

My Trip to the Volcano – the Guatemalan Version
(Costa Rica and Guatemala, 2007)

On December 12th, after a red-eye to San Jose and a four-hour shuttle on a two-lane, diesel-truck-crammed road, Peg and I arrived in the mountain town of Monteverde, Costa Rica. Beautiful country that the native people cherish. Even our Belmar Hotel Lodge had three small cans in the bathroom to separate plastic, paper, and trash for recycling.

The first day, we walked up and down the hilly road to the small town of Santa Elena with its small restaurants, and souvenir shops. The town had a comforting calmness. Little rushing – rarely did we hear angry voices. The people want to maintain this feeling, but are constantly battling corrupt foreign – mainly American – investors as they seek to preserve their way of life, their “La Pura Vida.”

One day, we toured the Cloud Forest. The guides ran here and there to show us the forest creatures. Interesting. It was intriguing as to how the guides helped each other. If one spotted a certain bird or howler monkey, he would call to the other groups so they could see it too. A very un-American competitiveness. We also took a guided night-walk in the forest. The next day, we traveled with a group up the mountain to take the zip-line ride. With the help of a “taxi-guide” we zipped along 2400 feet above the forest floor.

On the 17th, we arrived in Guatemala City and heeded the warning: “Get out of Guatemala City as fast as you can!” We took a taxi to the town of Antigua with its beautiful, old city brick roads that have been tested through the hundreds of years by earthquakes. The city was constructed in the 1500s on the remnants of the Mayan civilization.

From the safety of Costa Rica, a country with no military, we came to a place where soldiers paraded around with their machine guns – rifles – pistols. We were told not to look them in the eye, and to never attempt to take a photo of them.

We met Shoshanna, “her” Josh, and Shmuel at our hotel in Antigua. For the past five months they had been living in a small village in the mountains of western Honduras. Shoshanna teaching kindergarten, Shmuel fifth grade, and Josh, sixth grade, at a small bilingual school in Gracias, Lempira, Honduras. They seemed to be enjoying the experience, but were tired of the disorganization, lack of materials, and corruption of the Honduran education system.

We traveled by bus to the active Pacaya Volcano. Guatemala has thirty-three volcanos – seven of which are still active. You might have thought that after my harrowing experiences in Hawaii, that I would have learned to stay away from volcanos. Well, my learning curve is long with volcanoes.

As we rumbled out of the small bus that had taken us to the base of the volcano, the guides informed us that there was, as Shoshanna translated, a “short walk” up a dirt road in order to get to the active lava fields.

The air was dense with volcanic plume, making it hard to breathe. As I started up the road, the harden volcanic rocks below my feet caused my legs and back to throb. They offered me the option of a horse-ride up the mountain. I smiled, as I questioned what logic had brought me to this time and place. I contemplated sitting for hours at the base of the volcano, with my very limited Spanish vocabulary, waiting for everyone to venture up and down the mountain, or, saddling up, and taking the option of the horse.

Against my better judgement and for twenty dollars, I finally settled on hiring a boy, also on horseback, to lead my horse up the mountain. I struggled for what seemed like hours, slipping out of the stirrups and grasping the saddle horn so hard that my hands kept cramping. The horse stumbled and tripped going up the

mountain to the lava fields. I desperately tried to pull myself to the front of the saddle.

We were all given sticks to poke into the active flow of lava. The locals all laughed at our surprised reaction when the sticks immediately caught fire. A few years later, in 2010, that volcano would erupt, spewing ash as far as Guatemala City.

Day quickly turned into night. Seeing the fiery lava flow in the darkness was a spectacular sight! As I was becoming hypnotized by the flow of the lava, I suddenly realized I would have to travel on horseback down the mountain. The thought of traveling *down* the mountain, in the darkness of the night, filled me with more terror than the lava flow in front of me.

The boy who had guided me up led my horse back down the mountain, branches smacking me in the face, as we weaved and stumbled in the dark between the crevices and trees. I leaned as far back in the saddles as possible, gripping anything on that horse that I could so as to not pitch forward over the horse's head. Back at the base of the volcano was the small bus waiting to take us back to our hotel. I swore that this would be my final adventure to explore the volcanos of the world.

At four in the morning the following day, the kids left on a ten-hour bus ride to San Cristobal, Chiapas, in Mexico. We took a taxi back to Guatemala City in order to catch our flight back to the U.S.