

Depart Wellington to Auckland to LA uneventful apart from Joy Mc attempting, and succeeding, in changing seats!-well done.

We had a good meal at Denny's down road from our Airport Hotel.

However next morning things start to happen. US decided to turn their clocks back for the West Coast by one hour overnight so instead of getting up at 4am for our 7am flight to Mexico City we were rudely awakened at 3am to be told to get packing pronto. So a 4 hour sleep was had by all.



We had lots of airport searches both at LA and Mexico City, but had time to look round their photographic exhibition of Mexican culture—very nice!

A few hours later Air Mexico flight for Guatemala City taxied off an hour late. However...our final take off was 3 hours late as we turned back with technical fault and had to find another aircraft... and so to cap a disturbed day we arrived in Guatemala City 9:40....I without my main bag which was 'left' stranded somewhere in Mexico Airport and Sue with her bag and contents soaking having been left out in rain in a thunderstorm in Mexico City as we were transferred.. I retrieved my bag 2 days later at the hotel. In between times we went early next morning for local flight to Tikal (Mayan area) –North Guatemala for two days for start of our Guatemala trip.

Monday March 12th

To Tikal

Sue Walker

Another very early start after 4 hours sleep, having had to hang up all my clothes to dry after they got wet at Mexico City Airport. We had a wonderful view of a nearby volcano before take off and an uneventful flight to Flores, where we were met by our guide for the next 2 days, Carlos.



We started the day with a boat trip across Petén Itza Lake to the Petencito Zoo. This was rather a run down place but had plenty of potential and had obviously seen better days. The zoo contained a good range of the animals found in this part of Guatemala and gave us our only chance to see the jaguar, which was so important to the ancient Maya.

After the zoo we travelled back by boat to a different part of the lake where we (at least most of us!) climbed what seemed like several hundred steps to a lookout tower which gave excellent views of the town of Flores and the surrounding lake. After this climb we enjoyed a welcome drink of fresh coconut milk from a local farmer.

Then it was back across the lake to the island town of Flores. This picturesque town sits on a small island in the lake and is connected to the mainland by a causeway. We walked around the old town looking at the colourful buildings before going for lunch at the La Casona de la Isla Hotel, where the choice was beef or fish. This was served with a soup and a desert and we later found that this was pretty much the standard meal wherever we went!



After lunch it was a drive of about half an hour to our hotel for the night, the Camino Real-Tikal Hotel. This turned out to be an excellent hotel, right on the lake with lovely views of the lake and a swimming pool, which many of the group enjoyed. Unfortunately, after so little sleep over the previous 3 days my short nap lasted well over an hour and it was getting dusk before I surfaced so I missed out.

Dinner was preceded by a Grand Jaguar cocktail which was very nice. Then it was a fairly early night before going to explore the ruins at Tikal tomorrow.

Tuesday March 13th

Ian Speden

TIKAL NATIONAL PARK, GUATEMALA

After a lovely night and a substantial buffet breakfast at the five star Camino Real Tikal Hotel our guide Carlos and driver Manuel arrived to drive us to the centre of Mayan civilisation through rolling, forested country with rough grazing areas for sparse cattle and horses. Road bumps in villages slowed traffic, and the roads were in poor condition locally. We stopped at a local tourist shop where some of us brought maps and other items.

At the park Carlos guided us through the major features, all set in the tropical forest and spanning 600BC to 869 AD. We visited briefly all the major sites and temples, from the Grand Plaza with its Temples of the Grand Jaguar and the Masks to Templo IV, the highest, which all of us except one climbed up to the highest accessible level to view and photograph the forest covered park and projecting temples. I enjoyed the walk back through the jungle to the entrance near where we were showered with sticks and twigs thrown down at us by Spider monkeys.



At 1:30 pm we went to a large, open sided restaurant for a filling lunch of soup and bread, grilled chicken and rice. After lunch we visited a small, modern museum which had detailed displays and diagrams covering the many Mayan dynasties.

A nice, relaxing drive back to the airport at Santa Elena for a slow embarkation and, then, a rush to get a non-allocated seat - we were a bit slow. A good flight back, although due to clouds few views of the landscape until near Guatemala City where the incised gorges in the tableland showed how they controlled the suburbs. Met at the airport by a Clarke's Tour driver who returned us to the Barceló Guatemala City Hotel for us to collect our bags and room keys. Arranged to meet at 7 pm for dinner which we decided to have in the Sports Bar, which was not a good choice due to the noise, with a slow service by very nice and friendly waitresses. I had a large and substantial Southern Hamburger filled with Angus beef mince, a much better hamburger than I have eaten in New Zealand. Quickly to bed to sleep.

Wednesday March 14th

To Chichicastenango

Erica Speden

Guatemala is aprox 4,600 ft above sea level. Lots of lovely flowers & trees. The Jacaranda tree, the tree of Easter, was in full bloom and Ceiba trees with huge spreading branches were lovely to look at which dropped steeply down to the ground. Much agriculture in the districts, mainly sugar cane, mangoes, and rubber trees.

Visited several towns plus museum of craved stone heads; this was situated near an old sugar factory.

Left the lowlands and at aprox 300 ft and went to the Western Highlands passing many volcanoes, along windy roads and travelled through coffee and fruit plantations Ribbon development along the main town streets. That evening we stayed at the Mayan Inn in Chichicastenango, which we all enjoyed. I don't know how old the building was but it was once a monastery converted to a hotel in the 1930's. It was a charming place, built in a square with a lovely courtyard with many flowering plants. Colourful parrots were there in the morning waiting for breakfast. On arrival we were greeted with a mandarin drink.

Went for a short walk before dinner to watch the setting up of the street market for the next day.



Our evening meal started with music with Mayan children dancing in traditional costumes. Fires were lit in the bedrooms as it was cool in the evening. A pleasant end to a long day.



Thursday March 15th

Market day in Chichicastenango

Lis Pyle

Today we went to market, after a night spent in a charming Inn, with fireplaces lit for us at night and candles on the mantle piece.



Vendors outside selling their ware with varying degrees of persistence – persistence was rewarded!! The market was virtually at our Inn doorstep – we moved across to the church and the market was at our feet.



Turkey sold for someone's dinner soon after this photo was taken



Market place

We also visited several churches of varying ages. In many churches the old and new religions were integrated – hedging their bets as it were. St James Santiago is the patron Saint of Guatemala and many churches are dedicated to him. St Thomas is also prominent here and we visited the 400 year old Santo Tomas. There were many signs of preparation for Easter and associated parades.



We climbed and drove through steep narrow streets in the towns, then crested the range at 3015 metres – Summit Alaska. We visited the restored church of Ermita Concepcion La Conquistador at Quetzaltenango; also the Iglesia (church) del Espiritu Santo, with the facade having been built in 1532 and the main church in the 1930's.

We stayed the night at the Pension Bonifaz Hotel, Quetzaltenango. In the evening we walked around the square, found a supermarket, had a very cold swim and an evening meal at the hotel for some, while others, more adventurous, went out.



We were interested in the very small stature and good looks of the Mayan people and their strength and ability.

Friday March 16th

To Lake Atitlan

Joy McNicoll

Friday's cool early morning found chairs barring our access to the Dining Room until 7 00 a.m. We were served in a private room, and waited on – Buffet Breaka's are preferable!

8 a.m. saw our departure for the Almolonga market, (Almoloncath in Mayan), to an area known as the green gardens of Guatemala. Their wholesale vegetable/flower market was bustling and the quality of the produce appeared to be top-notch. Cabbages etc are sold by the dozen and carrots by 40 dozen sacks. There was only one gear, shove and push. There we learnt that today, Friday 16th, was an auspicious day in the Mayan calendar, a day for balancing the positive and the negative, and where special Mayan ceremonies are performed early in the morning, 3 – 4 am.



In the 1950's Protestant American missionaries arrived here from Nebraska, Oklahoma etc., and by loaning money to buy land, providing agricultural training etc. 80% of the Mayan people here are now Protestants.

Returning about 9am to Quetzaltenango (Xelo) for a few people to try to use Bank's ATMs in or near the main Square – success at last, Erica and Joy tried their ice cream. It takes a lot to beat our Tip Top (ice cream). Then it was on to see the first Church established in Guatemala in 1524/5 at Xecul, along with a modern art exhibition in the hall next door. This Church of the Patron Saint James was built to look like a military fortress, as the Spanish thought the Mayan's would respect it more, but they did anyway.



Driving up a steep and narrow mountainous road we arrived at San Francisco El Alto where we were privileged to be able to see a Mayan religious ceremony adjacent to the Church there, where there was an ancient Mayan Altar. A young Mayan men's Brass Band was in the Church enthusiastically practising their Easter Music - wonderful music. Too soon we made our way down the mountain to the Candy Church, San Andres Xecul, visiting the 16th century temple with a fabulous bright yellow façade, the colour the local women use for their huipil (indigenous blouse). There are saints and angels sitting next to corncobs and quetzal

birds on this façade. It is here that the Easter procession where the Cross is carried up to San Francisco El Alto begins and ends.

On our return to Four Road Junction we were entertained by people getting on and off the local buses with a variety of luggage – a 'hot-dog' machine, animals etc were on the roofs of the buses and retrieving these was sometimes a complicated procedure.



As we drove through the countryside agricultural practices could be observed, including watering young plants in the vegetable garden adjacent to the house from a large jug!! Eventually we drove around the hills above Lake Atitlan before zigzagging down to Panajachel, and our hotel on the Lake's foreshore and a welcome swim in their pool. Our rooms overlooked the Lake with its Crystalline azure waters, and in the background were Volcanoes.

Having walked up the road lined with small shops – yes some succumbed - to Chez Alex for Dinner at 6.30 p.m., we were greeted by our German host and chef who'd just returned from Guatemala City with a special Caribbean fish (Snook), which four of us tried. Together with Beatrice, whose Mother lives in Broadmeadows, Wellington they freely answered our questions about life here and produced fabulous international dinners with great wine for us to enjoy. And so a great day ended.

Saturday March 17th

Lake Atitlan to Antigua

Jeanette Page



This morning I awoke at 6am to watch the sunrise over Mts Atitlan-3537m, Toliman-3158m and San Pedro-3020m across Lake Atitlan in Guatemala. I walked down to the lake and from the picture by the hotel lift, imagined the scene before tourism became dominant. I saw a smaller mountain named Little Ceme de Oro or Golden Hill-1892m- because of its golden colour.

At 8.50am we drove to Hotel Atitlan to catch a jet boat which took us across Lago De Atitlan to Santiago Atitlan. No safety talk, no life jackets! The lake covered an area of 130 square metres and is 318 metres deep. It has 12 villages nestled around its shores. Once on the other side we climbed to see an old monastery- built 1547. Although missionaries converted many Mayan people to Christianity, they have managed to retain many of their traditional beliefs about their gods e.g. the carvings on some of the chairs in the monastery contained Christian as well as Mayan symbolism. In some instances the Mayan influence is disguised e.g. movable floor tiles which led directly into the Mayan underworld.



We returned to Hotel Atitlan which had its own helicopter pad, at 12md and boarded our 20 seater bus and headed for our next destination.

Antigua, Guatemala- city of perpetual roses- was founded by the Spanish in 1543. We stopped for lunch at Chichoy Restaurant at a place called Agua Escondilad-hidden water. This restaurant was started by a Dutchman as a social project to help the poor people in the area. Unfortunately he and his 17 year old son were both killed during the revolution. The project was picked up and promoted by 2 other men. At the end of the revolution, widows took over working and running the business. Today they operate 2 facilities and cater for international tourists as well as the local community.

We arrived at our next hotel-Villa Colonial- at 4.15pm. I was disappointed that the swimming pool was not as nice as that at the previous hotel, however the dip refreshed me. Our driver suggested that we eat at a restaurant in town, as the hotel meal prices were dear and drove us there for a meal. It was more expensive than the hotel! However, we enjoyed each others' company and brushed aside our gullibility.

Busy day, good company, beautiful country.

Breakfast on the second floor of the Villa Colonial Hotel Antigua looking out over the gardens and pool and watching the volcano puffing serenely.

Outside the hotel preparation was going on for the procession for Lent from the Church of Santa Ana. The road was being closed and floral tributes being put in place.

Into the van and the first stop of the day was at “Cuidad de los Caballeros de Santiago de Guatemala” (City of the Knights of St James of Guatemala). This, the 1st capital city of Guatemala, was destroyed by earthquake in 1541. The city was rebuilt 3 times and finally in 1773 when major earthquakes decimated the city again it was decided to move the capital to the present location of Guatemala City. Although all survivors were ordered to move many stayed and gradually rebuilt in the rubble – renaming the city Antigua Guatemala – i.e. Old Guatemala City.

Outside the beautiful “White Cathedral” Iglesia de Virgin founded in 1534 hundreds were queuing for mass so the inside of this church was not for us. Photos from outside only.

Phew!

In the mayoral square spheres containing firecrackers were being assembled to be used as part of the Easter Lent parades and festivities. We were all dying to see the effect but this did not happen while we were there.

At the next stop San Antonio Aguas Calientes two stories of booths full of textiles, and many of the weavers, confronted us. It was difficult not to buy something from the colourful array – and some of us were dressed and photographed in the costumes. Upstairs one corner was dedicated to a museum of various costumes of Guatemalan tribes. An interesting display.



On to San Miguel Escobar. A working bee was busy cleaning and painting the yellow and white church for Easter – a yearly occurrence. A

service was being relayed so that the workers on scaffolding and roof could hear while they worked.

In the van we passed coffee plantations, the small coffee trees protected by grevillias, as we drove to the church of St Pedro (Peter) resplendent in orange and white - and then to the town square where in a purpose built pool local women were doing their washing.

As we drove we saw the float carriers (cucurucho) - men dressed in purple hooded robes but no sign of the procession we were hoping to see.

In the Jade Museum the different jade qualities and colours were explained. The different chemicals present in the jade giving different colours from “white” to “black”. Info - New Zealand nephrite is softer than Guatemalan jadeite. The jade shop had many beautiful and expensive pieces



Most went to a hotel restaurant for a late (as usual) lunch. Here there were tropical thunbergia mysorensis vines in great abundance on the pergolas.

After lunch most of us went back to the Villa Colonial to relax rather than try to find the elusive procession. Some stayed in town – where pickpockets were unfortunately at work. At the hotel time was spent in the pool, on the internet or just resting until dinner. We checked the area of floral decorations outside and waited till 10:15 when the procession lead by a band came past. The magnificent floats along with a generator to light them were carried by the purple robed men and boys. They trampled right through the floral tributes and when they had passed in came the heavy machinery; in a few moments hey presto the road returned to normal. Day ended at 11:45pm.

Monday March 19th

Antigua to Guatemala City.

Verena Madgwick

After breakfast we were picked up by our bus to continue the sightseeing of the many beautiful churches of Antigua. As it was before Easter the flowers and the purple decoration inside the Churches were just grandiose. It is interesting to see how much effort and finances a poor population can spend on religious beliefs.



Casa Santo Domingo used to be a private home, but now it is an elaborate museum of Colonial, Archaeological, Pre-Columbian and Modern Art. We spent the morning wandering through the museum, admiring the exhibits.

After lunch, where we could choose our own venue and menu it was on to the bus again and back to Guatemala's Barceló City Hotel where we started out on our tour. Guatemala is divided up into zones according to areas and social wealth. From the well to do area the bus travelled over a bridge where we could see across to the lean- to of the shanty-town and then into the crowded city.



Tuesday March 20th Guatemala City to San Jose, Costa Rica John Durnford

After a comfortable night in the modern and well-appointed Barceló Hotel, Guatemala City, our group drifted down to a leisurely breakfast in a private room off the main dining room where we tucked in to the excellent selection, setting us up for a good start to the day.

Although this was our departure day from Guatemala, we had the whole morning at leisure before the afternoon flight. So a few got togged up ready to take a dip in the hotel's elegant swimming pool. Before hitting the water however, Sue managed to slip on the tiles and gash her index finger on a concrete column. This wound amazingly resulted in a lot of free-flowing blood which was dripping everywhere, and finally stemmed by the hotel nurse binding the finger up with bandages and instructing Sue to keep it dry for 4 days. So much for Sue's swim (and showers for the next 4 days)!

We all departed the hotel at 1pm for the short drive to nearby Guatemala City airport.

Proceeding through the security check, Jeanette had scissors confiscated (for the second time) and Joy Mc had her innocuous butter knife seized (but not without feisty appeals to the security official). Then we found that several forms had to be filled in both for departure and arrival. These took some time to complete: the miniscule text was a challenge to everyone's eyesight, and the pseudo-English used for some of the questions proved a bit of an IQ test, e.g.

First Last Name
Second Last Name
Name
Have you enjoyed in the last 6 months exoneration tributes? Yes / No

The 1 ½ hour flight went without a hitch and we arrived at San Jose at 6pm. After the immigration formalities (where an agricultural search through Maureen's baggage led to the discovery of an offending apple), we filed out into the arrival hall to be met by the Costa Rica hosts. Our particular hosts, Marco and Adilia, greeted us enthusiastically (hugs, etc) and we set off on the long drive to their home near the outlying village of Grecia, about an hour's drive from Alajuela itself. We soon discovered that communication was going to be a challenge, we of course speaking no Spanish and they with practically no English.

Their recently-purchased "retirement" house was a modern, spacious and immaculately furnished home set in a rural area near sugar cane fields. We were welcomed in with a glass of first-class Chilean cab sav and nibbles, then we sat down to a fine evening meal. This was to be the standard of friendliness, hospitality and dining we were to receive from our lovely hosts for the next week.



Wednesday March 21st

Alajuela, Costa Rica

Ngairé Durnford

Staying in Grecia Costa Rica meant our mornings always started much earlier than our FF companions, because our hosts lived the furthest away from Alajuela.

After a huge breakfast (we were always eating) we had our usual 1 – 1 ½ hours drive to our first activity of the day. This involved the gathering of Nelson, Wellington and Costa Rica FF clubs at Alajuela's Paraque Palmare (a small city square) for a Mayoral welcome.

On arrival it was discovered that only a handful of NZ FF people were in attendance, there seemed to be a traffic problem out of San Jose which delayed them. We were greeted by the lady Mayor, Costa Rica's ED Marco and a small gathering of young school children. Bob had the unenviable task of translating their welcome. Then 2 pre – recorded national anthems were played and those there sang along. Eventually everyone arrived, just in time for the unveiling of the Wellington and Nelson FF plaques, which were set in the gardens (within the square.) Our plaques were placed with other FF plaques from previous clubs visits. Each FF club could be easily identified as their respective flags were flying behind each plaque, Very impressive.



We then walked to the Juan Santamaria Museum for yet another welcome from the Mayor. As we entered the museum we were given morning tea (a plate of 5 cakes and a drink.) While eating morning tea the Mayor told us the history of Alajuela (again using Bob to translate.) We were told that Alajuela is Costa Rica's 2nd biggest city. There is no army in Costa Rica allowing the government to concentrate on the education system.

Also told that in 1949 the present day museum was a jail, One prominent prisoner was the brother of the President of Nicaragua, At a later date it went through another change and became a school, Then in 1970 became today's Juan Santamaria museum.

Bob and Lois (ED's) exchanged gifts with the mayor (a letter, and a book on Wellington from Wellington's Mayor) we were then invited to look around the museum and art gallery. This had a tabulated history of Costa Rica, featuring the campaign to overthrow the American invader William Walker and the restoration of Costa Rica's sovereignty.

We had a quick walk around the city in the heat then into the coolness of the Cathedral of Alajuela. After our visit we were then driven to the official FF welcome party outside the city.

Nelson Wellington and Costa Rica FF club members all met at Papavero (a small café and garden), for a buffet lunch. After the delicious lunch we were called up individually and given a substantially named FF club "goodie bag".

Six ladies from the Costa Rica club dressed in beautiful traditional costumes surprised us with some very impressive folk dancing. As the Central American's love to dance it wasn't long before everyone was up dancing. The end of the dancing signified the end of a very busy but wonderful day.



While driving "home" we had plenty of time to reflect on the days activities and anticipate the programme for the next day.

Thursday March 22nd

Day trip to the Pacific

Maureen Herlihy-Moloney

Up early on Thursday 22nd March. I, with my hostess Anja, was to leave Anja's home by 7 a.m.

We headed into the city. Our meeting place to join our other Friendship Force friends was the square in front of the very ornate National Theatre. I had not slept well in the night so I was up at 5.15 a.m.

We taxied to the square which was much easier than going to the city and having to find a car park for the day. Our meeting time was 8 a.m. but we were in the square enjoying the early morning sun by 7.20 a.m.

At 8.10 a.m. those of us that were on the city side had boarded the bus eager to head to our beach destination. After driving for one hour we arrived at Alajuela on the other side of the city. Here we stopped to pick up our members that were hosted on that side of the city.

At 10.40 a.m. we had a comfort stop at a restaurant. Then we all enjoyed a pleasant stroll to a bridge over a river where small shingle islands were scattered in places over the river bed. As we gazed downwards we looked upon many crocodiles lazily sunning themselves either at the water's edge or on the shingle banks. I was glad of the distance the crocodiles were from us. I certainly wouldn't have liked to have been eyed up as a mid morning meal. One gentleman from Nelson Club who was often cracking jokes, tried to convince us that the crocodiles had been placed in the river by Peter Jackson and Weta workshop and that there was a man hiding under the bridge with a remote control who was making them move. I suppose every group has to have a joker!!



Back at the bus we carried onwards to our destination – I caught my first view of the Pacific Ocean at 11.15 a.m. We then drove inland until we arrived at Jago beach at half to 12. Jago was very much a tourist area with many restaurants, apartments and hotels. Our bus carried on until we arrived at the beach house of Carlos Phillips, our Costa Rican day host.



On arrival most of us changed into swim wear and headed the short distance to the beach, which was encircled by Palm trees and other varieties of tree. The waters of the Pacific were warm but the undertow was very strong which made swimming dangerous. I just lay in the water near the shore and let the waves crash over me. Just to have the opportunity to enjoy the water was pleasant. The photos taken of me at the beach were certainly not glamorous.

Lunch was served in the garden when we returned from the beach to Carlos' home. The rest of the afternoon was spent interacting with each other and enjoying each other's company before boarding the bus and heading back to our hosting homes.

Friday March 23rd

Trip to Arenal Volcano

Bob Walker

Early morning we gathered at downtown Alajuela waiting for those billeted miles away or picking them up as we made our way North.

Now for a country less than one quarter the size of NZ it sure packs a variety of landscapes.

On up a windy road through plantations, then rainforest interspersed with crops of Yucca. Road windy enough to make some a bit travel sick.

On way up we stopped at roadside cafe for coffee and morsels of Yucca deep fried and soaked in sugar. The cafe had a little balcony facing the rain forest to which myriads of hummingbirds would come to almost touching distance in the nearby bushes.



It was a four hour journey up to the hotel at base of Arenal Volcano. A very well equipped hotel with hot pools, excellent food and interesting gardens and walks in immediate surrounds with enclosures for frogs, beautiful butterflies and moths and Costa Rican crocodiles (2~3 mtrs long).

Although very overcast a small group of us set off up the volcano for a walk, visiting a tree platform just below the canopy and hearing Howler Monkeys in the forest. As we climbed the drizzle turned to rain, but we continued, getting more and more soaked but no chance of hypothermia as it was so warm!

Returning to the hotel couple hours later and soaking through, some went into the hot pools, while the wet clothes were rung out and left to dry for next morning.

After another excellent meal, Marco had organized a get together in a hall at the hotel with all the hosts who travelled with us, singing songs a few light hearted games and everyone with an opportunity to introduce him or herself, their interests, hobbies and (past) work.

Although we never saw the peak of Arenal (Obviously this is their own Mt Taranaki!) which was to show itself next day, the day and trip was truly well worthwhile and very very good value from Marco and his helpers! Well done!



Saturday March 24th

Arenal and back to Alajuela

Sue Walker



At breakfast at the hotel we were treated to a visit from a beautiful Emerald Basilisk lizard.

After breakfast we went to Lake Arenal for a boat trip. From this side of the mountain you can see where the lava has flowed down the mountain previously. Apparently it was erupting regularly until 2010, pity we couldn't have seen a bit of glowing lava!!

It was a very relaxing boat trip and we saw several different birds, a lizard, frogs and a Caiman.

Before returning to the hotel for lunch we visited La Fortuna town for some souvenir shopping. While here I managed to get my only view of Mt Arenal without cloud on the top.



After lunch at the hotel we had a short time to have another wander round this beautiful resort and even managed to spot the elusive red Blue Jeans Dart Frogs in the frog house. Although only about 2.5 cm big they are quite spectacular and, apparently, poisonous.

On the way home we had a short stop in the town of Zarcero where the whole square in front of the church is full of topiary.

We arrived home quite late but I think that we all really enjoyed our excursion to Arenal Volcano and the excellent Los Lagos Hotel and Resort.



Sunday March 25th

Poas Volcan, Costa Rica

Ian Speden

After a nice breakfast of rice and banana, and fresh white bread with sour cream (tasty), our day host Ania came to drive us, our hostess Flory and her daughter Yessinia, to the Poas Volcan National Park located northwest of San Jose. Beyond Alajuela the narrow, windy road climbed through middle and upper class housing set in forest into agricultural and horticultural land with many shade houses for strawberries and vegetables, then along the upper parts of hills into pastoral land with scattered patches of forest, with few cattle, horses (white the popular colour), sheep and goats. School groups raising funds “blocked” the road in places. We stopped to photograph a man in traditional clothes with a brightly coloured, traditional cart and two relaxed, white Brahmin bulls; a donation given.



As it was a weekend the parking areas and reception centre were crowded, with entry being

\$10(US) for foreigners. After a quick look at the modern information displays and gift shop we walked steadily up the wide path through the forest to the large observation decks to look down on the large, steaming active crater on the right and the co-joined inactive crater on the left, and to read the very good displays. Near the top the fumes had killed off much of the understory vegetation leaving a stark scene of branches and tree trunks. Many of us climbed slowly further uphill to see the Botos Lagoon in an extinct, forested crater. I for one felt the inertia due to the lack of oxygen at the high altitude (c.8, 800 ft). A long interesting walk through the forest led us back down to the centre.



After some browsing and refreshment Ania drove us along ridge tops to a village on a saddle where we went to the Casa Bavaria where we ambassadors paid for the lunches of our hosts and ourselves, a nice meal of a raw fish soup, a selection of salads and main courses followed by a choice of four creamy cakes. We continued down hill through Alajuela to Las Sabana Park in central San Jose to wander around the many stalls and events of the International Arts and Theatre Festival. There were stalls from many central and South American countries selling a diverse range of crafts. We also saw, briefly, local dancers from two counties and clowns, including a masked man on stilts who started to give free gifts and who was soon swamped by children and adults. A very crowded and busy event, including the large food square selling national and local food. Took a taxi back to Flory’s house for a light meal and discussion to end the day.

Monday March 26th

Peace University and Farewell Dinner

Erica Speden

Travelled through the developing suburbs of Santa Anna to the town of Colon with a photo stop to take pictures of a coffee plantation. Coffee plants take 2-3 yrs to mature.

Visited the University of Peace which was established in 1980. It now has 165 students from graduates from around the world. The University is supported by UNESCO. We enjoyed a late 10.30am breakfast outside under a canopy. A very nice modern building and after breakfast we walked up to a memorial in the vast grounds.



Before arriving back to Flory's house she insisted we go to yet another market, which was very well organised plus a supermarket for coffee to take back to NZ. Across the road we went to a Chinese restaurant for Dim Sims at about 3.15pm. How was I going to manage Dinner?

How was I going to manage Dinner?



The Farewell dinner seemed to work backwards. After the introductions, dinner started, flowers were given to the ladies and a birthday cake for the 2 birthday people, Joy Mc Nicoll and one from Nelson. A very nice dinner then the dancing started. The evening finished about 10pm with many hugs and kisses. Costa Rica was a very huggie and kissy country, Mexicans took it much more quietly.

Ours and the Nelson clubs gift to Costa Rica was as a donation to the University of Peace.

Tuesday March 27th

Travel from Costa Rica to Mexico.

Lis Pyle



Flying into Mexico City

Up very early to be at the airport by 5 am. We flew from San Jose to Mexico City to Vera Cruz, being met there by Eduardo, his son and three ladies, all of who accompanied us on the bus to Xalapa. We insisted on a food stop and stopped at Carel, where we were alarmed to see Police trucks, with police driver and passenger in the cab and 3-4 very armed policemen standing in the truck at the ready. We had become used to armed guards in Guatemala and Costa Rica with Kalashnikov-like guns, but this was something new and came to be seen all over Mexico.

We had food and coffee at the Italian House of Coffee – a franchise visited a couple of times more during the Mexican tour after the exchange. They make excellent iced coffees – best ever!! Some of us changed dollars and used the ATM. We then travelled on to Xalapa, where we were met by hosts carrying gifts of insect spray cans – presented to us in anticipation of much biting during the week!



Our host (Joy T and I) was Rosalinda – a bright and outgoing 52 year old Grandmother. Initially Joy and I were to share a double bed, Rosalinda quickly came to the conclusion (after Joy had tripped over her bag and hurt her back!) that this wouldn't work, so Joy was moved to the other room and Rosalinda slept on the couch downstairs. We were her first hosting; she has been in the club just 2 months. It was a great hosting and Rosalinda was wonderful. She had some English and a lot of our communication was via Ipad translations. Good fun!!

Rosalinda and friend

Our house was on a hill – we wound up steep narrow streets full of pot holes and around many corners, zig zagging around the huge pot holes, then down the hill to our house. Our street was particularly damaged and we gathered that no-one did street repairs!



From the bedroom window



Dancers at the welcome dinner

In the evening we attended the welcome dinner – Joy and I maintaining our reputation for lateness! It was a fun evening with Tequila and dancing.

Then home to bed.

Today, in consideration of our Welcome Party the previous evening, our meeting time was 10.15am, adjacent to the Transport Museum, where there was an off-road area that was a great place for waiting for those who experienced transport difficulties. Our People Mover carried us to some 40 km north west of Xalapa, through agricultural lands – donkeys, cows and horses – and Jungle to picturesque Teocelo, the land of the Tiger God. Some 1,200m above sea level in a mountainous part of the country Teocelo is surrounded by two of Veracruz State's main mountains.

Teocelo was the first town established by the Spaniards to produce coffee. It has been a free municipality since 1830, with its Golden Age around 1898 when rail and light were first introduced. At this time it was the Distribution Centre for materials from Europe, an important commercial centre, and this brought economic benefits to the region. The population is now about 15,000 and is about 20,000 if outer suburbia is included. A strong earthquake in 1920 destroyed much of the town and saw the demise of the railway.



The Palacio Municipa was located on one side of the square not far from their oldest Church, Cathedral la Panol – 1535. There are tunnels underground between City Hall and the Church! The pavements were clean and there was an absence of rubbish on the streets. Teocelo is the only town to have a plant for compost – the trash is separated at home. We were given a short explanation about the Ocelet Family murals in the foyer and the history of the Mayors of the Town before assembling outside City Hall for a speech about the Town/City, but with the chatter of the birds competing with the human voice,

many details were lost. Local government elections are held every three years – that's all the time you have to get your policies through and to benefit from the position - and State government elections every six. Teocelo's Coat of Arms Tiger represents God.

After 2pm we visited the Benedictine Monastery, a Healing Monastery, where a healing Mass is held once a month and to which many people come – 2000! A monk, who was about to go over to the Vatican for 6 years, gave us a talk about the history of the Benedictine Order – many from the Benedictine order have become Popes. We were shown their museum and their shop was opened. A late lunch of local dishes followed - in the former Railway Station at Teocelo - before visiting, as the rain was starting, an older double storey home close to the Square where we marvelled at the inner courtyard, the kitchen and the murals. Returning to the Transport Museum over an hour behind schedule some of us sheltered from the rain in other vehicles until our transport arrived. A long yet interesting day but for me it was good to reach my hosts home.



Thursday March 29th

Coffee, Coatepec and Hiko

Jeanette Page

Today I left my host's home in Xalapa at 8.20am to meet the group at the Transport Museum. We called into El Cafe-Tal, a factory that grew "the best coffee in Mexico" and processed coffee beans and vanilla. Our group was introduced with a cup of coffee which most of us agreed, was very good.

Then we were shown the vanilla plant which is an orchard and first harvested and used by the indigenous people of the area, the Totonaca who called it xanath. Next, the Aztecs used it to flavour chocolate. The Spanish named it vanilla-little pod- and today we have vanilla which is used worldwide.

The story about the way in which coffee was discovered was interesting to me. Apparently a shepherd in Ethiopia followed through on the strange activities of his sheep that were "high" after eating berries from a tree. He took the berries to a monk who brewed them, drank and then threw them into the fire as they tasted bitter. He noticed that the fire perked the beans, so he tried again and thus began the coffee making process.

Coffee grows best between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn and at an altitude between 900 and 1200 metres. Today Brazil is the no 1 coffee growing area. There are 2 types of plants- Arabic which grows to a height of 3-4 metres and Robusta, 3-8 metres. Coffee plants produce beans ready for harvesting after 4 years. Between April and May white flowers flourish and fall after 5 days. The fruit turns from green to yellow to orange and finally cherry red at which stage they are ready to harvest. The trees grow best in the shade so that humidity is retained in the plant. The ripe beans are collected by hand-5kgs of berries makes 1 kg of processed coffee.



The red skin is removed; the spongy inner berry is left to ferment for about 16 hours, and then dried, preferably in the sun, for 2-3 days at a rate of 5 hours per day. At night the beans are placed into bags. When dried the second process begins. The second skin is removed leaving green beans which are bagged ready for export. The way in which the green beans are roasted is the producer's secret and results in light, medium and dark café beans. For me, visiting this factory was the most interesting part of the day.

We called into the township of Coatepec, walked around the park, noted a TV commercial being filmed, visited Guadalupe Church-built 1552, beautiful chandeliers, noticed a picture of San Rafael Guizar who was canonized in 2009 and walls and ceiling covered with gold leaf decorations.

Next we visited the Posada Coatepec Hotel, a boutique hotel which was once the private residence-built 1908- of a rich landowner who was a relative of Erica and Ian's hosts.

At the Teocelo Waterfall we lunched under a haya tree. We met the mayor of Xico at the Agua Bendita Hotel. He provided a typical Mexican meal for us including mole which was delicious. We were presented with a certificate which the mayor assured us was of no value what so ever. However the value in terms of friendship was very good. Following a visit to the Museum of Mary Magdalene where we viewed hundreds of donated gowns used to dress a statue of Mary, we looked through the Cathedral of Xico before having coffee/hot chocolate and biscotti at the Café El Viejito-the little old man. This was paid for by the mayor/ city.



The bus arrived back at the Transport Museum at 8.30pm and I arrived back at my host's place at 9.30pm – a long, tiring and interesting day.

Friday March 30th

Xalapa

Joy Turner

Another designer breakfast courtesy of our hostess Rosalinda. Then off to “Central Park” slowly in low gear up the amazingly uneven stonework that was “Santa Rosa Calle” into very heavy traffic. On arrival at a seemingly totally full private car park, one gorgeous smile and a car park was miraculously forthcoming.

A short walk took us to the Municipal Building where the seating was formally arranged and everyone shown to their place for the Mayoral reception. Short speeches of welcome and receipt of certificates then went like clockwork with many official looking cameras clicking (and a photo and article in the paper later). The formalities were followed by a live 8 piece band, wine and exquisite finger food on the the 2nd story balcony.



On the more leisurely walk back to the car we noted our first “real” shops. Glass windows with displays, not grated doors!

Travelling to Museo El Lencero we drove through a beautifully muraled tunnel, got lost, asked the way several times (calling across car windows) and almost got wiped out by a truck. The museum was a 16th century home built originally by one of Cortes soldiers as an inn. It then had various owners and is now furnished with historic pieces of various cultures and times. Something of a mishmash and only viewed from doorways. The grounds were spacious and attractive and included a lake and a 500yr old fig tree.

Back to town. Another car park! Then we were walking through a street full of people making beautiful palm decorations for Palm Sunday. Palm leaves all round and (mostly) women enjoying each others company as they chatted and worked skilfully to fashion large interwoven leaf shapes. Nearby we were shown “Jesus Street” where a young couple were killed by a jealous widower and “Jesus te ampare” (Jesus protect you) was the last thing she said to her lover. Large and colourful jacarandas blooming nearby overlooked the scene.



On to a delicious buffet meal arranged as our shout for our hosts, and when we all thought we’d had ample food waiters started coming with spikes of different sorts of meat, - and kept coming and coming.

Home to rest before the concert. Musica Maestro Orquesta Sinfonica de Xalapa. A Mozart programme for Easter with superb orchestration and soloists. A very special treat for us. To cap the day for Lis and I - Sangria and Tiramisu at our hostess’s favourite restaurant. Il Pomodoro! It seemed to be the whole town’s favourite eating place but the queue finally got to us and we enjoyed the atmosphere and our supper. Bed at midnight!

Saturday March 31st

Daytrip from Xalapa to Veracruz

Verena Madgwick

Early morning start, as the bus would leave at 8.00 am. Angelica cooked a Mexican black bean breakfast, a very tasty dish. To my delight Angelica and her son Victor Emanuel would also come for the day. Dad came to the bus stop to wave us good day. The first stop was at the city of Cempoala to see the historical Church, then on to the archaeological site where we meet a local guide to explain the ruins, rituals and rules. Lunch picnic on the site near the ruins where we all looked for shade as it was warm!!



Back on the bus again it was on to Veracruz. Veracruz is a famous holiday city, with lots of large hotel blocks on the sea front, but also an old picturesque centre. The harbour of Veracruz is a major port on the Gulf of Mexico.



We enjoyed a traditional Mexican lunch [meat on the skewer served individually] accompanied by dips and salads. Live music was played by Mexican Musicians.

After lunch we had a walk along the fore shore where we saw some man dressed in white costumes climbing up the what looked like a may pole. They sat on a frame while one man played a musical instrument. When the music stopped they jumped off the frame and slowly lowered themselves to the ground on ropes. A spectacular sight.

To finish our day in Veracruz we had a short walk along the beach and felt the warm sand and water. It had been a beautiful day to remember as we travelled back in the dark.

Sunday April 1st

Xalapa, Mexico

John Durnford

After staying the previous night at the house of our surrogate host (Bichina) in Xalapa, we were collected by our actual hosts, Porfirio and Rosa (plus 2 grandchildren), and driven to the Museo de Antropologia de Xalapa to meet up with the rest of our group for a tour.

This modern museum, containing sculptures and artefacts from the Gulf Coast's major pre-Columbian civilisations, was cleverly set out with exhibits displayed in a descending series of halls and patios in chronological order. The centrepiece of the first patio was a colossal 20 tonne stone Olmec head "El Rey" (The King).

After a lengthy tour with a Spanish-speaking guide (hard going for translator Bob) the group was picked up by respective hosts for an afternoon of free time. We two were taken to Xalapa's Parque Juarez (main square), a large tree-lined terraced area abuzz with vendors, musicians, and strolling families. Our host's charming and impeccably-behaved grandchildren – Porfirio jnr (12) and Fernando (6) – had a great time with fire-cracker bombs, soap-bubble blowing, and flying streamers.

From the elevated lookout patio, we viewed the local peak Cofre de Perote (4250m) 25km distant. In the hazy distance we could also make out the snow-capped Pico de Orizaba volcano (5747m) 65km away to the south. Wandering out from the main plaza we saw the neo-classical Palacio de Gobierno (state government building), the C18th Metropolitan Cathedral, and a comfortable café where we all popped in for a coffee break.

Mid-afternoon, our hosts took us for a very nice lunch at Restaurant Parrilla, where we enjoyed typical Mexican dishes and drinks and the kids got treated to what kids like! Driving on from there to another host's local house (to freshen-up and change) prior to the evening Farewell Dinner, we saw a juggler performing for motorists' coins at traffic lights. This was novel compared to the usual trinket peddlers, but not as spectacular as a fire-eater we encountered a few days before!

When we arrived at the Farewell Dinner venue at 7pm we were surprised to find it was in the commodious but draughty Centennial Trade & Arts School hall, with us all seated at tables at one end. After the multi-course meal, we were unexpectedly treated to a dazzling dance pageant by students of the Ballet Folklorico de Veracruz. This was a display in music and dance of a series of scenes depicting stages in the history of Mexico. It was a feast of colour and movement, and the highlight of the evening. Then followed the presentation of a farewell gift by the host club to each of the visiting Ambassadors. The evening finished late (some lengthy speeches!) and our host family took us on the long drive back to their Perote home for our last night there.



Monday April 2nd

Perote, Xalapa – Tlaxcala

Ngairé Durnford

Today was our last day in Xalapa. We had an early breakfast at home with our host family including the 2 grandchildren (6 & 12) Most mornings our host would cut open a long black skinned Mamey fruit (only ripe Mar – May) for us to try. Our last morning was no exception; he presented us with 5 Mamey fruits to take with us.



After exchanging gifts we all hopped in the car for our long drive from Perote to Xalapa City. (again another 1 ½ hour's drive) On this drive the 2 grandchildren taught me how to play Poker and I taught them to play Snap.

We had all had a wonderful time during our Xalapa exchange so it was hard to say goodbye, however we had to leave. All assembled outside a hotel in central Xalapa for our final tearful farewells and hugs with our Xalapa and Nelson FF friends, before boarding the bus for our next adventure. The Wellington contingent finally said their farewells by 10.30 a.m. then we were off.

Our Adventure World guide Everado and driver Fernando then met us for the start of our 7 days bus excursion in Mexico First place to visit was Cantona (about a 2 hour drive). As we drove along we observed in the distance Cofre de Perote and Pico (2 dormant volcanoes) which were ever present on the landscape.



On arrival at Cantona we walked up 52 rocky uneven steps to view the spectacular newly excavated archaeological site believed to be the largest urban centre yet discovered in Mesoamerica. Cantona covers 12 squares kilometres that are divided into three urban areas. The ruins include a roadway network of over 500 cobblestone causeways, with many ceremonial buildings and temples. These remarkable buildings were assembled by carved stones being placed one atop the other without any stucco covering or cement mortar being used in their construction.

As it became the norm in Mexico we had another late lunch, this time at Las Palmas, the proprietor gave us a free coffee flavoured egg nog to try. Some of our party signed the visitors book, before boarding the bus, again for another 1 ¼ hour drive to Tlaxcala city. On arrival at Tlaxcala City we walked to the square of the City Hall then on to the Palace of the Government buildings built in 1545. Here we were surprised by the armed guards on the doors, however inside were marvellous murals on the three walls and under the arches which needed protection.

More walking this time to the Cathedral through the Plaza Xicolatoncatl past the market stalls, (a few enterprising people snuck off to buy souvenirs.) and onto the oldest church on the American mainland, built in 1525. This small church was made of clay bricks with a wooden ceiling and is still being used today. There is no bell in this church it is housed in a small separate building beside the church. It is also still being rung today.

This was the end of the first day of our excursion, were then driven to the Mision Tlaxcala Hotel for the night, made time arrangements for breakfast then wearily made our way to bed.

Tuesday April 3rd

Tlaxcala to Puebla

Maureen Herlihy-Moloney

This was the day of the bulls. We had left our hotel at 10 a.m. We met up with our guide George who drove us to our Hacienda of the bulls. The 5th of May was 'The Pueblo' and the



Hacienda was to send seven bulls, six of which were to fight. There would be three matadors, sometimes four in case one was injured.

Some of the bulls could weigh more than 500 kg. Some bulls weigh less. These lighter bulls can move more easily. The ages of the bulls were four to six years old. The bull fighters have to be registered. The bulls do not eat for three days before the bull fight. The meat is sold when the bulls are killed.

George led us down to the paddocks to show us the bulls – the smell was horrendous. If a bull is noble when fighting and he survives they keep him for breeding. We then transferred to a trailer driven by a man on a tractor. We sat on hay bales on the trailer and were driven through many paddocks containing bulls. Although we were given many a baleful eye by some of the bulls, none attempted to charge us thank goodness as one toss from those horns would certainly have inflicted a messy wound.



We returned to our minibus after the tour of the bulls was over and left the hacienda now free to breathe in clean smelling air.



Next stop was the Hacienda Xochuca near Taxco. We were now in Agave country. Our Xochuca guide led us to where the large agave plants grew. We had it explained to us that after 10 years they cut the heart of the agave to get the juice – each plant produces for 4-5 months. The plant is then left to dry and it is used for fuel. Each plant produces 500 litres. Everyone was given a sample of the juice to try. It was not to my liking.

By 3 p.m. we were on our way again and arrived at Tlaxcala for lunch. By this time we had become accustomed to having lunch at 3 p.m. – Mexican time. The Italian Café was our lunch stop, they are in every town.

By 4 p.m. we were on our journey again. We espied two volcanoes in the distance – one, Popocatepetl was smoking. When we returned to New Zealand we heard on the news that Popocatepetl was doing more than smoking, it was erupting.

We arrived in Puebla City at 6 p.m. I thought that it was one of the loveliest cities I had seen in Mexico. The square was buzzing with people. The cathedral dominated one end of the square and many fountains played throwing water up in the air in front of the large cathedral.

At the end of the day we were tired but pleased we had seen so much and learned so much in a very full day.

Wednesday April 4th

Puebla to Taxco

Sue Walker

The day started with a visit to Cholula which is now almost a suburb of Puebla. Apparently Hernan Cortes said it was the most beautiful city outside Spain. It is the site of the largest pyramid ever built with a base 450 metres square and was known as the Great Pyramid of Tlachihualtepetl. It was started in the 3rd century BC and developed over many centuries but the Spanish put a church on the top! Excavations began in 1931 and have uncovered some well preserved murals among many other artefacts. The church is dedicated to Our Lady of the Remedies and contains a statue to the little known Saint Homobono the patron saint of tailors and seamstresses, seen here with his tape measure.



As we travelled on to Taxco we had many really good views of Mt Popocatepetl and the smoke and steam coming from the top of it. However, the journey became particularly tedious when we got stuck in traffic at Cuernavaca for about 2 hours. Apparently the week before Easter, Semana Santa, is the biggest holiday week in the year in Mexico and I'm sure that a significant percentage of the population of Mexico City were on their way to Acapulco.



When we finally arrived in Taxco we visited a silver shop for a talk about the local silver industry and how to tell good silver from imitation. The town is famous for its silver mines and the narrow cobbled streets were full of silver shops.

After another very long day we arrived at the Posada La Mision Hotel which had a swimming pool but by this time it was dusk and the water was cold. Some hardy people did brave the cold though.



Thursday April 5th

Taxco to Mexico City

Ian Speden

After a simple breakfast, with our agave honey added to items, we left the Posada la Mision Taxco Hotel with the bus travelling up the steep, windy but very good road through the barren, dry, pine forested hills of the narrow rugged range into an extensive basin and range terrain, then down to the dissected and smoggy plains which was bounded by the Eastern and Western Sierra and their prominent volcanoes. We passed extensive cornfields and went through the spread out city of Cuernavaca with its blocks of white and concrete coloured, one and two storied houses. Originally sponsored by government these developments are now built by private companies. Then over the “volcanic cordillera”, at 3,100 metres, to be passed by congested traffic heading south over Easter, down to the smoggy Mexico City, arriving at 11 am and into traffic jams. Drove past the 1968 Olympic Stadium. Told the traffic really was not bad.



Went around and passed through the large Chapultepec Park with its numerous, large playgrounds, museums, lakes and a “river” for boating; a very busy place. Stopped for a toilet break (4 pesos) then drove down avenues with many statues and monuments, one with many made from plastic bottles, and the Reforma Avenue with the Independence Memorial. Dropped off at the cathedral to queue for entry into the National Palace. Went through three screenings with some having to deposit belongings. The palace is noted for the

colourful murals (1954 - 86) of Diego Rivera which display the history of Mexico, native cultures (Olmec, Aztec, Toltec, etc.) and historical events.

Visited the immense, grey coloured cathedral with its intense, over-ornate interior. Crowded with people, some buying chamomile plants to make tea and bread over Easter. Stopped at a café for a light lunch of chicken soup, bread and tea, before pushing our way through the crowds to visit the adjacent Aztec Temple ruins and the exhibits in the associated, modern and well designed



Anthropological Museum. A great range of relicts displayed - statues, memorials, murals with some having original colours, musical instruments, pottery, etc. One large, circular stone memorial, when viewed from above, changed colours with lighting changes.



Back to the square to await the bus, and to see many police and troops watching the crowd. Made our way slowly through the congested streets to the Regente Hotel, and to a small room lacking soaps and noisy due to the ventilation system. Walked up the street to the Sanbourn Restaurant & general Store for a good meal in a quiet environment with good service. I had a nice enchilada and Victoria beer, while Erica had a spaghetti meal as not feeling “certain”. Again late to bed as most feeling tired after the long day.

GOOD FRIDAY April 6th

Mexico City to Real del Monte

Erica Speden

Almost no traffic on the roads. 3 pesos to travel on the underground, which at present only goes approx 15 kms out of the city.

Visited the badly damaged cathedral with sloping floors, Cathedral Santa Maria Guadalupe followed by the very beautiful new and modern cathedral almost next door. The last major earthquake was in 1985. Huge areas of grey concrete block houses have been built outside the 15 million Mexico City, most probably after the earthquake

Travelled to the Temple of the Moon and Sun. Most of the group walked down the avenue of death to the Temple of the Sun. As it was a holiday for the Mexicans there were huge queues waiting to climb to the top of the temple, but it was decided to abort that idea and go for lunch.



Travelled to Real Del Monte where we were to stay 2 nights. A hilly and small town, and my first impression was a shanty town, I have never seen so many rusty roofs. We walked up hill from the hotel with hundreds of other people to enjoy the sights, entertainment and crowd watching. Watched another of the men up a high pole and they came swinging down like a trapeze act.

The town is famous for pastes, as the Cornish people came in the 1700's for mining silver. They wouldn't recognize the contents of the pastes, now with a Mexican flavour. I found them delicious.

Saturday April 7th

Real del Monte.

Lis Pyle



After breakfast we visited a pastes restaurant and watched pasties being made. Four of us went there for dinner that evening and ate in the kitchen with the boss. The pastes were just yum!

Miners came from Cornwall to help set up mine machinery in the mid 1800's.



They introduced pasties and football and were buried in the English cemetery, facing Mother England. This is on a high hill to which we wound upwards on multi cornered cobbled streets. This Cornish connection has a strong history in Real del



Monte and we were able to visit a mine museum at the end of the day, not currently a working silver mine as the lower 200 feet is flooded. There are 140 mines in the area, with only one still working. Pachuca is a nearby silver mine village we passed through, with a historical connection.

This was Easter weekend and families and friends are out having fun. The roads were chokka, so we progressed very slowly to the famed Primus Basalticos, which turned out to have been developed as a family fun park, with people, stalls and noise! And a very nasty swing bridge.



We then went for lunch, the highlight of the day. We were lucky to be taken to an authentic Mexican restaurant where we quickly became the main attraction. We were served interesting soups; my mushroom soup contained a jalapeno as well as a chilly! The



owner's granddaughter brought us her Grandmothers mole (chilli chocolate) on tortilla – great; she then sang for us and we replied with Pokare, followed by lots of photos, and purchases from their shop. It was one of those memorable times of really interacting with the people of Mexico.



Later we arrived back in Real del Monte and had coffee at the best coffee shop in Mexico – right opposite the hotel.

Quote of the day: "I was interested, without knowing what I was interested in". The owner of the quote remains anonymous!!



With Maureen at Mass there were only eleven of us for Breakfast at the Restaurant. Again I enjoyed the fresh fruits and had the Mexican Scrambled Eggs but was not game enough to try the supposedly sugarless black coffee. Bob placed orders for several people for Cornish Pasties and once these were ready we left at about 9 40 a.m. for Mexico City. The weather was somewhat hazy but by 9 55 a.m. we could see the sprawling City of Pachuca across the Valley. Today the toilet stop at 10 20 a.m. was not at a Café. It was amusing watching the birds drink from

a dripping tap, the small birds scattering when any bigger birds approached but returning after their departure!

At the Regente Hotel, Mexico City by 11.35 a.m. it was great to find our room ready. Lunch was either eating Pasties on tables outside the Hotel with their coffee or across the road at the restaurant where we'd had dinner on Easter Thursday. Some then rested whilst others drifted down to a craft market before retracing their steps and locating the Art market, taking in the local colour. Others after visiting the Art Market found the fruit and vegetable market. All were at dinner by 7 30 p.m. across the road, where our waitress of other times was off duty. Lis proposed a vote of thanks to Bob, but language difficulties along with credit card acceptance problems and later upset constitutions for most left a few queries for some.





Today we began our journey home to the land of the long white cloud!

We left the hotel at 11am, all checked to fly to L.A. from Mexico International Airport by 12md. One last opportunity to have a photo shot of the group on the large Samsung screen.



We left the airport at 2.40pm for the 4 hour flight arriving at 6.40pm, turned the clock back 2 hours and said haere ra to Joy Mc Nichol who was spending a few days in Santa Barbara. We checked into Air NZ at 5.30pm then on into the lounge to wait for our flight boarding time.

We crossed the equator about 4.30am, then the International Date Line taking the time from Monday 9th 7am onto Wednesday 11th 2am-a 19 hours leap ahead. Arrived at Auckland International Airport-so pleased to hear Kiwi voices-at 5.30am. I bought my duty free goods before passing through customs, then onto the domestic terminal for the flight to Wellington-the coolest little capital in the world-arriving at 9am. The 25 hour journey was uneventful and routine. I was pleased to be home following a wonderful experience in Central America with some wonderful companions.