

Recollections of Guatemala -2

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March 31, Friday ... today is a very happy day. We leave this madhouse called Guatemala City (really ... it's not that great) and head northeast, to the playground of the country, and for some sun, relaxation and exploration. We intend to stop by some major cultural attractions on the way so the sooner we start the sooner we can breathe easier (figuratively and literally speaking). We get up at 6AM ... make our makeshift breakfast of coffee, juices and oatmeal ... (Jim had the leftover pizza) ... do our hygiene and pack our bags. And there are a lot of bags to handle. Besides the personal luggage and carry-on's, Patty brought, for her parents and sisters, one humongous bag of clothing, a ceramic crock-pot and a porcelain water dispenser ... which she carried ever so gingerly, or shall I say lugged ... through the airports. Our little sedan took on an air of a mini chicken bus, sans the roof carry. It was tight in the rear seat but once this excess baggage is deposited in **Playitas**, (her parents village), near **Morales**, we will regain our comfort. Anyway ... we're off at 7:30AM ... we pull out of the tightly wedged Tally parking lot, turn left and maneuver our way through the gridlock. We pass a bus station where overland busses are ready for departure. We will drop off Patty at this station in three weeks for she is to stay an extra two weeks with her parents. Yes ... she will take a bus (but not a chicken bus) a distance of nearly 300 miles on her own. No big deal, says Jim, as Patty is accustomed to Guatemalan bus travel and is skilled enough to manage her way. So on we march through bus-choked streets ... through **Avenida de los Arboles** ... take a shortcut through **Calle de las Tunczez** ... **Diagonal 8** ... and catch the **CA9** highway at **La Ermita (Asiento original de la ciudad**, which translates to 'the original entry to the city'). The **CA9** is know as the **Costa Atlantica Highway**, the most direct and the only way to reach the Caribbean coast from the interior.

Bus congestion is pervasive ... they are noxious, loud and grimy. They stop at the wave of a hand at any inconvenient location ... even the middle of the street. They block traffic, belch black smoke and are driven, or aimed, by 'jockeys' who seem to have a suicidal death wish but are essentially skilled drivers. Pedestrian dare not play "chicken" with a bus for surely they will lose.



Buses run a tight schedule and any "casualty" on the road is overlooked ... drivers have been known to hit a pedestrian, abandon their bus and are never seen again. Isn't this culture "quaint"? Pretty soon we are on the CA9 outside the city. The road is mountainous, winding and steep in many locations. Guatemala City lies at an elevation of nearly 8,000 feet (I would guess) and the elevation drop to the coast is significant. Being the major artery, it is clogged with buses, trucks and cars in a hurry. It does not help that several sections of the CA9 are under re-construction and the sound of impatient horns is ever present. One back up going to the city was over one mile long and the exasperated look on the drivers was telling. As we wound our way downhill we began to see a transition in "architecture" ... from the brick and concrete housing to truly "shantytown" structures that demonstrated utter poverty.

These hovels were everywhere and in every conceivable open space. On lowlands, hillsides and perched precariously on ridges and hilltops. Imagine a group of tin-roofed, dirt-floored lean-tos clinging to the slope of a 60-degree hillside. The only access is by well-worn footpaths, winding like serpents among the homes, small gardens and fields of corn. Like a deck of cards, if a landslide or torrential downpour takes down a house on the upper level, surely all structures below would be swept away. Much of the population living in this squalid, appalling condition is "squatting" ... they do not own the land. Such is the disparity between the "have" and "have not". As we navigate our way ever eastward the scenery changes little for the first 100 miles. The high-alpine countryside is pretty and the distant mountain peaks are awesome. The sky is grey and somewhat overcast for this is the beginning of the "slash and burn" season (above) ... a little early this year due to the ongoing drought.



Soon the drop in elevation changes to high desert with cacti becoming the dominant vegetation. We pass many small **aldeas** (small towns or villages) with **tiendas** and **vendoras** (left) everywhere. Our little sedan is underpowered considering the four passengers and excess luggage. But going downhill we are making good time.



Today's destination is **Esquipulas** ... a historic town near the Honduran border.

*The town of **Esquipulas** in the **Chiquimula Department** is one of the most significant in Central America. Second only in importance to the shrine of the **Virgin of Guadalupe** outside Mexico City is the **Basilica of Esquipulas** with its **Icon of the Black Christ** that dates back to 1595. Pilgrims from all over Central America gather here. **Esquipulas** is also the seat of the **Central American Parliament** and, given its location just a short distance from the borders with **Honduras** and **El Salvador**, it has also been the place where several important peace agreements have been signed. The villages, forests and mountains of **Mataquesuintla** are home to the **Pocomam Indians** who produce some outstanding textiles and ceramics.*



The ride is tense considering the overcrowded roads so we decide to take a short break at a major intersection ... where the **CA9** to **Tikal** and **Puerto Barrios** (and the Caribbean) and our road, the **CA10** to **Zacapa** and **Esquipulas**, meet (left). We stretch our legs and wander among the **vendoras** ... purchasing some juice drinks and **agua pura**. It's a littler early in the day so most are just opening up and displaying their modest offerings. The fruit stands are doing a brisk business but the food stalls are again unappealing. After stretching our legs we head back to the car to continue our journey. I see some hammocks on display down the road so I ask Jim to meet me there while I walk the short distance. I turn and start my walk when a major catastrophic (to me) event of the trip happens ... I stumble.

How or why I stumbled is easy to understand. The typical Guatemalan roadbed slopes gently for water drainage with a concrete ditch alongside. However, in this particular section of the road (right), the transition from roadbed to ditch was abrupt ... a misstep on my part and my right knee buckled. I knew that I was flying through the air like Superman and the bottom of the ditch was rapidly approaching my face. The odd thing thought is ... I knew I was in for a rough landing and I had the presence of mind to protect my \$1,000 digital camera. I raised the camera even with my head and landed square on my stomach in the ditch ... in the middle of the ditch. I looked left and then right and all I saw was the rubbish before my eyes. My right elbow hurt from the impact and I heard laughter, or was it a surprised, anguished exclamation, from my fellow travelers. Even a surprised Guatemalan came out from the adjoining tent to see what happened. I lay there for what seemed like an hour, but it was only a few seconds. I raised myself out of the ditch ... spat out some dirt and leaves ... and walked back to the car. I knew my camera was OK ... just a tiny scratch on the underside. My elbow, though, was another matter. It was scraped and bruised and started to ache. It also started to swell. Upon closer inspection I discovered, to my dismay, that I punched a hole in my elbow that was $\frac{1}{2}$ " in diameter and $\frac{1}{4}$ " deep. I started to bleed like a butchered pig ... blood running down my forearm and onto my clothing. Oh oh, this looks serious ... and it was! But what the hell ... what can I do in the middle of the country, away from any clinic or medical assistance. I applied a compress to stop the bleeding and advised all to just get in the car, head for the nearest town on our route and find a pharmacy where some first-aid items may be purchased. You know ... "stuff happens" and this was just an incident I would have to accept and treat accordingly. Hopefully, it would not impact the trip in any major way and my only concern was infection. Time and adequate treatment of the wound would lessen the mishap. We resumed our journey and all tried to offer some assurances that my injury was not life threatening. Right ... it's my elbow, it hurt like hell and everyone just took it in stride, except me. The compress lessened the bleeding but as soon as it was removed blood poured out ... over my slacks, over the car seat and door panel. We had to find a **farmacia** soon.



On the road to **Esquipulas** there are only two towns of any size ... **Zacapa** and **Chiquimula**. In Zacapa we did not encounter any pharmacies so we headed on to Chiquimula. Patty's brother lived there so perhaps we can achieve two goals ... administer aid to my elbow and locate her brother. On second thought ... my elbow took priority. We pulled into town, drove down the main street (left) and found an open **farmacia**. In third-world pharmacies things are not done as in any other civilized country ... nearly everything of value is behind the counter so it cannot be stolen. We ask for hydrogen peroxide, iodine, bandages, gauze and tape. I forgot the cost, perhaps Q30 (~\$4 USD). Back on the street, Jim assisted me in applying medical treatment. Now Jim is no medical practitioner but being a former sailor he knew enough to do the right thing. We cleaned the wound with the peroxide (no, it

did not hurt). Then he applied the iodine ... yes, felt like a hot branding iron was applied to the wound ... followed by a gauze pad and secured with tape. The tape was wound too tight but it was necessary to stop the bleeding. Medical procedure finished, we

elected to bypass finding her brother (will do on the return leg) and headed out of town to Esquipulas. Some sort of merriment returned to this journey and the ride was becoming pleasant again. The scenery was becoming of interest again as the high desert of the countryside offered interesting diversions.

Soon enough we crested a hill and saw the town of **Esquipulas** ...



But first we had to attend to my injury again ... it started to bleed profusely. As with any injury, the body reacts by isolating the injured part with a water sack. In my case, the water sack drained the wound and soaked my clothing, car seat and door panel again. At the town overlook, we redid the bandage with peroxide, iodine and new bandages. By now, my slacks had the color of a red rose and it was disconcerting to walk around like a war casualty. I changed into another pair of slacks ... in full view of many people ... and Jim washed down the car interior, which surprisingly was successful. Injury still ached and the arm was stiffening up a bit.



Bleeding stopped, we lingered a while at this overlook, partook of a lunch snack of **pollo** and juice and admired the purpose of our visit ... the **Basilica of Esquipulas** (right). Continuing our journey, we made our way down the hill and entered the town. It was time to find a hotel for the night,



not an easy task considering the few choices and the many visitors. We drove around the town center a few times looking for a hotel that Jim stayed in a few years back. We found the hotel (left) and noted with interest the many **tuc-tuc's** (right) that plied the town. This is a new import ... a sort of cheap taxi alternative that took the country by storm. Not cheap to buy but cheap to operate and affordable for people to hire. A few Q's and you can be taken from one end of town to the other. Every city, as we discovered, has these contraptions. They're both a blessing and a nuisance.



No one was minding the hotel at the moment so the ladies looked around the area for other accommodations. There were alternative hotels that looked promising but were so out-of-date, so shabby and uninviting that even at Q150 (~\$20 USD) a room, they were unappealing. Eventually the chosen hotel's manager showed up, we selected our rooms at Q175 (~\$25 USD), unloaded the car and settled in. Jim parked the car at the hotel's secure **parque**. To celebrate the arrival, I applied an ice pack to the elbow ... Jim and I poured ourselves some rum and cokes ... and we collectively unwound our bodies. In short order our thirst was satisfied and it was time to head out and visit the basilica. We made our way to the main street ... ignoring the many **vendoras** plying all manner of religious trinkets and garish souvenirs. Two blocks away the plaza in front of the church beckoned us and we joined the horde of visitors entering the church. This was our first encounter with the indigenous Guatemalan Indians. Their colorful dress made for an interesting experience. We intended to make the most of this visitation; the church beckoned us.

Church of the Black Christ, Esquipulas, Guatemala ... In 1595, a statue of Christ on the Cross, carved from dark balsam wood, was installed in the church. It is not known specifically why the statue is dark. (Some people assume it is due to the centuries of candle smoke inside the church, but this is not the case. The smoke does not stain the clothing of the statue, and underneath the protective clothing the wooden skin is no less dark.) Most probably the dark color - it is not really black but rather a coffee brown - points to the strong pagan elements that infused and influenced early Colonial Christianity throughout Meso- and Central America. Christian pilgrimages to the church began shortly after 1737 when the Archbishop of Guatemala visited and went away cured of a chronic ailment. Local church authorities, knowing the enormous income statistics of vital European pilgrimage shrines, constructed a new church in 1758. Situated about a mile from the old church of Santiago, the great white basilica was soon attracting pilgrims from all over Central America. While pilgrims journey to the shrine throughout the year, there are two periods when their numbers multiply greatly. One is for a week up to and culminating on January 15, the other is the week of Easter. During these times, upwards of a hundred thousand pilgrims descend upon the normally quiet mountain valley to adore the Black Christ. Great markets spring up, the hotels are over-filled, and people sleep in the church courtyard and along the city streets. These festivals are said to be the finest displays of native dress in all of Central America

The primary goal of pilgrims during these two festivals is to have a few seconds in front of the Black Christ. Winding around and within the church is a long, constructed path upon which the pilgrims walk toward the sanctuary of the Dark Christ. It is traditional that one never turns one's back to the Christ. That is why pilgrims leave the area of the icon by walking backwards. From early in the morning until late at night well over 10,000 people will be walking very slowly in this line, patiently waiting for their time with the venerated statue. Some pilgrims, possessed of great devotion or expressing intense prayers, will crawl - on their knees and elbows - the one-mile from the old church to the new. The basilica is not a particularly beautiful building nor does it have the fine carvings and lovely stained glass windows found in European pilgrimage churches.



Images above (left to right, top to bottom) ...

- The Basilica approach ...
- Daytime worshippers holding vigils and lighting candles ...
- Nighttime in the Basilica ...
- Devoted worshippers on knees – from front door to altar ...
- The “Black Christ” in the sanctuary ...



Completing our visitation, including viewing the Black Christ ... and yes, exiting backwards ... we wander the nearby **Mercado** (left). It is unbelievable how much "religious stuff" is hawked by the **vendoras**. I suppose the devoted worshippers feel compelled to take back something that reminds them ... or impresses others ... of their visit to this shrine. This "stuff" is not cheap so it is a wonder how Indians of limited income can afford to buy. But business is brisk. Coupled with garish local craft items, weavings, carvings and trinkets for the kids, there is an air of conviviality and merriment. Food stalls are busy and beer is welcoming on this hot day. We price out some items but find no bargains. Patty finds solace in her many one-on-one chats with the locals but Jim and I just park our butts nearby and people-watch. Amazing

how many 12 or 13-year girls we see carrying small babies on their backs. Wonder what stories their situation could tell. Did you know that the average Guatemalan baby's feet do not hit the ground until they are about 3-years of age? They are carried and suckled for the first three years. What an agonizing burden on the mother. No wonder Latino boys and girls are so spoiled ... they are catered to ... literally, to satisfy every whim and desire. They cry at the drop of a hat because something displeases them and the parent simply condones it regardless of the scene created. A spoiled child creates an arrogant adult ... in my view!

Hunger set in and we set out to locate the **Pollo Campero** restaurant ... a sort of Kentucky Fried Chicken place. Located on a side street away from the noise and grime of the Mercado, this eatery is well attended. Clean and spacious ... we order the typical chicken entrées with **papa frias** (french fries). Because this chain of restaurants is consistent in value and quality we felt comfortable eating here. Soon enough it was dark outside and we felt compelled to revisit the Basilica. As in the daytime, the pilgrims were in full attendance and the interior was well illuminated with hundreds of burning candles spread out on the stone floor. A cleaning man was seen scraping away the hundreds of square feet of candle drippings ... what a laborious job. Wonder what they do with the candle wax? Make more candles? We linger among the worshippers trying not to intrude on their vigils with our camera. It is a somber time, for these worshippers appear devout and sincere in their pilgrimage. A lot of negative things may be said about these Indians, Guatemalan, Honduran and El Salvadorans, but their apparent piety in a church setting is moving and inspiring. No matter our opinion of them, as Roman Catholic or Maya-Catholic the majority is committed to their faith. Entire families may be observed in their penitence ... lighting and tending to their little cluster of candles ... chatting in a voice barely audible. Having said that ... it is equally disheartening to see them depart and leave their garbage behind. What a dilemma.

We leave the basilica and again walk through the Mercado. The frenetic pace of buying and selling continues into the late hours ... and it does not diminish. The food stalls are still doing great ... the **tuc-tuc's** are ferrying their customers to points unknown ... and the strong combined odor of food and urine is gagging. More on the urine subject later ... in Antigua. Having had our fill of the buzz in plaza center we head back to our hotel room only two blocks away. The activity outside our window was still going strong when our heads hit the pillow. A mariachi band played until 11PM ... some local yokel sang his songs (off key) until about 1AM. The air was humid ... no air conditioner in the room. Bedding was soaked with perspiration ... welcome to the Guatemalan jungles. Sleep was difficult ... I longed for the tranquility of my bed back home.

April 1, Saturday ... the dawn came soon enough. My elbow still hurt ... the coffee and juice tasted fine and luckily there was hot water for the shower. Had to shower with elbow held high so as not to damper the dressing. Funny to watch ... not so funny to experience. Waiting for Dolores to clean up I wandered outside and met Jim. He already retrieved the car. We walked to the main street, parked our butts again, sucked on our coffee and watched the early morning activities. You learn a lot by sitting and watching ... the world in capsulated form opens up in front of you. The comings and goings ... the merchants hosing down their sidewalks ... the displaying of their goods ... the men and women in business attire hustling to their jobs ... the drunkards and beggars asleep under bushes ... the young children off to school. Like watching a colony of ants ... everything became a blur. I must admit this is an interesting pastime ... people watching. In time, boredom set in, we left for our room, packed our bags into the car and headed out of town. It was 8AM. Day was overcast and slightly foggy in the jungle.

On the return leg to **Chiquimula** we stopped briefly at **Quezalteque** ... a small town that offered a peek at a typical market day.



The church was open ... we briefly toured the interior. Clean and orderly with a few worshippers. This was a nice little town with many Indians who must have come in from the nearby mountains. Loud **marimba** music was emanating from some **tienda** and the delivery trucks were blocking traffic. Nearby buses were herding passengers aboard. The bus attendants were screaming "**Guati ... Guati ... Guati**" to beckon customers for a ride to Guatemala City. This is an odd phenomenon ... seen only in this country. The bus driver only drives. There is always an attendant hanging out the open door, moving bus or not, who screams (yes ... screams) the "**Guati**" call advising all that this bus goes to Guatemala City. This attendant assists in the boarding, collects the fare and helps with loading the customers' packages atop the bus. Seeing this once is unique ... seeing it at every bus stop is mesmerizing ... almost funny. In time this market day becomes too much for us and we maneuver our way out of town and west north to **Chiquimula** ... to find Patty's brother, **Juan**.