

Recollections of Guatemala - 10

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April 13, Thursday (cont.) ... we make our way to the vicinity of the **San Francisco Church** and find a suitable spot on the procession route and await the show. Now ... I'm 5 foot 8 inches tall ... average or even below average in height for an American. But when I stand on the sidewalk looking at the procession, I am literally heads-over-shoulder above virtually all of the Guatemalan and Indian throng before me. I have a clear line of sight and I'm standing in the rear ... that shows you how short these people are. Anyway, in time we hear the blaring of trumpets and the show is about to start. We can see a heavy plume of incense smoke near the corner and the Roman centurions are making their presence known and the procession starts. This is another reenactment of the "Passion" ...





You may ask, or should ask ... what of the trampled carpets ... what happens to them? Simple ... no sooner does the procession pass than the Antigua Department of Streets and Sanitation (or something similar) descends on the scene and picks up the debris. Efficiency if ever I saw ... not even enough time for Indian scavengers to rush in and pick over the flowers (perhaps to resell elsewhere).



By 4PM our eyes glazed over from the colorful displays and tearful from all of the incense ... time to head back to apartment for some rum and cokes, cold wine, and some snacks. Later we will dine on some fine **carne** (chipped roast beef) ... it was a great day. Tomorrow we will see more processions.

April 14, Friday ... it is **Good Friday**, to be exact. In the Christian world it is a day of sorrow and mourning; the day **Christ** was crucified. Antigua will be hosting three processions today in observance of the crucifixion. We were advised that a special procession would be held in the early morning hours of Friday morning ... actually in the middle of the night. Not to miss this opportunity we get up at 2:30AM and head out of the house looking for this procession. Have no clue where it starts or its intended route. It is rumored that the **Roman** legion is on the lookout for **Christ** ... to arrest him. So that's what we were looking for ... **Roman** centurions on a manhunt. Hearing a commotion, we head in that direction ... we pass by more carpets being created as well as the occasional all-night reveler sleeping it off ...



The last image is the reading of "the crimes of Christ and why he is being arrested". I understand that this "search" will go on for the next 3 hours with a reading done every few blocks ... we heard enough and head back to bed. It is 3:30AM.

It was a restless night considering our mid-night stroll, the dogs barking, the buses arriving with more El Salvadorans and the after-effects of rum and cokes. The raucous nearby tells us that another procession is just outside our door ... it was passing at 6:45AM.

We hurriedly leave our apartment just as the procession is forming. The crowds are assembled but I take my place in the rear, considering my height. Some tall Euro-trash (white guy) is mingling among the processionalists and ruining any chances of a good photo-op. Sorry ... add additional American-trash doing the same. Morons just don't get it ... just because they have a camera does not mean they have free-access to the interior of the procession. What a**holes (sorry for the language again). We make every effort to capture decent images of this procession ... **Christ** in his "passion" ...



The white clad participant (2nd row, first image) is Pontius Pilate. You will note, above, the men carrying the bier with Christ carrying his cross. This was one massive bier, requiring, at my count, a minimum of 60 men per side. The women's bier required 15 women per side. By 7:30AM the procession passed and we returned to our apartment for a shower and some breakfast.

By 10AM things settled down and we left for town again. **Central Plaza** was filling up for something was about to happen nearby ... who knows. Oh yes ... a procession was passing by. By now we are "processioned-out" and do some more shopping, sit and people watch and observe more children who are having children. We return to our apartment and feel like salmon swimming upstream because the procession watchers are going east while we are heading west. A hot lunch and a nap were in order.

2PM and time to do ... what else ... watch another procession? This one is to be held at the **Catedral**. We arrive in time to see **Central Plaza** mobbed ... wall-to-wall people, mainly Indians. We find a spot near the street and, hopefully not blocking a small Indian, stand our ground and watch the events at the Cathedral. The crucifixion ended and it was time to take **Christ** down from the cross. We followed this hour-long ceremony, but it was in Spanish. While standing there I started to observe the happenings around me ... virtually the Cathedral 'play' mesmerized the entire plaza. Now these Indians follow Catholicism and Mayan-Catholicism and display piety and spiritualism. Although the Evangelical movement is making headways into Latin America, Catholicism is still the dominant faith. Heads raised and arms uplifted these Indians appear lost in their "communion with God" (right). But I look downward and what do I see? A small Indian boy, perhaps 6 years old, was searching among the garbage on the plaza grounds for something edible. He finds an empty ice cream cup and, with his dirty little finger, scrapes the sides retrieving leftover ice cream. Next he finds a spoon that someone just discarded and licks the remaining foodstuff. His clothes are ragged ... his face unwashed ... his hair matted ... a pathetic soul. Yet his father, standing next to him, was properly dressed and had a mobile phone hanging from his belt. Can you believe the irony of this scene ... hunger or merely unsocial behavior next to modern technology? I made sure I had my hand on my wallet for who knows what this kid may be looking for next. Honestly!!!!!! The Cathedral pageant images follow ...





Festivities over, we look for a place to have late lunch. Find **Monoloco Restaurant** ... climb to the second floor outdoors veranda ... and sit down to order a light snack. Beer is satisfying ... the onion rings greasy but tasty ... and the second-hand smoke from nearby tables disgusting. Weary from the day's procession watching we head back to the apartment and collapse. Rum and cokes in hand, laid out on the sofa and easy chair, we settle-in for the evening. Watch soaps on TV ... American movies, CNN and FOX news are our daily staples. What one sees on news networks is totally different outside the US as in the US. Internationally, blood and gore do not lead the news ... international happenings do. The immigrant (or the 'illegal') issue dominates the news. CNN-news appears balanced but FOX-news is so heavily pro-Bush that it is almost an embarrassment.

Dinner consisted of tacos ... different this time. Could not find salsa in the local market so had to do with tomato-like condiment. Tasted odd, almost bland. Having no alternative, I downed two. Jim passed on dinner ... tomato is not the same as salsa. Don't blame him. Evening was spent watching TV and sucking down rum and cokes. Did you know that homes in Guatemala, as a rule, do not have furnaces for heat or air conditioners for cooling? True ... this is tropical country. Winters are mild and only a space heater is needed. If you want a cool house ... open the windows and seek a breeze.

Ready to call it a night we hear a "boom-boom" outside ... this can only mean ... a procession. No ... it's enough for one day and we absolutely take a pass.

April 15, Saturday ... today it's quiet in Antigua. The major festivities are over (meaning the processions) and most of the Hondurans, Panamanians, Mexicans and El Salvadorans have left town ... we have the town to ourselves. We spend a leisurely morning at the apartment and go out about 10AM. We stroll the town without a care because the pickpockets are mostly gone and the sidewalks devoid of Indians. It's a clear day ... the volcano is showing its peak but the air is heavy with the stench of urine. I suppose before the visitors left they must have emptied their bladders in force. Boy does it stink. We stop by a coffee roasting company but they are closed for business ... we go on to Central Plaza ... nothing happening here. Boy is this town dead ... and that's a good feeling. Being almost noon, the **Artisan Market** should be open by now so we head that way. We shop for bargains ... and those bargains are appearing with more frequency since most of the tourist disappeared. We buy placemats with the most vivid colors ... napkin holders shaped like fruit ... wax candleholder with free candles ... and eggs made out of clay. We're able to relax and enjoy the town. Finally have a chance to purchase CDs ... although every CD is pirated. There is no such thing as Guatemalan folk music so we have to do with marimba.

Over drinks, Jim and I discuss the state of tourism in Guatemala and conclude that tourists are prime targets for crime ... because tourists are naïve enough to believe that this culture is wonderful and benign. Truth is ... if you decide to visit the nearby volcano park or even the park above the city, the Indians can recognize a tourist a mile away and make them a target for scamming or outright thievery. These Indians are not stupid ... they know what they can get away with and mistreating tourists is one of those things. But then again, tourists do it to themselves. A reasonable person would stay in their hotel room after dark and not roam the streets, especially in areas suspect. They would stay away from outlying small towns where the Indian population is high and tourists are easy prey. Like I say ... know thy enemy and one such enemy is stupidity.

We roam the town at will and before long it is early evening ... time to eat. I offer to treat Jim and patty to a supper. The only restaurant of any reputation is the **Tres Fratelli Restaurant**, serving Italian fare. We are offered a table in a no-smoking section and contemplate our evening's dining with anticipation. We order Chianti wine, lasagna, and fettuccini, Caesar salad accompanied by fresh bread. The evening was off to a leisurely start, for a waitress (not our waitress) approached us and started a conversation in English, presumably because she overheard us talking in English. Her name is **Izabel Babula** ... a Guatemalan of German descent. What was interesting was that she is married to a Pole, lived for a time in Poland (City of Rzeszow) but left because of the cold winters and spoke German, Swiss German, Polish, Italian, English and of course Spanish. **Izabel** regaled us with anecdotes of her travels, her husband and life in Antigua. It was refreshing to have an intelligent conversation with a total stranger. The service at **Tres Fratelli** was excellent and the meal superb. Cost was Q450 (~\$60 USD) and worth the expense. Not counting Dolores' meatloaf ... the best I had in Guatemala. As we left, **Izabel** bade us farewell with a "**dobranoc**" ... Polish for "goodnight". It was a delightful evening with good company and good food.

We walked to **Central Park** ... found that a 10:30PM Mass was in the **Catedral** and joined in the service briefly. This Mass was followed by an all-woman procession immediately in front of the church. I can only assume that it was an all-woman procession because **Christ** has not risen yet and men "had nothing to carry". We left for the apartment soon after.