

Costa Rica / Panama (November - December 2005)



Other than eight deported handcuffed Guatemalans on the plane, our flight to C.R. was uneventful.

We made our way to the beach at Nosara to spend the first week of the trip birding, tanning and lying around the pool. Trogons, mot-mots and howler monkeys kept us company while we waited to meet Ken and Astrid. Our first highlight was a visit to a black sand beach to see Olive Ridley turtles in daylight, intently laying eggs and digging holes in the sand with their flippers. The black sand was littered with white eggshells as far as the eye could see, and a couple hundred vultures stood guard, waiting for baby turtles from a previous laying to emerge from under the sand.

We rendezvoused with Ken and Astrid in Liberia. After trying a restaurant that Yammy recommended, I am doomed to dream. The seafood was of a quantity and quality and price that astounded us. We added to our bird sightings and spotted a tarantula one night. Our early morning trip to the nearby Rincon de la Vieja volcano was marred by police and ambulance recovering the body of a 74 year old woman who had slipped into the crater the day before. We were rewarded for our muddy slog and dozens of black fly bites by getting to see boiling pots of mud near the trail. The crater trail was closed but there was no doubt about the fact that the heavily forested hill was no ordinary piece of rock, but one capable of perpetually boiling mud and splattering it like oatmeal.

Liberia gave way to Fortuna which we all liked, probably too much. Life was furious bouts of birding and spotting huge, heavily spiked iguanas in the trees near our pool, which was near our blue-tiled rooms. Evenings were spent trying to decide what to order for dinner and imagining moving into the area. A hacienda-style house with a few acres, complete with horse, garden and landscaped with fruit trees and shrubs would suit me well enough. Hummingbird feeders and shaded tile patios would be a must.

Bussing our way away from Fortuna was no easy decision, especially when it landed us in a high mountain lodge so damp and rainy and foggy that we could barely see our hand in front of our nose. This lodge was located on Cerro de la Muerte - The Mountain of Death. All in the hope of seeing the renowned Resplendent Quetzal, we tucked into our sodden beds hoping body heat would dry the sheets before morning. Our guided walk the following day revealed ONE quetzal. Glenn did get a short video of it silhouetted. I could feel our packs absorbing moisture and gaining weight by the hour. Spending another night was not an option, as far as I was concerned.

It was comforting knowing that our next bus trip would not be as eventful as the last. The "event" being a bus letting us off on one side of a bridge so damaged that passengers had to walk across and meet another bus on the other side. This news didn't faze me until we got there and discovered it was a large suspension bridge spanning a very deep gorge. Huge pieces of cement (re-bar reinforced) were broken, revealing the stream far below. Also, big gaps in bridge pavement had to be jumped/stepped across. My childhood fear of heights had no trouble rearing its head. There was a lot of very nervous laughter coming from me. Hopefully the fingernail marks in Glenn's and Astrid's arms healed quickly.

We all made it to San Vito and settled in. We were fortunate to find a five bedroom house for the four of us to rent for \$24/day. Unfortunately the house had some pretty gruesome carpets and some very adventurous carpenter ants but the TV and the louvered windowed living room made for a spacious and comfortable stay. We birded from the balcony and visited a nearby botanical garden to see toucans, capuchin monkeys, flame-billed aracaris, mot-mots and agoutis.

Again we were almost too comfortable and a decision had to be made. Ken and Astrid's stay was shorter than ours so they headed back in a more airportly direction. Ken's birding was threatening a saturation point.

Glenn and I forged on into Panama. Left at 7:00AM and settled again by 3:00PM. It all sounds so simple but a comment on the intervening hours must be made. I was threatened with jail and Glenn came close to a strip search, forced bribery and a shouting match. We had read in the guide book about possible difficulties at this border crossing but "how bad could it be?" We were let off the bus at the border amid acres of semi trucks, duty-free sheds, offices, mud, hustlers and trash. It reminded me of the bar in Star Wars. Made our way to one window and paid for a stamp, another window to pay for a piece of paper, another window for a stamp and we were finished. We slogged on over to the Panama side and caught a bus. As we sped down the highway in a new country our mood lightened after the dip of parting with Ken and Astrid. Ten minutes later the bus was stopped at a check point. An immigration officer got on the small bus full of people and asked for our passports. After looking at the passports he asked us if we "had clothes in our backpacks?" ddaaaaaah! Since we replied "Yes", we were asked to get off the bus. The bus promptly left and we were escorted to the tiny cement block offices.

A customs officer went through our bags one at a time and discovered that Glenn had a camera - surprise, surprise. "Had we declared it?" "There WAS no declaring of anything. What are you talking about?" "How much money do you have?" " Let me see it" " Let me count it." They discovered in my bag my U.S. passport. " Why do you have 2 passports" etc etc? - something new to pretend was a big deal. I was told to go into the next room, so they could work on Glenn alone. They told him that they would throw me in jail for 24 hours. "How much money did he have?" They counted it three more times and started in on the passport routine again. Finally Glenn got angry at the nonsense of it all and insisted they phone someone about the passport. The armed officer passed through my room on his way to make the pretend call, politely commenting to me on how hot the weather was. After 45 minutes of drilling/grilling sweating Glenn, they just let us go???. The language barrier had made it all difficult. Imagine, carrying "clothes in your backpack"!

Food in Panama is frequently in cafeteria-style and very inexpensive. Chicken/rice/beans/salad \$1.75. The Boquete region (Baru Volcano) is so scenic we found ourselves there a second time just to film euphoniums and honey creepers at a bird feeder in a breakfast restaurant. Even though it was the wrong time of year, we did find and film a resplendent quetzal (female), which was the goal of quite a bit of effort. We paid a farmer (near vertical fields of lettuce/carrots/celery) to take us behind his farm to the fruit trees that the quetzals like. He found a female in a very filmable spot, so we "filled our boots", so to speak. Two hours had elapsed, so having other farming duties to attend to, he left us with the assurance that the female was waiting for the male. "We should wait another 30 minutes." After another 35 minutes in the high altitude bright morning sun, Glenn was interrupted saying "Well, I guess we should..." Suddenly, in swooped.....another female. They both flew away and we began our slog back through the farm and down the long hill to the hotel.

We took a coffee tour and are now much enlightened. The coffee farm we toured is a small one that won the U.S. and Europe FIRST PLACE AWARD for 2004! The "organic farm" consists of very untidy fields of old coffee trees/shrubs interspersed with weeds, grass, elephant ears, soy bean plants, banana trees, impatience flowers, and large trees (usually topped so the don't supply too much shade). The prize-winning coffee is grown on old bushes, in shade, picked individually when ripe (no stripping of branches), and dried in the sun (on cement pads, raked by hand). Only the beans that sink in a water bath are used. The floaters are sold for instant coffee and "other inferior brands". There are 48 beans used to prepare a "standard" cup. Once roasted, there is a balance between acid and bitter. Anybody that adds milk or sugar or ice-cream to coffee is trying to hide some crummy taste and is a scumbag.

Although we had seen many molas in stores and resisted purchasing them, today we finally succumbed to purchasing four from an Indian on the sidewalk. These are the yokes removed from worn dresses of the indigenous people from the coast. The pattern on the first one is 2 crosses used as medicine to keep a roaming child closer to home. The second one is four birds that stand for great struggles in their history: two wars, one revolution, and the arrival of white man. The third shows 25 symbols of the four directions of the compass. The fourth shows two sets of fallopian tubes, complete with uterus, delivering one male and one female child. A fifth, which we did not buy (because I did not like the colors) depicted a man and a woman with an albino ("God loves them") in between.

Being way too comfortable in Boquete (for a second time), filming honey creepers at breakfast, doing laundry whenever we wanted and paying \$3.50 for dinner for two, we forced ourselves back onto the bus.

We headed for an island south of David called Boca Brava. Enroute we met two gringo tourists and shared taxi and boat charges to finally arrive at the island. Unfortunately the place we were headed was under renovation, and closed. Therefore we four were dumped on the dock of an alternate place owned by a German. Claus was not home so we waited (stranded) five hours in anticipation of "the German" arriving home to his immaculate home to find four grinning grubbies, anxious for his reaction. All worked out well even though he was "sort of closed", as well. Our stay included a snorkeling trip to a beach lined with coconut palms where Glenn and I swam with two polka-dotted manta rays!

Leaving Panama behind, we returned to Costa Rica and headed to Golfito. We hunkered down in a \$10/night bay-view room. Our stay was uneventful until getting a bag stolen as we were catching the bus to leave town. Losing our video camera and expensive digital still camera was quite a wake-up call for the old guarding-of-the-luggage routines. How someone could pick up a bag and be off with neither of us seeing, was amazing. Luckily, Glenn had all our tapes from the vacation in another bag.

Our time in Florida was spent spreading ashes, staining our house, visiting and partying, etc.

Spreading ashes of three beloved was not as solemn an affair as might be imagined. We were to drop the ashes from a small plane into the Gulf of Mexico. Arriving at the Gulf, sightseeing and the beginning of tears turned to terror when we opened the door of the Cessna 310, as we'd been confidently instructed by the owner of the charter airplane. The plane lurched, the pilot became very busy, my earphones blew off, Cheryl and Glenn were holding hands, Elaine was pulling back inside the plane a full metre of Bob's shirt tail as Bob was using ALL his strength attempting to hold the door closed, after quickly dropping the ashes. Despite Bob's effort, the door would not pull closed. A deafening and frightening 25 minutes resulted as the pilot bee-lined it back to the airport while Bob strained, cheeks and eye lids flapping in the hurricane-force wind. It took the rest of the day to "come down" from the experience. Our only regret was not being able to hear the "conversation" between the pilot and his boss, after we left. The boss' "ash spreading procedure" was not to be repeated by that pilot, I'm sure!

A good visit in Canmore, Alberta and four days of driving through the Rockies and the Alaska Highway have landed us home - reunited with dog, rabbit, birds, fish, plants and friends.

-Kathy Piwowar, January 2006