

El Salvador and Guatemala

April 2004

We flew from Detroit to Houston and then on to San Salvador, El Salvador. We were two of only three gringos on the flight from Houston and the third looked like a businessman, leading us to conclude that we were the only tourists that day. I made my first mistake at the airport ATM. I had checked the Internet before departure and the exchange rate for one US dollar was about eight El Salvador Colons. I wanted about \$100 spending money, so I entered 800 for the amount. My eyes widened when the machine door opened. There were 800 US dollars in the drawer. We came to find out that three years earlier, the government had eliminated the Colon and replaced it with US dollars. Why it is still shown on currency exchange lists is beyond me. Panama and Ecuador have done this as well. El Salvador and Guatemala have a reputation for petty theft, and this was way too much money to be carrying around. Secondly, since when did our bank raise the limit to allow us to withdraw \$800 at once? We were now carrying more money than the median El Salvadoran makes in a year. We hid the money inside our clothes and headed for Suchitoto, which is a small town in the mountains. Our room at the Posada de Suchitlan had a wonderful private balcony with views of a lovely lake and mountains covered with coffee trees.

Semana Santa, or Easter Week, is the highlight of the calendar in Central America. This was Good Friday and we walked into the town square in the evening. Along the way, several groups had created alfombras in the streets. Translated literally, this means rugs, but these were not rugs. They were elaborate religious artworks, perhaps twelve feet square made of colored sawdust, sand and beautiful flowers. About seven in the evening, the Easter Procession began. There were three lighted floats with Mary, Jesus and the local saint. These were big, heavy contraptions which 20 men struggled to carry through the streets. Others carried a generator for the lighting. They were led by a dozen or so monks and followed by over a thousand townspeople carrying candles for the two-hour procession. The alfombras were destroyed as the procession walked right through the middle of them.

The next morning we took a hike in Cerro Verde National Park, had lunch overlooking a lake, visited some Mayan ruins and toured the capital city. There was next to no tourism. El Salvador's bloody civil war ended about a decade ago and the best tourist hotel was still largely empty. Both El Salvador and Guatemala were the last battlefields of Communism. The decades long civil wars ended during the nineties, and the countries are still adjusting. Guns and machetes are everywhere. One guide expressed great concern that the Communist Party received 800,000 votes or 20% in the recent elections.

On Easter Sunday we flew from San Salvador to Guatemala City. We drove first to Chichicastenango to visit the large indigenous market. The women were selling colorful fabrics and other handmade souvenirs. After some persistent salesmanship, I had my shoes polished in the park, but even that did not stop the countless offers to make them even shinier. I normally don't wear tennis shoes in foreign countries to avoid being labeled a tourist, but here I stood a full foot taller than the average person and had a much lighter complexion, so I wasn't fooling anyone. I wore tennis shoes for most of the rest of the trip just to keep the swarms away.

We spent two nights in Panajachel on the shores of a beautiful lake at around 5000 feet. The area is surrounded by volcanoes, one of which we intended to climb after a day of acclimatization. Our second mistake was eating in a restaurant with a lovely balcony overlooking the main street. It looked pleasant enough with artistically folded napkins and cloth tablecloths. After ordering, we went to wash our hands and found that there was no running water, only a large drum with a scoop. We should have questioned the cleanliness of the kitchen and left. Instead, we ate there, and I spent the next two days popping Imodium as I recovered. Our assault on Volcano San Pedro never happened.

The most common form of public transportation is in the back of pickup trucks. No, not a big full-size Chevy Silverado. We saw up to seventeen people crammed into the back of small, economy pickups. Some stood, others sat on the rim. Older women might be granted the comfort of a sitting space on the floor in the bed of the truck. The highway death toll has to be tremendous. A step up in public transportation is to a "chicken bus". These are old American school busses which are considered too tired to transport our children safely and reliably. They're brought to Guatemala, painted brightly and placed in service. In a chicken bus all of your fellow passengers are not necessarily human. Also, the machismo attitude of the drivers makes driving look like a game of chicken.

Our next stop was the Spanish colonial city of Antigua. It's also surrounded by volcanoes. One of them was putting on a show, puffing smoke into the otherwise clear blue sky. There are many tourists here. Lots of people come to study Spanish for \$145 per week including a private tutor for four hours each day, and room and board with a local family. There were many volunteer organizations seeking help with projects ranging from working in the hospital to setting up recycling centers to building houses. In addition to the more common tourist, we also met several missionaries and other people out to save the world. We stayed in the Posada de Don Rodrigo with verdant courtyards and lovely fountains. Most people were very welcoming, but it was important to count your change, whether the shopkeeper was smiling or not. There was no shortage of stories about thieves. There were armed guards most everywhere, from banks to Burger King.

This was the only city we stopped in without a litter problem. A guide explained that nearly all business is done under the table, so almost no one pays taxes, and the government is powerless to provide much in the way of services. A local group has started collecting ten percent of the hotel bills, which is used to fund independent foundations which pay for the special tourist police, garbage collection, historic preservation, and an orphanage which does not support foreign adoptions. There were many foreign visitors in Antigua for the purpose of adopting Guatemalan children. This was similar to our experiences in China and Russia. The foundation does not support foreign adoption because of stories that some of them involve kidnapped babies or babies taken from their mothers by coercion. In the country, a typical woman has 8 children and a fifty-year-old grandmother would expect to have fifty grandchildren. There is also purportedly a fair bit of sexual tourism, but not in the open like we saw in Thailand. It's allegedly arranged over the Internet.

We spent the last few days in the jungles of the Peten province visiting the ancient Mayan ruins of Tikal. We climbed several of these massive structures in the steaming heat and looked down on the hummingbirds, parrots, toucans and macaws in the treetops. We saw coatis, deer and some very industrious ants. Monkeys howled and swung from the trees. These seemingly harmless animals make such a horrific noise that it was used as the voice of T-Rex in Jurassic Park. We stayed at a lodge deep in the National Park where the electricity is from a generator, which is turned off at ten PM. It gets very dark. An incredible experience. Our last night in the jungle was spent in a luxury hotel in El Remate. We rode mountain bikes into town and ate at a small Italian restaurant. Mistake number three. This time it was Cheryl scrambling for the Imodium. Nevertheless, we enjoyed a sunset cruise on the lake and a hike to an ancient Mayan overlook. We were the only tourists on this hotel-sponsored event. We had a private guide and were accompanied by our own shotgun-toting guard.

We finished with a trip back to Guatemala City and had a very brief tour before returning home. As further evidence of the lack of tourism, the Immigration Officer was looking at our declaration form in Houston. "You've been to El Salvador?" he asked. "Yes" was our reply. He continued, "Do you know someone there?" He checks in flights everyday and still seemed surprised that American tourists would choose to visit. We were tempted to tell him that we enjoyed the trip. It was fascinating to study the culture of countries not far removed from civil war. The weather was warm and there was no rain. The country people wore incredible, vibrant outfits, and the scenery is beautiful. We could recommend this trip for other experienced travelers. We didn't tell the Immigration Officer any of this. We kept our mouths shut and he let us go.

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