

July 6, 2003

We have had a wonderful stay in El Salvador, plus a most fascinating land trip to Guatemala and Honduras. The weeks have certainly passed by quickly.

El Salvador is the smallest Central American country. Even though the 12-year civil war has now been over for 11 years, the country is still quite security-obsessed, and this obsession can readily be seen in the number of guns and security guards. When we first arrived, we definitely took notice. Now, it doesn't even bother us. As a lot of people left the country during the war, the country's top foreign exchange source is the money being sent home by those still living abroad. In 2001, El Salvador changed its official currency to the US dollar.

Barillas Marina, where we have been staying while in El Salvador, is a club geared toward the elite and wealthy El Salvadorans with its motto of privacy and security. Besides the usual amenities featuring a couple of pools, some showers, and a restaurant, Barillas also has landing strips for both planes and helicopters as some of its members use those forms of transportation. The President of El Salvador, Francisco Flores, is a member, and he and his family came to Barillas last Sunday for the day in their helicopter. Although he and his family were off on an outing most of the day at one of the remote private beaches in the Bay of Jiguilisco, he did take time to say hello to us upon his return. Naturally, with his presence, there were a few more Barillas security guards on hand, plus the president had his own along. We definitely felt safe!



*Barillas Marina*



As Barillas is about ten miles from the main road, Tuesday and Friday mornings the marina provides transportation in one of its minibuses into Usulután for shopping. In Usulután, it is always amazing to see many women carrying their loads on their heads, and we'll usually see some men wearing cowboy hats carrying machetes in holsters. (Note: It's illegal to carry a machete not in a holster.) The large central market is always bustling with activity, and the vendors can often be heard calling their prices out to prospective customers.



*Usulután Market*



*Marina Bus to Usulután*

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Before our land trip to Guatemala, we took a walk along a jungle road to see some friendly spider monkeys, and we also visited the Mayan archaeological sites of Joya de Ceren and San Andres. As we traveled along the road to the sites near San Salvador, the damage from both Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and the earthquake in 2001 can still be seen. Joya de Ceren was quite interesting as it had been a small Maya settlement which had been buried under five meters of volcanic ash in 600 AD. The ash from the eruption amazingly preserved the actual structures plus the pottery, tools, and crops of the Mayans at that time. Much excavation work still needs to be done at both sites as research funds in El Salvador are quite limited to almost non-existent.

On Friday morning, June 13, we started our land trip to Guatemala and Honduras. We boarded the local bus in Usulután and headed to San Salvador. Our first bus trip lasted two hours. In San Salvador we transferred to a plush air-conditioned bus for the rest of the trip to Guatemala City, arriving there four hours later. We spent our first night in Guatemala City.

All the local buses we experienced during our trip in both El Salvador and Guatemala were quite similar. All had a bus assistant besides the bus driver. He was the most exciting person to watch as he did literally everything except drive the bus. He would lean out the front door of the bus calling the bus' destination to passing people. If someone was interested, he'd quickly jump out, help him or her onto the bus if needed, put any big cargo underneath the bus (in El Salvador) or on top (in Guatemala), and off the bus would go again. Then, when the bus was well on its way, the bus assistant would come down the aisle collecting the fares. Afterwards, each time new people boarded, he'd come down the aisle again but this time jiggling coins in his hand as a way of reminding the new people to pay. At all the bus stops in the different villages and towns along the way, local food vendors from kids to adults would board the bus, call out their products, and then travel down the aisles trying to sell their items. Even now, after our trip, I can still close my eyes and hear all the many, many different sounds we heard along our travels on the local buses.

Saturday morning we took the Guatemalan "chicken bus" to the Mayan village, Chichicastenango, in the Guatemalan highlands. As we traveled along the winding roads, it was amazing to see pine trees and experience much cooler temperatures. The change in temperature certainly felt good. On the steep Guatemalan highlands, the Mayas were cultivating almost every bit of usable land. As each individual land plot was rectangular, the total effect was like a patchwork quilt.

The ride on the Guatemalan "chicken bus" was definitely quite an experience. These buses were for the most part recycled U.S. school buses and thus smaller than the local buses on which we traveled in El Salvador. Even so, the bus assistant really managed to pack in the people. At the point of our thinking that the bus was full, the bus assistant just kept adding more people. We were packed in like sardines, and believe it or not everyone was seated. No one stood. Seats for two people became seats for three, and because the aisles were so narrow, a grown person could straddle the seats on each side of the aisles. Afterwards, the bus assistant would squeeze by everybody to collect the fares. As people's cargoes were put on top of the bus, you could hear at times the bus assistant running across the top of the bus when he needed to get something off. 3 ½ hours later we arrived in Chichicastenango - glad to finally be able to stretch our legs.



*Chicken Bus (Shades of Romancing the Stone)*

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Saturday afternoon in Chichicastenango we hiked up a hill to the Shrine of Pascual Abaj, a Mayan idol that looked like something from Easter Island, although much smaller. In the late afternoon and evening we watched Mayas coming to town carrying their loads and putting up their stalls for the Sunday market. The majority of Mayas in the highlands were shorter than five feet tall. The women carried their loads on their heads, and the men carried their loads on their backs. The embroidered tops (huipiles) that the women wore were just beautiful with their bright and colorful designs. The traditional clothing of each village bore its own unique styles, patterns, and colors. Some villages had such intricate designs that huipiles could take six to nine months to weave. When we went to bed, we thought we had seen everything. On Sunday morning we were stunned to notice the increase in the size of the market. The narrow cobblestone streets directly outside our room, which had been normal streets the day before, were now packed with stalls on both sides - and to think we had heard almost no noise during the entire night.

To be in Chichicastenango on a market day and on a Sunday was truly an event that needed to be felt firsthand. So many Mayas were congregated in such a contained area that the multitude of beautiful, colorful clothing worn by the Mayan women was even more awe-inspiring. Besides throngs of people trying to sell their goods around the vicinity of the church, there was also an immense hubbub of religious activity. There were incense burning ceremonies on the lower church steps, and a couple of indigenous prayer leaders were at the top swinging censers (like tin cans poked with holes) containing incense and chanting magic words. Inside the church and along the floor of the center aisle, Mayas were making offerings and lighting and burning candles, the color of the candle representing the nature of the desired request. The church, Iglesia de Santo Tomas, may have once been a Catholic Church during the Spanish days, but it definitely has reverted back to the scene of traditional Mayan religious rituals.



*Chichicastenango Market*



*Incense Burning Ceremonies*

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Sunday afternoon we took the “chicken bus” to Panajachel on Lake Atitlan, and on Monday we took a boat around the lake visiting three Mayan villages - San Pedro La Laguna, Santiago Atitlan, and San Antonio Palopo. Of particular interest in Santiago Atitlan was seeing the folk god Maximon (mah-shee-mohn), a wooden figure wearing a cowboy hat and draped in colorful scarves smoking a cigarette or cigar. The local Mayas revered him and asked his help in many areas of their lives. While visiting Maximon, there was a ceremony going on at the time with incense burning, candles lit, and someone singing and playing the guitar. The faithful were waiting their turn to make their offerings and ask for blessings. (Note: Each year Maximon is moved to a different elder’s home and his favorite gifts are liquor, cigarettes, and cigars.)



*Maximon*



*Lake Atitlan*



*Local Weaver*

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Tuesday morning we took a local bus directly to Antigua from Panajachel. Antigua was the Spanish colonial capital from 1543 to 1776. On Wednesday we took a tour of the surrounding area and of some of the special spots in Antigua. We visited a coffee plantation and an experimental macadamia nut station, with the goal being at the macadamia nut station to provide the Mayas in the Guatemala highlands with a sustainable agricultural crop and at the same time protect the environment. We also visited the Mayan village of San Antonio Aguas Calientes (known for its weaving) and Ciudad Vieja. In Antigua we visited first La Recoleccion, a massive and impressive ruin, destroyed by earthquakes in the 1700's. Then, we visited La Merced, one of Antigua's most striking colonial churches. Afterwards, we stopped at a jade factory before ending the tour at Palacio de los Capitanes. Although Antigua has had much damage from many earthquakes throughout its almost 500 years of existence, much of it has been rebuilt in the original architecture of the 16th and 17th century using the original cobblestone streets. There are, though, many ruins still visible from the many previous earthquakes.



*Community Clothes Washing*



*Earthquake Damage*



*Antigua Town Square*



*Local Volcano*



*Cobblestone Streets of Antigua*

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Thursday morning at 4 a.m. we took the Monarcas Travel minibus to Copan, Honduras (almost a five-hour trip) to visit the Mayan archaeological site of Copan, known for its magnificent sculpture carvings contained in its stelae, altars, and architectural facades. In ancient times it was a major cultural center of the Maya, flourishing from A.D. 426 to the 800's. On Thursday, we visited the Principal Group and went down into two of the excavation tunnels used by the archaeologists. On Friday, we saw the Museum of Sculpture where many of the original carvings are now kept, and visited Las Sepulturas, a residential area where some of the rich and powerful nobles once lived. Copan was definitely a most fascinating place to visit! We left Copan at 2:15 p.m. and arrived back in Antigua at 8:30 p.m., unfortunately hitting rush hour traffic in Guatemala City.

Saturday in Antigua, we celebrated our 34th wedding anniversary. We visited Casa K'ojom (La Azotea Cultural Center) and Casa Popenoe, a restored royal official's mansion of the 1600's, and then enjoyed listening to traditional Guatemalan marimba music while having dinner.



*Honduras Border Crossing*



*Copan Mayan Ruins*



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Sunday, June 22, we returned back to our boat in El Salvador. We left Antigua at 5 a.m. and arrived back at Barillas Marina about 2:30 p.m., having used one van, two buses, and two taxis during the day. All in all, during our ten-day trip, we spent 30 hours riding on all types of buses.

Unfortunately, we think we must have drank some bad water at the hotel we stayed at in Honduras as we ended up being sick for a couple of days upon returning. Later in the week, I visited a small school nearby (first through second grade). First, I taught them a little English, and then, they taught me some Spanish. Upon leaving the classroom, they all gave me a big hug.

Most of June ended up being quite a rainy month. Often at night we would be hit by torrential downpours, complete with lightning and thunder, and at times with rain totals of five inches in just one hour. A few days after our return to the boat, it was as if Mother Nature decided to turn off the water switch. The weather seemed to change, and although we still have some rain at times, it has not been in the quantity as before. This pattern will definitely change, especially as we head further south, but we are enjoying the lull.

One of the highlights of our stay here at Barillas has been the socializing and exchanging of ideas with other cruisers. When we arrived at Barillas there were 26 other cruising boats but only 8 were “active” with crew aboard. The rest were vacant as owners had returned home. Since then, those eight boats have left and headed south. In their place, cruisers from three previously vacant boats have returned, and one boat just came in from the south. So, we are presently back up to five “active” cruising boats. Quite often we’ll have a movie night at the club restaurant. On the 4th of July we all celebrated with a barbecue and some fireworks and invited the entire Barillas’ staff to our party. What a fun day!

As soon as our boat parts arrive, we will be heading south, hopefully by the end of this coming week. Our present plan is to cruise Costa Rica in July, cruise the Pacific side of Panama in August, transit the canal either the end of August or beginning of September, and then cruise the San Blas Islands on the Caribbean side of Panama before arriving in Cartagena, Columbia, the first part of October. Cartagena comes highly recommended by many cruisers as an excellent place to leave our boat upon our return to the states for the holidays.

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