ever seen from any freshwater species. It just hung up there for an instant, before the violent thrashing of its head got rid of the Mirrolure. The fish won its freedom.

John Renk, Cuenca, our guide, and I got a very good look at this fish, and we thought it would weigh 25 to perhaps 30 pounds. It was a bitter-sweet experience: I had hooked a magnificent fish, surely among the largest peacocks ever jumped; on the other hand, I had lost a possible world record that would help to establish the Ark's potential and reputation. Landing this fish would certainly increase bookings at the Ark and help PanAngling's bottom line.

"I wish that I had a photo of that fish up there in the air," I lamented.

"You do. It's in your mind and you'll never forget it," John said. He was right. I can still see that gigantic peacock up in the air, shaking, tumbling, thrashing.

We explored lots of waters. You must understand that this is a very desolate area with a maze of lagoons leading into other lagoons. One day, John Renk, Cuenca and I went into one lagoon. Cuenca—the area's most experienced guide—thought there might be another lagoon at the other end so we "macheted" a passageway and indeed found another lagoon. Then we accidentally discovered another hidden lake beyond that one.

What a magnificent place. The indescribable beauty of the jungle-lined lakes, the unexpected clarity of these waters and the remoteness of this area would appeal to any freshwater angler, but no doubt would overwhelm the largemouth bass fisherman limited to fishing the crowded lakes back home. Except for the sound of feeding fish, the song of birds, or wildlife rustling in the bush, a total stillness prevailed, reflecting an unexpected gentleness of the jungle. Never mind that the survival of the fittest undoubtedly exists in full force here.

Cuenca was convinced that we were the first people to be in this lagoon. Ever. Certainly not any of the locals would bother going in. There was no reason to, and it was almost entirely lined with mangroves. We felt an eerie, overwhelming feeling, really a special honor, because perhaps we were the first humans in this lagoon. Cuenca convinced us that this was true.

Who would make the first cast in these treasured waters? John and I agreed to do it simultaneously. *One-two-three-cast!*

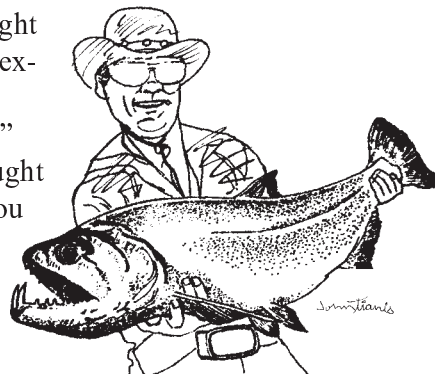
And the fishing was what one would reasonably expect from a truly virgin lagoon. Double-digit peacocks smacked our lures with explosiveness that jarred the quiet waters and surrounding jungle. We were convinced that we saw peacocks of more than 20 pounds, but the smaller fish (12 to 15 pounders) were faster and more aggressive. It was a special thrill to fish this lagoon.

Back at the Ark, John did some crazy things and I wonder about my judgment for going along with them. For example, one night around midnight he couldn't sleep because of the extreme heat.

"Why don't we go in for a dip?"

"Are you nuts, John? We've caught piranha right from the boat and you want to swim here? At night! And the guides said there is a big anaconda that lives near the boat . . ."

John thought about that, but



only for a few seconds.

“I’m going in.”

I heard this huge splash as big John cannonballed from the deck into the ominous waters.

I don’t know what possessed me, since I seldom swim except when necessary, but I went in, too. Soon Erland and the rest of the guests woke up—Bob Miller, Bert Ellison, Kay Brodney, and Ken Cloaninger—and here we all were swimming in the Orinoco watershed at midnight, under the light of a full moon. Someone thought he heard the growl of a jaguar.

I was particularly concerned about the anaconda. I anticipated that Erland, a powerful swimmer, would dive under water and grab my legs, imitating this powerful snake. He did, and, although I had expected it, I still catapulted out of the water.

The next day John Renk wanted to see an anaconda. Cuenca said that he knew of a place where a huge one lived, but we would have to walk over some shallow, muddy flats for about 400 yards. John insisted we do it. I didn’t want to, but John talked me into it.

As we sloshed along the muddy flats we noticed trails on the marl bottom, obviously made by some animal.

“What are those?” I asked Cuenca.

“Alligators. Mucho alligators aqui,” he answered. “Grande alligators.”

Gulp.

We could not find the anaconda, but we weren’t attacked by the alligators, so I considered it a good day.

Despite the fact that Cuenca spoke almost no English, and our Spanish was very limited, our communication was excellent. More and more he was becoming familiar with sport fishing. He understood the practicality of spinning and plug casting but not fly fishing. Before the Ark was born, there were only two fishing methods utilized by the locals: netting and spearing. Cuenca, of course, was puzzled by the clients’ catch-and-release philosophy.

One day we all went to Sema Lagoon, about two hours away from

the Ark. This place was loaded with huge peacocks, and they were voraciously feeding on the surface. Just about everyone was catching big fish, so this was the perfect time to use the fly rod. While the peacocks were aggressively hitting the lures, I was able to attract only smaller fish on the fly rod. Cuenca could not understand why I insisted on fishing with the fly rod.

“You want big fish, then use this or that,” he seemed to say in Spanish and point to the spinning or plug-casting rods. Then he would point to the fly rod, shake his index finger back and forth and insist that it was not good for big fish. It may have been the first time he saw a fly-fishing outfit, and he could not comprehend the sense of it. I tried big surface poppers and huge streamers, and although I had some substantial boils underneath, I didn’t hook up with any big fish.

Bob Miller, fishing at another lagoon landed a peacock bass on a fly rod which for many years was the IGFA world record. Bob, an accomplished fly fisherman, caught an 11½-pound peacock on a yellow popper.

The Arbogast Jitterbug became Cuenca’s favorite lure, although it wasn’t necessarily the preferred lure among the peacocks. The Jitterbug



is a topwater lure that, when retrieved steadily, wobbles from side to side. The *ploop-plop-gurgle* noise it makes as it waddles on the surface is mesmerizing. Periodically Cuenca would insist that I put on the Jitterbug, not because he thought it was the best lure, but he liked the sound of it. I caught a number of fish on it, but they were small.

When it came time to say “goodbye” to Cuenca, we were all emotional. We had spent a wonderful week together. We had become friends. John Renk and I decided that we would tip Cuenca 150 U.S. dollars each—which was much higher than the average or suggested tip—but John insisted. When we gave it to him, he politely thanked us for it, but had absolutely no idea of what a U.S. dollar was

worth in local money.

“Something’s wrong?” I asked Cuenca.

He looked down and then up, and said something in Spanish.

We didn’t understand what he was trying to convey.

He asked if I could open my tackle box, and when I did, he looked at the lures. Then he spotted the Arbogast Jitterbug. He picked it up and handed the money back to us and said something in Spanish.

He wanted to trade the \$300 tip for the Jitterbug!

We laughed, insisted that he keep the tip and gave him the only Jitterbug we had with us. What a happy young guy!

“And how much happier he will be when he discovers how much a dollar is worth,” John said.

Miller’s Second Trip

John Renk, Bert Ellison and Bob Miller returned to the Orinoco Ark the following year (1982). Here’s Bob Miller’s account of what happened:

During dinner (I think we had snake as the entree) John Renk belatedly: “Tomorrow we will go to the *Rapido del Morte* for big payara.”

So the next morning we traveled by boat for about an hour to the mammoth Orinoco, when suddenly I heard the loudest roar or thundering of water possible. We went around a bend and there before us, about 200 yards downstream, we saw and heard a wall of water crashing down a 10-foot fall against rocks that were as big as a house!

The guide ran the dugout up a small feeder stream and into a quiet little bay. We got out and walked to the *Rapido del Morte* or “Rapids of Death.” We cast flies and plugs for payara but fishing was slow, so after about an hour I started back to the dugout to get a soda. I walked about 500 yards over the huge rocks and I stepped over a crack that was about two feet wide. I slipped on the debris, gravel and small rocks—that acted like ball bearings—and fell straight down into the crack which was about six feet. I felt myself stopping after hitting rubble at the bottom and then I felt the most excruciating pain ever. It shot from my right foot up my leg.

Of course, I couldn't see anything as the crack was not wide enough for me to look down. I was surrounded by rock walls. After the shock, I really got scared as I was concerned about snakes and other critters that may live in the crevice. As you know, Jim, anything and everything strikes or bites in the jungle, especially when they are threatened. What to do?

I knew that John, Bert and others would have to use the same trail, but when? What if they had good fishing now and decided to stay there for a long time? Or worse, what if there were another way back to the dugout?

Although I am six-feet tall, I was unable to get a grip on top of the crack to pull myself up. So I put my hat on top of my fly rod and stuck it above the crack of the rocks as a marker.

It seemed like hours, but shortly thereafter I heard big John's booming voice: "What the hell are you doing down there, Miller!"

John then laid spread eagle at the edge of the crevice. I reached up and grabbed his arms and then he got up and pulled me out of my prison. I couldn't believe what he did—the immense strength it required—and thanks to John, I survived. Bert was also there to assist me. The next three days were the most dreadful in my life.

We went back to the Ark houseboat. My ankle to my knee was swollen like a football; another guest, a urologist, looked at it and said it was a "slight sprain!" The camp manager never came down to check with me.

One of the guides looked at my foot and advised that it was "*mucho malo*"—very bad—as if I didn't know this. But he thought he could help. We later found out that he was also a witch doctor.

I sat on the floor as the "doctor" felt the swelling of the ankle and foot. He thought for a moment and then he dug into a bag and pulled out a jar of some repugnant black and grey salve. Before applying the ointment, he opened the bag again and removed a few feathers which he proceeded to scatter around the floor in a circle around my foot. I think there were nine feathers.

He then set fire to the feathers on the floor and mumbled something in a dialect; it was definitely not Spanish. Then he started to

chant as he also rubbed or shook some sort of a small gourd. Very mystic. Then he applied that vile salve on my foot and ankle and placed one hand on the heel of my foot and the other in front of the foot and pulled like hell, apparently trying to force the bones back in place.

I let out a heckuva cry as I've never felt such pain before. I then heard feet thundering down the steps.

"What's going on?" John asked.

I told him.

John wanted to scrap the fishing trip and to leave that night by boat for Puerto Inirida, which is about a five-hour trip, and head back to the States, but because it was dark we held off until dawn.



During the night, the Indian witch doctor thoughtfully made me a crutch. The only problem was that the crutch was made for someone his size and he was about four feet, ten inches tall. I happen to be six feet tall.

It took us between six and seven hours to reach Puerto Inirida. I sat in the front of the dugout with my bandaged foot on the luggage. Bert found a bandage in his gear and with some duct tape and a shower clog he fashioned a shoe for me.

The trouble was that once we arrived at Puerto Inirida dock there were about 50 stone steps to climb. I sat on the bottom step, and using my hands and one foot, and with help and encouragement from John and Bert I crawled up. One step at a time.

Since we didn't have reservations for the plane service to Bogota and onward to Miami and then home we ran into problems, but we worked them out.

Home at last! When I arrived in Toledo around 1 A.M., my wife, Pat, met me and took me to a local hospital. But the next day, after my foot was X-rayed, the doctor said they couldn't (or wouldn't) handle that kind of a break so he sent me to another hospital. There another doctor insisted on immediate surgery. I told him when I broke my foot, and he couldn't believe that I withstood so much pain for so long.

The surgery lasted about two hours and then I was fitted with a cast and crutches. The accident happened in February but it wasn't until September that I could get rid of the leg cast and crutches.

On this trip, I learned how wonderful it is to have superb friends like John Renk and Bert Ellison—they were with me all the time. Now poor John is gone.

The things we fishermen do and endure, for our passion for fishing! —*Bob Miller.*

Aftermath

The Orinoco Ark and Colombian fishing? Well, Erland von Sneidern built a new, more comfortable Ark and had it moved to the same spot. It was fully booked the following season. Tremendous success was guaranteed.

Except that some local people, with an obvious interest in growing and processing certain plants, objected to the fact that the Ark was in this area. American fishermen traveling up and down rivers might interfere with regional “farming.” At least that’s the theory advanced and it makes some sense. So the new Ark mysteriously sank one night.

Convinced that this was a very dangerous area, Erland then built a fantastic camp called El Morichal on the Beta river, further north, near Puerto Carreno. There was a military unit at Carreno and police and Army personnel monitored the region, so Erland felt secure.

Erland enjoyed several very successful years at El Morichal, and it appeared that he made a wise decision to establish his camp there, until he was kidnapped and held hostage for about 80 days. Finally, after a wild shoot-out in which several dozen people were killed, Erland and an Italian hostage were rescued by Erland’s brother, cousin and a half-dozen hired hands.

But that’s another story. Or a book. Or a Harrison Ford movie.

Erland is offering a new fishing/hunting program in Bolivia.

John Renk? He returned to his Wisconsin home/farm where he operated a lucrative agricultural business. He was killed soon thereafter in a tragic, gruesome accident involving farm machinery.

John was a super human being. I feel privileged to have known him, and to have fished a lagoon that perhaps no one else ever fished!

