



## ChimDingo Publishing – Life Story

### “Calovébora – Believe in the Good”

*Authors Note: This is a current and true ongoing story with hopefully a happy ending.*

#### **Trust and Gut Feeling**

Sometimes you just have to follow your dream, trust your instincts or gut feeling and just go with the flow. You also have to believe in the goodness of people. Sometimes you get surprised.

#### **Centoya Expedition to Calovébora, Gulfo de Mosquitos, Panama**

Let's talk about trust and betrayal, reading the character of people and following your gut feeling (instinct) in the context (or situation) of following my particular crazy dream. Let's see how to react when that goes wrong and let's see how to move forward and stick with it instead of walking away.

This particular story starts in Punta Brava, Veraguas, Panama in August, 2006. It really started with an idea or dream to own some beach land in Latin America and travelling to Panama look into it and explore the possibilities but it unfolds from Punta Brava Surf Lodge. To cut to the chase when I was there with a lady friend I met a local entrepreneur from Chirquí and we discussed that land in the area was now more expensive since the bitumen road had gone in and was invited to join an “expedition” to Calovébora on the Caribbean side to look at some prospects. So eventually I flew up from Panama City to Bocas Del Toro to meet them as we had to travel in by boat. Bocas itself was a bit of a disaster, after a bit of sightseeing walking around and swimming at one of the beautiful surf beaches, Playa Bluff, I stayed in a quaint waterfront hotel.

Disaster 1: I nodded off in the deck chair, it must have rained while I was asleep and the water ran off the roof onto the chair; one drowned digital camera and book! This led to a cascading problem. I tried drying out the camera with a hair dryer I borrowed, partially successful but melted part of the case. Then I tried compressed air at the dive shop and finally bought some precision screwdrivers at the Chinese hardware shop and dismantled it and got it dry and working finally. Then I had a beer while waiting for my buddies to turn up with the boat.

Disaster 2: About this point I realised I'd lost my billabong surf wallet with cash, license, credit cards, debit card with the PIN for one card<sup>1</sup>, but luckily not my passport. So I backtracked and searched everywhere but couldn't find it. My amigos turned up in the boat at this stage, I told them, they helped me and lent me some cash to use internet, make some international calls and for a beer. I managed to cancel my Bank of New Zealand cards ok immediately but couldn't get hold of HSBC UK (turned out there was a typo in the number on their website) so I rang HSBC Visa Panama to fax urgently and advise. We also reported it to the police for what it was worth. It was getting late so we decided to travel in the morning instead so we stayed at another motel (I had no money) on the water and had some beers and a feed. Not much more to be done about wallet, one of those things; never lost my wallet before anywhere, only airline ticket at Mexico airport.

#### **The Trip**

At 5.00am next morning we headed off, my two entrepreneurial amigos, the surveyor and his assistant, the Capitano, the supplies and me on a 5 hour trip in your typical Latin deep “V” fibreglass ocean going barco with a big Yamaha on the back. This one had a console though at the rear. On a glassy flat sea with the sun just rising, it was exhilarating and we flew across the water. It was August, which is wet season and the sky a little overcast so the water was a dull green colour.

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<sup>1</sup> I was working in Iraq (non-military) but at the time you couldn't change HSBC Jersey PINS anywhere but the UK even though they were offshore accounts and most of their customers were overseas – Doh!). I'm having a better relationship with HSBC these days after a few rocky years.

About an hour and a half after leaving we stopped for breakfast at a local Indian village; coffee, bread and ham. The kids, as I found in Mexico and Iraq, were fascinated by a 192cm “gringo” with blue eyes. After an uneventful trip (apart from bum bouncing on the hard seats and refuelling) we reached our destination, Calovébora on the Gulf of Mosquitoes. It's beautiful coastline along here, coconut palm fringed beaches, small surf, occasional cliffs and it's pretty much Indian reserve all the way from Bocas del Toro to the Calovébora River. The sealed (bitumen) road from Santiago de Veraguas ends in the mountains at Santa Fe about 100km from Calovébora and the dirt road is virtually impassable in the wet season and a difficult 7-10 hour trip in the dry season.

One of the local boats came out to meet us and to help us navigate the river mouth bar (sandbar) as it can be a little tricky with the surf break and the river outflow. The village is perched on a bluff overlooking the river mouth. We setup camp in a few rented ‘cabanas’, talked to a few locals and then the surveyors set off to do a survey on some of my amigos’ proposed land. The rest of us went in the boat to get some more fuel, have a beer at the next village and see some of the coastline (a nice set of rocks you can go between) and we made a detour up a river/lagoon behind one of the beaches, supposed to be an alligator up there, we didn't see it but there were plenty of mosquitoes and sand-flies; it was also oppressively humid. Getting back to the main purpose of the visit, we came back to Calovébora and looked at some potential land for sale after speaking to some “owners” (it's a small isolated village and the people are very poor and live a simple rural life free from the stress of modern life; there was one satellite common public pay phone, a village store, a school and a sprinkling of houses and the people were very friendly). We walked the rough boundaries (it's pretty much jungle in a lot of parts) and worked a rough price per hectare (all translated of course) and this is where crunch time comes; have to decide whether I'm interested in buying and whether they are interested in selling to me and pay for the surveyor to survey it to determine exact boundaries and size <sup>2</sup>. This isn't one of those situations where you think it over, it was a yes/no decision on the spot else another trip back would have to be arranged and paid for and local paperwork needed to be filled out by the local “magistrate” (who consists of a guy with a table and a rubber stamp). So anyway I decided, yes, as I wanted to put that part of my One Crazy Dream plan into effect. The survey was duly done, a price worked out, a verbal agreement made regarding sale and a “local” right of possession obtained <sup>3</sup>. The next morning we set out back for Bocas del Toro and took the owner's son with us (as the parents had put the local possession in his name) to take back to Panama City and sort out some legal issues and pay some paper lodgement fees and a deposit. This was pretty much the start of the troubles including a bad dose of the trots that night in Bocas. I flew back to Panama City the next morning not feeling too well at all and the others drove down the next day.

### **Wallet Saga**

On arriving, firstly I rang HSBC UK to see if the card had been cancelled; well it still wasn't after 3 days so I was getting annoyed at this point. Then there was an interesting surprise in my email when I arrived back. Seems the missing wallet saga was only beginning! It was an email from someone purporting to have my wallet and that they'd withdrawn money from my account using the PIN. Well I figured I was in trouble at this point as the card hadn't been cancelled. So I took a punt, as the tone of the email indicated the writer wasn't too bright, and tried a bluff. I had a military pass from Iraq in my wallet so I sent back an email saying I would have to report it the FBI as it was a Homeland Security issue and that as in addition there was now a fraudulent transaction and basically a written confession in the email that he'd be in double trouble and that the FBI shouldn't have much trouble finding him on a small island like that. And I sent instructions to put it on the plane back the next day and return the cash to a friend there. Well the next day I got my wallet back on the Aeroperlas plane at the freight desk with all my cards plus the money withdrawn, but not the lesser amount that was in the wallet, so I was happy with that outcome. I finally managed to get the card cancelled just in case. So there was some good in this and a surprise outcome.

### **Land Saga**

I had a few more days looking at units in Panama City, met with my lawyers and handed over a little money for lodgement of papers and expenses and left back for Iraq. Later a Buy and Sell contract was worked out before I paid over a more substantial deposit. I was advised from the beginning that it might be a bit dodgy and not to do anything before the clear government possession was clear. I did ask if the Buy and Sell contract would cover me legally in any way before handing over any money. I understood this would, but subsequently found out later it wouldn't, so I couldn't see the point in doing that. But I did make a decision based on that and my gut feeling, maybe I was tired and misunderstood, so these things happen.

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<sup>2</sup> Land has been passed down through generations and is often marked by a known rock, tree or creek as the landmarks that define the boundary. Exact sizes aren't known, that's why a survey is required to work that out for any sale price per sqm/hectare price.

<sup>3</sup> This is not legally worth a lot and is only the first step in a long protracted process through to actual title. I didn't know a lot about the exact process, I had asked in general and read some information on the internet, but it's a bit more complicated than it first appears.

After several months of inquiring whether the paperwork had been lodged there was no progress. I also misunderstood that my entrepreneurial friends were just that, friends helping me out and not getting any commission or had any involvement apart from the fact they were buying land up there as well. So once I understood that it was easier to deal with and they have helped me out since, which I am very appreciative of. After several more months it became apparent there was a big problem. The son had apparently gotten himself arrested and jailed, the papers hadn't been lodged, the parents had been given some of the deposit money and he'd spent the rest. This was a major stuff-up and betrayal of trust to the parents and to me. So the bottom line here is there was:-

- Dubious paperwork
- Son defaulted on his obligations and ripped off me and parents
- Parents felt bad
- My lawyer did things by the book and acted on my instructions so the accountability lay with me

So what to do? Well all the advice I got from all quarters was cut your losses, you've been ripped off, don't throw any more good money after bad and learn a lesson. Well I didn't really want to do this for a few reasons:-

1. There was a reasonable amount of money at stake.
2. I was sure the parents felt bad and they also would like the balance of deal.
3. I fundamentally thought it'd be able to be sorted out eventually when I had a talk with my entrepreneurial friends as they said they had a few problems with one of their blocks as well albeit a different one.
4. I'm not rich, I just made a mess of my first "life" and am trying to build a better "second" one and I worked hard, made a plan, sacrificed and risked my life for 2.5 years in Iraq (non-military) to try and pursue my dream and I wasn't going to give up that easily.
5. The experience with the wallet saga gave me reason for hope.
6. It's nice to prove other people wrong sometimes.
7. There was good faith by my Panamanian friends.

### **What's Your View of Purchasing Land in Foreign Countries?**

Are you exploiting people or are you assisting to open up the area and provide much needed cash?

It's quite a process to go through a land purchase where there isn't already clear title and that's why titled property attracts a premium. Many land owners don't have the resources to even obtain the title paperwork. At a minimum if you agree to purchase some untitled land you will have to go through these steps and inevitable delays:-

- Survey Done by Professional Registered Surveyor
- Local Right of Possession (ROP)
- Lodge this (Survey and ROP) with Reforma Agraria Along with Application Form
- Physical Inspection of Property by Authorities & Interview Adjoining Landowners
- Public Notice
- Investigate Any Claims or Disputes
- Official ROP
- Reforma Agraria & Catastro Paperwork
- Your Lawyer and Fees
- Purchase and Sale Agreement
- Some Land is Reforma and Other Catastro e.g. Along Beachfront and Different Taxes May Apply
- Pay Taxes
- Obtain Title

I think paying a reasonable commercial price considering the risks (paying survey fee, deposit or reforma fees in advance of title, no developed infrastructure or roads, right of possession risk and paperwork hassles) and that it may take months or years is a win/win situation as the locals get some much needed cash now to fund for example their children to school or purchase boats to fish or ferry supplies. Timing and need is an important consideration e.g. I sold a block of land for 11,000 when I got divorced as I needed the money, 5 years later it sold for 95,000. That's just the realities of the market, being prepared to wait and the luck of the draw. If you need the money now you need it now. Obviously the issue of large rich developers buying huge tracts of land may be another issue. I think as long as governments put in adequate protection by gazetting certain areas to be set aside for the whole community e.g. sporting fields and parkland and landowners are compensated then these "new" communities can be developed successfully.

The new residents will bring income, stimulate the economy and create jobs eventually by maybe starting businesses in these remote areas or benefit the community and country by setting up other pet projects e.g. I'd like to set up an orphanage one day when I have the resources.

Since the above I have made another visit to Panama, made a trek to the end of the sealed road at Sante Fe (the nearest point on the way) to meet the owner of the land behind my possible purchase, negotiated through my friends with the parents and we are working towards a negotiated resolution. And my real estate broker is assisting.

## Lessons

There are always lessons in everything you do in life and I would list the lessons out of this so far as:-

1. Take A Chance Now and Again
2. Trust Your Gut Feeling (Instinct/Intuition)
3. Bad Situations are Retrievable
4. Don't Always Assume the Worst
5. Commence Some Dialogue and Negotiation to See What's Possible
6. Throwing Good Money After Bad, Walk Away or Take a Bigger Gamble/Risk
7. Trust a Good Outcome
8. Give Up or Find Another Dream
9. The Bigger the Risk the Bigger the Pay Off / Loss
10. Your Misfortune Might Help Someone Else and May Also Benefit Them in Different Ways (A Deed in Return)

So to date it's been since August 2006 till June 2008 (at the time of writing). I believe a physical inspection has been done. Sometimes things move slowly i.e. I'm still waiting for an international trademark after nearly a year and a half, lucky I'm not needing to run a business immediately!

A friend of mine said this in response to my crazy dreams in Panama and my tribulations and I quote:-

"I think it is great what you are doing in Panama because in life there are many people who have ideas but no courage (these people are management consultants) or who have courage but no resources, and few are the people who have courage and resources. Most people in fact have no ideas, no courage and no resources (these are the majority) although I might be being a bit harsh.

You have taken the risks with the work in Iraq to build up resources and then invested in the various Panamanian ventures and I hope it pays off for you. There is also a streak in me that says life should be lived like you are in a casino, and really, with materials things if you are prepared to go a bit Buddhist and end your days in a quiet contemplation of fortunes you have lost, then why not give it a red hot go while you yet have breath."

So I think I'll persevere, I'll rely on my judgment of people's character and hope for a successful outcome to this saga and one day they'll have a good Australian neighbour. I'm sure we'll be able to get the son to do some free work in the future to work off his indiscretion and restore his image to his parents! I will keep you posted.

