

2003 COSTA RICA AGAIN

Wednesday, January 29, 2003. Laid low by a 24-hour flu bug causing me to erupt like the volcano we were on our way to see. When I checked with Martha, in Ohio, she had the same bug and both of us wondered how we would make the plane tomorrow!

Thursday, January 30, 2003. Fortunately we both felt much better and met at the gate for the flight to San Jose. Dowell is also with us but prefers to sit in the back rather than use his sky miles! The movie was My Big Fat Greek Wedding. Just as much fun the second time around, as it was the first.

We were met by Sun Tours and taken to the Finca Rosa Blanca. What a charming inn. It is on a hillside, with a glorious view over the countryside. Glenn and Terri Jampol, both artists, conceived it and run it. Every room is different and decorated with murals and artifacts. We walked up to the attractive swimming pool. Why don't we spend the whole time here?

After a nap we caught a cab to the Banco de los Mariscos, a seafood restaurant where the catch has been made by the proprietors. I had the langouste and a delicious fish soup. For \$10 I got five baby lobster tails.

Slept like a baby in my comfortable bed. We are at 4000 feet.

Friday, January 31. We had booked a semi private tour by van to Sarchi where the ox carts are made. A shuttle took us to the Hampton Inn. Hearing it was a van we assumed we would have it to ourselves. Wrong! A Swiss couple was also in the van (they thought they were going to have a private tour). Scotti and Mac came from their hotel in downtown San Jose. So there were seven of us.

Our first stop was at the Doka Coffee estate. They think their coffee is the best in Costa Rica. On our last trip we were brainwashed that the best coffee was from Monteverde! No matter, it was a good rest stop and you could go down to the plants and have the coffee process explained. These beans are picked by hand, and there are two pickings. In other parts of the world, the coffee is picked by machine all at once with red and green beans mixed.

We traveled on to Poas Volcano. There are 88 volcanoes in Costa Rica and 5 of them are active. We walked up to look down into one of the three craters where a beautiful shimmering blue lake had formed. The volcano is 2574 meters high. It last erupted in 1910, but there are wisps of smoke coming from the fumaroles. Eruptions go to the west because of the prevailing wind. Poas means yellow flower. Clouds often obscure Poas so we are lucky to have such a clear day. They optimistically say you can see the Caribbean from here but it isn't THAT clear! A good breeze was blowing so it was somewhat cold at the crater and we were soon back in the van.

Lunch was at Chubasos Restaurant. The Swiss couple had only booked a half-day so they left us here. We sat on an open porch and watched the many birds coming to feed on the fruit skewered on the feeder in the garden. Just as at home, a squirrel invaded and grabbed a piece for himself.

Proceeded on to Grecia where La Mercedes Church dates from 1735. It is made of iron. Both an iron church and an iron school were shipped from Europe and the church was supposed to continue on to Belize. But they were both off-loaded at Punta Arenas and so Costa Rica got both the church and school!

At last we came to Sarchi. Sarchi is half way from San Jose to the Pacific and a large industry of wood products can be found here. The brightly decorated ox carts were originally designed to carry the coffee beans but have been obsoleted by trucks. They are the national symbol of Costa Rica and smaller copies can be had to be used as coffee tables, mini bars and so forth. After touring the oldest factory in Sarchi we were taken to a souvenir tourist trap store to purchase the goods this factory made. We then went back to the factory where Dowell negotiated with the owner for a "donkey" cart to be made for their donkeys. A sale was not finalized as it was getting late and the prices were very high.

Back at the Inn we found Mary and Tom enjoying the pool and soon Evans and Charity came from their walk down into Santa Barbara the nearby town. So I have all four of my children and their spouses to enjoy a long weekend celebrating my birthday! I am so pleased they all figured out how to take the time off from their jobs to come! We haven't all been together since Rich's wedding two years ago.

A delicious dinner was served at the Inn with all nine of us around the largest table.

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Saturday, February 1, 2003. Our naturalist guide, Paulo, and bus driver, whose last name is Pollo (known as Chicken) picked us up at the hotel. Chicken is a freelance bus driver and his bus is labeled ©Chicken Tours.

We are headed for Arenal Volcano, four hours away, the most active volcano in Costa Rica. It was dormant for centuries but started erupting in 1968 and has been active ever since. Our route starts out the same way we went yesterday and includes a stop at the Doka Coffee plantation.

The Pacific side of Costa Rica is volcanic while the Caribbean side was formed from erosion and silted reefs. Thus the East coast is very humid, but the west is lovely. In the Central Valley sits San Jose.

As we drove up to the continental divide clouds moved in from the east.

We stopped at the La Paz gardens, which include a rain forest. Here they have a butterfly enclosure. An owl butterfly took a shine to Evans and landed on his nose, staying long enough for all the cameras to capture it. I had a blue morph land on my back. It is supposed to be very lucky to have a butterfly land on you. After the butterflies we came to a small area where they attract the many types of hummingbirds who come each winter to Costa Rica from up north. We left the garden area to enter the rain forest and admire the three waterfalls it contains. Paulo says the rain from the forest is what provides the water. It was a fairly long walk until we got back to the bus but it was largely down hill.

After a buffet lunch we drove on, finding a troop of howler monkeys, some toucans and a white hawk.

We had a long stop at La Fortuna where Chicken buys gas and we all buy souvenirs. I just hope the kids can get all this wood home.

We had a nice view of Arenal and then went up a long gravel road (in not the greatest condition) to the Arenal Observatory Lodge. This is safely 1 1/2 miles from the volcano and away from the direction of the eruptions. In our huge Smithsonian rooms, we each have a queen and a king bed facing a large plate glass window so we can watch the volcano all night. Mary even comments the showers are bigger than the one she has at home (which is very big). Walked to dinner over a swinging bridge. I had a reasonable curry chicken and then the kids started a this is your life discussion on videotape, asking me about my childhood. I've lived a long long time and have forgotten many of the details but did the best I can. I'm sure my sons-in-law and daughter-in law were bored with all this but they endure. All the while they gave me cards and letters from all my widespread family and some of the tributes from the grandchildren, are almost embarrassing.

The clouds have moved in but through the night we can hear the rumble of the eruptions.

Sunday, February 2, 2003. My birthday. For years I have used it as an excuse to get out of town to a more enjoyable climate. Last year, Martha and I were in Australia. When I got home my kids were bound and determined to celebrate my birthday. Been there, done that did not satisfy them and finally when I insisted there is nothing to celebrate about getting old, they finally got the message and laid off. I knew I couldn't get away with that this year, as this is one of those milestone years, so I decided to give a party for myself. My first thought was Venezuela to see Angel Falls, but the political situation there got a bit dicey so we moved the event to Costa Rica. Two years ago, I was also in Costa Rica with Mary.

We had a six AM wake-up knock on the door because we wanted to get to the Rio Frio before the crowds. After a two-hour drive we boarded our boat for a cruise up the river, in the Cano Negro refuge. We are so close to the Nicaragua border we had to have our passports. There were loads of birds and caimans to see, and Paulo is very knowledgeable. We saw some birds that are not usually found, and even the boat driver was craning his head to see. Paulo took some pictures for his own collection. The rare limpkin, turtles, aningas (we watched one who caught a large fish figure out how to get it first in his mouth and then down his snake like throat where it made a bulge). There were Jesus Christ lizards (who walk on water) and we saw all four types of kingfisher. A pair of Jabaru storks in a tree was a very rare sight. I think we saw everything there was to see except a jaguar!

After lunch we started back, stopping to see some iguanas that live in the trees near a restaurant. It was feeding time and they came lumbering down the trees and along the bank of the river to get the lettuce leaves. Only a mother iguana could love these ugly animals.

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At Tabicon Springs we stopped to enjoy the thermal pools. A lovely garden surrounds these pools, which are at various degrees, some extra hot, and we had a great hour and a half playing in the water. In the background we could see Arenal groan and burp and one white plume.

On the way to the lodge, Paulo pointed out one badly eroded hole where in 1968 a rock as big as our bus had hit. When we got back to the lodge the clouds were once more obscuring the top, but we had a magnificent red sunset to watch.

More cards and a Spanish 'Happy Birthday to you' were the order of business at dinner while I had a delicious beef stroganoff. One of my most memorable birthdays!

Monday, February 3. Woke at 5:00 to a loud explosion from Arenal. I saw the big white plume. The Howards reported they also saw rocks rolling down the sides. Went up for breakfast and watched the many birds at the feeder.

As we drove away we had one last look at the volcano, which was out of the clouds, and I finally did see the rocks being belched out of the crater.

We drove back over the mountains to get to the airport by 12:30. Our plane to Atlanta did not leave until 3:00 and the airport was very crowded and seats were at a premium. Martha went to get us some sandwiches and it took almost an hour standing in line. There is no business class lounge in San Jose.