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STORIES IN TRANSIT

THE DONKEY ROUTE



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Despite increasingly strict immigration policies in the U.S., more and more Indians are migrating without documents to fulfill their own American Dream. A majority of them are from Punjab and Gujarat, provinces in the North of India. These migrants face a lack of economic opportunities in their home country and undertake a treacherous journey nicknamed the "Donkey Route" (termed as 'dunki' in Punjabi, which means to hop around from place to place). This journey can take up to a year and consists of dodging border controls through dangerous pathways. Here is the story of Rajesh, an Indian man from Haryana, a province from which hundreds of men undertake the Donkey Route.

MY NAME IS RAJESH SINGH

I am a 35-year-old man from a rural village in Haryana, a province in northern India. Although I earned a degree in engineering from a university in India, I had been unemployed for six months before leaving. This left me unable to support my wife and daughter, and there was little left for my family in Haryana. Facing this reality, I made the same decision as many other men in my village—to undertake the 'Donkey Route' to the United States.



I hired a smuggler who had been used by many men from my village. He arranged my flights and transportation between countries, assuring me that the journey would be safe and would take no more than 14 days.

The smuggler demanded 5 million rupees for the journey. To pay this, we sold our family's house and land. My wife and daughter moved in with my mother, who promised to take care of them while I was gone. The smuggler also gave me a cover story in case I was caught—that I was facing persecution for being gay. I packed some clothes, dry food, and my Lakshmi idol—the goddess of wealth, luck, and prosperity. After saying goodbye to my family and promising I would see them again soon, I headed to the airport.

ON MAY 13, 2023, I STARTED MY JOURNEY TO THE US



That Saturday morning, I boarded my first flight to Dubai. The smuggler had secured me a tourist visa to Dubai, and had arranged my flights. I found myself on a flight with about 300 other Indians, most of whom were also attempting the Donkey Route.

Once in Dubai, 30 of us stayed in a man's basement for twelve days, waiting for our connecting flight to Ecuador. We shared six beds in shifts and were given no food—only water.

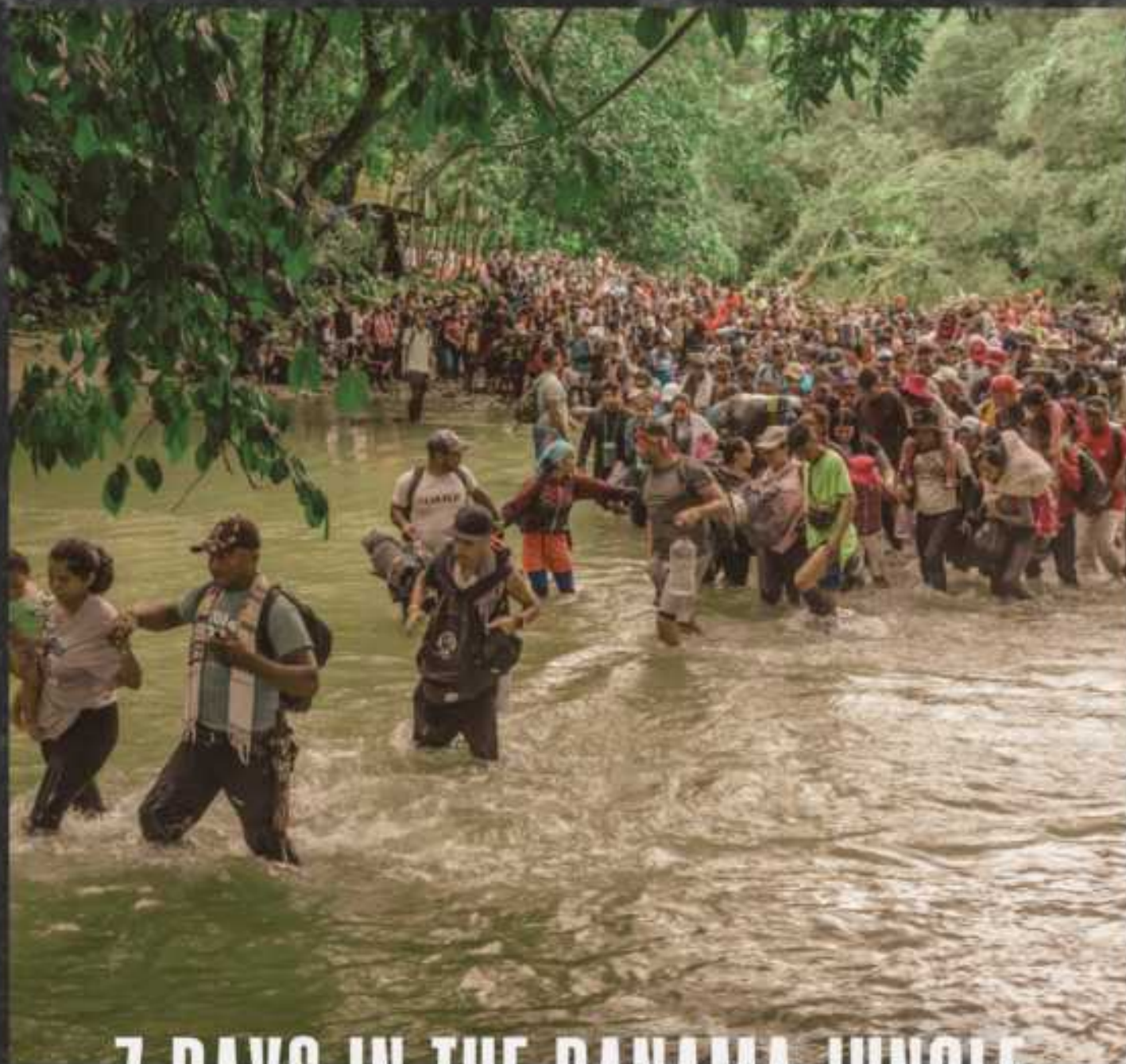
Twelve days later, we returned to the Dubai airport to board our second flight. We were one step closer to reaching the land where dreams come true.

Many Indians taking the Donkey Route fly to Ecuador, as no visa is required. Upon exiting the Ecuador airport, a man guided seven of us to a Bolero truck. I initially thought we would be sitting in the seats, but instead, he instructed us to get into the cargo bed of the truck and crouch down to avoid being seen. We didn't depart until nightfall.

I have no idea how long we were in that truck—at least two days—but I finally saw sunlight when we arrived in Necoclí, a coastal town in Colombia. From there, we took a boat ride to the Panama border, traveling from Necoclí to Capurganá. I paid \$40 for the hour-long ride, crammed into a small, overcrowded speedboat with 25 other passengers.

The journey was treacherous. Due to rough weather and overcrowding, two individuals fell overboard. They couldn't swim, and the boat drivers refused to stop, claiming they had other migrants to transport.





7 DAYS IN THE PANAMA JUNGLE

The Darien Gap is a 106km stretch of very treacherous jungle on the border of Panama and Colombia. It's known for its incredibly dense rainforest, rugged terrain, and lack of infrastructure.

This 7-day walk marks the most grueling part of the journey, and it's a major migration route despite the risks of robbery, assault, and even death.

At the Panama border, the smuggler instructed us to burn our passports. I didn't want to destroy my own picture, so I gently tore it off before burning the rest—severing one of my last official ties to home.

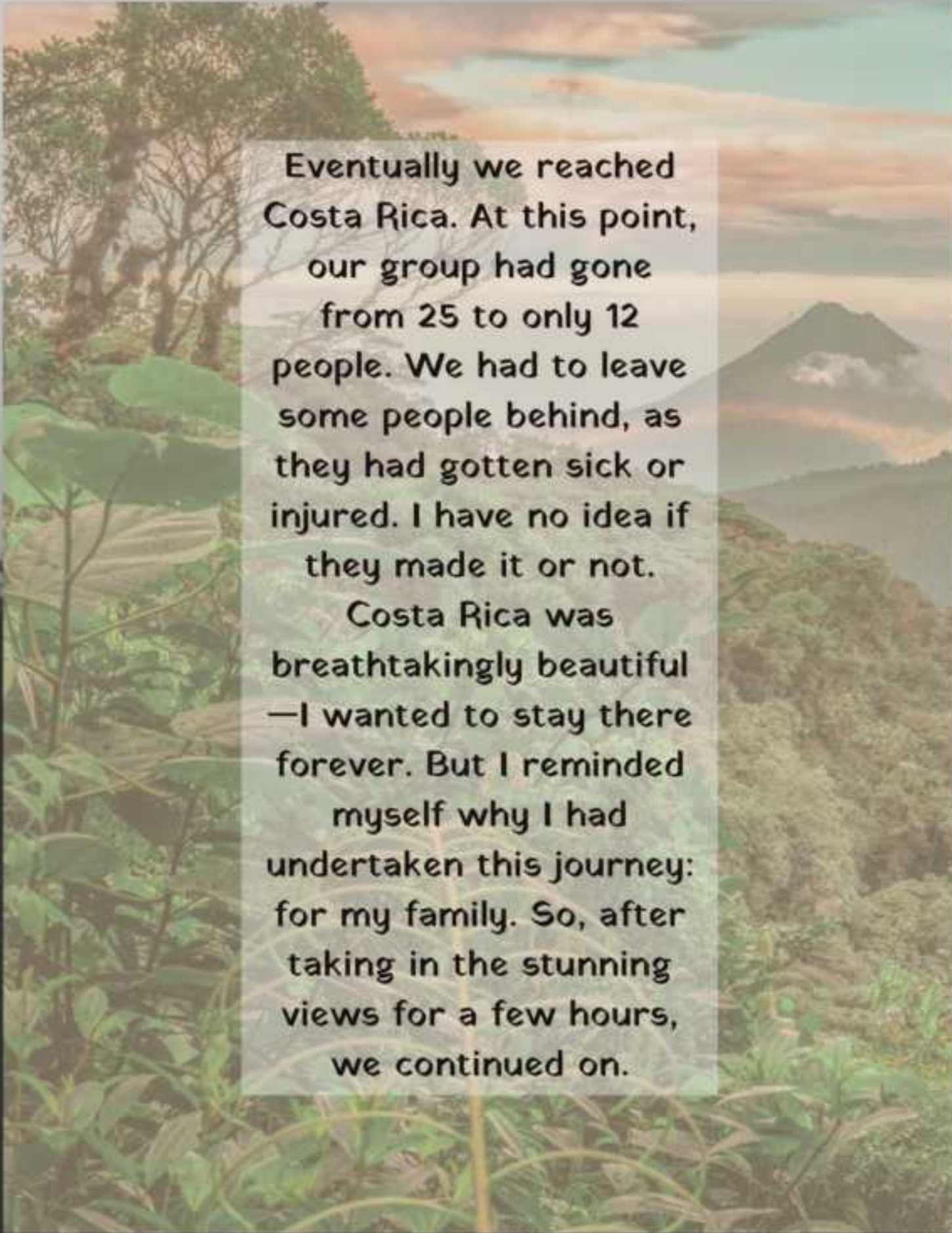
As we crossed the border, a man greeted our group of 20. We weren't sure if we could trust him, but his kind demeanor gave us a glimmer of hope. Among us were pregnant women and even toddlers. Despite our fear, exhaustion, and hunger, we were filled with excitement as we took another step closer to our destination.



It costs \$170 to hire a guide to help you through the forest, \$100 for someone to carry your backpack, and \$10 for food. Knowing I would need to save money for later parts of the journey, I only paid for the guide. I scarfed down the food I had packed and threw out my heaviest clothes. It seemed others had done the same—there were piles of abandoned clothes scattered everywhere.

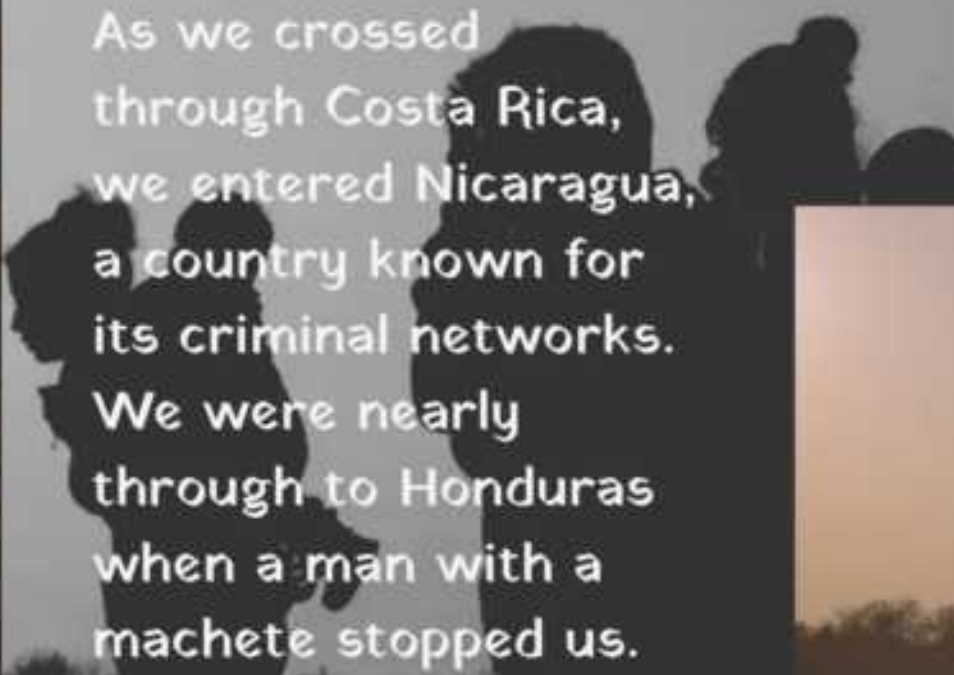
I climbed and climbed, feeling as though the ascent would never end. At one point, I came across a real skeleton, and a chill ran down my spine. It was then that the gravity of the risks truly hit me. But despite my fear, I pressed on.

THROUGH CENTRAL AMERICA



Eventually we reached Costa Rica. At this point, our group had gone from 25 to only 12 people. We had to leave some people behind, as they had gotten sick or injured. I have no idea if they made it or not.

Costa Rica was breathtakingly beautiful—I wanted to stay there forever. But I reminded myself why I had undertaken this journey: for my family. So, after taking in the stunning views for a few hours, we continued on.



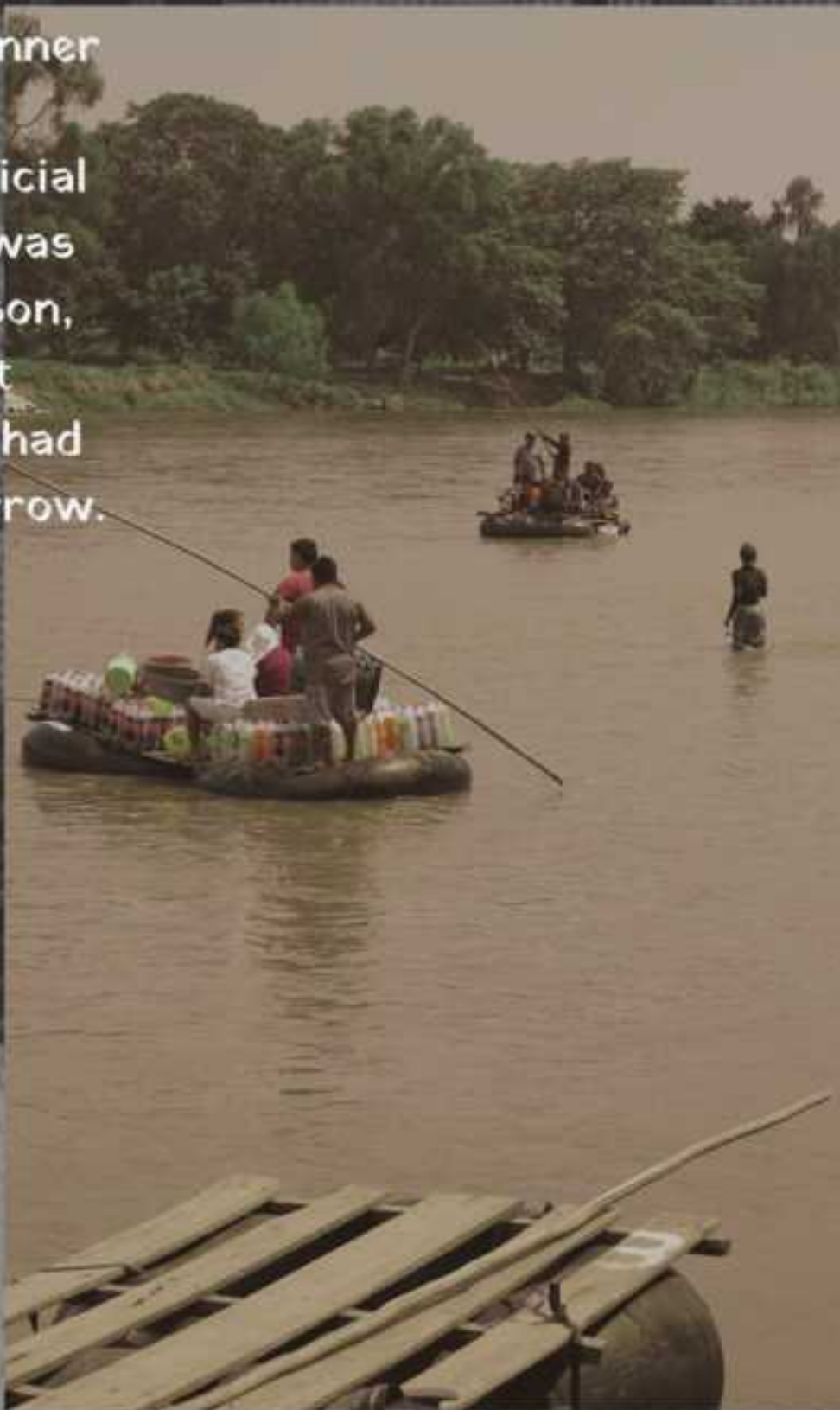
As we crossed through Costa Rica, we entered Nicaragua, a country known for its criminal networks. We were nearly through to Honduras when a man with a machete stopped us. He demanded our possessions and threatened to detain us if we didn't pay. He took the last of our clothes, food, and even our shoes. Terrified, we each handed him around \$50—some of us had nothing else left. Thankfully, he let us continue on our journey.



Entering Honduras, we spotted a migrant caravan and decided to walk with them through Honduras and Guatemala.

GOING TO MEXICO

Between the northern border of Guatemala and the southern border of Mexico lies the Suchiate River. While there is a road bridge, we used a makeshift raft, crafted from old wood and inner truck tubes, to float across and avoid official attention. The cost was about \$1.50 per person, and those who didn't have enough money had no choice but to borrow.



Once in Mexico, you're granted 15 days. After that, you're registered as a refugee in Mexico. For most of us, this deadline is critical, as the U.S. is our ultimate destination.

We were processed at an immigration center on the southern Mexico border. Five of us pooled together \$600 for a taxi to take us 250 km to Arriaga, where we boarded the Tijuano—the bus that transports migrants to the U.S.-Mexico border. The 4,000 km ride from southern Mexico to the north cost \$100 per person. We spent four days on the bus with no AC, limited food, and exposure to four different climate zones. The bus had to stop at military checkpoints, each requiring a \$60 bribe to avoid issues with law enforcement. In the end, the total cost of the bus ride was \$340. Once in Tijuana, we stayed in a migrant shelter for three days, waiting for the chance to jump over the U.S. border fence.



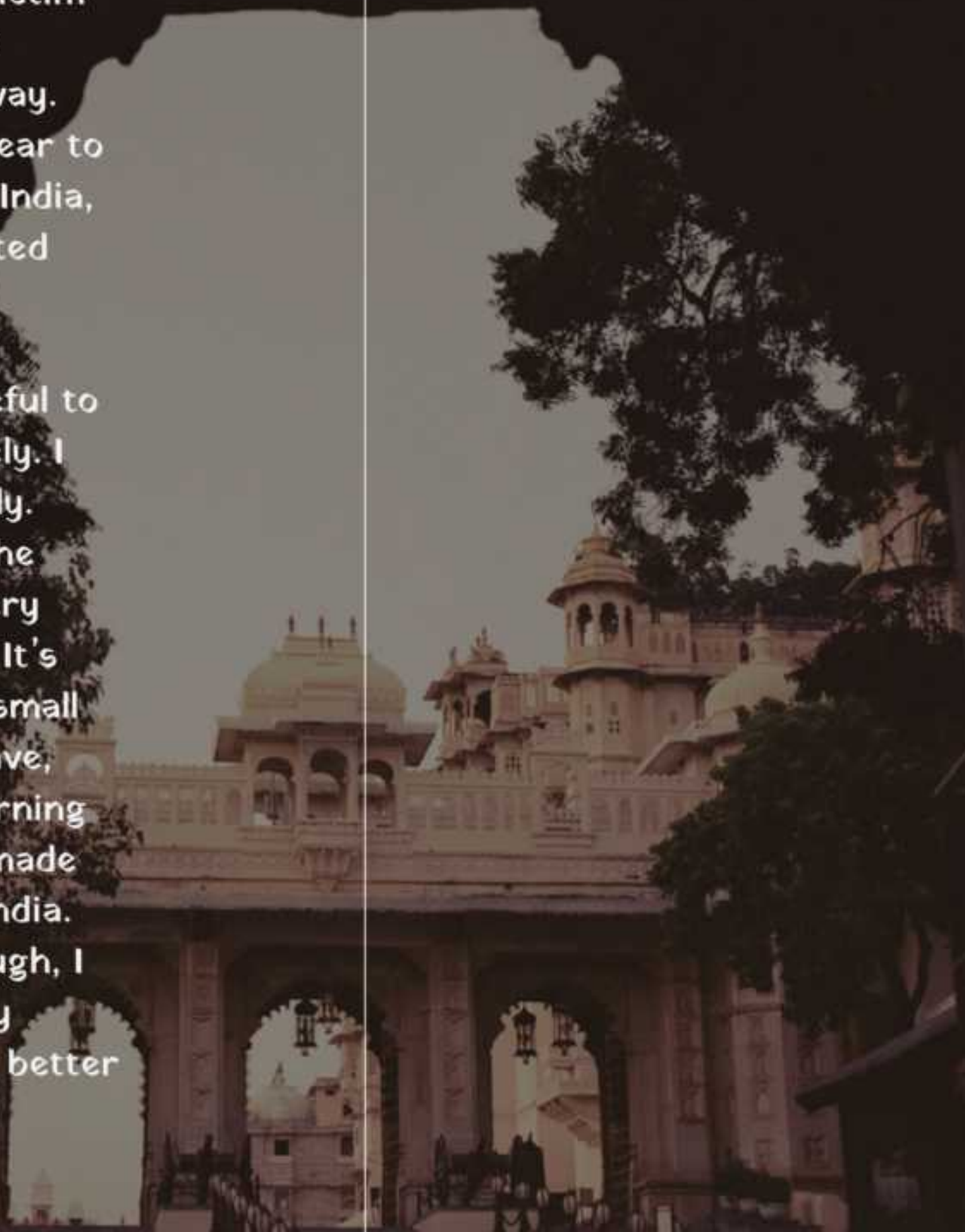
On August 30, I jumped over the U.S.-Mexico border fence. About 100 of us crossed together, hoping to overwhelm the border patrol agents and avoid getting caught.



LIFE IN THE US

I am one of the lucky few who actually made it to the U.S. Many others get sick or injured, fall victim to smugglers, or get detained along the way. Some take up to a year to reach the U.S. from India, and many are deported once they arrive.

I am incredibly grateful to be here, but it's lonely. I miss my family deeply. Right now, I live in the basement of a grocery store where I work. It's modest, with just a small mattress, a microwave, and a TV. But I'm earning \$100 a day—what I made in a month back in India. Once I've saved enough, I hope to return to my family and provide a better life for them.



THE FULL JOURNEY



TOTAL EXPENSES:

Smuggler fee: \$6,000	Pay trafficker: \$50
Dubai stay: \$50	Boat to Mexico: \$1.5
Necocli boat ride: \$40	Taxi: \$120
Darien Gap guide: \$170	Bus: \$340
Total: \$6,771.5	

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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