

December 1998

Cheryll and I departed on Wednesday, December 16th for our great South American adventure. Rich had taken his Spanish final exam on Tuesday evening at MCC and was ready for the real test. We had an eight-hour layover in Miami, so we rented a car and drove to Everglades National Park. We took a few short hikes in the sawgrass and met some alligators (or were they crocodiles?) sleeping contentedly. The first Spanish test came when paying for the fuel for the rental car. In the area around the Miami airport, English is not the primary language.

Our overnight flight stopped in Belém, Brazil and then continued on to Manaus. Manaus is a city in the heart of the Amazon region. It is the product of the rubber boom around the turn of the century. We checked into our hotel (The Novotel - We were pleasantly surprised by all but one of our hotels on this trip) and our first cultural experience was at breakfast. They were serving piranha soup. I scooped out a ladle full and got a piranha head. It was staring straight at me with its beady eyes and long, sharp, pointed teeth. I decided to try the mangoes instead. They seemed less threatening. In the afternoon we went down to the city pier and took a boat ride into the jungle. It was a very interesting port. Boats that are styled after Disney World's Jungle Larry's Safari are running up and down the river to the small villages along its banks. Passengers sleep in hammocks and most of the journeys take several days. Manaus is the hub of activity and people contract with the Captain of a boat going in their direction. Our tour took us into the jungle where a monkey stole my Pepsi. We visited the "meeting of the waters" where the black Rio Negro flows into the brown Amazon. It looks like mixing Coke with hot chocolate. The next morning we had a brief city tour and then headed to the airport for our flight to Rio de Janeiro by way of Brasilia.

Rio was not at all what we expected. It was wonderful! Our hotel was right on the Copacabana beach. It seems that in Brazil no license (only a cooler) is required to sell ice-cold beer on the beach, and it was plentiful at around a dollar a can. And the scenery! Suffice it to say that the Brazilian ladies' beach uniform consists of four small triangles (triangles are good!) and that the Brazilians take great pride in their appearance. Oh, and the surrounding mountains are nice, too. Cheryll spent a lot of time hitting me, warning me that I could get whiplash from turning my neck too fast, and wiping the drool from my chin. We also toured the city and spent one evening at an overlook (Sugarloaf) watching the sun set and the city's lights come out. We took a day trip to an island in the bay (Paqueta) where cars are banned and enjoyed a horse-drawn carriage ride. A walk down Ipanema beach also provided much neck exercise. We had expected to be surrounded by slums, but most neighborhoods were middle class. It was very modern. Rio deserves a return visit someday.

Our next stop was at Iguazú Falls in western Brazil, near the borders with Argentina and Paraguay. The falls are in the rainforest and are a two-mile long chain of 275 smaller falls. Cheryll took a lot of pictures from many angles. We also took a boat ride to see the falls from below. Nearby is the Itaipu Dam, which is the world's largest producer of electricity. We took a tour, drove across the dam, and watched a propaganda video at the visitor's center. The video spent more time discussing the politically correct social impacts of the dam than the construction of this incredible engineering feat.

As we do keep score of how many countries we've visited, we felt compelled to briefly visit Paraguay. There is a bridge to Ciudad del Este from the Brazilian side of the river which we walked across. It was not a pleasant place and reminded us of Tijuana. There was garbage all over the streets and lots of armed guards. We had a beer and hurried back to Brazil after less than an hour.

We enjoyed our week in Brazil and hope to return someday, but they still seem to have some problems with political patronage, which require fixing. The first involved the \$45 visas we had to get

before departure. We had to appear personally at the consulate which required a trip to Chicago. There, Cheryl presented our passports, applications, photos and \$45 each (no credit cards or checks). They stamp the passports and return them after 24 hours. If you can't make it to a consulate, you can use a service for \$100. They refuse to do this by mail. I think this is make-work for friends of Brazilian politicians. The second problem was with money changing. The only places authorized to change money were banks, hotels and travel agents who were all helping themselves to a healthy ten percent fee to change currency and fifteen percent for traveler's checks. In the rest of the world, two or three percent is the norm with no charge for credit card purchases and \$2 for an ATM transaction. Our ATM cards did not work because their machines were not hooked into an international network. We've used them all over the world but not in Brazil. I just read that the Brazilian Finance Minister was recently fired. Perhaps he's the one who the official moneychangers paid off to hold on to their monopolies. It couldn't have happened to a nicer guy.

We found Argentina to be thoroughly modern with a much more progressive attitude. We flew from Iguazú to Buenos Aires on Christmas Eve. Our first cultural experience here was at the ATM machine at the airport. We had no problem making a withdrawal and were given a choice by the machine; we could select either Argentinean Pesos or United States Dollars! US dollars worked for transactions all over Argentina, except at the post offices. It seems that the Argentineans have been trying to model their government and economy after the US in many ways. We checked into our hotel and were awakened at midnight by fireworks (fuegos artificiales). It seems that the Argentineans celebrate Christmas on Christmas Eve. Next time we'll stay up. The city tour the next day was quite pleasant. I treated our fellow passengers to my version of "Don't cry for me Argentina....." in front of the Casa Rosada (President's Palace). Everyone thought I did better than Madonna as Evita. Argentina is famous for the tango and we went looking for lessons. We had to settle for a tango show. We enjoyed it thoroughly, as all drinks were included in the admission. Cheryl the shopper had been frustrated by the prices in Brazil, but we bought cashmere sweaters in Buenos Aires.

The next day we signed up for an optional excursion to the countryside (pampas) to a ranch (estancia) to see Argentinean cowboys (gauchos) at work. This was a disappointment. It was not a working ranch. It was 20 acres set aside for a brief show for the tourists in an area that looks like the Midwest. However, the lunch was good and Cheryl got to kiss a gaucho who speared a small ring while riding his horse at full speed..

The next morning we took a flight two hours south into the dry, barren region of Argentina called Patagonia. It reminded us of Montana. We stayed in Bariloche, which is a city settled by Germans and Danes on a beautiful lake on the edge of the Andes. We spent four nights in this area and took a series of busses and boats across the continental divide into Chile. The scenery was spectacular and the days were long. A highlight was in Puerto Varas, Chile. The night sky was clear and there was a full moon. It was reflecting off the snow-capped peak of the Osorno Volcano 40 miles distant across a quiet lake. Spectacular!

We enjoyed Argentina and plan to return. Next time we may also take the ferry from Buenos Aires to Montevideo (The capital of Uruguay). We'd also like to head south to Tierra del Fuego at the tip of the continent and cruise the Beagle Channel. Western Argentina also has a "train ride to the clouds" which looks interesting.

On New Year's Eve we had a morning tour of the Puerto Montt, a fishing village that is the southern end of the Pan-American Highway. It's as far south as you can drive in Chile. Rich tried to expand his Spanish vocabulary with the names of many weird shellfish (mariscos) at the market. We found the Chileans to be tough, hard-working, disciplined people.

We caught a short flight to Santiago, the capital. Our tour guide explained that although Chile was recently a dictatorship, that it was now a democracy. His definition of "democracy" must be somewhat different than ours, as he went on to explain that eight out of nine senators are appointed by the military. Santiago reminded us of Phoenix. It's a modern city in the high desert. When we come back, it will probably be to go to Easter Island, a Chilean possession 2000 miles west in the Pacific.

It was New Year's Eve and they blocked several streets downtown and shot off fireworks. We had spent the last New Year's Eve in Assisi, Italy. Unlike the Italians, the Chileans were very polite and well behaved. They watched politely, applauded at the end, and then went home. We saw no one who was drunk or disorderly. Perhaps people have been conditioned not to stand out because the recent dictatorship was known for having people it considered a threat "disappear".

On New Year's day we joined three others from our tour group for a day tour of the nearby cities of Valparaiso and Vina del Mar. Valparaiso is Chile's biggest port. It's known for its "ascensores" which are fun but rickety cable cars which take you to the upper levels of the city for terrific views. Vina del Mar is a beach resort where we had a nice lunch in a seaside restaurant.

The next morning we had an early flight on a tired AeroPeru 727 to Lima, Peru. AeroPeru is one of the few remaining airlines which still allows smoking. The flight attendants were taking full advantage of this privilege. I think it helps them keep their weight down so that they can fit into their, er, ah, uniforms (Whoa, I'm having a flashback to the seventies). Lima is a beautiful seaside city in a dry, desert area. The colonial architecture is beautiful with big squares, cathedrals, and red-tile roofs. The unfortunate part of the architecture is that everything seemed to be decorated by a very high wall topped with shards of broken glass set in concrete, spikes, barbed wire or an electric fence. Most of the stores and restaurants also employed an armed guard with a bulletproof vest. We enjoyed our stay and personally witnessed no crime problem, but it was difficult to feel comfortable surrounded by such extreme security measures. One day was enough in Lima.

Our final stop was high in the Andes at the ancient capital of the Incan Indians in Cuzco, Peru. The altitude was over 11,000 feet, and it took a while to acclimatize. Cheryll and I were fine, but several members of our group were sick. Three returned to Lima early and one spent the day in a clinic suffering from altitude sickness and dehydration. We took a train to Machu Picchu, the ancient Incan city at the top of a mountain high in the jungle. We rolled the clock back 200 years as we rolled through the countryside where descendants of the Inca were working their fields by hand and children watched over the livestock. The views of the ruins at Machu Picchu were fantastic. I felt like buying Kodak stock. Our final day was spent touring the countryside as Cheryll shopped for the local handicrafts. Our trip home was uneventful and we arrived early, just after a snowstorm had shut down Detroit Metro the day before.

We enjoyed South America and hope to return soon. My Spanish courses were very helpful in getting around, as English is not widely spoken in some areas. I expected it to be like a Mexican beach resort with a row of hotels on the beach and then a slum. It wasn't. Most neighborhoods were very middle class. The drivers tended to be polite. The people were very hard working and the service at the hotels and in the restaurants was generally excellent. We hope to return again. It's nice during the winter to enjoy long days and warm weather. We're considering a trip to Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands to welcome the new millennium.

The statistics (for those of you keeping score at home):

Flights: 15 (Everything connected, two were an hour or two late)
Longest wait for our bags: 30 minutes (None of the flights were on Northwest)
Countries Visited: 5 (Rich has visited a total of 53, Cheryl 48)
Theft attempts on our group of 29 people: 8 (Mostly pickpockets, none on Rich or Cheryl except for the monkey stealing the Pepsi in the Amazon Jungle)
Successful theft attempts on our group: None
Weather: Most days in the 80's or 90's, 70's in the mountains; 2 hours of rain in 22 days
Snow on the ground upon arrival home: 1 foot
South American Countries claiming to be the "most" Catholic: At least 4
Average age of our tour group: Around 65 – We did many things independently
Direction water drains from the bathtub in the Southern Hemisphere: Counter-Clockwise

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