

PART ONE –PRE-TOUR OF COSTA RICA

Friday, February 16/07

Edmonton to San Jose, Costa Rica by Marj and Carl Eckert

The trip to the sun begins! It was an early start. We had to be at the airport by 4:30am. Yesterday was -27C with the wind-chill. This morning it was snowing and +2C. Roads were slushy. We picked up Ruth & Marion, and then son, David, who drove us to the airport and took the van home. The St. Albert group arrived at 5:30am after surviving a snowy drive to the airport, but still had lots of time as we sat on the tarmac for an hour waiting to get the plane de-iced & fixing a computer problem. I thought this was America West (not Air Canada)! We saw the Grand Canyon and Bryce Canyon on the way. We were not too late getting in to Phoenix – our plane was waiting for us. Then we sat on the tarmac again. Still we arrived on time in Mexico City where there was free tequila in the airport. After that, the drink with dinner for most of us was Sol. We arrived late in San Jose where we spent the night at the Presidente Hotel – just a very short sleep and then onto the tour bus for an early start.

Saturday, February 17/07

San Jose to Tortuguero, Costa Rica by Marion Boutellier



After two hours sleep, we were up early & left at 7:00am, in perfect weather, to Braulio Carrillo National Park through a cloud forest which on this day was clear. We were lucky enough to be joined by David Cyrman, an environmentalist and botanist, who acted as our guide for the five days. At the highest point on the mountain road, we crossed the continental divide - waters from here go either to the Caribbean or west to the Pacific. David told us that 1/3 of Costa Rica's land is in national parks, thus protected for future generations. We traveled through thousands of different trees and plants, a canopy of green. En route we enjoyed a typical CR breakfast of rice & beans (Gallo pinto), eggs, fruit juices, rolls and fruit. We enjoyed stretching our legs by strolling around the beautiful gardens of the hotel where we ate.



Once across the divide, the topography changed--- coffee plantations on the hillsides, and many short-legged horses adapted for the terrain. We saw a three-toed female sloth up in a dead tree near the road. After traveling for the last 40 minutes through banana plantations on a very rough washboard gravel road, we arrived at Cano Blanco, where we embarked upon a 45-minute covered launch ride, up the Sarapiquí and Parismina rivers to the Jungle Lodge, our retreat at Tortuguero. It was an absolutely beautiful rustic setting. After a good lunch and two hours to rest and swim, we were off across the river by launch to the village of Tortuguero. It is a tiny town of 700 residents,

with no roads or cars, a small school, police station, some houses, a few stores, and many stalls selling handicrafts. Here, on the dark Caribbean sand, is where the green turtles come ashore lay their eggs each year. We toured the Turtle Conservation Center and enjoyed a film outlining their work. Tourism is the #1 industry in this area. Later, after happy hour,

David gave us a lecture on the culture and origins of Costa Rican people. It is interesting that there is no army & little crime here. We were glad to find our beds by 8:30pm after our short night before.

Sunday, February 18/07
Tortuguero by Ruth Sheppard

A cacophony of sounds started the day at 5am. Tortuguero is only accessible by boat or plane, and air and river activity started early. I was awakened by what I was sure was some kind of jungle beast. Turns out that this raucous noise was “Howler Monkeys” – amazing how a small black monkey could make such a noise!



After breakfast, we met at the dock for another beautiful day’s adventure – blue sky, a few fluffy white clouds. We boarded an open river boat on the Parismina R., took lots of pictures, and saw many varieties of herons and snowy egrets standing in the shallow water along the edges of the canals, and on low tree branches. While we waited for David to purchase our tickets for the National Park, a man came over to show us a foot-long poisonous viper snake that he had found in the office. We then began our journey to explore the fresh-water canals, some of which were man-made and some natural.



Highlights of the trip were seeing:

- Oro Pendula birds related to the oriole, which have golden stripes on their tails and have group homes, 30 to 40 hanging nests in one tree;

- Yellow and blue butterflies; a “red-leaf butterfly” discovered by Lynne!
- David picked what looked like a very thin banana, pulled off the pod, and a beautiful cream and red flower came out which is pollinated by bats at night;
- Black river turtles, green camouflaged lizard;
- Birds of all kinds: great green macaws (only 90 pairs left due to illegal smuggling of birds), parakeets, singing turrigon and toucans (who talked to David and he talked back), chestnut-headed strike bird that eats ants, turkey vultures etc.
- Cayman swimming beside us in the water – similar to a crocodile, up to 6 ft. long.
- A rare sight of a river otter,
- The foliage was incredible – so lush and green, with much diversity of shade and type.



Because the day was hot, and the animals and birds had gone into the shade, we returned to the lodge for lunch and a refreshing swim in the pool. This was followed by a short walk in the park from Tortuguero Village through the secondary growth tropical forest. The canopy is a carpet that blocks 90% of the light. Plants called Epiphytes compete for the remaining light, living on other plants, sending roots down and vines up. We saw a termite nest in a tree, spider and howler monkeys, a leaf-cutter ant trail (interesting because they follow the chemical track from the tree to the colony and rain can wash out the track so they get lost), huge fig trees, many vines and haliconia plants. On the way back there were many more birds and interesting trees and flowers. The water in this part of the canal is usually very dark because of the tannins from decaying plant matter, but was a bit lighter today because of lots of rain in the mountains. We were pleased to see a Canadian flag on shore at one point, which turned out to be a Canadian foundation which brings eco groups to CR.

We enjoyed David’s interesting commentary about the area as we traveled with him throughout the day. He told us that further into the jungle were jaguars, puma & deer, and a small population of manatees. Although we didn’t see one, he told us that the poison dart frog is common and would be down in the tree roots at present because it was so dry. Lucky for the frogs, it began to rain at that point. As we re-entered the Parismina R. from the smaller canal, the rain became an absolute downpour. We were drenched! What an adventure! We finally docked, and then warmed up with hot showers and dry clothes. An evening card game ended abruptly as the torrential rains caused the electricity to go out – and I forgot a flashlight! What a day!

Monday, February 19/07

Tortuguero to Arenal Volcano by Clarence Collins

We sure had a real taste of the jungle after staying at the Jungle lodge through hot sun and a tropical downpour. Huge puddles everywhere! We left the lodge after a healthy breakfast and traveled back by boat along the river. Luckily it was a covered boat since it was still raining quite

hard. Back over the rough gravel road through the fertile countryside filled with banana plantations. We stopped to watch a banana processing plant in action, and sample fresh coconut milk right from the coconut. Very refreshing! During this journey we saw fields of sugar cane, pineapples, papaya, coconut and other fruits, and learned that there is a great deal of control imposed on those using land or water for farming, tourism, or manufacturing, to protect the environment. We passed shanty towns where migrant workers and refugees from surrounding countries lived, and attractive company towns provided by Del Monte, Del, and Chiquita. It was interesting to see school children dressed in uniforms, allowing all the students to feel equal. They have both private and public schools here, and poorer families are subsidized for the cost of uniforms and supplies.

We have been treated royally by the people we meet here. There is pride in their country and all seem to have a positive expectation that the future of their country will be bright. David, our guide, is an excellent example of this. He has also provided us with a treasury of facts, wisdom and down-to-earth personal insights about nature and his country. Hats off to him!

We arrived at the volcano in the dark so weren't able to see the top. Our units at Arenal Springs are very classy and quite new. We had an excellent dinner of typical CR food such as casados, fried yucca, palm hearts, and banana flambé for dessert.

Tuesday, February 20/07

Arenal Volcano by Audrey Barner

We woke up to more rain today, and still couldn't see the volcano because of the clouds. Since the weather was so dismal, we chose to spend the morning looking for souvenirs and rain coats in La Fortuna, and the afternoon at the Baldi Hot Springs and Spa. It advertised waterfalls and 25 pools from cool to very hot. After a lunch of chicken soup (excellent) or seafood chowder (too many squid legs), nachos, and beer, we were ready to take advantage of the opportunity to lounge in the hot pools, and explore the gardens filled with flowers and birds. Meanwhile, another kind of "advantage-taking" was happening in the locker room, and many of us returned to find our belongings mixed up and even missing. However David, the efficient problem-solver, sorted it out and everyone left happy after a relaxing afternoon. The day ended with another excellent dinner at another "typical" CR outdoor restaurant – lots of grilled fish, casados, and veggies – served by waiters in costume.



Wednesday, February 21/07

Arenal Volcano to San Jose by Eryl Jones

After 1 ½ days of continual and hard rain, we woke to glorious sunshine, and birds “singing their hearts out”. At 9:00am, after a scrumptious breakfast of omelet’s, scrambled eggs, rice and beans, plantain, pancakes, fruit, juice, toast, and coffee, we set off for the Arenal Hanging Bridges. Arenal Lake, the beautiful blue-green artificial lake we passed, took three years to fill and boasts 35 different species of fish. It stretches 37 Km., is 300 ft. deep in places, and is fed by three rivers. We were also able to enjoy the mist rising to finally reveal Mt. Arenal and the volcanic effects.

The Arenal suspension bridges are in the Pre-mountain Wet Forest (there are many classifications of rain forest), in a private reserve. There are strict rules. It is forbidden to leave the trails, to disturb wildlife, take samples of plants, or swing or run on the bridges. The 15 suspension bridges are between 15 and 200ft long, high above the forest floor. Below them, streams and waterfalls can be seen in the distance. The variety of trees with their various leaves and color are impressive. The height of some plants, starting from the forest floor and reaching to the sky, leaves visitors in awe of the wonders of nature. Each plant has its own unique method of survival, often with dependence on or cooperation with others. The paths through the forest are laid with 1 ft. square cement blocks all the way to the highest bridge and down again, giving us a solid surface to walk on in the wet forest.

Our guide, David, was amazingly knowledgeable about nature – birds, insects, other wildlife, and plants, and made everything a learning experience. We saw very little wildlife though we knew we were being watched by millions of eyes. The exception were hundreds of leaf-cutter ants that continued their business of moving leaves twenty times their size from one place to another, down tree trunks, across paths, over logs, under logs, with only one goal in mind. We also met a little brown bat in a tunnel, a poisonous yellow viper snake on a leaf, and heard tree frogs chirping in the underbrush.



On the way back around the lake, we stopped to take pictures of Costa Rica’s Brahmin cows which are sometimes crossed with Angus, Jersey, and Guernsey cows to develop better meat. We also came across a small pack of coatimundis begging for food on the road. The walk through the gorgeous forest, and the sight of Mount Arenal was a fitting closure to our time with our guide, David, before he delivered us back to the Hotel Presidente in San Jose for our last night of the Pre-tour.

Thursday, February 22/07

Transition Day & Heredia Welcome by Helen Kieran

The city of San Jose woke up to yet another bustling, hot sunny day. Some of our group had an

extended breakfast; others were on their way to the market; while yet a few enjoyed that horizontal position for just a little longer today. No wonder crime is negligible in this city. Fingers and toes of many people would be needed to count the number of police and security guards on the streets and in the market. A concerned citizen warned one of us to take off her jewelry. There were food tasters, bargainners, buyers, and many of us just window and stall shopping. There could be no delay since in a few short hours Carlos Herra, the ED, would arrive to escort us to Heredia.

With suitcases rolling, keys handed in, and everyone accounted for we piled into the van, wound our way down some very narrow streets and were on our way for the twenty-minute drive to meet our hosts in Heredia. Hugs, roses, gift cards etc. greeted many before our group dispersed to various homestays. Relaxation, laundry, sightseeing, and getting acquainted with our new homes and families occupied the afternoon. Before we knew it, it was party time at The Heredia Hotel, where Carlos, with the help of our trusty interpreter. Lou Duigou. gave us a warm welcome. More dancing followed a delicious meal of Chicken Cordon Bleu with all the trimmings. Since morning would come all too early, we parted company about nine PM.

Friday, February 23/07

Poas Volcano and La Paz Waterfall Garden by Brenda and Glen Kane

The day began at 5:30am with the phone ringing, buses roaring by, and birds beginning to sing in the courtyard. It's so hard to get used to these hours when you love your sleep! Breakfast with our hosts and Marj and Carl included fresh fruit, freshly squeezed fruit juice, and sweet rolls with excellent coffee. As we rode the bus from Alajuela to Heredia, we saw red and pink bougainvillea vines, beautiful old churches, colorful hibiscus hedges, tall palm trees, dogs of every color and kind, and the tall stacks of the huge Imperial beer brewery. Rush hour begins about 6:15am, and the roads were packed with trucks, buses, and cars moving slowly into Heredia and San Jose.

Today was a celebration of Costa Rica's favorite saying – *Pura Vida* or “Pure Life”.

After passing through strawberry and coffee plantations and farms with Brahmin cattle, dairy cows and sheep, we reached the Poas Volcano National Park (alt. 2674m), north of Heredia. It was cool and cloudy in the crater, but the clouds blew off every once in a while so we could see the outline of the lake, which was very acidic and smelled of sulphur. The trail up to the lookout or “mirador” was edged by twisted vines full of small black birds with yellow legs, blue-chested black warblers, and large squirrels which the Costa Ricans called chipmunks. While most of us walked up the long twisting path, Eryl enjoyed a lift in the ambulance. After spending some time searching for a FF member who was already on the bus, we set up a “numbering-off” system to speed up taking attendance – a great idea!

Lunch at the Colinas del Poas was an elegant buffet overlooking lovely gardens with fish ponds and a canopy zip-line. Then we were off to the La Paz Waterfall Gardens. We arrived late in the day so could only spend an hour, but we would have loved to spend the whole afternoon there. Light rain fell as we drove up the mountain, around hair-pin turns and across “Oh My God” bridges. Some highlights were the Orchid Terrace with its white, purple and pale green orchids; the Butterfly Observatory where we saw one large butterfly that had just hatched from its cocoon; the Hummingbird Garden filled with every size and color and shape of hummingbird, flying freely and surrounded by red flowers of every kind; the Frog House where we saw tiny red, gold and

fluorescent frogs hiding in the leaves; and the series of waterfalls with their crashing noise and wild spray.

We hurried down the wet cement steps and just made the last shuttle bus before the park closed – this is a place we would really enjoy visiting again.



Dunia, our host, had dinner waiting when we arrived home at 7:30pm, after a long busy day – veggies and meat, rice, and fried plantains. We shared our picture albums and Alberta photo book with our host, and then packed 55 snack bags for tomorrow’s trip. We are getting better at communicating with each other, using a combination of hand signals, a bit of English and a bit of Spanish.

Saturday, February 24/07

Maen Orphanage and Sarchi by Donna and Larry Wyatt

We woke up at 5:50 a.m., showered and had a breakfast of eggs, toast and coffee. We hurried to make sure that we were at the central square in Heredia at the appointed time of 7:30 a.m. The bus however was on “tico time” and arrived at 8:00, so we had lots of time for visiting.



Our first stop was at the Maen Orphanage for girls where we met 9 orphaned girls and their teachers and caregivers. Our group shared presents of pencils, stickers, books, scribblers, postcards and Canadian souvenirs. Money was also given to the orphanage. Everyone was very open and friendly. The children were well-cared for. One of the rooms in the orphanage had been donated by Canadians.

We were taken to the Bella Vista Club International of Sarchi, home of the painted ox-cart. Here we enjoyed the swimming pools and the water slide. (The water was cold – “aqua esta frio”) For lunch there was a choice of pollo en salsa (chicken) or carro verde en salsa. (pork) The vegetables included green and yellow beans that the Costa Ricans refer to as “border beans”. It appears that

lunch is the main meal of the day and that it is served later (1:30- 2:30). After lunch, there was some more Spanish dancing.

At 3:00 p.m. we left for the Sarchi gift shop area where members of the group looked at all kinds of items in the shops and bought hand-crafted bread boards, salad tongs, and boxes made of wood; jewelry; cards; t-shirts; scarves and other souvenirs from Sarchi. We carefully considered the wooden chairs made with wide leather strapping.

We stopped at the metal church in Grecia. The Cathedral de la Mercedes is a gothic style church made from metal pieces that were imported from Belgium in the 1890's and is a deep red colour. It is as beautiful from the inside as it is impressive from the outside. What's interesting is that this church was supposed to be sent to Punta Arenas in Chile, but when it arrived in Punta Arenas, Costa Rica, they shipped it inland and erected it in Grecia. The church is located in a beautiful park covering 4 square blocks filled with local people relaxing on the many benches.



We returned to Heredia at about 7:00 p.m.

Sunday, February 25/07
Cartago by Angela Seery

We were a large group today as many of our hosts were able to come out with us. Our bus trip took us to the south east end of the Central Valley. Over two-thirds of the population lives in this valley. There are many small towns here, lush vegetation, coffee plantations and some squatters' shacks. Our first stop of the day was at McDonalds' for a coffee break!

This area has suffered much earthquake damage over the centuries, some of which is still visible today. Ruins here date back past the 16th century, with one of the first churches in Costa Rica, the Iglesia Del Convento, built in Cartago in 1635. However, over the centuries the church suffered much damage from earthquakes that have rocked this region and after 5 rebuilding attempts, the church was abandoned in 1910 and the ruin is now a national monument in the city's park.

Next we stopped at Lankester Botanical Gardens and saw the orchid collection. It was still quite spectacular even though the peak blooming time was in January. What was most fascinating was to see orchids which can attach themselves to trees with 'soft' trunks and root there. It was strange to see a palm tree and a cactus with an orchid blooming on them.



Cachi Dam is one of the largest in the country and provides about 35% of the country's electricity. Lunch was at the La Casona del Cafetal Restaurant. The restaurant is in a beautiful building set in the midst of a coffee plantation. The after-dinner coffee was prepared in the traditional manner in individual drip bags. This makes a wonderful cup of coffee.

We had a short stop in Cartago itself to see the Basilica de Nuestra Senora de los Angeles which is an important pilgrimage site. This is a beautiful church with amazing stained glass windows; this basilica is home to the La Negrita, or 'The Black Virgin'. Mass was being celebrated when we were there so the church was packed.

Back on the bus and home for some family time.

Monday, February 26/07

Beach Day at Playa Leona by John Yule

Today we lucked out because the bus passed our end of the San Jose metropolis on the way to Punta Leona, so we were able to get on later. After a leisurely breakfast, we headed to the Pacific coast of Costa Rica to Punta Leona. The view from the bus has been wonderful and today was no exception. The change in vegetation was noticeable once we got to Atenas. It was noticeably drier and the mountains support more teak. Near Atenas we passed a statue, one of three in the area (San Ramón and San Mateo-Orotina have the other two) that were placed in the belief that they would protect the area that they enclosed. A strong Catholic presence is apparent here and throughout the country.

The gate into the Hotel Punta Leona was guarded and it was several minutes before we were given the go-ahead to enter. The hotel itself was quite separate from the beach and after the group had been "banded" we got back on our bus for the short drive to the beach. Apparently the Hotel is in a bit of a dispute with the local authorities over the privacy of the beach. The beach is inaccessible except by the road we have taken or by boat from the ocean and the Hotel wants to keep it that way. The Hotel's desire to keep the beach private flies in the face of the laws of Costa Rica.

The beach was beautiful – a small bay shallow water off the shore with two rocky points guarding the entrance to our refuge. It was hot today. The water was very warm and very clear. Individuals staked out chairs and tables in the shade all along the beach. The rental facility did a brisk business in lounge chairs and snorkeling equipment. The views in the water were fantastic. Lots of very

colourful fish, an octopus and a couple of skates provided a viewing feast for the snorkelers. Another swimmer tipped us off to a sea turtle in the area so Jean, Brenda and I took off in search of said turtle. Marj was also on her way in to help with the search when she was waylaid by a small jelly-fish and had to have first aid administered. However, the three of us were soon rewarded after the turtle appeared out of nowhere in front of me. The turtle was missing one back flipper and some of its shell in the same area likely as a result of an attack by a crocodile or possibly a shark. What an experience drifting with the turtle as it fed! The turtle seemed to have no interest in the humans around it.

Waterlogged but elated with the swim, it was time to leave. In the seat behind me Jean and her host Marie resumed their Español-English lesson. The bus took us to the other half of the resort - the El León Marino - a beachfront hotel around the point from where we had been swimming. It boasted 7 swimming pools along with a restaurant and bar. It was nearly deserted and at that moment not a great atmosphere. The salsa lessons were starting as we pulled out of the parking lot.

On the return, we stopped at a viewing area for crocodiles that congregated below. The river was well fenced off to prevent people from venturing anywhere near the river yet I wonder how many people those crocodiles still manage to take out of the gene pool each year.

That night Damaris has arranged a visit to her friend Cecilia's home for dinner and it turns out an impromptu lesson in making stuffed tortillas. Wonderful, welcoming people and an evening of great food and lots of laughter at our tortilla prep abilities. Everyone got a bit of a break as one of the family members had enough English to smooth out the conversation.



Tuesday, February 27, 2007

Heredia and Farewell Dinner by Lynne and Lou Duigou

Today was a free morning so we slept in a bit and did some laundry and ironing to get the wrinkles out of the dress clothes for today's formal luncheon (comida).

Flor Urmana, our hostess, took us on a historical tour of Heredia – “Cuidad de las Flores” begun in 1575 and settled by indigenous people. It was named for Alonso Fernandez of Heredia. We began with “El Fortin” the old fort for Heridia which was begun in 1876 by Fadrique Gutierrez and was completed in 1882. It was a major military establishment and quarters for troops. It is now under restoration as the weather has destroyed some of it as the windows are broken. The bricks were made locally but the stones were from the quarry in Punta Arenas area to the west. There was also a fort built in Alejuela but it was smaller. La Casa de la Cultura (House Alfredo Gonzalez Flores) next door is also an old building with wooden and mosaic tile floors and beautiful woodwork. It had a display of paper mache masks used in local Festivals.

Across the street in the Central Park is the Iglesia de la Inmaculada, a national historic site constructed in 1797. Inside there are a number of beautiful stained glass windows and beautiful tile work. In front of the church is a huge square with a gazebo used for musical concerts several times a week and a large fountain in bronze that dates to approximately the 1850's. We went out of the park and walked along the streets and did some shopping for souvenirs and coffee.

At 12:30 the bus picked us up and then we went to the central square and picked up the rest of the group to take us up the mountain to the Hotel Tyrol. We arrived at the hotel after about a 30 minute drive. The hotel looks like a Swiss village with small cabins and several larger buildings. We sat down to dinner at tables decorated and set for eight. We added Canadian flags to each table. Dinner music was provided by the same fellow as at the Welcome dinner. The Buffet consisted of Hearts of Palm salad, rolls, Mushroom Crepe, Rice, Chicken in gravy, Green Beans, Potatoes, Coconut Flan or Cheese Cake and Coffee.

Eryl Jones played the Canadian and Costa Rica national anthems and Carlos Herra and Marjorie Eckert exchanged club gifts. We presented the Heredia Club with a book on Alberta and we received a wooden tray with a painted scene and the date of the exchange. We also presented a letter from Mayor Stephen Mandel for the mayor of Heredia.



Glen Kane, John Yule and Lou Duigou presented the skit "The Hats" in English and the several of the men of the Heredia club presented it in Spanish. Dancing followed until about 5:00 pm when the bus returned us to our homestay. That evening we took our hostess and her family out for dinner as a way to show our appreciation for her hospitality.

Wednesday, February 28, 2007

Heredia to San Jose to Mexico City to Xalapa by Lynne and Lou Duigou

We were up at 3:45 am to finish packing and get ready to leave for the San Jose airport in Alejuela. Had coffee and left at 4:30 am. Once at the airport, we had to pay the airport tax of \$26.00 usd each and fill in customs forms. During our luggage search, the officer took away my laundry detergent and took the batteries out of my book light. Once we all had our boarding

passes, we headed to the gate where many of us got a bite to eat. We boarded at 6:25 am and took off at 7:05 arriving in Mexico City at 10:10 am. It took until almost noon to go through Customs and Immigration and claim our luggage. The bus company representative, Luis Badio of “Tornado”, was waiting to meet us. Our driver, Rudolfo, took us to a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet where we had a great time ordering in Spanish, since they spoke no English. The driver and rep. picked up beer, pop and water for sale on the bus for our five hour journey. Luis informed us he could not take our Mastercard as stated in the contract and would need cash. This presented a problem.

The trip through the outskirts of Mexico City showed a lot of litter and poverty beside the six-lane toll road, with partially completed grey concrete one or two level houses on either side. The toll for the bus was 171 pesos. Along the way, it was at first barren and dry, with few cattle. Soon we began to glimpse several volcanoes topped with snow in the distance, against the blue sky. Later, as we climbed to higher altitudes, there was a lot more corn and vegetables growing in large, irrigated fields. Most were cultivated by hand or with oxen or horses, and few tractors were in sight. Once we left the toll road for Highway #140, we drove on a two-lane highway where we saw shepherds with sheep along the road, pineapple growing, and lots of cactus being cultivated. There were pine forests at the higher elevation, and the countryside became very green as we got closer to Xalapa. Both highways were in excellent condition, and the traffic moved smoothly.



We arrived at the “Mega Mart” in Xalapa about 5:15pm and were met by our cheering hosts and a member of the city council. What a great welcome! Xalapa is a beautiful clean city with lots of flowers in the boulevards and lots of trees. We were given a lovely dinner and visited as much as we could, as our hostess did not speak any English. Early to bed after a long day!

Thursday, March 1, 2007 “World Friendship Force Day” Xalapa, the City of Flowers by Elma Pawl

This was a very busy day – mostly within the central four blocks of the city. We were up early to meet at the Police Academy with our guide and interpreter, Harold. (He said he was a mouse only bigger, and he was.) We were welcomed by the Police Commissioner and shown a video on the new private policing in Xalapa. I was amazed that the policewomen wore very high-heeled shoes to march in. Coffee, sodas, and cookies were served in the garden.

Next stop was State of Vera Cruz Government Palace. The Diego Rivera murals were beautiful. Then we went to meet the Mayor at City Hall, who graciously welcomed us and spoke about his

city. Marj gave him greetings from our Mayor and before we left, he had a reply for Edmonton. All of us were given a mug, half a pound of coffee and post cards of the city. We learned a little more about the weather. A misty rain is called "chippy-chippy". The mayor's chambers had beautiful angel murals on the ceiling.

Our welcome lunch, catered by a local FF member, was held at the Artist and Musical Display Center. All the ladies received a long-stemmed rose. The tables were decorated with lights under the tablecloths -- very impressive. A five-course meal, with wine, was served, while two different bands played marimba and Latin music. We did the Bird Dance and they showed us their version of a Mexican Congo line. They love music and dance! It was a wonderful way to celebrate World Friendship Day.



We came back to the recreation center in the evening to see a folk dancing presentation. There were two groups -- one of boys and girls, and one of young adults -- wearing beautiful costumes as they did foot stomping dances with swirling skirts and many twirls. We had front row seats and were very close to the performers. A clown act of old men in costume ended the evening.

Coatepec and Xico by Pat and Jim Ewing

We traveled by car a very short distance to Coatepec, a delightful village, about 10 miles from Xalapa. Our first stop was the Municipal Palace, a public administration building. From there, we visited San Jeronimo Church, unique in that it was built in the form of a "cross". This Church was partially destroyed by an earthquake and has since been rebuilt, as close in appearance as possible to the original building. From there we were able to eat chirros and potato chips from the vendors in the park, on our way to the Orchid Area. We were told there are 1500 varieties of orchids and as they grow with very little water, or care, they are in abundance in the area.

The "pause that refreshed" was a visit to a "bar" and "liquor" outlet/manufacturer, where we were able to sit in the shade, and served "Torita de Cachuate, a drink with ice, coffee liquor, condensed (spell) and evaporated milk, all mixed in a blender. Some of us also enjoyed the sampling bar, tasting several liquors, as well as purchasing our share! Next, was an antique home that had been converted to a hotel, Hotel Posada Coatepec -- very luxurious with a center courtyard filled with pink bougainvillea, orchids and roses, and several fountains. As an aside, Michael Douglas once stayed there while he was filming "Romancing the Stone". The guide told us that the recent Mayan movie, "Apocalypse" was also filmed in this area. The "Iglesia de la Virgende Guadalupe, a beautiful church decorated with gold leaf and famous paintings were next. Here, in 1833, families of patients suffering from cholera prayed for their loved ones.

We moved on to Xico, another village nearby, visiting a coffee plantation, and Mayan mounds

where prehistoric artifacts have been found. We celebrated annual "Witches Day" here. We were given a "cleansing" ceremony, whereby we stood on a Mayan Mound, brushed ourselves with a portion of the "Rue Plant", after which we went through a "smoke" ritual, and then dropped the plant into a hole dug on the mound for this purpose. Hopefully we will all have nothing but Happiness to follow! No bad thoughts!!!



Next it was time to eat again, at a lovely restaurant beside a stream. On the way to the restaurant, we passed burros carrying bananas and coffee beans, and women carrying large piles of sticks on their backs. Mexico is quite a mixture of modern and traditional. We watched a woman twirling dough and making fresh tortillas on a grill as we waited for dinner. This dinner was provided by the mayor of Xalapa, along with more gifts -- beautiful baskets of Mexican candies for each of us. Before we left Xico, it was "chippy- chippy", a light shower. Our day ended with an outstanding concert, given by fifty voices from the University of Xalapa choir and over one hundred musicians of the Xalapa symphony orchestra who have toured the world with their music. To bed, tired, but happy after a long and interesting day!!!

Saturday, March 3, 2007

Bus to Veracruz by Laura and Neil Larsen

This morning we left at 8:00 A.M. by bus to Veracruz. It was a warm, sunny day. Today we had an opportunity to learn about the history of Mexico. There were 3 main periods in the local civilizations: 1600BC – 0 -- Olmecs; 0-1000AD -- Mayas; 1,000AD – 1500's -- Totonaca (Spaniards arrived). Our first stop was at an archaeological site in Cempoala. This site is of historical importance in Mexico because this is where the first talks took place between the native people and Cortez, when the Spaniards came in 1519AD. The site, abandoned for 300 years, was covered with trees. It was restored by the Germans from 1932 to 1985 and is now a tourist attraction. There was a population of 25,000 to 30,000 people in 1500. Water was brought by canals. There were no work animals; therefore, everything had to be carried by hand or baskets. These people were known for their cheerfulness. The walls and structures were made of rocks retrieved from the river carried on their backs. The cement that held the rocks together was made from sea shells, animal bones, and sand and is still in good condition after so many years. The walls were not built to fight battles but to separate the village from the ceremonial structures. Many people died as there was no way to fight diseases.

Our second stop was Quiauiztlan which is an archaeological site situated high up overlooking a beautiful view of the sea. Here we found the remains of the Totonaca burial grounds. The fort consisted of terraces where they functioned as supporting walls for grazing spaces and as defensive barriers against possible attacks. The cemetery is still visible and the tombs were covered in stucco. Some are the originals and others have been restored. White is the original color. In the

square, priests lived on the upper terrace. Eighteen sacrificial knights have been found. Cortez first landed here and took this land.

Our third stop was to the beach where we indulged in a fabulous picnic lunch prepared by our hosts, complete with beer and tequila. It was great to sit and watch the ocean. We were not able to swim as the red flags were out but we did get our feet wet. After a relaxing two hours we were on our way to Veracruz. Cortez landed in Veracruz in 1519 and this seaport became the major gateway for the Spanish settlement and foreign trading. It is now the third largest seaport in the world. Veracruz has a population of 500,000 and is a cosmopolitan city situated on the Atlantic Ocean. Many Mexicans like to vacation here. As you look around, you see evidence of people with Indigenous, African and European ancestry. Veracruz is famous for its festivals. In February they have a Mardi Gras carnival with floats, parades and dancing. We stopped for coffee at Cafe La Parroquia which is a famous coffee house. We then went shopping at the open market and finished off the evening dancing in the open air city square. We left Veracruz at 8:30 P.M. It was a very busy day but a very enjoyable one.



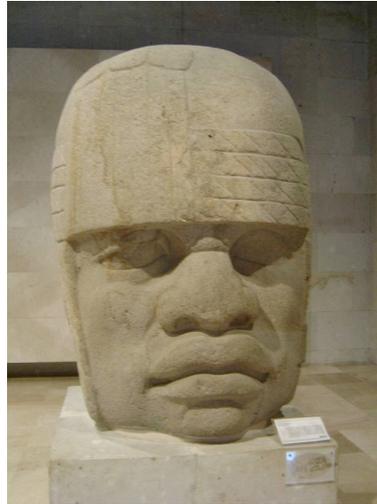
Sunday, March 4, 2007

Xalapa by Enid and Helmut Nikolai

In essence our day began about 1:00 am as we were going to bed after we and Helen talked to Amalia, our Home Host, into the wee hours of the morning. As we entered our bedroom, the neighbourhood dog was barking so loudly that we knew we would not get any sleep. Alas, Enid had the solution as she went to the window and barked ferociously at the dog. The dog was very frightened, looked around him for signs of impending danger and then ran as fast as he could down the street. We had a good sleep anticipating our next day in Xalapa. The day began at the Hacienda Museo "El Lencero" in

Carretera Xalapa which had been the home of Santana, a Mexican General. What a magnificent complex that has been converted into a museum! The Hacienda was sold from family to family and is now owned by the government. The furniture was shipped from a variety of countries and included a German piano, a clock from England, many

Persian rugs, marble from Italy and furniture from Austria as Santana saw himself as a European Nobleman. From the Hacienda we went to the Museo De Antropologia De Xalapa which is a magnificent museum housing 29,000 pieces on display and is second only to the Archeological Museum in Mexico City.



March 4 was to be a rather "low key day" as it was the day before we were leaving our friends in Xalapa; therefore, from the museum we all went our own ways and treated our hosts to lunch. We chose the Crown Plaza as we knew we could get a variety of foods that would satisfy many tastes. Brenda and Glen hosted Aurora; Enid, Helmut and Helen hosted Amalia; and Laura and Neil hosted Manual to a wonderful lunch accompanied by a live band playing "Mexican" music. It was a treat for all of us. We were amazed at how much food we were able to consume at such a reasonable price. The camaraderie was also very special.

After we left the Crowne Plaza we did some shopping as Amalia, the President of the FF in Xalapa, needed to buy some drinks and food for the final banquet the next day. We accomplished the necessary shopping and then shopped for gifts to take back to friends and family in Canada. We went to Amalia's to rest, regroup, and to begin packing. Then we were off to visit Amelia's sister where Glen and Brenda were staying. We were all satisfied with our day that combined history, friendship, wonderful Mexican cuisine, shopping and more visiting and experiencing life with our hosts. It was a fine day!

Monday, March 5, 2007

Xalapa by Jean Anderson

A cool, "chippy-chippy" day of 14 degrees was our last day in Xalapa. We began the day by meeting Elsa, Licha, Reyna plus Donna and Larry for breakfast at Meson del Alferéz. Ere and I were late as Ere had to wait for her maid to arrive at her "casa". After breakfast, we walked to Callejon del Diamante (little street) to shop and a trip to the bank for more pesos. We had mucho fun and mucho laughs. Just as we were leaving, I saw a purse I liked. I had very few pesos left, so I dumped every bill and coin I had on the counter, and the sales lady said the purse was mine.

On the way back home, Ere needed to stop at her bank to get money. The bank machine was down so we drove to an open-air pollo (chicken) restaurant, where the lady opened the till and gave Ere money. I laughed and asked her how the "pollo bank" works. Apparently, Ere owned the building and was just collecting rent.

The farewell dinner was held in the Howard Johnson Hotel, and was a lovely dinner catered by the same woman who did the welcome lunch. We had grapes, corn chowder, chicken in green chili sauce, fried potatoes, wine, coffee, and a delicious cake. We were entertained by a mariachi band which marched in and serenaded us. Although we started out feeling quite chilly that day, we warmed up with mucho dancing, hugs, kisses and tears. We received gifts of a book of children's stories of Vera Cruz and hand-painted bookmarks and letter openers made of coffee tree wood from our hosts and the city. We were very impressed with the efforts taken by the city's administration to welcome us and help us to have a good visit in Xalapa.

After the party, Ere had to drop in on a friend to give her some money. She belongs to a group of twenty ladies who gather every Monday to donate money to help an unfortunate different woman each week. From there we went to say goodbye to her son who was a lawyer, and then another son who was an architect with three children.

What a special day we had as our final day in Xalapa!

Tuesday, March 6/07 -

Xalapa to Mexico City by Brenda and Glen Kane

We woke to a cool grey morning, everyone "rugged up" in their warmest clothes. As we stood outside the supermarket waiting to board the bus, we could see our breaths in the cold air. Amazing! After final farewells, and many tears, we boarded the bus at 8:00am, and waved goodbye as the last stragglers arrived. This was our first outbound trip, and we both loved our hostess, Aurora, and will really miss her. The whole club was warm, friendly, and fun, and Amalia, the ED, did a wonderful job of organizing the exchange.

As we left Xalapa, the sun came out and we saw blue sky for the first time in two days, mixed with fog at times, low on the trees. It's true that in this area of Mexico, you can experience four seasons in one day. As we passed Perote, outside Xalapa, we waved to John and Angela who were staying on for a few days with their hosts. Outside Xalapa, we passed pine forests in the hills, then out to the plains full of corn, dairy cows, chickens, sugar cane, and cactus farms. Farmers worked their fields with wagons and horses, oxen or burros. The two volcanoes shone white against the blue sky in the distance, and there was a haze on the lower slopes as we neared Mexico City.

Arriving at the International Airport in Mexico City, we dropped Marion, Jean, the Larsens, and Ewings off to catch flights back to the U.S. and Canada, while Lynne and Donna sorted out the travel arrangements with the bus company. They were great negotiators and sorted out the problem with expertise.

We finally reached our Best Western Majestic Hotel about 1:30pm, through heavy traffic in Mexico City. It is a lovely old building from the 1700's that became a hotel in 1937. Some of the rooms overlooked the plaza where there were street performers doing amazing break dancing and bands playing music; sellers of every kind of handicraft; and the huge Mexican flag was raised and lowered each day by the army and navy. Our room looked out toward the beautiful old Cathedral. It was built on the foundations of the old Aztec temples, and is sinking because of the marshy land below. Mexican engineers have spent much time developing a method of leveling the building. Below our building was a busy street corner, with four policewomen controlling traffic with

whistles. There are armed guards and policemen everywhere – even in the local liquor store. It is a fascinating, colorful city. The streets are clean and tidy, with sweepers working all day long to keep it that way.

We ended our long day with a pleasant meal on the roof patio of the hotel, overlooking the plaza. As we sipped our coffee, the flag was lowered once more, and the moon came up above the lighted Government Palace across the square – a memorable sight. A final highlight was a luxurious hot bath in a deep old tub – my first in a month since we have been away.

Wednesday, March 7/07 -
Mexico City by Susan Supruniuk

With our tour guide, Julliette, we took a one-hour walk around the square. The Aztecs, in earlier times, had built their temples here, in the middle of a shallow lake, and named their city Tenochtitlan. These were destroyed by the Spanish invaders during the 16th century. To build the structures we see today, the Spanish reused the same stone building blocks finishing the interiors in the most modern style of the time.

Plaza de la Constitucion, also known as the Zocalo or “foundation”, is one of the biggest squares in the world. It is surrounded by the National Palace, the Metropolitan Cathedral and two government buildings. The Majestic Hotel we were staying in is on the fourth side. The National Palace is a three-story building that features colorful Diego Rivera murals showing the history of Mexico, on the walls in one area; and honors Benito Juarez, former president, in another. Over the main balcony hangs the Independence Bell which rings every year on September 15 during Mexico’s celebration of its independence from Spain.



The Metropolitan Cathedral is the largest church in Latin America and features five different styles of architecture. It has many outstanding works of art and has a crypt where all the city’s bishops are buried

After walking through a market behind the National Palace, we boarded a bus to Chapultepec, an elegant area developed by the French in the 1700’s. We drove down wide tree-lined streets, with

statues and fountains down the center. Nearing Chapultepec, we began to see high rise buildings, large estates, parks, and restaurants. We stopped at the Palacio Restaurant for a delicious lunch of fish, vegetables and rice, topped off with ice cream for dessert. After our late lunch we returned to our hotel to spend the remaining few hours on our own.

Thursday, March 8/07 - International Women's Day

Shrine of our Lady of Guadalupe, Teotihuacan, and Mexico City by Irene Moir

With our guide, Juliette and all on the bus, we went to visit the Shrine of our Lady of Guadalupe. The most-visited religious site in Latin America, built in the 16th century, this shrine is a great example of Spanish Baroque Art. From December 9th, for 5 days, over four million people come to visit the shrine each year. In Mexico, 85% of the population is Catholic. The wood for the beautiful ceiling was donated by the Catholics in Canada. All Catholics in the American continent are represented in the shrine by their countries' flags, plus the flag of Lebanon because there are many Lebanese in Mexico.



Along the highway we observed mile after mile of cement homes built up the sides of the hills. These are farmers displaced because they cannot make a living on the land, and have moved nearer to the city.

Next, we visited the archeological site of Teotihuacan, located 40 km north of Mexico City. This was the first planned city on the continent, built around 1600 years ago. The center is laid out representing two axes, the north – south is named the Avenue of the Dead, and at one end stands the Pyramid of the Moon. Off to one side looms the Pyramid of the Sun which has 250 steps and is 65 meters high. Brenda, Glen and Lou were the heroes of our group when they made it to the top. Hundreds of years after it was abandoned, the Aztecs named this site the City of the Gods for its existence was governed by deep religious convictions.



We stopped along the way to hear about the agavi cactus. There are many varieties of this plant and many uses for all parts of it. The ancient Aztecs made a drink called pulque which was the early tequila ... we were offered a sample in the store later.

Maria, our guide for this area, showed us how paper was extracted from the agavi leaves, and how the spines were used as needles and thread. The fibers extracted from the leaves were used to make bags, rope and many other objects.

Another guide told us about the minerals and semi-precious stones used by ancient tribes, and about obsidian, which is a volcanic glass, a rock rather than a mineral which comes in several colors.

We finished our tour with lunch at the Hotel Quinto Sol - a very nice buffet. Then back to Mexico City and our hotel. As we got closer to the hotel, we found there was a demonstration with thousands of people taking part. As our hotel overlooked The Plaza where they were meeting, we could not get very close by bus, so we walked the rest of the way. It was most interesting -- they all marched in with their banners and there were people on a stage making speeches in Spanish so we could not understand it. We were amazed at the orderly fashion, and when it was time to disperse, they all just turned and walked away without any trouble. An amazing sight to see such a large demonstration! I think they were demonstrating against the government about the increase in prices of many of their staple foods like beans, corn and onions. The price had gone up by 30% or more with no increase in their wages.

After the demonstration ended, we went out for our last dinner in Mexico to the Café de Taguba, founded in 1912, a lovely building, great food and good service, with a band playing for our enjoyment. A fine way to end our last night!

Friday, March 9/07 Mexico City to Edmonton by Marj and Carl Eckert

After yesterday's demonstration, we all came away knowing that democracy is at work and we hope our country can rally like that for important causes. This morning we had time to walk around, shop, or just relax as we didn't have to take the bus to the airport until noon. We chummed with Lou and Lynn, while Lynn found the scarf she had seen on the first day, and had coffee at MacDonald's. Then we spent some quiet time at the Cathedral. Larry & Donna shopped

for belts but bought a sweater, Irene and Elma both found the puppets they wanted, Helen bought a wallet and Susan found a Harley for a grandson. Ruth, Helmut & Enid walked around, while Brenda & Glen went to the archeological museum which they enjoyed. Clarence & Eryl found a “farmacia” and walked around the square one last time. We all had to check out the tents that rose up from 1 – 6 am in the square. (Some heard the hammering all night) We were so lucky to have an inside suite!

At the airport I managed to spend most of the pesos we had left. More free tequila at the airport! Carl got some along with kahlua and I had no idea how we were going to pack it! I also found a T-shirt for a grandson. Audrey had her material purchase shrink wrapped at the airport for \$7US - a good idea for items for next trip. The plane was late in leaving Mexico City. In Phoenix we managed to shift things into the check-in bags at customs, we had to have our boarding passes stamped, then there was only time to grab a pizza to take onto the plane. We ate our food while sitting on the tarmac waiting to take off, and arrived home in Edmonton at midnight, only 5 minutes late. Lots of goodbye- hugs for our buddies, and then home with daughter, Sheila, who had picked us up some fruit for breakfast. The group melded together so well on this trip that it made it a pleasure to be the ED.