

My trip this year was to country #47 El Salvador and #48 Guatemala. Both were amazing, but very different. El Salvador has little tourism infrastructure. I was there 5 days before I saw any place that sold postcards and even then it was slim picken's. Because the country is so small, I was able to bounce around the highlights in a few days thanks to the comprehensive bus system. Guatemala on the other hand, was much more developed and catering to backpackers. The highlight of the whole trip was the city of Antigua, its former capital. More about that below.

I arrived in El Salvador in the late afternoon...but my backpack did not arrive with me. I was really irritated because the same thing happened to me 3 years ago to Peru which then screwed up my whole schedule. I was told that it was likely my bag would arrive later that evening but I likely wasn't going to get it until the next morning. So, onward to San Salvador I proceeded in 90 degrees in my jeans and fleece! Luckily it arrived the following day around 2pm, so I was only delayed a few hours.

San Salvador was a typical central American colonial town. The old quarter of the city is very small and the rest of it is just sprawl of concrete without many interesting sights. I was a bit nervous on this trip as both countries have bad reputations for robbery and in fact, El Salvador has one of the highest murder rates in the world, albeit mostly gang related. My hotel was about \$23 per night and in a non descript part of town, across from a big shopping mall with a Tony Roma's ribs restaurant!. El Salvador by the way, now uses US Currency which was very convenient! I spent the afternoon tooling about the city and found the local markets. I love to visit the markets in all the countries I travel to. Not only are they stocked with all kinds of exotic fruits, vegetables and spices, they are more than just a means of commerce, but serve as a community center as well. It's fascinating to watch the flurry of activity as goods are bartered and sold.... I am always so jealous that we do not have more like them in our own country. My local farmer's market really pales compared to even some of the smallest village markets. The locals of course all think I am a lunatic (mucho loco) as I "ooh and ahh" and photograph beautiful mountains of fresh tomatoes, ripe avocados stacked head high, meat hanging on the hooks in the open air, and aisle after aisle of every imaginable fruit and vegetable at its peak ripeness. My first plan in El Salvador was to head up the "Route de Flores". It was a road that led north through some beautiful mountains and passed through many small colonial villages. Along the way coffee plantations and flower farms abound...I jumped on the bus to Juayua, the first stop on the Route. Juayua is known for having a food festival every weekend where local and regional chefs head to the town square and showcase their dishes...of which, I tried many. When I travel I do hit the street food. I think it's the only way to get a real taste of authentic cuisine, especially in countries that don't have many restaurants. In Guatemala and El Salvador, dining out is only by necessity as opposed to pleasure. Several towns I went to had no official restaurants. People would put "comida" signs in their window and you'd knock on the door and tell them you wanted to eat and they would prepare a plate for you and then charge you appropriately. This was always an adventure because you never had any idea what you are going to get; however, I had some of my best food at these places, the most expensive plate being \$2.00! While the food in both places were great, neither country really has a unique national cuisine. Breakfast was always typically eggs, plantains, fried beans and a type of cr me fra che. Dinners and lunch were grilled meats or fish, some type of vegetables, rice and always served with tortillas. In the evening, as soon as the sun went down, the streets would fill with echoes of the pitter patter of women clapping dough for Pupusas. Pupusas are a type of tortilla filled with beans or cheese and then grilled on a griddle. They are normally eaten as an evening snack since most locals eat their largest meal at lunch. Of course after all the jungle and street food I ate, I ended up getting food poisoning on the continental airline breakfast on the way home! I was so MAD! But at least I came home from my holiday 3 pounds lighter than when I left!

So, I traipsed on for 3 days through the Route de Flores stopping in little towns and hanging out. Some of the bus rides were very scary! One driver would negotiate the turns in the road so fast that all the people on the bus would swing dramatically from one side to the other like little human pendulums. I like to take public transportation as often as I can and in these countries-- it's a huge part of the culture and experience. Most of the buses are old school buses that are painted with palates of every neon bright color on the spectrum. They are adorned with plastic flowers, blasting party music and always some plaque, sticker or picture of Jesus or the Virgin Mary. When you get on your bus at the station, and are awaiting your departure, you are entertained by a long caravan of vendors then proceed from one end to the other selling everything from chicklets, to chickens. Some even give amazing infomercial demonstrations. I never knew until now, just how many uses a little pocket flashlight could have and how durable they could be...the ShamWow guy had nothing on my el Salvadoran friend!

At the end of the Route de Floras is a town called Tacuba wherein lies the Parque el Imposible and one of my primary destinations. It's a fabulous preserve of wildlife and Fauna and has some amazing trails. The only real outfitter in town is a bit of a celebrity...with his name being Manolo, the girls will understand why!. Anyway, I arranged for a full day hike to the summit of the highest peak in the park. There was another guy signed up...a young Austrian student who was going to school in san Salvador, studying religion. Central America has had this huge influx and rise of Pentecostal churches now which has the Catholics on the offensive. Any night you wander through the villages, you will invariably pass at least one church full of clapping hands, lively music, and praising Jesus. The Pentecostals have realized that the more "party" type mode of worship suits their Central American's taste and culture and it has been wildly popular and on the rise, many say driven by women who find their husbands are much kinder and responsible after attending this type of service as opposed to solemn catholic masses. Anyway, so Josef, my Austrian friend and I set out at 6am with our guide. We knew it wasn't a good sign when we were handed machetes. We weren't sure if this was to defend ourselves against the robbers who have sometimes staked out the park waiting for tourists, or if it was to literally bushwhack our way through...we weren't thrilled with either idea! It turned out, it was definitely for the bushwhacking. I now understand why it is referred to the Park "Impossible" It was beautiful, but extremely challenging, and one of the hardest climbs I have done. At one point I was like "TAXI"!! It took 8 hours of constant climbing and bushwhacking to reach the summit, which then made it all worth it. We didn't see any wildlife to speak of, but lots of wild coffee plants, orange trees and my favorite...wild avocado trees.

After my big day on the Mountain and my five days of traveling, I was looking forward to my next stop: Montericco, a beach town, where I could get a little R n R and ring in the new decade. I took a car, a bus, a bicyclette and a boat to get to my destination. My guide dropped me at the Guatemalan border where I went through immigration and then had to walk across the Bridge over the River of Peace to get to the Guatemalan side. It was a bit eerie as there were many heavily armed guards standing on both sides of the bridge and it was a misty, foggy morning.. I felt as though I was in some Hollywood spy movie involved in some secret prisoner exchange as I slowly strolled across with my 25lb backpack. I then had to take 2 other buses and a ferry to get to the beach. Montericco is a cool beach town with a laid back vibe. The sand is black which looks amazing juxtaposed against the white sea foam. My hotel was pretty decent for \$40 a night on the New Years Eve weekend. I was surprised at how few tourists there were as the beach was mostly filled with locals...I hung out New Years Eve with a couple Guatemalan students who spoke pretty good English and a group of Canadians. There was lots of partying going on including shots of this type of liquor known as 4 Aces...but it is spelled and pronounced '4 Ases" which is kind of funny. Getting drunk off your ass is one thing, getting drunk off your 4 Asses, is quite another!.... New Year's at the beach was fun and festive with parties, music and fireworks for miles down the beach. One of the things I love about Latinos are their love of life and festiveness.

After 3 days at the beach of just hanging, I was ready for my next adventure: Lake Atitlan. It is officially one of the most beautiful places on the planet by several authorities. A lake that was formed by an inverted volcano and surrounded by 3 other volcanoes. It took about 3 hours to get there and I was surprised I made the trip on a mini-bus without hurling as every 2 minutes there were 90 degree turns. I concur with the reviews that it is absolutely stunning. The scenery as it is truly breathtaking. The sunsets yield such a kaleidoscope of colors creating psychedelic tie- dye sky you cannot take your eyes off of.... I didn't have a reservation, so I had the bus drop at the far end of town near the shore to go check out this old hotel I had seen in a brochure. I lucked out as they had plenty of rooms, lakefront, at the whopping rate of \$20 a night. The hotel had been around over 150 years and used to be THE place to go for wealthy coffee plantation owners in the days prior to air travel. The hotel had such wonderful old bones and soul. I could imagine the beautiful soirees that must have taken place so long ago in such a magical place. Hopefully, someone will fix the place up and it will experience a new renaissance. In Lake Atitlan you basically do 2 activities...hang out by the lake shore and shop for handicrafts...There is 2 mile long street of local handicrafts will take care of all your souvenir needs. Since I only had 2 more days (in which I would then have to carry my purchases) I decided to do all my shopping here. I set out in the morning with a list of who I needed to get souvenirs for. By lunch time the score was: Stuff for Susan: 5 Stuff for her pals: 0. Despite telling myself ahead of time, there was nothing I really wanted or needed, I couldn't help buying a few of the beautiful textiles, a great wool hat, a small hand-woven "chicken" carpet for my kitchen (\$20), some gorgeous cheap beaded jewelry, a funky cotton shirt and wrap around pants. Unfortunately, my friends did not make out as well as I had hoped once I ran out of quetzals spending on myself!



One of the reasons I love to go to developing countries is because they seem to still have a stronger national/cultural identity. When I do walk through the open air markets and see chickens being slaughtered on site and thrown into a basket, or you see entire families, helmet-less, on mopeds...you sometimes wonder, do we really need all this govt regulation we have here in the US? While no doubt it makes our lives safer, I wonder sometimes what we trade in for that. Many developing countries still seem to have the freedom just to do what works best, what is most efficient, what is traditional. Things smell, look, taste and sound differently than in the US. I mean here, a bartender cannot pick up a lime with his or her fingers and throw it in your drink without technically being in violation of Dept. of Health Guidelines!. I would say Guatemala and El Salvador still have that great quality of doing their own thing. They haven't been regulated or sanitized or pop culturalized yet.

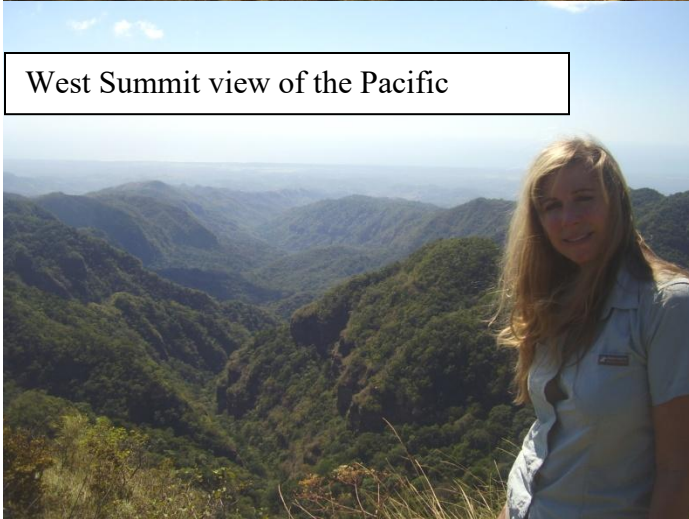
My last stop on my trip was to the town of Antigua. It used to be Guatemala's capital until a volcanic eruption ruined most of the town and then a new capital was established in Guatemala City. They say that many people however refused to evacuate and slowly, the town was rebuilt and reborn. There are no highrises or modern buildings in Antigua and it is truly frozen in time. It appears today the same as if it had indeed been entombed and embalmed by Volcanic Ash. It is beautiful. Cobblestone streets, secret courtyards. It is clean, it is safe. There are tons of Spanish schools here and a large expat community. You can do a week of Spanish school, 5 hours a day private instruction, room and board for \$200. I am seriously considering it! There are tons of really cool funky bars, gourmet restaurants and cute little shops....and it's still cheap. You could find a room here for \$12 a night. It is 45 minutes from Guatemala City, so most people just go directly to Antigua from the airport. All in all it was a great trip. My last night I had dinner with this very cute, 42 yr old single Norwegian male nurse who was on a 5 month holiday. His youngest son just moved out of the house off to school, so he was planning on

traveling around central America...first Spanish school and then Master Diving school in Honduras. He was a lot of fun and it was interesting to learn a lot about Norway as I have yet to visit any Scandinavian countries...obviously that will be a summer trip. In my travels I also met this amazing French Canadian woman who was 75 and traveling around. She had a bad case of Parkinson's I think it is where your head shakes a lot. Anyway, she got bored with just hanging out in Florida in the summer, so she rented an apt for the winter in Antigua. I actually met her in the beach in Monterico and she had already been traveling all around the country. I really admired her and wondered if that would be me in 30 years...although I pray to God by then I will have someone to backpack around with me! Anyway, it just goes to show how easy it is to up and go no matter what your age or economic status. I did this whole trip,(excluding the airfare for which I used miles), for \$900. That is only \$200 more than what I spent on cocktails for my bday party! That included 11 nights hotel, food, transportation and other stuff!. So, grab your passport and go have some fun! Until country Number 49,.Susan





Beach Horses



West Summit view of the Pacific

