

Recollections of Guatemala - 4

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April 2, Sunday ... we're on CA13 on our way to **Rio Dulce** ... it is mid-afternoon. The road well traveled is changing ... the countryside is becoming more tropical. Banana **fincas** are changing to pineapple plots clinging to hillsides. Mexican Fan Palm trees are everywhere ... this is the tropics. Air is hot and humid. Pineapple stands are everywhere ... we decide to stop by one to taste the delicacy and purchase more for later ... Q20 (~\$4 USD for 4). The taste is unbelievable ... unlike Hawaiian varieties that are acidic and tart, these Guatemalan smaller cousins are sweet and juicy. Good buy!



We enter **Rio Dulce's Fronteras**, the major **aldea** at the foot of the bridge spanning the gap between two lakes. We stop atop the bridge span (above, right) to admire the unfolding scenery and what awaits us. The sea/lake breeze is strong ... the air cool ... the weather perfect. Yes ... we're blocking some traffic but who cares.

Rio Dulce ... *The area called "the Rio Dulce" begins at the mouth of the river on the **Bahia de Amatique** at the **Garifuna** town of **Livingston** on the Caribbean coast. Going upriver, one passes through a spectacular steep walled canyon lined with jungle vegetation and wildlife. The river then widens into a small lake, **El Golfete**, the shores of which are lined with beautiful locations, Mayan settlements and a manatee reserve. The river then narrows and passes the towns of **Fronteras** and **El Relleno** (at the bridge) where there is an abundance of hotels, restaurants, marinas, services for boaters, medical care, communications and transportation. A little further and the river widens into 590 square kilometer **Lake Izabal**, the largest lake in Guatemala. The **Rio Dulce** is a large river that is 500 to 1500 meters (1/3 to 1 mile) wide over much of its length. The narrowest spot is at a point called **La Vaca** where the river narrows to a little over 100 meters (300 feet) as it squeezes through **The Canyon**. The river and both lakes are navigable by vessels of modest draft. Many smaller rivers and countless creeks and streams feed the river and lakes. Many of these rivers can be traveled for miles by dinghy or canoe through beautiful forests and grassy meadows. The **Rio Dulce** is an aquatic community. The highway passing through **Fronteras / El Relleno** on its way up to the **Peten** is the only access road to the area. Outside the towns there are no roads or footpaths other than a road leading to **Castile San Felipe** and **El Estor**. The get around to different places on the Rio one must travel by boat. Homes and businesses on the Rio Dulce have a boat dock ...cruisers usually have a dinghy with a small outboard so getting around is easy. Travelers arriving by land will have to hire a speedboat (**lancha**) to get around. The people along the Rio Dulce are among the friendliest. The Rio Dulce is a favorite vacation spot for many wealthy **Guatis**. Emphasis is on boating and water sports. Backpackers and travelers from all parts of the world use Rio Dulce as a jumping-off point for trips into the **Peten**, the rest of Guatemala, and to **Belize** and **Honduras**.*



As we descend into **Fronteras** from the bridge (extreme left) we encounter a chaotic main street and almost immediately spot Jim's old friend – **George**. We stop by the side of the road, renew old acquaintances, make arrangements to meet later and look for the driveway to **Bruno's**, our hotel for the next few days.

The entryway to Bruno's is under the bridge span. We circle around ... find the access road and park in the dirt lot. At first glance Bruno's is not that attractive of a place but Jim recommended it because it was modestly priced and on the water. Bruno's is an all-inclusive resort offering lodging, a bar, and a restaurant and docking facilities (below, left). It was only meters away from **Frontera's** main street for shopping. We secured our rooms and checked in. Accommodations were on the third floor ... very nice layout (below, center), good view (below, right) ... with air conditioning. Hot water was promised.



First order of business was to orient ourselves' to this place. After unpacking and stowing our luggage we made way downstairs and went straight to the bar. Jim met another **ex-pat** (ex-patriot as Americans living outside the US are commonly referred to) whose name I never learned. To unwind we ordered beer and found a table. Another ex-pat named Al soon joined us. Al lived in a trailer at Bruno's. Conversation centered on what transpired at The River over the past five years. I sucked on my beer because I had nothing to offer to the conversation. I learned that over time the more things change here the more they stay the same. People come and go ... marriages and living arrangements come and go ... money is spent of buying land and waterfront property ... boats bought and sold depending on who is getting a divorce ... etc. Beer bottles emptied we needed to get to town to do some currency conversion and visit another old contact of Jim's.

Leaving the ladies behind we make our way out of Bruno's and walk the main street ... dodging cars, buses and trucks that have to squeeze past the **vendoras** spilling onto the roadbed. Keeping a tight grip on my money clip in my pocket we hang a right past some grimy looking Mercado stalls and head for **Miriam's** ... a small **tienda** next to a **licore** (liquor) stall. Jim engages Miriam in renewing their past friendship while I survey the antics around me. Being a Sunday, the Indians are in town in force. They are everywhere and are making nuisances out of themselves. Most are drunkards and their presence is tolerated only so much. Before I can utter "What?" the **licore** stall owner makes a mad rush out of his stall ... runs into Miriam's back room (Miriam being his daughter) and comes out with something HUGE in his hand, held behind his back. As explained to me later, the Indians were urinating against his building and disturbing his clients. An argument ensued ... a drunk Indian became belligerent ... threats were exchanged and this **licore** owner whipped out the biggest **45 AUTO** semi-automatic stainless steel handgun ever brandished. He pointed the gun at the chest of the drunkard, only 4 feet away, and promised to shoot if he did not leave. Jim motioned for me to move away from the line of fire ... that I did. The scene was tense and filled with electricity. Would he really shoot? Another semi-drunk Indian stepped between the two, calmed down the drunkard and semblance of order was restored. The gun was put away ... the Indians moved on ... and all felt relief. It is said that Indians here are obnoxious and trouble makers. They have little regard for the property of others. They drink ultra-cheap liquor and spent most of their time on their backs under bushes and in doorways – drunk. They urinate, defecate and throw-up in public places. I believe that the **licore** owner would have shot the Indian, left the body where it fell, and left for his **finca** in the country. After a few days all would be forgotten and it would be business as usual. Life is nearly worthless here ... especially Indian life. What an abrupt introduction to Guatemalan life.

After this sordid episode we left Miriam's for some shopping, currency conversion and general walk-about the main street. Eventually we met up with the ladies who were on a provision-shopping spree. Returning to Bruno's we settled in for the evening with some rum and cokes and snacks. I do not recall eating an evening meal ... for we spent the better part of the evening on the balcony sucking on our drinks and watching the sunset. The day was tiring and sleep beckoned ... we turned in. Sleep, as is so typical for me, was impossible. The air conditioner could not keep up with the humidity and the location of Bruno's, near and under the bridge, came with a major problem ... trucks with **Jake brakes** descending the bridge into **Fronteras**. What is a Jake Brake? The Jake brake is an add-on engine brake for diesel engines. Big semi trailers and the 18 wheel trucks can weigh as much as 80,000 pounds. Stopping them or slowing them down results in a great deal of wear on the brakes. This brake's primary use is on long downhill grades where the wheel brakes would otherwise have to be frequently pumped to keep the truck from gaining dangerous speed. The Jake brake completely changes all this for it effectively transforms the internal combustion engine into an air compressor. It has only one drawback: it is very noisy. You may have heard a semi use the Jake brake without realizing what it was. Sometimes when a truck is approaching a stop sign or stop light it suddenly emits a load roar, very much like a large lawnmower, for five or ten seconds. It is this noise that is causing many towns to ban the use of the Jake brake. At

night or early morning the low frequencies seem to carry a long distance and are very noticeable. And this is what we were subjected to all night long. Time and time again the sound of this braking kept me from falling asleep until I had no alternative but to resort to my earplugs. I cannot imagine anyone tolerating this level of noise. And supposedly Bruno's was in a first-class location. Forgive me ... but hell NO! Staying here was tiring and uncomfortable. We were paying Q250 (~\$35 USD) a night.

April 3, Monday ... morning arrived none too soon and a shower was in order, considering the high humidity. We turned on the hot water in the shower and waited for the water to become warm enough to use. We waited ... and waited ... and waited. No hot water. Added to that, the water pressure was so low that only a sorry stream of water was emanating (right). A promise made but promises not kept ... in our room we had no hot water for three full mornings. Ergo ... we did not shower for three mornings. It is unbelievable that a supposed classy resort could not be designed with adequate plumbing. This was mentioned to the hotel manager who only shrugged his shoulders. This is an example of how Guatemalans provide service ... and equally hard to believe that a Canadian owns Bruno's. I wonder if he has hot water in his suite that was on the same floor?



Sans shower we fixed coffee, fruit and oatmeal for breakfast. The plans for the day were for us to meet with George who would take us for a tour of Rio Dulce on his launch. In time, we met up with George at Bruno's marina. The four of us plus George pushed off and headed across the river to fill up with fuel for the outboard. George noted that the price of fuel was inching up a Q at a time in anticipation of brisk business for **Semana Santa** (Holy Week) the following week. These **Guati's** are not stupid and certainly take advantage of every opportunity to make an extra buck ... just like in the States. Then we're off, back on the river,



under the bridge and heading west into **Lake Izabal**. The day is warm but the speed of the launch cools us perfectly. We hug the shoreline admiring the various resorts and sailboats. **Lake Izabal** is more than 45 kilometers long and covering about 590 square kilometers. We approach the Old Spanish fortress of **Castile San Felipe** (left). This small fortress was built in 1651-2 at the lake's mouth, to keep out marauding pirates. Later it served as a prison and was reconstructed as a historical monument in 1956. We will visit this attraction later before departing Rio Dulce.



The day was just becoming more interesting as we headed towards **Susana's Marina**. This marina was a popular hangout in prior years but has since become less so since the owner's wife passed away. From what I learned, **Suzana** had a keen mind for marketing but her husband is more inclined to be laid back. There were a few sailboats moored nearby and the small bay was indeed tranquil and serene. We docked the launch and made our way to the bar (left). We ordered some **Gallo cerveza** (**ga-jo**, meaning rooster) and soft drinks. Stayed here about an hour reminiscing old times ... making a new friend (right).



Being mid-day it was time for lunch. Leaving **Susana's** we made way to a **tienda** under the bridge to tie up the launch and walk a short distance to **Cindy's Place**. George frequents this small diner and recommends it for quality and value. Well ... it's not exactly fine dining nor is the place healthy looking but we manage to keep a straight face as we sit down and order (right). The floor is crushed stone, the ambiance "rustic" and the utensils well worn. The kitchen behind us is beyond description and the preparation of the food is suspect. We order scrambled eggs, tortillas and black beans. **Agua pura** was the only drink of choice. George orders some **carne** (meat) which I declined after seeing past Mercado meats for sale. Patty helped in the kitchen, as is her habit. Total bill was Q135 (~\$18 USD) for the four of us. Jim picked up the bill. Thanks ... and we left.



Hopping back in the launch we make our way to George's house on the channel east of the bridge. George lives in a homestead that was previously a restaurant and marina. It still functions as a marina as we tie up the launch. From the water line to the dock is a stretch even for the ablest of people so getting Dolores up was a job. Not elegant and a few scrapes on the elbows were obvious. We make our way to the lower level and are given a tour of the sleeping quarters. George has a housekeeper so everything was in some order ... although it did resemble a bachelor's pad. Climbing the spiral staircase to the upper level revealed a giant room that was previously the restaurant's main room ... with cooking facilities poised on one side. Not sure what George has in mind for this place ... perhaps opening up a restaurant again. He was made a generous offer for this property but declined it ... where else would he go. We lingered about ... were given a tour of the grounds and just relaxed for an hour or so.

We made it back to Bruno's marina and tied up the launch. Time to visit another of their friends who was starting a bar business down the road. We walked the side street under the bridge and soon located a door built into a high wooden fence. No sign, no indication what lay behind. But it was well known to the locals. We entered, walked up the slight rise, and descended into a makeshift bar of sorts ... hugging the side of the waterfront. An ex-pat (we will not use his real or alias name) owns this property and intends to make it a marina / bar combination due to its prime location. We sit at the bar, order some rum and cokes and start a conversation. (Jim casually mentioned that the rum used here is of inferior quality and I agree. Price was not cheap but thirst demanded quenching.) Almost from the start I noted that this former New Yorker was as cocky and abrasive as anyone from the Empire State. In short order that cockiness became arrogance and was beginning to wear thin. A couple more rum and cokes did not improve the situation. He was ranting and raving about this and that ... the US Social Security System ... the US government and its policies and the general state of "**Bushlandia**" as he called America. He is married to a Guatemalan and has one child by her. He was in a serious accident some time back ... had to return to the States for medical treatment (he did not seem to appreciate that US benefit) ... and was undergoing rehabilitation. I noted an agitated give-and-take among Jim, George and this fellow so I would presume that he was not in good standing in the ex-pat community. I sensed this fellow's displeasure, or was it jealousy or envy, at other ex-pats' successes so this further eroded my already low opinion of him. If I had to label this fellow it would be as a world-class jerk. Time in his presence was anything but amiable. Our departure was met with pleasure.

Returning to Bruno's we bid goodnight to George. He would deliver his launch tomorrow morning for our day use. George was a real gentleman. He is somewhat soft spoken ... not a hint of cockiness or arrogance about him. He is easy going to such a degree that people sometimes take advantage of him ... especially someone called Rosita ... of whom we will not reveal any details. George enjoys his Rio Dulce lifestyle and delights in the laid-back atmosphere this area offers. With approach of dusk we make our way to Bruno's restaurant and order our supper. Patty is dieting so she stays in her room ... Jim, Dolores and I take our meal by the dock. Specialty of the evening is sirloin and pasta at Q28 (~\$3.75 USD). Beer and wine washed down the meal and we have to admit it was excellent ... the **carne** (meat) was chewable and palatable. How's that for a compliment. Returning to our room we spent the rest of the evening sucking on rum and cokes and admiring the view of a sunset. Jake brakes kept humming all through the night ... earplugs were made ready.

April 4, Tuesday ... no shower ... lack any hot water ... had to shave with cold water. Had breakfast of coffee, fruit juice and instant oatmeal. By 9AM we're off to the dock ... today we visit **Livingston**, on the mouth of the river on the **Caribbean** coast ... some 20 miles away by water. Patty's sister **Maria** joins us on this trip. We make our way to a marina to fill up the gas tanks ... price is up again by a few Q's then we shove off and head northeast. The day starts off nicely ... water is placid ... a slight breeze ... humidity is low ... the air temperature is quite comfortable. We make good time down the river, stopping often to admire the surrounding countryside and for Jim to point out a piece of land that he once owned and signed over to Maria.



A little later we enter lake El Golfete and the wind picks up. We hug the shoreline and eventually enter the most majestic section of the river ... where the banks of the river rise abruptly from the water line and reach for the sky. Many **cayucas** (dugout canoes) ply this channel ferrying Indians to their fishing grounds, transporting families to their destinations, or acting as small barges carrying supplies and building materials. Both riverbanks reveal simple homes with tended gardens and fruit trees. Now and then we catch sight of a fisherman casting their net. It is a relaxing float down this river.



We enter some side channels ... observe women at **pilas** ... watch boats being made or repaired ... observe children at play. A wave of the arm is thrown our way ... smiles abound. This place is tranquility at its finest.

Further on we enter some sharp bends in the river where, it was told to me, Tarzan movies we filmed. Graffiti emblazoned some of the riverbank limestone (right) ... some recent, many high up from decades ago. The breeze was picking up in intensity as we rounded the last sharp bend and caught glimpses of **Livingston** on the horizon.



A few miles to go.

Livingston ... a charming town located at the mouth of the Rio Dulce, is unique in Guatemala due to its **Garifuna** culture. Originally a cross between a native tribe, the **Kalipuna's** and slaves from **Nigeria** they mixed in the 17th century and conserved their own language, music and religion. This small town of brightly painted wooden houses and balconies is located in the jungle among coconut groves. Formerly the departure point for coffee farmed in the plantations of the **Verapaz** region, it still has a small fishing economy. The language here sounds almost as if one were in **Jamaica**.

We make our way to the headwaters of the river, make a wide swing around and locate **Jennifers**, a resort/hotel Jim was familiar with. The shoreline is littered with shrimp boats in all conditions of disrepair (right). Abandoned and derelict boats are half submerged almost everywhere. Nearby is a Guatemalan gunboat ... presumably a border patrol boat. We tie up the launch at Jennifers and ask permission of the owners. Jennifer no longer owns this place but the new owners are agreeable. We will have lunch here later. We take leave; make our way to a side street and head for the town center only a few blocks away. The architecture of this little town is bewildering. Everything is old and decaying. The streets are littered with garbage and the strong odor of fish drying on platforms is choking the air (below, left). **Tiendas** left and right; with more black people than I have seen in years. Car traffic is extremely light as there are no roads into town ... only a few within. Soon enough we happen upon a plaza that appears to be the hub of activity for this town. A social club on one end with souvenir stalls on the other. This is also a departure point for water taxis and launches to distant ports. We price out some trinkets ... too pricey. Next we head up the hill to the main business district (below, center). Nothing but souvenir stalls ... one after the other. The area is oversaturated with merchants hawking useless trinkets to unsuspecting visitors. We make a wide swing through some residential areas ... arriving at the Caribbean seashore side of town. The view is splendid but the odor of fish is depressing. Returning to the main street, we purchase a **cayuca** trinket (Q10 or ~\$1.25 USD) and sit down to partake of a beer. The air is humid and the sun is hot. We decide to take leave of this place. Interesting to get to but, once here, it's not worth our time. We have lunch of **quesadillas** at **Jennifers** (below, right). We make way back to Bruno's ... we used 4 gallons of fuel in 4 hours of boating.



Arriving back at Bruno's late in the afternoon we drop off the ladies, return the launch to George and spend some time in the bar **b-s'ing** with the guys. We then have the car washed (Q20, ~\$3 USD). Waiting ... we swing in a couple of their hammocks. Relaxing way to watch four kids and one adult power washing. Car cleaned, we return to our rooms and fix some more rum and cokes. While shopping, the girls pick up a rotisserie chicken and some flour tortillas for supper in our room (left). Cheap is cheap but this goes beyond frugal. We decide to leave tomorrow ... a day earlier than planned. Bruno's is not the place we envisioned. Lack of hot water is one reason. It's been a slice - but not of heaven.