

2001 COSTA RICA

Friday, January 26, 2001. It's a four-hour flight from Atlanta to San Jose, a miserable flight, for Delta has crammed as many seats as possible on the plane. I don't know how the big men even get into their seats. Lunch was also bad. I had a tough piece of beef that was nearly cold and so made do with salad and carrot cake. The problem is that, as an economy measure, I elected to take the tour's air, and, of course, that was the back of the bus! My friends, Connie and Seymour Smilowitz, also signed on for the tour, while Mary is flying from Ft Myers on American and will meet us in San Jose. Actually she met our plane and General Tours transferred us to the Camino Real Intercontinental Hotel.

We had no plans for the rest of the day so we took a cab to take us to the Plaza de la Cultura, near the theater, and walked the pedestrian street nearby with all the locals who were out doing their Friday night shopping. The shops are familiar, some US chains and even the ubiquitous McDonalds and Burger King. The museums were closed, so we decided to walk to the El Pueblo area where we had dinner reservations.

We walked and walked finding a small lane of stalls selling handicraft items and finally asked a pedestrian if we were going the right direction and, sure enough, we weren't! We caught a cab and found it had been too far to walk in the first place. El Pueblo was built about 15 years ago as a tourist area and is like a traditional Pueblo. Picturesque lanes and courtyards connect a complex of restaurants and shops (mostly art galleries), and we walked about enjoying. We stopped for a drink and the bartender very kindly led us to our restaurant, La Cochina de Lena. We had a delightful dinner of Costa Rican specialties. My dinner was sopa negro (a black bean soup with two eggs poached in it), followed by chile rellenos, all washed down with a bottle of Chilean wine.

Saturday, January 27, 2001. We had arranged for a private city tour and Juan Carlos picked us up in a mini bus. He took us first past the American Embassy and some elegant residential areas and then to a jewelry factory and handicraft store. I admired an unusual emerald ring, and the salesman was willing to negotiate, but the negotiated price was the price of another trip and I do have my priorities. Connie found a colorful mask to add to her collection. Then we went to the Plaza de la Cultura where we had walked last night and Juan Carlos pointed out some of the interesting buildings we had not noticed before. The Teatro Nacional is a gem of Carrara marble with statues of Beethoven and other musicians on the facade. Inside were lavish gold decorations. In the lounge there is a beautiful parquet floor and gilded furniture. The inside of the theater itself is interesting. From the first balcony, near the presidential box, we looked down on the orchestra. When the seats are removed it can be raised to the stage level and becomes a ballroom. The best acoustics are in the second balcony. Next we drove to the fort. Since the army was abolished in 1946, this building now houses the National Museum with exhibits of Costa Rica's history from prehistoric times to the present. Juan Carlos made it all so interesting. And then he took us to a huge souvenir store and told us we had 40 minutes to shop! I have never understood what the tourists do with all this junk when they get home.

I was happy to get back to the hotel where we packed and had a sandwich before checking out. Conexiones (General Tour's agent) picked us up and took us to the Marriott, a lovely resort near the airport, done in a Spanish motif. We wondered why General Tours had not put us up here but perhaps it was not as close to downtown as the Camino Real. After about an hour our big red bus arrived to transfer us to the ship. Our two naturalist guides, Rudy and Giovanni briefed us on the ride. The best news is that there are only 26 of us on a ship built to hold 100! We drove up the Pan-American Highway through mountains and rain forests, stopping only at a vegetable stand to stretch our legs. At Punta Arenas, the main west coast port, we turned south. We crossed a river and had a great view of a crocodile eating a fish while his fellow crocodiles swam to join him. I was happy to be on the bus! At last (after about three hours) we got to Herradura where, at the Marina Los Suenos, the Temptress Explorer was waiting.

The Explorer was built in 1970 as a supply vessel, but after Temptress bought her five years ago she was gutted and completely rebuilt as a cruise ship. We were disappointed with our "suite". Its main furnishing was a double bed and no desk or sitting area! After we complained they rearranged things so they could bring in another bed so Mary and I don't need to share. At least the suite is well located, next to the Observation Lounge, and one flight down from the sundeck and bar. The dining room is two flights down, which is also where we get into the zodiacs to go

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ashore. It was nice to get unpacked. We had been told to limit our baggage to 25 pounds (we never did figure out why) and I find it very hard to live out of a duffel bag! We had our briefing on how the ship operates and among other things find there are free mini bars and snack bars everywhere. Drinks at the bar are included also.

We had a buffet dinner and went to the lounge for a briefing of the next day's activities, and told to sign up for what we wanted to do. I was ready for bed after the long day.

Sunday, January 28. We are at Curu Wildlife Refuge at the end of Nicoya Peninsula. Since the northern part of Costa Rica doesn't get as much rain as the south, this is a dry forest. The first tour left at 7:00 AM and I was up and ready to go but my group wanted to sleep in and so we were on the 7:30 tour! We went ashore by zodiac, with Giovanni Belli, our guide of Italian extract. He lectures with military preciseness punctuated with spot quizzes, like how many species of birds are there in Costa Rica (about 600 resident breeders and 200 migrants). We tramped inland over wobbly bridges in the swamp, pausing to hear Giovanni describe the delicate eco system in a mangrove swamp. He is an ardent birder and pointed out several species, including the rufus-tailed hummingbird and the pale-billed woodpecker. He has a huge scope and can give us close-up views of the birds, which is certainly an improvement over standing around squinting at small blobs far away. One of the purposes of this privately owned park is to reintroduce the spider monkey and we came upon one recently reintroduced monkey who was overly friendly and tried to run off with Giovanni's scope. Beyond in the trees were the capuchin monkeys, another of the four indigenous monkeys in the country. The trail was not too difficult but the standing was very tiresome, so after we reached the road Connie and I walked on ahead. We reached the park headquarters where we saw a large iguana and a coati with his long nose. He had been a pet and has only recently been reintroduced to the wild so he was very friendly. A small hut sold T-shirts but we don't buy and walk on to the beach. Here we changed into bathing suits and took a swim, but it was quite shallow and muddy so it was really just a refreshing soak in the cool water. Back on board we had lunch, lifeboat drill, and our briefing for the next day.

The boat was moved to Tortuga Island where I decided to take the Canopy Tour, not being too sure what it was but assuming it was a high walk through the canopy of the trees. The worst part was climbing up the steep steps. I don't breathe very well climbing and they almost had to carry me to the launching platform. I was strapped into a sort of diaper, which they hooked onto a roller on a wire and invited to step off. I did have a brake and the next platform was only about 50 feet away, so after the initial panic I realized there wasn't a lot to it.

Mary followed me but braked too hard and they had to pull her up on the second platform. Then we had the long drop to the ground. I felt a bit like Tarzan (or Me Jane) as I launched myself off the platform. It really wasn't scary, somewhat comparable to Para sailing. I was just sorry we didn't have longer in the canopy. They offered a second ride at half price and I would have gone if it weren't for the climb up. We sat on the beach enjoying wine and delicious cerviche, and then had dinner ashore: barbecued beef, chicken and fish, to go with the usual salad bar. Since all the food comes in by container from the States, the salads are ok to eat (this is the part of the world where you can get Montezuma's Revenge). Back on board I was so tired I must have been asleep by 7:00 and I slept all night!

Monday, January 29, 2001. We steamed all night to Corcovado, which is a huge island off the Osa Peninsula in the southern part of Costa Rica. Here we ran into our sister ship, the Temptress Voyager. Smaller than we are, we understand she has 45 passengers for a trip through the Panama Canal.

This island gets five meters of rain a year so it is covered with rain forest. We took the easiest of the two tours, a mostly level walk through the forest, but the numerous roots made the walk challenging. We spotted a green kingfisher and red-crowned woodpecker. We also saw an agouti that scurried away. Giovanni identified the trees (over 3000 species in Costa Rica). The strangler fig is interesting for it starts as an epiphyte at the top of a tree, winds it's way to the bottom, where it becomes a hemaphyte and then turns and strangles the tree, which has sheltered it! Giovanni caught a small norulpa lizard and passed it around for us to see. Then he spotted a black-throated trogon with its brilliant blue back. A more demure female was in the background. We reached the Rio Pargo, which empties into the ocean through several pools. I

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had my swimsuit under my clothes but the water was a little too cold for my taste. It was refreshing just to wade and watch the surf crashing against the rocky shore. Overhead we saw scarlet macaws. We walked the beach back to the zodiacs.

Then we moved to San Josecito beach and had lunch ashore followed by snorkeling. The reef was shallow which made me worry I was going to touch it but there were schools of interesting fish. Back on board I actually had time for a three-hour nap before Giovanni's interesting lecture on his hometown, Monteverde, (where they grow wonderful Monteverde coffee) and where there is a cloud forest. He had some amazing slides of the birds in Monteverde. Then it was time for tomorrow's briefing and the Captain's dinner. Dressing up was optional, but many were better dressed than the shorts and T-shirts, which is our normal attire. Dinner was served, not buffet, and I had a delicious shrimp dish. And of course, the Captain and his crew were there dressed in their whites.

Tuesday, January 30. When we opened our blinds we were looking at a gem of an island that looked like something out of a storybook. A wide beach, high hill and one lone palm tree sticking up. The island is called Granito de Oro (the little golden nugget) and it is part of Coiba, Panama. We had wonderful snorkeling off the beach, with a large quantity of fish. The Smilowitz's' and Mary tried the sea kayaking.

Lunch was served on the sun deck while the ship moved to the headquarters of Coiba Park. This used to be a prison but the convicts have been relocated and now it is a nature preserve managed by the Smithsonian. It all seemed so civilized with buildings and a covered terrace where a tame deer came up to greet us. Giovanni started his walk, pointing out the vultures on the beach, large grasshoppers and a banana-quit bird. Then we started to climb the hill, with its low vegetation and lack of shade. It was very hot, probably close to 90 degrees and after awhile I could not breathe and felt I might faint. I left the walk, returned to the beach and called a "taxi" to go back to the ship, but not before I had looked at the humpback whale skeletons on display. I found out later that others had also had trouble with the heat.

At dinner we celebrated Veronica Ray's birthday. Anthony and Veronica live in Wales and she has had by-pass surgery and a hip replacement, but you wouldn't know it when you watch her take the nature walks. After dinner Mary treated us to her slide show of amazing pictures she has taken on her digital camera. She also demonstrated the many ways you can edit the pictures.

Wednesday, January 31. The scheduled walk was described as moderately difficult so we decided to find something else to do. We were tied up at a dock in Golfito, a small town in south Costa Rica that had thrived when United Fruit Company had a plant here. Then Costa Rica imposed an export tax on fruit and the company closed their operation. Now most of the residents are fishermen. We took a taxi to the Mercado Libre (Free Port), which is where Costa Ricans come to buy their refrigerators and TVs. You have to be a resident for 48 hours to take advantage of the tax-free goods. We looked into many of the shops, which carried American brand names, but the prices were not as good as at home. Some stores sold clothing, liquor and perfumes, but there was nothing of interest for the tourist. If our Spanish had been better we might have negotiated a longer ride up the mountain to see a waterfall and view, but just the change of pace of walking around the market was refreshing.

After lunch the ship moved to the Casa Orquideas Botanical Garden. Trudy and Ron MacAllister started the garden. They are transplanted hippies from the United States, who homesteaded here twenty years ago. At first they planted fruit trees in order to survive. Now they have many varieties of orchids and tropical plants from all over the world.

They live in a simple two-room house with no glass or screens in the windows. A solar generator gives them electricity so they can have lights and their computer, but there is no television. Their income comes from the \$5 head entrance fee and sales of small souvenir items.

The house is full of rot and other problems so they are building a new house just behind the present one. As we started the walk we found a rufous-headed hummingbird sitting on her nest on a palm frond, sheltered by another frond above. Bromeliads and other plants lined our walk. A huge kapok tree is only found in Costa Rica and Nicaragua. We were fortunate enough to spot two types of toucans, the fiery-billed and the chestnut-mandible, feeding on a papaya tree, which is native to Costa Rica. Giovanni poured water on a mimosa or sensitive plant to show how it

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folds its leaves in defense and won't open them again for hours. The garden was filled with so many experiences and is certainly a highlight of the cruise.

While we were there the ship circled and circled for it could not anchor due to some problem with the anchor cable. Temptress' main engineer arrived when we were back at Golfito and they worked all night trying to fix the problem. After dinner we invited Georgia Tasker and Sandy Schultz to see the pictures. Georgia is the Garden Editor of the Miami Herald. Sandy teaches wellness classes at Miami-Dade Junior College. They are two of the most fun people on the cruise, although everyone is very nice.

Thursday, February 1. The next morning we were back at Corcovado Conservation Area in Drake Bay, which is where Sir Francis stopped in 1574. We had a relaxing tour by boat to explore the "jungle" river at Aquijatas. The river is not long, but very picturesque and it cuts a swath through the rain forest on each side. We stopped to look at a number of birds and when the river got too narrow to proceed further, stopped and many went for a swim where a picturesque waterfall fed the river.

After lunch back on board, we had a long zodiac ride to Caletas Beach for the Explorer didn't want to have to re-anchor. Two choices of walks were offered, one along the beach to look for birds with Giovanni, the other to explore the rain forest with Rudy. The beach sounded like too much sun and heat so I opted to walk with Rudy. Rudy is different from Giovanni, walking right along without much standing. He gives a detailed account of whatever we see. We climbed a fairly steep trail, but he did pause to allow people to catch up and me to catch my breath.

On the ridge we had tall trees from the valley below making us feel as if we were in their canopy. It was all quite beautiful but we didn't see many birds, just a couple of squawking macaws. The other group saw more macaws and actually saw them mating. Finally it got so hot Rudy led us back to the beach for a swim. He complimented me twice on what great shape I was in and even told Mary the same thing. Guess he didn't notice me gasping for breath. It felt good to get back to the air-conditioned ship.

Rudy gave a lecture on the diversity of Costa Rica. Millions of years ago, North and South America were not joined. About a million years ago the movement of tectonic plates caused volcanoes to erupt in the north and uplifts in the south so that eventually the isthmus was formed.

There are more volcanoes in Costa Rica than any place else on earth.

Animal and plant life came north from Columbia and south from North America giving Costa Rica a diverse plant and animal population. Costa Rica has more types of butterflies, more insects and so forth than any place else on earth. It is a beautiful country and is very much into preserving the ecology. A high proportion of the land is preserved in National Parks and eco-tourism is actively promoted. Hopefully as more and more tourists come they will carry home the message that cutting down the forests and development is ruining the habitat of many species, and our life as well. There are fewer and fewer natural habitats left.

We had dinner with the "fun" group, Connie, Seymour, Georgia, Sandy, Mary and myself. Lots of laughs and conversation on a wide range of subjects.

Friday, February 2, 2001. Why do they call them milestones when I feel they should be tombstones! The anniversary of my birth seems to come around quicker and quicker.

We are anchored at Manuel Antonio National Park, Costa Rica's most popular park. It is easily accessible and as a result we saw many other tourists. We came ashore on a pristine white sand beach with lots of surf and a short walk took us across to another beautiful beach on the other side. We have opted to walk with Rudy. First he found a troop of white-faced Capuchin monkeys with their very humanlike faces. Only new world monkeys have prehensile tails and they use them like a fifth limb. These monkeys have a very short gestational period, which means the mother's give up their young at an early age for the grandmother's to rear. Since they reproduce so frequently, they are used as research animals in laboratories. They produce equal numbers of males and females. Rudy pointed out fruit bats clinging to a tree and an agouti, a large rodent like animal. We saw dinosaur lizards, members of the iguana family. He was also pleased to find a puff bird, which is quite rare. In fact, he was unable to find one when the Audubon Society came on a recent tour. The birds nest in termite nests. We saw the motmot bird, the national bird of Nicaragua. And then we were lucky enough to see the endangered and shy spider

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monkeys in the trees. They are endemic to Costa Rica but have no prehensile tail. They have been made into pets and many have been killed which is why they are endangered. Along the road we saw a spectacular aristolochia flower. My biggest thrill was when we came across the three-toed sloth. These slow moving animals only come down from their tree to defecate and that may only be once a month. They can't relax enough in the trees to be successful. Some sloths starve to death with a full stomach because their bodies carry protozoa to help them digest and if the temperature falls too low the protozoa can't work. Back on the beach I had a swim before coming back on board for a delicious chicken curry lunch.

Then most everyone went back to the beach but I washed my hair and tried to finish a book I have been reading all week. And of course my afternoon nap. I don't know if it's the heat or all the nature walks, but I feel at times as if I have sleeping sickness. The crew entertained us by showing how they fold the towels, which lie in different patterns on the bed each night, embellished by candies. The chef came out to talk about his recipes. Since he spoke no English Jose translated and at times I felt it was Jose's words we were hearing and not the chef's translated ones. After dinner the Captain came in with all his crew and they sang Happy Birthday to me first in English then Spanish, with the inevitable cake, before all the crew came forward and kissed me. Then it was dance time and they took us out on the floor for Latin dances.

Saturday, February 3. Early wake-up call and by 7:30 we were in the bus headed back to San Jose. It took only two hours although the road was much more curvy and scenic than the one we came on. Many times the bus had to back and fill to get around the curves and traffic. Back at the Marriott we sat by the pool for awhile before Beverly and Len Woodward, who are from Rome, Georgia, Connie, Seymour, Georgia, Sandy, Mary and I had a gala last meal in the restaurant while Seymour regaled us with some of his experiences being a clown. At 3:00 PM we took off for Atlanta; same uncomfortable plane, same bad food (I was glad I ate in San Jose).