

MULE FOOTING POINTS ON THE SPANISH COLONIAL CAMINO DE CRUCES IN PANAMA

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Photo Credit: Francisco Cedeno of AED

The only reminder today of the passage of the mule trains through the Panamanian jungle on the 470 year old Camino de Cruces (Trail of Crosses), other than the old mule shoes that can still be found along the trail, are footing points etched by the mules in the soft shale stone that forms the base of stretches of the trail as it climbs and descends the hills through the jungle.

Large portions of the remarkably well preserved old Spanish colonial trail transverse deep ravines which forced the mules to walk in constrained circumstances. This in turn forced repeated use of the same footing points by successive animals as they climbed or descended. One California Forty-niner that traveled by mule on the trail wrote "...in some places there are holes worn by the mules' feet in the stone ... they would put one foot over and plant it firmly in one of those little holes, then the other in the same way."

After Francisco Pizarro conquered the Incas in South America in 1531, the King of Spain ordered the Camino de Cruces to be built as a route across the Panamanian Isthmus to transport precious metals and other merchandise to meet the Spanish treasure fleets at Portobello for transport back to Spain. It was constructed from Panama City half-way across the Isthmus to the Chagres River town of Ventas Cruz. From there goods were shipped down river on boats to the Caribbean Sea and along the coast to the port of Portobello.

There were other important Spanish colonial mule trade routes in South America and Mexico. The route from the silver mines in present day Potosi Bolivia to Lima Peru required 50,000 mules! However, Panama was the only



This is an interpretative banner at the ruins of the town of Venta Cruz which is on the Chagres River and was the start of the Camino de Cruces. U.S. Grant was stuck here for a week in 1852. The stockyards here had as much as 800 mules for hire.



These footing points that were etched by the mules in the soft shale stone that forms the base of stretches of the trail as it climbs and descends the hills through the jungle.

route that required constant importation of mules because it proved impossible to breed mules locally. Feed to sustain the mules also had to be imported because it was difficult to produce locally. One thousand mules had to make 3 trips across the Isthmus to supply the needs of the yearly trade fairs at Portobello.

The 1.5 meter wide Camino de Cruces was built with forced Indian and slave labor with different sizes of stones and a characteristic pattern stone crosses that gave it its name of the Camino de Cruces (Trail of Crosses). The Camino

de Cruces and the World Heritage Sites of Panama Viejo, Fort San Lorenzo, and Portobello have international significance as the primary historical connections for the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and the commercial nexus for the Spanish colonial world.

The Camino de Cruces was used intensely between 1532 and 1550 when enough gold from Peru was carried across it to double the commercial supply in Europe and reduce its purchasing power by half. This valuable transport attracted bandits and marauding bands

of pirates led by Sir Francis Drake and Henry Morgan to attack the mule trains.

A second period of intense use flourished from 1849 until the completion of the Panama Railroad in 1855 with the crossing of as many as 4,000 Forty-niners a week on their way to California. Thousands of mules were imported from abroad to handle this traffic. The stockyards at Ventas Cruz were said to contain as many as 800 mules for hire.

Future Civil War hero and U.S. President, Captain Ulysses S. Grant, was stuck at Ventas Cruz in July 1852 with all the equipment, family members, and the sick soldiers of the U.S. Fourth Infantry on their transfer from New York to be garrisoned in Oregon. An unscrupulous contractor wouldn't supply the mules he agreed to because he could rent them at a higher price to the Forty-niners. Grant led church services for his contingent on the banks of the Chagres River and read from Psalms 137 "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" Cholera was raging in Ventas Cruz at the time and Grant paid to rent mules at any price, even using his own personal funds, to get his charges across the Camino de Cruces to the relative safety of Panama City.

Mule footing points have been found in several locations on the trail. They are quite prominent and it is easy to see the shape of the mule shoes that formed them. Different footing points used to ascend and descend can even be distinguished. The ascending ones are deep and round. The descending points are longer and more shallow with the mule's hooves sliding and forming a trough until a catch hold was reached. The slippery shale stone would have been a challenge and even dangerous for horses. Sure-footed mules capable of placing their back feet exactly where their front feet found a foot hold were the perfect pack animal for this terrain!

The Soberania National Park in the old U.S. Canal Zone borders the Panama Canal and contains 9.5 kilometers of the 30 kilometer long Camino de Cruces. The few people that hike on the trail today have the opportunity to see four different species of monkeys, luminescent blue morph butterflies, and the



“Dibujo de Mules” is a sketch of Spanish mule drivers leading their mules on the Camino de Cruces

broken bottles at the old Spanish and Fortyniner way stations.

Outside of the park, the Camino de Cruces is under increasing pressure from land development, particularly the closer it gets to modern day Panama City. The mule footing points were identified as part of a joint effort by the Academy for Educational Development and local Panamanian authorities with financial support from the U.S. Agency for International Development to map the trail and identify historical sites. Additional information can be obtained by writing to brudert@cableonda.net.

1. The view looking up at the canopy of the jungle.
2. One of the huge trees in the jungle.
3. Ruins of the colonial Catholic Church at Venta Cruz. Shown are the steps to the alter.
4. This is the Cabulla River. The Camino de Cruces crosses it in the jungle.



Embera Indians that live right across the river from Venta Cruz

