

## Year's End In the Forest

Bill Morris, PCDR '03-'05

Saturday in Vuelta Larga began early. Yeury was up at five, harnessing the mule for the trip to town. At eight years old, he is the youngest of Ramon's - my host's - grandchildren, and has thus earned the privilege of being sent on the long journeys for vegetables and rice, neither of which grow very well in this valley buried in rainforest. My dog Zeke (unpronounceable to my neighbors, so they just call him "The German" as the result of an unfortunate taxonomic misunderstanding) was up at that hour as well, yipping his head off at the activity. The family began stirring soon thereafter, so I rolled out from under my mosquito net, slid on my sandals and stumbled outside to behold the complete lack of anything resembling morning. No birds were singing. The waning moon shone through a thickening bank of clouds but no other light was evident; in this land without daylight savings time, the winter sun rises at about 7:30.

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It's cooler now. The rain continues falling consistently. I am reminded of the cusp of autumn in Vermont, just before the plunge into the actual cold of late September. But it is not really cold here in this village, tucked in a folded corner of a large island in the Caribbean. I would say only that it is no longer ungodly hot. The locals - now mostly clad in flannel shirts, heavy pants and the occasional wool hat - would argue otherwise. Anything under seventy-five degrees is COLD, no matter what the gringo says.

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The coming of light found me climbing yet another slope planted with cocoa trees; the angle was such that I would have wanted a belay if it had been rock. But with plenty of branches to grab, it posed few problems to Ramon, Chepi or myself. We were back on the harvest, taking advantage of a forecasted break in the rain. The work of cocoa is something I've gotten better at; the depths of my initial inexperience have been surpassed, such that I can now consider myself equal to one-half of a Dominican harvester. I hope to work my way up to two-thirds by the time I leave here. Ramon and his son-in-law were talking about the imminent arrival of the holiday visitors, and where they could be housed. They didn't mention it, but my bed is occupying prime space in the house's annex shed, and they could otherwise put a family of five in the 9'x12' room. As such, I hope to be elsewhere by the time that truly turns into a dilemma. Say, spending the 24th-25th surfing on the North shore or hanging out with Peace Corps volunteers who have their own houses.

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And so Christmas comes. This season looms large on the heavily-Catholic Dominican radar as a time when relatives return - a time when sons, daughters and grandchildren make the trek back from the cities where they had moved in search of work, the sort of migration that can be found the world over. It's a time when the constant sound of explosions can be heard in the remoteness of the jungle (gunshots of rebel insurgents to my excitable perception), as the children set off physics-experiment-looking contraptions involving peanut cans full of some combustible minerals, sealed with pieces of inner tube - A good substitute for holiday fireworks. It is also a time when rum sales skyrocket.

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Having slung squishy sacks full of cocoa beans to the valley floor and tied them to the waiting horse, we slogged back to the village proper just as a hint of midafternoon sun lit the world. The morning's product was quickly laid out on tarps to dry - perhaps even to toast a bit for better flavor - and we sat down to our respective lunches - two pounds of rice and beans. It may be the only real meal of the day, but there is no danger of starving. Lounging in the comfortably warm evening, I let my mind wander to Decembers gone by, and of course this led into the ongoing speculation as to the whereabouts and activities of friends and family. Eligio - another of Ramon's sons - was listening to a horribly-garbled holiday merengue tune on his dying radio, and I was tempted to ask him to turn it off

and let the peace return. Then I thought better of it – since I'm the same way with a recognized song; no amount of static ultimately matters when memory can fill in the blanks. So I countered with my portable shortwave and came up with a scratchy BBC broadcast of Sinatra singing *Winter Wonderland*. Not quite the holidays as I used to know them, but close enough for the current circumstances.