The Donkey Trail: A Difficult New Migrant Pathway to the U.S. Border

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To cite this article: Andrew Gardner & Deeipendra Giri (2023) The Donkey Trail: A Difficult New Migrant Pathway to the U.S. Border, Anthropology Now, 15:2-3, 120-129, DOI: 10.1080/19428200.2023.2321067

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/19428200.2023.2321067

Published online: 16 May 2024.
Imagine yourself strolling through Portland, Oregon, on some weekend in October. The rains characteristic of the Pacific Northwest have arrived, but you’re prepared for the weather. And you’re hungry. You stop to order a gyro from one of the food trucks that have persevered in the city’s center. After a few minutes’ wait, a young man in the food truck hands you your sandwich. You pay him and then meander into the park to sit for a moment. Perhaps you failed to notice that the young man didn’t really look very Greek, at least as
you imagine a young Greek man might look. Lucky for him, everyone involved with this particular food truck somehow sidestepped the Portland-esque accusations of cultural appropriation—in spite of the fact that the man who handed you your sandwich was actually Indian, and the truck itself is owned by a Jordanian.¹ There were no Greeks involved with this business at all, actually. But setting aside issues of culinary appropriation, the story below concerns “Yesh”—the young man who handed you that gyro sandwich.²

Yesh is from a village not far from New Delhi, India. Before departing on the path to America known as the Donkey Trail, he had just completed the 11th grade.³ Note that the term Donkey Trail is one that migrants in India and elsewhere in South Asia use to describe the illegal backdoor pathway into the United States. Yesh comes from a fairly well-to-do family in Northern India—his parents are both doctors, and his uncle is a locally notable politician. It was as a result of this uncle, however, that Yesh found life to be difficult at home. Local politics in India can be a rough-and-tumble life, and as a result of his uncle’s profile, he found himself to be in constant danger via extortion or worse. Yesh was not forthcoming with more details about this. But it also bears mention that Yesh has several younger sisters, each of whom will need a healthy dowry if they are to marry well.

So it was in this context, and with his family’s blessing and financial support, that he first flew to Amsterdam to seek entry there. At Amsterdam’s Schiphol airport he was denied entry. He then tried flying to Canada, and later to the United States, seeking entry at both places. Both times, he reports, he was also turned away. It was only after these failed attempts that he and his family made arrangements with an agent in New Delhi. This agent would usher him onto the Donkey Trail. After some preparations that he didn’t detail in our interview, all was arranged: Yesh departed shortly thereafter for Astana, Kazakhstan. He remained there for nearly a month, as arrangements to move onward were slow to develop. Finally, he received word from New Delhi that it was time to proceed.

The agent in New Delhi sent him a ticket for travel onward to Turkey. After arriving at the airport in Istanbul, however, he was informed that there was some sort of issue concerning receipt of the next payment from his family to the agent. As a result, Yesh was stranded in the Istanbul airport for 12 days. Yesh hid in washrooms and slept in coffee shops as he attempted to resolve the issue from afar. Later he learned that several of his own his relatives, acting as middlemen, had absconded with the payment. The issue was resolved when his family arranged for a new payment. Onward for Yesh!

From Istanbul, he departed on a long flight to Suriname. As he would learn, this was also the conclusion of the Delhi agent’s direct supervision of his journey. From here forward, the agent in Delhi would pass money to a representative from one of the Mexican cartels. Yesh and the other migrants (still all South Asian at this point) never met this person nor learned his identity. Before
landing in Suriname, however, he was given a phone number, and the person he reached at that number informed Yesh that, henceforth, he would arrange the journey to the Mexican border. A black car awaited him outside the hotel where he had overnights.

Now a small group of men, they traveled 6 hours through Suriname toward Guyana. Finally, nearing the border, they arrived at a rural house equipped with numerous boats for the river crossing. There Yesh also encountered a crowd of other Indian nationals headed north, along with migrants of many other nationalities. Yesh recalled Pakistanis, Nepalis, Afghans and others. After his father paid another US$12,000 to the agent in Delhi, Yesh was cleared to depart the farmhouse for Guyana. He and 20 migrants crammed in an SUV, and they proceeded 6 miles up the river. There, they crossed into Guyana by boat in the dark of the night. Once in Guyana, the migrants again piled into vans and drove through the backcountry for another 3 days. While speeding down bumpy rural roads in the jungle, Yesh was injured—he accidentally bit through his own lip. Luckily, it seemed to be a fairly minor injury. Passing through the jungle for days, he learned that they were headed south to Brazil. Yesh also remembered going 2 days without food on this portion of the journey. There were other frightening challenges as well—one of the other vehicles caught fire, resulting in one migrant’s injury and another boy’s death.

Finally, they reached another farmhouse near the border with Brazil. There they awaited nightfall. When darkness arrived, they drove for 2 hours and, upon reaching the shores of a river, they joined together with another group of migrants headed north on the Donkey Trail. On small boats they paddled across the river, and after reaching the far shore, they trekked for 2 miles in the dark. Finally, they reached the border fence. They could see the Brazilian army patrols and were told by their guide to avoid them. Waiting in the dark, they finally saw an opening and scurried across the border into Brazil, entering that country near the city of Boa Vista.

For nearly 2 weeks, Yesh and the others stayed in Boa Vista. Then he and the others traveled down the Rio Branco and then the Black River on a gargantuan riverboat. After 5 days traveling by river they arrived at Manaus, and after some time there, he received a ticket from his handler. He and others boarded an overnight bus that took them to a small town near the Peruvian border. Unbeknownst to any of them beforehand, at the time of their arrival there was a strike in Peru. As a result, he and the other migrants were stuck on the Brazilian side of the border for an entire month. Finally, when the strike ended, Yesh and the others entered Peru and proceeded to another large rural house. At this location, he recalls they joined together with many more migrants headed north—they were now a group of perhaps 160, Yesh estimated.

As the large group awaited guidance onward, he and others were told that the payment from India had not arrived with the agent in this hemisphere, and hence they could not proceed. He fought with his Spanish handlers. Finally,
after a series of more urgent calls to his agent in Delhi, he was allowed to depart. Now, the migrants were instructed to clamber on motorbikes, and with five people stacked on a single motorcycle, they drove for hours through Peru. Eventually, he and the others arrived at a town and boarded a bus. The bus took them to Lima, the capital of Peru. Arriving there, they transferred into a caravan of 20 cars. Yesh says the fleet of cars reminded him of the caravans he had seen in movies about the cartels and the mafia.

In that caravan they crossed into Ecuador where, again, he and others boarded another bus. After traveling for 2 days and 1 night they arrived near the border with Colombia. The bus dropped them in the mountains near the border, and for 4 days the group traveled by foot through the rugged terrain. Yesh recalled torrential rains and clinging to cables and ropes as they ascended and descended steep mountains and cliffs.

Once inside Colombia, they made their way to another rural farmhouse where they rested as they awaited guidance. Suddenly—and unexpectedly—the Columbian army descended upon them: six cars of soldiers armed with large machine guns surrounded the farmhouse. Yesh is unclear what happened next, but he suspects that the cartel communicated with the Army, for suddenly the soldiers loaded back up in their vehicles and departed without further word.

The next morning the migrants clambered into large cargo trucks. For 3 days they journeyed across Colombia to the beach town of Necoclí. There, they stayed in a good hotel for a time—as Yesh recalls, the food at this hotel was memorably good and their quarters were passable. After some time Yesh was selected to depart for Panama and the difficult crossing of the Darién Gap. He was handed a large sack that included rubber boots, other jungle gear and some food for their journey. From the ocean shore nearby they departed on a small motorboat and undertook a harrowing journey across the Golfo de Urabá. Battered and tossed about by an angry sea, the men were wet, salty and frightened when they reached Capaganá on the western side of the Gulf. After such a treacherous journey, he and the other men knew that there is a God in this world, Yesh recalls.

In Capaganá they hid in yet another house on the outskirts of town for nearly 2 weeks. Then, boarding another boat, they journeyed up the coast by night to a place called “Coconut Beach.” Yesh took pains to note that this was the most dangerous part of his entire journey: the waves were as tall as telephone poles, and there were more than 30 people crammed into the small boat. “I thank to God that I am alive today,” Yesh recalled, because in 2017 some 40 people from India died on this precise leg of the journey. Indeed, Yesh’s boat also succumbed to the waves, but they were less than a hundred yards from their destination when it sank. He and the others swam ashore at Coconut Beach. Some other migrants on the boat—younger South American children—could not swim, but he and the others helped get them to the beach.
Once ashore, they were given tents and other basic materials. They slept the night on the beach. When morning light broke, one of the handlers from Capurganá came to the camp and said, “Ready, ready!” None of the people managing their journey could speak English, Yesh notes, except for a few phrases like “Let’s go, let’s go!” The migrants donned their boots and prepared for what Yesh referred to as the “Panama Jungle.” From the 200 migrants assembled on Coconut Beach, the handlers came and took $110 from each of them for passage through the “Panama Jungle.” This fee was the extra price of their “ticket,” permitting them to take a shorter and less arduous route through the Darién Gap.

Yesh’s journey through the Darién Gap took about 2 days. At first it seemed to Yesh like a normal jungle. But after journeying over the first hills, the real jungle started: the rain was incessant, it was slippery and steep and, as in Colombia, they clung to cables and wires as they progressed over the rugged terrain. Thorns and cacti were a big problem for them. Yesh also injured his knee terribly on this portion of the journey, and the whole group stopped an extra night so that they could tend to this injury. Other groups of migrants passed and continued onward as the group tended to his injury. In describing this portion of the journey, Yesh grew more measured and pointed to this: the cartel men guiding migrants through this leg of the journey were particularly

![Image 2](image-url). A collection of images and screenshots drawn from Yesh’s camera phone that portray junctures of his trip on the Donkey Trail. Locations are unknown, and persons are not identified. Photographs by Yesh/Anonymous, 2023.
brutal and fearsome. Yesh showed us pictures and movies of dead bodies, body parts and unspeakable acts that we wish we could wipe from our memory. We will speak no more of that here.

The group of migrants remained stranded in the Darién Gap as they cared for Yesh’s injury. One of the other migrants had been a wrestler in India and, as Yesh noted, all Indian wrestlers know the body well. This man manipulated Yesh’s knee and reset the joint. By morning he was able to continue, and after walking another half day on his improved knee, Yesh and the others finally reached a river. There, they crossed on a small motorboat and soon arrived at a Panamanian army base. For 2 days they remained on that base. The soldiers took their passports, their fingerprints and other biometrics. Yesh was then told that tomorrow he would travel by boat to another army base. When morning came, however, the boat was unavailable. The next day the news was again the same. Eager to proceed on their journey, he and the others decided that they would simply walk to the next army base. This would take an extra day, and they would risk attacks by lions, but they were tired of the delays. A single soldier with a gun accompanied them for protection from wild animals.

Upon arrival at the second army base, again their fingerprints, passports and biometrics were taken, perhaps to ensure that the same people were moving north from base to base. From that second base, they boarded buses and crossed the border into Costa Rica. In a Costa Rican hotel, Yesh and the others were then stranded for a month. It was also there that they were passed to other cartel personnel—individuals who would facilitate the remainder of the journey north. And again at this juncture, more of his family’s money was purportedly stolen by middlemen involved in these complicated transnational transactions. This time, his parents were forced to take another loan to push his journey forward.

Now they were again a group of 160. Once they were cleared to leave Costa Rica, the cartel handed each of them $600 in cash. This money was designated for the immigration officers at the border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua. They successfully crossed into Nicaragua, and there they transferred into two large freight trucks with 80 migrants in each. For perhaps 2 days they were in these large load trucks, but time was difficult to measure—inside the trucks it was pitch black. They had no food. They urinated in bottles and defecated where they crouched. Terrible smells filled the truck.

Finally, after a few days they reached Honduras. There, they transferred into small covered pickup trucks, and the drivers grouped into two caravans of 80 migrants. Through mountainous country, they traveled in these trucks for 6 hours, finally arriving at their destination hotel. Upon approaching their destination, however, they learned there were already some 300 migrants there. One caravan of 80 migrants—Yesh’s group—would have to wait overnight in the jungle. There, sleeping on the ground, the ants were terrible, and he was covered with bites by the morning. They spent the next day there with no food as
well. Finally, one of their handlers offered them a basic meal of beef and rice. As Hindus, however, none would eat it. “I was so hungry,” Yesh recalled, “but what could I do? So we found some mango trees, and I ate green mangoes with my rice that day.”

After another 6 hours he and the others reached the Honduran hotel. Their arrival brought the total number of migrants in the hotel to 460 people, Yesh estimated.

From there, handlers would take 50 people at a time to continue north. Departures were occasional, and Yesh had to wait 2 months for his turn to depart. As he and the others awaited their turn, they were locked in the hotel. He recalled this to be one of the most difficult junctures of the journey. Each migrant received only two spoonfuls of rice and some boiled frijoles every day. Then, finally, some new men arrived and said, “Rapido! rapido!” The migrants scrambled aboard a yellow school bus and traveled north toward Guatemala on a 12-hour journey. At one point, they stopped at a remote gas station, and there they were all informed that their money had not been received. Yesh suspected that the Indian agent had failed to send the payments to the cartel, for he was in communication with his parents, and they confirmed that they had paid the money to the agent.

For 2 or 3 days the group was stranded at this rural gas station as they awaited resolution of this dilemma. Eventually, for reasons that were unclear to Yesh, the issue was mysteriously resolved. They proceeded and entered Guatemala. At their new destination—again, a rural house—Yesh finally bathed. He remembered the food there as “good, like Indian food, with spices and everything. I was happy again!” They slept on the roof of the house, as the rooms below were so crowded. He noted that the cartel had migrants stashed in houses by the dozens in this town. The next day, via the same yellow bus, they proceeded onward to a river that divides Mexico from Guatemala. They paddled across the river on inner tubes. Pickup trucks arrived and carried them to Tapachula, Mexico.

There, in Tapachula, Yesh and the others again were stranded in a hotel for nearly a month. Evidently, the hotel belonged to a family member of the cartel that was orchestrating their journey. This long month was excruciating. With poor food and no bath, he and the others grew increasingly frustrated as the days passed. Yesh called his family in New Delhi and reported that he was again stuck on his journey to America. His father then organized a Panchayat—a traditional elderly council system of local governance that predates modern political forms in India and still functions to this day. Under the gaze of the village council of elders, the agent arranged for Yesh to finish his journey north with a different Mexican cartel. Yesh was energized by this change, but he and 20 others still had to escape from the hotel in which they were imprisoned. They clambered out at night. After his agent in New Delhi forwarded him the location of the new contact, the men made their way to the other cartel’s safe house. Gears
began to move again: by the next day he was in Mexico City. Shifting from one cartel to the other, Yesh noted, also cost his family a lot of additional money.

Compounding these travails, yet again the middlemen in India who helped get the money from the agent to the new cartel absconded with the family’s payment—another US$20,000 was lost this time.\(^8\) Yesh was in Mexico City for 20 days. After the monies were secured, he proceeded by bus to Sonora and the border with the United States. Upon boarding this final bus, the cartel’s representative gave him 1,200 pesos for the army and mafia that he would encounter on his bus ride north. In his experience, the mafia and the police were both extractive forces, and he seemed to use these terms interchangeably. Upon receiving those pesos, he hid a small portion of the money intended for food in one of the cushions of his bus seat.

“One hour before reaching the border, there was the army—I don’t know if it was the army or gangsters, but they took my passport and cut it with a knife,” Yesh recalled. Threatening to cut the passport apart, they demanded US$1000 from him and each of the other passengers. He only had 400 pesos in his pocket. Yesh then showed us the deep cut in his passport. Finally, the brigands gave up their attempted extortion, and the migrants’ journey northward continued. They eventually disembarked at another house just 10 minutes from the border. His payments were all complete. That very same night the handlers let him proceed to the border. The Mexicans had cut a hole in the steel border fence. After opening the hole for them, they were told to run to the left, as there was an army camp to the right. They crossed into America as a group of 200. They joined 600 others—kids, women, all sorts of people—who were already detained by the U.S. border patrol.\(^9\)

Yesh also reported that the U.S. Border Patrol had a sign that said, “Welcome Indians.” He adds that on this sign it was also written that “Venezuela and China are NOT ALLOWED.” Yesh added that he knew this was only for show. Regardless, he and the 200 others immediately surrendered to the police upon entering America. Now a group of more than 600, they assembled in a line under orders from the U.S. Border Patrol. Those who were under 18 were then directed to step forward. Yesh was still 17 at the time, so he stepped forward. Then those under 21 stepped forward to form another group.

He and the others in his group were then taken to what he referred to as an “Army Base.” One of the soldiers there verbally abused and aggressively searched them, but as he quickly added, everyone else they encountered on the American side was helpful and kind. He was then taken to a new camp for migrants—we clarified after some discussion that this was a detention facility. Yesh was there for 2 days, and during processing he gave them the name of a relative who already resided in the United States.

Next, Yesh was placed in a shelter in Mesa, Arizona, where he remained for 24 days. While there, he went to school, and he happily recalled playing soccer and basketball. His 24th day in the shelter was his 18th birthday, and when
that day arrived, he was informed that he was free to go. Yesh then made his way to Georgia, and then to the Pacific Northwest, where we encountered him. In summarizing this aspect of his life experience, Yesh notes that this was his third trip to Mexico and that both times previously he had been unsuccessful in gaining entry to the United States. Altogether, these three attempts cost his family more than US$80,000, not including food and incidentals. When asked about his plans for the future, Yesh replied that once he gets the appropriate documents from America, he intends to work very hard. He has already completed his biometrics for a work permit. Asked what he envisions for himself 10 years from now, he says that he hopes to be a successful businessman.

In the months after this interview, Yesh would depart the Pacific Northwest as he searched for opportunity. His next stop was Denver, Colorado.

**Postscript**

The key and principal method used by cultural anthropologists to explore the experiences of contemporary humans is *ethnography*. Ethnography is best conceptualized as a toolkit—as a collection of methods that, altogether, are best defined by the objective for which they were configured more than a century ago: to comprehensively portray the complicated social worlds that are, typically, different from those of the researcher. Interviews are a key component of this methodological toolkit. To reach toward the aspiration of holism and comprehensiveness in portraying these other social worlds, ethnographers typically conduct many interviews with an array of different stakeholders in whatever other social world they seek to understand and portray. By triangulating between many different lived experiences gathered in such interviews, ethnographers hope to get incrementally closer to an accurate and informed portrayal of the social world they seek to portray.

The migration synopsis presented here is the product of a single interview and, notably, of our very first ethnographic interview with an individual who arrived via the Donkey Trail. As any ethnographer knows from experience, first interviews raise more questions than they answer. In the context of this interview with Yesh, for example, our questions abound. What promises were made to Yesh and his family before his departure? Why did Yesh follow such a circuitous route through South America? How frequently was Yesh able to communicate with the agent in Delhi, and how did that agent communicate with the cartels? Is Yesh’s socioeconomic background typical or atypical of this transnational migration route? Under what auspices were such frequent border crossings completed? What other nationalities join these migration caravans, and at what points? Are such frequent and long delays on the journey typical?

We have no answers to these questions, and there are certainly many other questions that we also cannot answer. Instead, to illuminate the scientific legacy of anthropology and the scientific method, we simply present here one piece of our forthcoming body of evidence—the first piece of evidence in our endeavor
to better understand the topography of transnational migration in the contemporary world and, more particularly, the experiences of the tens of thousands of migrants (and maybe more?) who travel on the Donkey Trail. In America today we hear a lot about the migrants arriving at our southern border, of course, but we hear very little about the details of their experiences traveling from their homes to that border. Our first interview clearly suggests that there is a lot for all of us to think about in this troubling and emergent migration system. We aim to address some of the questions posed above as our project proceeds.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes

1. In 2017, owners of a food cart selling burritos were famously shamed into shutting down their business, as both were seen to be “appropriating” the cuisine that purportedly belonged to others. This subsequently led to a public list of Portland restaurants deemed “culturally appropriative” by some. Both aspects of this episode are widely discussed on the internet.

2. Yesh is a pseudonym selected by the young man himself.

3. He was in the 11th Standard in the British-Indian system. We didn’t discuss whether he had actually completed the 11th grade.

4. Yesh reports that the dead boy’s body went to the hospital and eventually back to India.

5. Yesh referred to all of the persons between here and the United States as “Spanish,” indicating Spanish speakers of different nationalities.

6. But as he notes, different agents use different routes through the Panama jungle. Others he encountered on the journey had been in the jungle for 6 days, for example.

7. He meant jaguars, we suspect.

8. He didn’t learn these details until he reached the United States, Yesh added.

9. Yesh often refers to the Border Patrol and other uniformed forces as “the army.”

Notes on Contributors

Andrew Gardner is a professor of anthropology at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington. He has several decades of experience researching transnational labor migration, with a particular focus on migration flows connecting South Asia to the Arabian Peninsula. He is the author of several books and numerous articles.

Deeipendra Giri is an independent researcher and a former transnational labor migrant himself. Originally from Nepal, his life experiences have carried him to several different continents. He has experience speaking about transnational migration in Los Angeles, London and Abu Dhabi, and he has contributed to several research projects stewarded by Andrew Gardner and others.

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