

THE MEXICAN THRILL

OR

‘How I managed to survive a trip to Middle America on a shoe string budget’

By

HERMANN GRASSL

Dedicated to

My dear friend Duncan from Leeds, GB

**„Un viaje muy divertido con un amigo ingles tan amable y
precioso para mi vida“**

These personal lines coming up now are also considered a tribute to his personality that had been heartily admired by my sister Gaby, too, when she got the chance to meet this outstanding guy on the Vanderbilt campus during the parents' weekend.



Duncan, my sister Gaby in the middle and a friend from Turkey

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INTRODUCTION

Can you actually imagine hopping on a bus in Nashville and use this means of transportation for a trip to Middle America ending up travelling roughly 100 hours? As a matter of fact, I was part of it and I am pretty proud about this real endeavor.

By writing this travel report I would like to present you a hands-on insight into the wide variety of geographical, cultural, local and nutritional specialties of some of the last resorts in the world, let alone to mention countless occasions that happened to be fairly exciting but still worthwhile to be narrated in detail.

What made this journey ultimately unique was the circumstance, that I had been accompanied by a lovely British fellow, whose name's *Duncan Crossley* and who was another foreign student at Vanderbilt University, TN like me.

He turned out to become an excellent travel companion, thus making this time of my life last forever in my mind. '*Variety is the spice of life*' – this was his basic philosophy and it definitely proved to be the overall principle of our comradeship during the Xmas break when we eventually decided upon choosing the states of Mexico and Guatemala for our 4 week vacation.

I'll never forget his beneficial advice '*everything will be sorted out in the end*' and so it was for the majority of our sometimes delicate and tough situations which had to be mastered once in a while.

When I first met Duncan, there was an immediate mutual understanding characterized by justified criticism regarding the university body of Vanderbilt in general. As a rather creative person he suffered from internal struggles whether to change his subject – English literature, drama – or even return to England. I remember well, that he often complained about the amount of work the faculty put on him; however he would have preferred more quality in the sense of 'food for thought' instead of the prevailing quantity mostly consisting of writing tons of papers that also reminded him of a grinding mill where the students work at an academic assembly line.

Therefore Duncan's mind deserved a much better spiritual fulfillment. I was lucky and I'm still glad having experienced his invaluable linguistic creativity on this journey. He taught me so many useful thingamabobs which are indispensable in one's life and applicable in many ways. I mainly benefited from his tremendous reservoir of stylistic expressions and sayings which he continuously uttered upon specific situations. I also appreciated his support concerning my precarious state of habit with the roommate of Turkey who – por desgracia – turned out to be a pain in the neck. Whilst clarifying this juicy matter he showed much sympathy and finally I was able to cope with everything in a reasonable way.

Unfortunately, I lost track of Duncan, which is a real pity. But my basic instinct is telling me, that our ships will be crossing sometime soon again.

So, take your time and be ready for lots of astounding events and happenings.....

Greyhound is calling – Nashville to Nuevo Laredo

Por fin y por alegría - we had to show up at the bus station downtown Nashville where the famous Greyhound enterprise already expected us to register for an unforgettable period of time.

Beforehand I should mention a short story that perfectly fits into this location and happened to Duncan only a few days ago. No kidding, he was actually but not voluntarily involved in a shooting battle going on at this station. To me it sounded like a Wild West movie thriller which I wouldn't have favored at all. Honestly, this thrill didn't quite calm me regarding our forthcoming departure in a little while.

Upon entering the lounge my mind went almost crazy trying to lively imagine all kinds of feasible circumstances that might have occurred. Therefore both of us took care of each other via carefully watching our luggage and always taking a serious peep towards strange fellows snuggling around this area at this time of the day. Eventually we hit the road - it was December 18, 1987 - and left our safe, academic base crossing the Mississippi River early in the evening and finally reaching Little Rock in Arkansas around midnight.

Looking back now I am fully aware of the fact that I passed through a famous city of the States due to Bill Clinton's presidency lateron. Though we were ready to sleep like a log our time schedule forced us to move on. The next spot on our agenda was Dallas, TX. From there we peacefully continued to Waco, Austin and San Antonio without being involved in any kind of dubious or extraordinary event whatsoever.

Never mind, your attention is going to be excitingly stirred again very soon.

After we had stayed in San Antonio for a couple of hours the Mexican border was almost within walking distance, namely Nuevo Laredo, a small town being divided into an American and a Mexican part. There it happened: our first adventure – here it was time to say good-bye to Greyhound not denying its efficiency so far. Thus we left the bus and attempted to cross the border on foot. All of a sudden we came across a local family that asked us for a favor which we simply couldn't reject. We were to assist them in loading their car and preparing it for their intended ride to Mexico City. What a coincidence – same idea, same plan, same route! In fact they suggested us to accompany them. Caramba, caray!

Of course both of us felt quite happy about this unexpected proposal and immediately agreed upon it, however not foreseeing potential uncomfortable impacts. Anyway we gladly put our stuff into the leftover space and joined in through the heavy traffic. Once we got closer to the border on the bridge, we – however – felt rather bewildered since we did not possess any official permission for trespassing, so we almost went bananas. Being trapped in midst the flood of cars around us we desperately tried to get out of the car but did not succeed at once, maybe due to some language deficiencies so far; nobody really listened to us. Somehow I predicted these hassles.

Last but not least we managed o.k. and could convince the driver to stop on the other side of the bridge. There we were fairly lost, even left outside alone having no documents to show the local police as a proof of evidence. Now we doubtlessly had to do something about it. After heavily debating with some policemen we were sent back to the U.S., in order to fetch the mandatory papers for entry.

I can tell you we were rather relieved and eventually approached the never ending queue of native people already waiting in front of the tienda de la frontera.

Mexico City – A giant among the world’s largest capitals

Since everything perfectly worked out as Duncan always put it, we could happily purchase our tickets for the trip to Mexico City still feeling and being looked upon like Gringos anyway. This bus ride should take about 16 hours and reckon only a pittance of money (20 \$ each/one way). However, choosing the local bus meant to say farewell to the neatly equipped vehicles of the States. This time we had to get accustomed to a totally different way of travelling: sitting on tiny seats in midst a colorful bunch of natives, taking all kinds of stuff with them like tons of bags, fruits and – not joking – animals (e.g. chicken). That was quite something, which I’d never come across before.

It even happened that the locals were trying to sell bebidas or tacos through the windows once the bus stopped for a while somewhere in the outback. These occasions made up for a very diversifying journey embedded in the real life. On the 20th of December early in the evening we could already spot the suburbs of the capital admiring its colossal extension that simply overwhelmed us. It took us quite a bit coming down from the hills surrounding the entire city and approaching the central bus station, where we got off for about 4 days.

Heading to the *Ferrocarriles* located near the main station and close to the *Plaza de Republica* we planned to remain in a cheap but decent hotel which was adjacent to the *calle de insurgencia*, the longest straight road in the world. Talking about quantity and superlatives I ought to mention, that spending some time on the *Zocalo* was definitely a must. Este lugar impresionante is supposed to be the 2nd biggest open paved main square after the well-known ‘Red Square’ in Moscow.

Above all, it was Christmas and that’s why it was even more exciting to stroll around and enjoy the nicely decorated enormous place. There were Xmas motives all over, posters, lights and even stalls where you could have gotten peculiar pictures together with Santa Claus or other fairy tale motto. Anyway it looked to me rather tacky and unreal. Nevertheless, we loved to absorb the hectic and pulse-beating life to its full extent.



Christmas celebration in Mexico City

Upon walking through the lovely streets of this magic city I always stuck to my inherent inclination of denying my idiomatic background, i.e. my primary goal being abroad was to learn and to speak the respective language and dive into the cultural roots of the country.

The regular Mexican breakfast turned out to be a nutritional highlight, relishing the mixture of pan, huevos revueltos o rancheros, frijoles y jugo de naranja con frutas variadas.

Strengthened for the rest of the day we then chose the museum of *Bellas Artes* as another sightseeing spot, where we got a solid impression about the Mexican revolution and its relationship with the Estados Unidos (= USA) in particular; however, this relation was primarily characterized by hatred, displeasure and injustice due to the 'geographical modifications' imposed upon the State of Mexico.

The States of Arizona and Texas once belonged to Mexico but had been conquered and incorporated by the U.S. in former times. The history was vividly exhibited and visibly supplemented by numerous, tremendous murals fixed on the wall clearly displaying certain historical events.

After that great experience we deserved a gigantic view over the whole city and its towering outskirts, when ascending the '*Torre Latin Americano*' until the 42nd floor, obviously being the highest tower in the Americas at least according to official descriptions.

Before calling it a day we accidentally approached some artists performing Pantomime on the street; all of a sudden volunteers had desperately been spied for continuing the show. Arbitrarily, Duncan was picked by the actor himself, not being aware of the fact that my dear friend grasped this unique opportunity utilizing his great acting talents. He performed on stage in such a professional way, that the crowd surely had a hard time to actually distinguish who had been the lucky guy or the original showman.

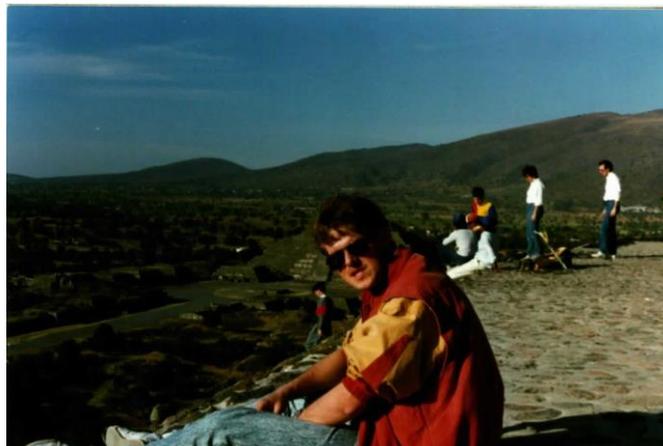
Last but not least I had been selected as well, making me feel real proud and nervous, too. Eventually, the people scattered around us seemed to be rather fond of our performance.

Our first topic on the next day's agenda was to detect the embassy of Guatemala, since Duncan and I had made up our mind to scoot down to *Tikal* and see its famous pyramids. Therefore we needed to get there especially because Duncan was obliged to have a Visa. By coincidence or on purpose the typical yellow VW-cab took us to a building that only consisted of its outer walls, since the earthquake a few years ago had completely destroyed it causing approximately over 10,000 deaths in Mexico. Its terrifying impact on other sites of the city couldn't be overseen let alone to mention the cathedral on the *Zocalo* which happened to be extremely damaged as well as the *Plaza del Alameda*.

In the long run we succeeded in applying for Duncan's Visa at the new embassy which was located in a pretty wealthy area close to the *Parque Chapultepec* with its well-known archeological museum nearby.

Going to Mexico City without stopping by at the renowned pyramids of *Teotihuacan* north of the capital would have been a real pity. Departing from the *Estacion del autobus del norte* we arrived at this historical site late afternoon after a 45 minutes bus ride. At first glance we were very astonished about their magnificent size constructed at the street of the Dead, called *Calle de los Muertos*, stretching over a rather huge area. Since at this time of the day almost no tourists were to be met there we gladly climbed one of those 2 immense pyramids called: *La pyramide del Sol*.

On top of it we were rewarded with a gigantic view over the plateau. Once we reached the peak – not underestimating the steepness of the stony stairs – I simply felt great like the king of the world (do you recall the respective scene in the movie *Titanic*?), who proudly adored *la pyramide de la luna*, that was to be found at the opposite side of the alley. Now it seemed to be the right moment to ponder and contemplate about the historical roots of the Aztecs and their way of life in former times.



La pyramide del sol con migo

Back to earth again we finished this gorgeous day mentally absorbing this holy place once again and returning to our temporary accommodation. During the next Early Bird's breakfast – December 24, 1987 – at the cafe called *Adenaria* we forged our plans to head on to *Oaxaca*, which is located about 12 hours southeast of the capital.

We actually tried to purchase the necessary boletos right away but were somehow prevented from realization because it nearly seemed to be impossible to leave the city on Xmas Day. In fact, we seriously did not take that matter into consideration. Having arrived at the central bus station downtown we were shocked about the millions of people eager to get out of town ASAP for Xmas reasons.

Eventually we could get tickets for a nightly journey on Friday but we'd explicitly been warned that travelling overnight might be rather dangerous due to the most probable attack of countless bandidos. The man behind the counter made all kinds of efforts to persuade us and have us postpone our departure time, but in vain; we insisted on our schedule and managed to get the mandatory prolongation for our hotel, too. Being aware of potential dangers and adventures coming up soon, we intended to avoid going nuts and browsed along the *Alemeda* instead, where the colorfully decorated Xmas stalls stroke our attention once more and for good.

Last but not least we ended up at the *Zocalo* and spontaneously decided to join the night mess in the cathedral which turned out to be the 'Dot on the I' of our stay. Trying to comprehend the words of the priest and figuring out his deeper message for the audience, mostly local inhabitants, we really enjoyed being at this safe location. At the end the whole church celebrated *La Paz* via shaking everybody's hand and wishing each other all the best for the future: amor – salud – prosperidad.

Oaxaca – My favourite jewellery

Friday the 25th of December was the ultimate day of our departure from the unhealthy city. We confidently reached the TAPO, the central orient bus station and looked forward to diving into the rural beauty of *Oaxaca* very soon. Upon embarking the local bus we could not help grabbing a bite from the vendors surrounding the area. This time we went for *una taza de fresa* as a refresher for the upcoming horror trip as being clearly anticipated.



La vida real con mucha gente que está vendiendo una mezcla de comida

We were already used to a terribly overloaded bus but experiencing marvelous desert regions coupled with high mountainous landscapes was the 'cross on the t'. Nevertheless, after a while, I noticed a strange stomach ache probably due to the recent meal and/or the various climatic zones we went through during this journey. I felt fairly sick and recognized some hearing problems, too. Moreover, there was another tough situation Duncan was involved in. He also suffered from cramps because he badly needed to use a toilet; since I couldn't bear anymore his desperate struggle with his physical condition I had to make a decision within a second.

The driver had to be convinced to stop at once; therefore I bravely targeted him whilst fighting my way through all passengers on the aisle by excusing myself over and over for this hassle. In the end I guess the majority of travelers seemed to be quite elated about this unexpected stopover. There is no doubt that these hours were rather frightening and embarrassing for both of us.

Glad about the relief of pain we arrived in *Oaxaca* early in the morning being completely shattered and longing for some rest. The sun was rising and we were just in time to dive into the opening ceremony of the local mercado which was described as the biggest and most famous one in Middle America. Once we succeeded in cherishing some relaxation and rejuvenation we planned to explore the market life the next day. The fact that this splendid market only took place once a year made this occasion even more spectacular. Predominantly old and young natives were busy fixing their warehouse-like stalls to sell turkeys, chickens, all sorts of different decoration material for Xmas, clothes and cloths and many other striking thingamabobs.



Market scenario in Oaxaca

The entire market reflected such a blaze of color of Indian art, craft and culture, mostly due to the appearance of an increasing number of Indians who were hoping to earn some additional money. As our temporary resort we chose a small hotel depriving our wallet of 14,000 pesos but satisfying our basic needs in spite of the presence of bugs and cockroaches. Making the acquaintance of two lovely local Indian girls who perfectly managed their vending-booth was one extraordinary and even a bit emotional highlight the next morning.



Our lovely chicas together with Duncan

Looking forward to chatting with them and applying our acquired skills in Spanish we ambitiously headed to their booth. By means of Duncan's splendid body-language there was no doubt achieving a solid communication anyway.

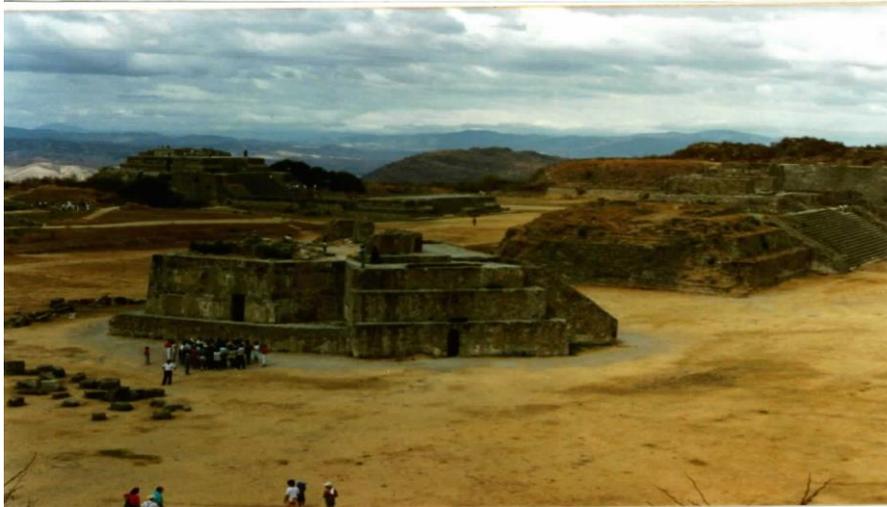
Knowing much about culture in this area we originally planned to attend the famous local museum but we couldn't make it maybe due to the actual distraction illustrated above; instead we focused upon an alternative program that turned out to be a real delicacy in terms of artistic and performing aspects.

The place was called *Teatro Alcala Macedonia* where we'd been nicely surprised by a choir consisting of boys and girls who had been dressed like 'Little Buddhas' in their orange-brownish robes and costumes. Eventually, the whole theatre was involved in their activities via parading through the audience and inspiring the people to sing and dance. A few extras suddenly emerged from backstage, too, waving huge flag-banners and joining the performance, which ended up in a sea of colors making everybody feel rather jubilant.



Two nice guys enjoying simplicity of life

The last overwhelming point of interest on our schedule ought to be the well-known archeological sites of *Monte Alban* to be located about 8 miles away from Oaxaca. By bus we had been taken up to a fairly high mountainous plateau where an incredible amount of remaining ruins still well conserved and belonging to the Mitztek culture (800 BC) could be gazed at. Lucky to cling to a guided tour we gleaned many precious bits of information about its history thus concluding our stay in this wonderful town.



Above you get an excellent view of the ruins at Monte Alban, Oaxaca

New Year's Horseback riding adventure in San Cristobal de las Casas

On Tuesday the 29th of December we left *Oaxaca* very early morning and after an 11 hours lasting ride through hilly landscapes – you may take a wild guess – via bus a primer clase, we safely arrived in *San Cristobal de las Casas*. On our way there we had to cope with a sandstorm which is part of life during this season, however not harming us at all, but leaving a kind of anxiety nevertheless. By cruising along the lush environment we came across an interesting American fellow from L.A., whose name was Barry Cutler and who basically worked as an actor at the muggy fun parks in Florida. This guy should become one of my best pen-buddies after my return to Germany, although Duncan and his creative mind had been much more tailored for generating an enduring friendship with him.

Regarding my physical condition so far I have to state, that due to the cordial assistance of a Swiss couple whom we also got to know on this bus trip, I had been provided with the necessary but mysteriously looking pills to keep me alive and

kicking for at least the following week. Since his vocation was to be a doctor he gladly prescribed some homeopathic medicine that improved my status quite a bit.

Wednesday, the 30th of December is the day that is deeply anchored in my mind because then Duncan and I grasped the unique opportunity to stop by at *the* famous museum and library displaying the history of the Mayas to its best. This place was called *Casa Na Bolom*, meaning house of the jaguar and located close to the *Selva Lacandona*, the tropical rainforest of *Chiapas* at the border to Guatemala. The most interesting and appealing surprise, however, was Ms Gertrude DUBY Blom, who was the sovereign owner, manager and organizer of this terrific site.

She was 83 years old at that time but seemed to be in a very good physical and mental shape despite her age. Unfortunately, in 1994 Ms Blom died just before the farmer's uprising of the EZLN in South Mexico. ELZN symbolizes the liberation army of the *Zapatistas*. According to reliable historic sources she was the last integrative personality between the Indian and Western civilization. Endorsing the struggle for social welfare and material justice played the prevailing role in her entire life. In the year 1943 she undertook the first expedition to the jungle of *Lacandona* looking for the roots of the Mexican revolution. Then, this area was fairly unspoiled hosting only about 250 Lacandones, who were able to survive the Spanish colonization for centuries. Gertrude Blom's primary explanation for the inherent misery of the Indios had been the conscious destruction of their cultural, religious and ecological identity. Together with her husband – a Danish archeologist who died in 1963 – she founded the Lacandones endowment and the Maya Study center 'Na Bolom', where everybody is welcome to treasure about 50,000 pictures and photographs showing her journeys into the forest near Chiapas. Deservedly the Mexican government has proclaimed the honorary citizenship but in fact did neither listen to her nor appreciate her exceptional deeds.

Above all, the UNO institution promoted and appointed her into the Council of the world's wise people, which however had no effective power for any kind of beneficial decision whatsoever. Doubtlessly Gertrude DUBY Blom was one of the most crucial persons in the world. We will definitely miss her, in particular because of her distinctive ambition, her strive for humanity and her extremely warm attitude towards people in general.

Experiencing such an extraordinary event even contributed to ease my sickness for quite a while until the next adventurous goody was ahead of time, which is basically flying when you are having fun but this was not true for me on the last day of the year 1987. I felt rather miserable again and urgently needed some medical treatment. Por desgracia the 'Swiss angel' with the pills had already gone without telling us anything. Thus I had to depend on other assistance. Finally Duncan succeeded in seeking a Mexican doctor, who scrutinized my body and had me pay about 35,000 pesos for medicine against my coughing the pain in the neck, the swallowing and el dolor de estómago. I am still pretty sure paying such a huge amount of money was fairly exaggerative. It obviously seemed to me like a rip-off, but 'mother is the necessity of invention' anyway.

How could I possibly participate in the forthcoming New Year's horseback riding event? That was the essential question that I had to cope with the entire day. The answer was to take a brief but deep nap and feel ready for that unique occasion scheduled next morning. The night before, we could not help taking part in a spontaneous year's end celebration in the patio of our hotel. There we spotted a bunch of multinational people sitting around a fireplace joyfully playing music and – believe me or not – smoking pot. In fact someone offered me a 'piece of heaven' but first of all I rejected though being very tempted to give it a try.

Being well-educated I simply postponed this kind of mental trip to the campus-life at Vanderbilt once I returned from the Xmas break. Inhaling the philosophy of 'each day is a new opportunity' I was actually game for another gorgeous and hilarious highlight terminating this year. Duncan and I were to be picked up in front of our hotel at 9 30 a.m. in order to be taken to a hacienda out of town. Almost forgotten though being on time like a German role model we had ultimately been transported to this rural spot, where the indispensable horses already expected us. Not being aware of the basic attitudes of these animals I eventually had to throw the dice which one I should choose for the ride. For my part I went for the calm and peaceful caballo that made the best first impression on me however imaging the nightmare of being thrown off sometime.

Oh boy, I can tell you it was quite thrilling and I was still very excited about it recalling stories of my sister Gaby, who was a horse maniac and such a talent in that matter. In that respect she meant to be the perfect example for me. We finally started off with our horses slowly walking through the suburban spots of the city. Our objective was *Chamulla*, a small village up in the mountains and about 6 hours away from *San Cristobal de las Casas*.

After a while we approached a more hilly landscape causing the horses to invest much effort to manage the stony path. Oh my goodness, I thought to myself, how can I seriously survive this trip without suffering from any grave damages?

Thanks to God that our group had been led by two natives, one riding up front and the other securing the back. I can assure that the physical presence calmed my nerves a lot giving me the strong belief of being well taken care of and always being able to cling to well-trained experts in case of trouble. Meanwhile I really fell in love with this riding business, idolizing myself because of the great job I did so far, but also admiring the horse itself which complied so well with the leader's guidelines. However, this trip ought to change within a second, let alone to mention the fact that our animals were equipped with saddles made of pure wood (!). That gives you a sound impression how comfortable this day journey had turned out in the long run. It did not take too much time when our speed surprisingly enhanced all of a sudden. Without any reason, the horses developed a strange inclination to switch from sail to steam. How come? Did they get an official permission for this unexpected transition?

No way to stop them – I was now part of the game and anxiously galloped about 500 meters through a meadow. John Wayne couldn't have done it better, I said to myself being fully aware that I passed this test on an AAA basis.

With this success in check the mutual understanding between me and the horse tremendously improved immediately even fostering my present state of habit, too. Upon reaching our target we gladly stopped by at a water spot, where the horses vividly and actively refreshed. Some of them meant it literally, i.e. they actually threw off their passengers and happily took a bath. Somehow it didn't happen to me though I predicted the moment of truth anytime, Eventually, *Chamulla* was just ahead of us and – believe me – I was badly looking forward to this break, since my body already ached hell of a lot.

Rejoicing this splendid ride we were told to have a 2 hour stopover before heading back to *San Cristobal de las Casas*. Not hesitating a minute we got off the horses and indulged in the local mercado that had just begun. Al azar we sighted the church and entered it. What we had seen there was merely unbelievable: the interior space on the floor was covered with hey candles fixed up all over and surrounded by – take a deep breath – bottles of Coca Cola. As a ‘Dot on the I’ the local people even put eggs in the middle of this piece of art.

Now it's up to you, the reader, to figure out the main purpose of this sort of celebration. I would love to share your thoughts with me. Something came into my mind -the vision of the founder of the company: “we are going to bring this product to everybody on this planet to its arm-length” – And so it was. Still being a bit puzzled about this religious experience our horses recovered and were ready to take us back surely demanding their entire energy for transportation again. Once we safely returned to the city I felt sorry for my travel companion since I noticed a few injuries on its feet bones, which seemed to be only superficial to me at least but definitely required more examination by the owner. This journey concluded our stay in the marvelous town of San Cristobal de las Casas.



Here we have got a visto peculiar taken downtown of San Cristobal de las Casas

Guatemala – the road to paradise

The plan for traveling down to Guatemala was in our head long before and on January 2, 1988 it became effective. The bus ride – what a surprise – should last approximately 8 hours and bring us primarily to the border, where we met an American traveler called Sam. All of us, Duncan, Barry, an Australian couple and me spent the night together in a small village, Huehuetenango close to the frontier.



What a scenery?

Sam turned out to be a real weird guy because – despite serious official warnings – he kept on going to the mountains where heavy gun fights were going on between the army and the Guerilla fighters. I am not joking but this noise was even to be heard during night at our accommodation in the valley.

Next day we continued on the Pan-American Highway and eventually sighted the capital of Guatemala, Guatemala City, where we gladly settled down for several days, in order to share precious moments at the famous pyramids of *Tikal* soon to come. It was long ago that we spent some time of distraction in such a big city since the capital of Mexico. We were quite impressed by the colossal amount of colored billboards spread out all over the town revealing a touch of multi nationality.

We chose a kind of a youth-hostel, called La Meza.



As you can observe on this picture poverty played a crucial role, too

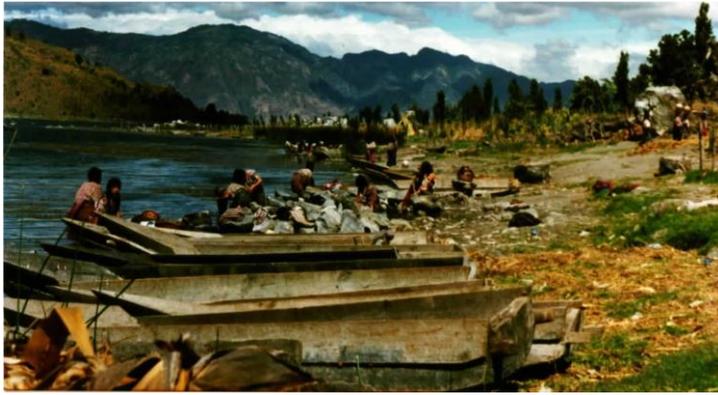
By coincidence, we ran into a familia guatemalteca that politely invited us to dinner at their house. Raise hell, one of the relatives we got to know there, turned out to be a former Miss Guatemala. We cherished the invitation via carefully listening to their opinion about the current political situation in the country and the daily struggle of life.

Upon hitting the hay we already pondered about potential preventive measures that would be necessary for our trip to the jungle of *Tikal*, north of the capital. Being familiar with the impact of Malaria pills that ought to avoid any infectious transmission of diseases we strolled down the street looking for a pharmacy. In spite of precise explanations – at least from our point of view - the owner didn't catch anything. Nevertheless we did not want to give in beforehand and therefore purchased some pills which were supposed to provide for mandatory antibodies in case of emergency. We felt content and relieved and left for *Panacechos* on January 3, 1988.

Due to 'millions' of tourists scattered all over we quite disliked the village desperately missing the local Indian tribes. In terms of strategic planning, however, we weren't too far away from a real hotspot, called *Lago Atitlan*, which happened to become my most favorite resort from now on. It is a wonderfully located valley, surrounded by 3 volcanos which are still partly active these days. The perfect setting was created by a lake that encompassed those volcanos. It doesn't have to be neglected that we had been luckily rewarded with a terrific sunset every evening even adoring a small cloud remaining on top of the volcano that made for a rather romantic picture. This time our 'campground' was a tiny hotel characterized by an abundance of exotic flowers even ranging to the top of our veranda.

Por el desayuno, I discovered the best cereal ever, but to be alert was still the prerequisite of daily life, since gun fire filled our ears once in a while. On the 5th of January, 1988 we fancied a boat trip over the lake to *San Pedro* and *San Antonio*, two pueblas pequenas close to the volcano area. These villages were both supposed to be real resort places to enjoy calm and peaceful moments. Most of all we liked the vast majority of children populating those sites. I guess it is due to an extremely high fertility rate but also rooted in an inherent lovely attitude towards kids in particular, that generated such a wonderful outcome.

Best practice is one girl, whose name's *Constitución* that we treasured very much because of the etymology. Although this excursion lasted only 2 hours it won't be able to erase that day from my memory: On our way back to the boat we came across numerous local Indian women doing their washing at the lake in a diligent manner. Then something occurred to me that nobody could have ever foreseen in any respect. Duncan and I slightly changed our route on foot by following the stony shore.



The peaceful area around the volcanos near Lago Atitlán.

All of a sudden my feet recognized sort of muddy ground which was not exactly differentiable from the surrounding. Since we were a bit in a hurry I just ignored that aspect unconsciously but could not avoid being slowly drowned in the mud. At first glance I had no idea whatsoever how to (re) act upon this rather unexpected occasion especially because my feet even more disappeared.

Whilst realizing the seriousness of the situation now, I simply surrendered - at least mentally - and thought about my earthy end, when – out of nothing – the surface was within reach again. Some kind of ‘higher force’ had mercifully saved my life and soul, thus keeping this adventure as the most thrilling moment in my mind. The fact that several children happily watched my struggle with nature made this event even more absurd and bizarre.

After changing my trousers we celebrated this ‘reunion’ in a vegetarian restaurant, called ‘La Paz’, which perfectly fits. Getting back to our hotel we were already excited about our intended departure to *Tikal* next day, but I felt very bad and sick again, still suffering from ‘Turista’ which is obviously very common in those countries. Considering my state of health I had many doubts in realistically believing in the trip. Longing for some distraction Duncan persuaded me to hop on a bus taking us to the suburbs, where the original and ancient capital of Guatemala is located.

People still look upon it as their secret capital though it had predominantly been destroyed by the earthquake years ago, too. However, the old city maintained much of its former charming glamour. Recalling the process of contemplation with regard to the proper means of transportation for this jungle journey it was fairly clear that we favored the bus (14 hours one way) instead of the plane (45 minutes but too expensive). According to our present financial situation it was solely impossible to go for the flight. We had been told to pick up the tarjetas at a sleazy bus-station somewhere in the middle of nowhere: as a matter of fact, there did not exist any kind of ticket booth and we had been strangely observed as gringos once more. Since we also managed to deal with this task, Duncan and me followed up collusion and eventually decided to start off early in the morning for the jungle despite some collywobbles.

Considering my health it was sure risky to travel like this. During the ride there was no way to catch some sleep, because the vehicle was incredibly packed and sufficient space for my knees didn't exist at all. 'Beggars can't be choosers' – there was no reason to complain. At the beginning the roads were bearable but the longer the trip lasted they got worse and worse. Driving through almost muddy soil did not mean real pleasure for the participants but constant attention instead. Of course we were allowed to appreciate a few stopovers in small villages, where we could brush our teeth with probably contaminated water and fancy a bite in a restaurant. That should basically do it as a survival kit.

Upon approaching the entrance of the Tikal jungle our bus had suddenly been prevented from continuing. What happened? Everyone was asked to get off the bus and then sort of 'ghost busters' appeared to clean up everything inside. Obviously the bus needed to be examined for certain insects or scarce but dangerous bugs; since nobody really solved the overall confusion this explanation tends to be the only theory so far.



The bug fight in the jungle – the good looking chap in the back with the red sweater that's me

Confidently but 'not actually taken to the cleaners' we kept on traversing wonderful highlands and astoundingly green forests until our driver got in real trouble with a hill ahead of us. He had to undertake several attempts to overcome that natural barrier but nearly caused the entire bus falling down the abyss on the left side. I experienced this tricky and tough situation being surprisingly calm and cool. Maybe this was due to the mud story just some days ago making my mind think positively with respect to this kind of critical moment.

Anyway this had been the 2nd closest reunion with God – thank heaven that's over again. Looking forward to finishing this journey very soon we happily and safely arrived at *Flores*, close to the *Lago Peten*, which is about 15 minutes from Tikal. Being totally exhausted we did not intend to waste any time for anything else but

settling down in a small hotel. There we took a nap beneath mosquito nets fixed upon the ceiling in order to keep away this filthy nerve killing species from sucking our precious veins.

On Friday the 8th of enero 1988 at 6 a.m. we had to get up for the long expected ride to the well known ruins of Tikal. Indeed we were fairly lucky to show up there pretty early before the herds of tourists invaded this beautiful site. We did start our individual tour at the *Plaza de Mayor*, then strutted for about 10 minutes through the lush forest when we – all of a sudden – came across an apparent natural wonder, it happened to be still a bit foggy but nevertheless here we go: two giant pyramids emerged from nowhere and mightily stood in front us: *la pyramide del sol y la pyramide de la luna* proudly facing each other. These pyramids were supposed to symbolize the world and its astrology.

Overall, 5 pyramids had been scattered within this jungle area. The remaining ones are called: *templo de inscripción, templo de jaguar y el templo de serpiente* – quite powerful names. You are probably familiar with the world's famous pyramids in Mexico (near Cancun), but as a matter of fact, we'd been very grateful to treasure these holy sites still being a well known jewelry amongst the Mayan culture. We were mostly impressed by the gorgeous view on top of the sacred pyramids: we selected el pyramide del sol which we bravely ascended on our own. It was rather steep to climb up to the peak utilizing a strong chain put aside the steps. Once we reached the summit a guide accidentally explained to us the history of those temples and the extension of the Mayan empire at that time.

Historically brilliantly influenced now, we relished these precious and invaluable moments inhaling that holy spot the whole nine yards. Since we were geographically and spiritually blessed the continuation of our journey needed to be brainstormed anyhow. Actually Belize was on our agenda but therefore Duncan had to acquire a Visa again, which seemed to be too much of a hassle right now. So, how to get back to Guatemala City? In theory we had two choices, but realistically speaking?

On behalf of my physical state of habit there was only one way how to decide: We both agreed upon a return via plane which shouldn't arouse any molestas seriosas and take only 45 minutes this time. Spending the last day in Flores, Petén we had to sort out every Quetzal (= the official currency of Guatemala) and/or each dollar which was left in our pocket, in order to realize this aerial journey. The first price we encountered reckoned up to 30 \$ per person, an amount we simply couldn't afford at the moment. How to get rid of this precarious financial dilemma? Since we ran into a German/Mexican couple at the ruins of Tikal, whose address we gladly jotted down, there was no chance to reject their offer. So we did and promised to balance our account once we were back in the capital, feeling fairly content about this resolution.

It is not easy to stay cool when I tell you this: next morning we had been mercifully taken out of our complacency; something unbelievable had occurred: the price for the flight had curiously doubled over night, immediately deteriorating my health situation again. Now we were not able to make it possible anymore, unless an ingenious and

witty thought tackled our mind sooner or later. Probably in the jungle far away from civilization, anything can happen to anyone at anytime. We desperately tried to find a different airline with a cheaper price, but obviously there had been a general sobreprecio in this area. Now chaos and uncertainty predominated our last hours there. I felt so bad and sick that I nearly swallowed a piece of toilet paper.



El desperado – no comment

I was so determined to split this pop sickle stand ASAP but my mind literally went nuts when being reminded of the second best solution of yet choosing the bus ending up in an atrocious nightmare. I mentally resisted believing in this option due to my physical weakness. Taking a powder by any chance wouldn't have been a wise decision, so we hung on in for a while.

Since everything works out anyhow – Duncan's proverb as you may remember – all of a sudden an airline offered a special fare for 96 Quetzal one way. La esperanza muere por fin, therefore our wallet obliged us to go for it, although still some money was missing, but here's the trick: I recalled the situation of the hotel manager expectantly staring at my calculator during registration just a few days ago. Though being a no name product – at least in my opinion - it completely stroke his attention. After some bargaining we agreed upon a decent price for sale.

Eventually, the goose was cooked and off we were making the mandatory reservations beforehand. The only issue which had to be clarified was the probability of seats being booked out already. Nevertheless we scooted to the "airport" and luckily noticed no problem regarding this matter. With no strings attached in anything else for preparation we finally arrived in the capital again, leaving behind this last chapter of confusion and anger.

For the last two days we also chose the hotel MEZA, which happened to be the only reasonable and acceptable accommodation in town at least for our demands. It was Sunday the 10th of January, when both of us shuffled to a public laundry to do our washing; this procedure meant to be a kind of catharsis. Besides, I grasped the opportunity to get rid of my beard which I admitted to grow since the beginning of our break. We finished up this day by meeting the German/Mexican connection and – as

promised – we paid back the money we owed. This act definitely released our consciousness quite a bit; we didn't feel shackled any more in terms of financial dependence.

On Monday, the 11th of January something fishy was going on concerning our reservation for the flight back to the E.E.U.U. Though being scheduled for TACA airlines (El Salvador company) we couldn't be sure at all whether our seats were already firmly booked or not. A waiting list always creates some problems, that's what we have learned. In the long run everything worked out again due to Duncan's charming persuasion: the crucial argument that had to be taken into account was the official day of registration for the Spring Semester at Vanderbilt University that shouldn't be missed at all.

Early next morning around 5 a.m. we said farewell to the MEZA and its lovely resident, a funny parrot which was even apt to communicate. When we slowly trudged along the patio I realized an interesting map, which did not display the state of Belize where we ought to stop as well on our return flight. That proved to be rather strange to us. Maybe there had been sort of a political and geographical turmoil causing that modification on the map.

Our last adventurous event took place during the departure of our aircraft: on the one hand there was this noisy interference near the wings which I spotted shortly after take off. On the other hand there was this man, sitting in the first row and making the impression of being seriously wounded or even dead, since he didn't show any movement or (re)action. Once we left the plane for our 1st stopover he still sat there quietly and somehow peacefully.

Firstly, we needed to stay at the airport of San Salvador for transit reasons. The flight over the country itself turned out to be exciting as well, because we had read about the civil war going on there. Anyway the presence of massive volcanoes surrounding the airport totally reimbursed.

Secondly, we had to remain in Belize for a couple of hours in order to have the plane completely checked with regard to the passenger's passports and potential dubious fellows being sought by the local police. The only thing which embarrassed us a bit was the duration of the control, but for the time being we had been marvelously rewarded with a spectacular forest area until the continuation of our journey back home.

Home again?

We had absolutely no clue what would have expected us once we safely landed in New Orleans, our final destination. Approaching the so called western civilization again, we primarily were deeply shocked, since all the friendliness and gentleness, that had accompanied us so far, was gone: instead, efficiency and perfection played the essential role and everything seemed to be sterile and superficial.

That's why we immediately wanted to escape from this depressive perception. Thus, the French Quarter was the ideal spot for distraction, e.g. indulging and dancing Cajun music. Unfortunately, time had come to embark the beloved Greyhound bus taking us to Nashville through snowy landscapes. On campus, I had eventually been treated well enough for coldness, diarrhea and a virus infection that I caught in Mexico.

The forthcoming process of recovery should be a long-lasting affair which I successfully coped with as I did with so many things during the last 3 weeks thanks to the assistance of my friend Duncan.

SYNOPSIS

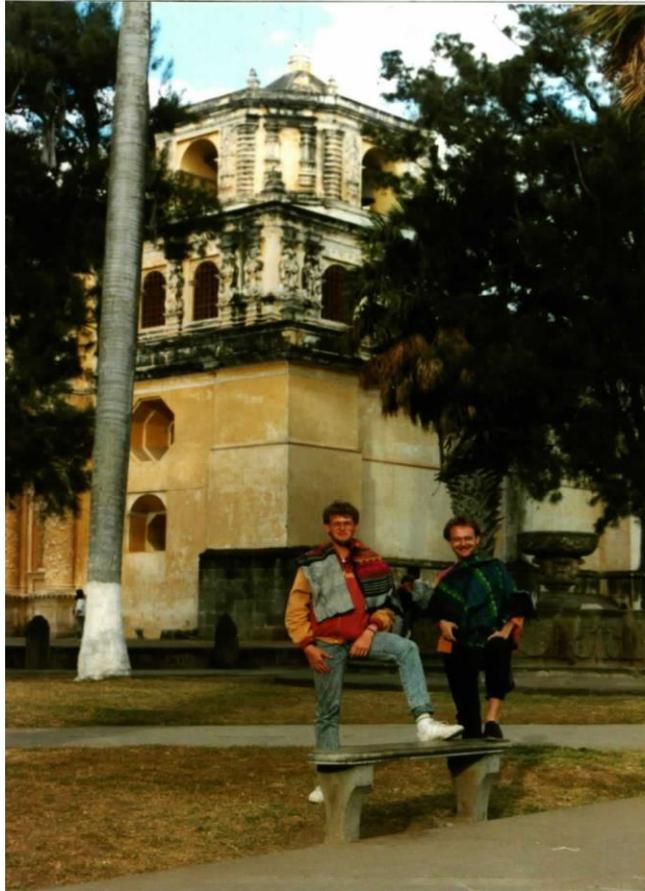
Summarizing all my stories, adventures and experiences you had been gifted with so far I would like to put it simply like this:

A mixture of

- spontaneous travel plans
- a shoe string budget
- a humorous and gifted company
- some clever ideas
- a few crisis-based solutions
- a stunning environment
- numerous courteous natives
- lots of historical treasures

leads to outstanding results with regard to friendship, human behavior, sympathy and overall satisfaction without any doubt.

Last but not least, I enclose a picture showing me and my friend Duncan in front of a church in Guatemala City. The title I chose is without saying.



The “Dream team” of Middle America