

WORLD OF WONDERS PROJECT
Central America and Mexico return, 2008

January 1, 2008 - New Years Day in Panama City, Panama

We have had to change the direction of travel for the World of Wonders Project. Our plans to continue from Australia to Southeast Asia were thwarted by bureaucratic red tape. While making plans for travel through Singapore and Malaysia we were notified that in order for us to drive through these countries we would have to post a cash bond of over \$50,000us. We concluded that the best way to continue our around the world expedition would be to return to the Americas and then head east through North Africa or Europe. Our transportation sponsor Wallenius Wilhelmsen Lines took care of our Fuso and shipped it back to Panama.

Arriving at the airport in Panama City, we were greeted by that blast of warm humid air that said "welcome back to the tropics". Entering the country went pretty smoothly, although when we got up to immigration we were asked if we had our tourist cards. Well, no we had already filled out a tourist form and we thought that the fee was covered in our plane ticket. Hah. So we had to go to a little desk back at the beginning of the line (no sign of course) to pay our \$5 each fee. Fortunately, we didn't have to stand in line again, we just went back to the inspector, gave her the cards, and got our stamped passports back.

We collected our bags, passed them through an x-ray machine (to enter the country?) and left the airport. We met the driver for our hotel and away we went. Really easy.

In the morning we collected our rental car then began the process for getting our Fuso released from the port and into Panama. Getting a rental car really simplifies things as we have to literally cross the country from Panama City on the Pacific Ocean to the port in Colon on the Caribbean.

Our first stop was at Barwil, the agents for the shipping line to collect an original Bill of Lading (BOL) properly stamped by the agents. Central America bureaucracy loves their stamps. The more stamps a document has on it, the more official it MUST be.

After getting our BOL, we went to the next stop - Aduanas. This is the customs office and here we collected our temporary import permit after surrendering a whole dollar for the cost of a few copies. Then it was time to cross the isthmus to the port.

Being lunch time, we decided to delay arrival at the port since everyone was probably at their lunch anyway, and stopped at a small local restaurant, ordered the meal of the day and got a good filling meal for \$4.60! Yes indeed, welcome back to Central America.

At the port, we met with a representative of our sponsor, Wallenius Wilhelmsen Logistics to collect an Authorization to Release the Vehicle to us. Then it was time to stand in line, first at Cuarentena, then at Aduanas to get copies of all of our papers and more stamps on everyone of them - including the stamped copies and paid our \$3 for copies. Then across the parking lot to Aduanas #2 to get more copies of everything and yes, more stamps on every page. Here we thought we were finished and drove to the RORO gate. Guess what - we missed one window with more stamps.

So back to the main port gate and to the last window that we missed, Importacion, into another line to pay our fees of \$11 and collect two copies of stamped receipts, and then to back to the window to have everything checked. OK. Ready to go back to the RORO gate.

Here we had to go to yet another window, get the documents checked again and stamped again before they would bring out our Fuso. There it was - all in one piece, but too tall for the exit. No problem they said.

But before we could leave, there was the customs inspection. The agent checked the VIN number and then looked inside the door of the camper to make sure all was OK. No physical inspection and out we could go.





But one more stop to drive through the fumigation spray booth where the underside of the truck is sprayed.

Finally we were free. Being about 3pm, we knew we wouldn't get far, so we headed first to a grocery store, filled the fuel tank and then to find us a parking/camping place for the night. The city of Colon has the rather unsavory reputation as possibly the most dangerous city in Panama. Maybe the reputation is deserved, but we found a quiet

parking area at a shopping center to spend the night. We even got serenaded by a jazz band that had set up in front of a store-front church.

Jan 2

We started our first full day back on the road by trying to get the few things that we brought with us put away. Remembering that we had to return our rental car this morning, Kim wanted to check our return time as the clerk had told us that he would give us an extra three hours to turn in the vehicle. But upon checking our documents, there was no indication of the extra time, and realizing that our contracted return time was just 30 minutes away we packed up quick and messy then drove off to the rental company, arriving right at the last minute.

On our last trip through Panama, we were a bit rushed to deliver our Fuso to the port for shipment to Venezuela and therefore didn't have the opportunity to explore the city of Colon nor the north coast of Panama. We decided to explore the Zona Libre, which is basically a huge duty free shopping area. The Panamanian government decided to try to jump start the economy in Colon by literally walling off about one-third of the city and turning it into a duty free zone, thinking that the revenue would help the city. Well yes, the Zona Libre earns something like a billion dollars a year, second only to the economy of Hong Kong. Yet almost nothing of the money earned makes it back into the local economy. Thus high unemployment, a high crime rate and a lousy reputation.

After a quick hour walking through the Zona Libre, we drove east along the Caribbean coastline toward Portabelo and its many Spanish colonial forts. We stopped at a camping area on the beach about half way there. Many Panamanians are still enjoying vacation time, and the beach was full of people, yet we were the only ones spending the night.

In the morning we drove the remaining 10 miles or so to Portabelo. The bay here was discovered by Christopher Columbus and named beautiful port. In fact the area still is beautiful and the town set on the shoreline of the bay with the Portabelo National Park filling the mountains.

The town was set up by the Spanish so that they could load up their galleons with the riches they had plundered from the new world for shipment back to Spain. The town was also the terminus of their overland route which crossed the Isthmus from Panama City. The Spanish ships would sail up the west coast of South America, unload their riches which would then be transported by mule to the Caribbean, then on to Spain.

Obviously the port became a target of Privateers licensed by England to basically attack the Spanish and take their riches. To protect the port, the Spanish built a series of forts around the bay. We enjoyed a day of

exploring the remains of the forts. One of the forts was actually dismantled during the construction of the Panama Canal and used to build a breakwater!





Portabelo is also famous for its statue of a black Christ. Many stories exist about how the statue came to be here, much like many of the stories about religious icons found around the world. Needless to say, the statue and the church built to house it are the setting for a tremendous pilgrimage and holiday - but not when we visited.

After exploring the area, we found a nice spot along the bay to set up camp for the night.

Jan 5

Crossing the country back again towards Panama City, we then drove along the Canal to the end of the road in Gamboa. After driving over an old one lane train bridge we climbed a hill to an old lighthouse to get a view looking back over the bridge and the canal.

Gamboa was a specially constructed town built to house the management and workers of the Canal, but is now home to a botanical gardens and tourist resorts. We were heading to the famous Pipeline Road (Camino del Oleoducto) which is recognized for its tremendous diversity of birdlife.



We set up camp at one end of the 17 km long road then hiked in. Immediately we spotted two types of toucans - very exciting. On our walk we spotted maybe a dozen more types of birds including hummingbirds and parrots, we also saw spider monkeys, an agouti (basically a very large rat) and heard several different groups of howler monkeys, quite a satisfying hike.

After dark, we enjoyed a great stellar display while listening to the sound of ships and trains traveling along the Canal. The combination was rather bizarre. Oh yes, and there were all of the lightning bugs blinking on and off as they floated by us.

Jan 6

Shortly after 7am the tour groups began showing up for their birding hikes. Not like there were a ton of tourists, but there were a few. We started our hike right about the same time as a group from one of the high priced resorts showed up. We pretty much stayed ahead of them as we had a faster pace, but when we'd stop to look at a bird they'd catch up and we'd show them whatever bird we had identified. This worked to our benefit as well. On our return walk to the parking area, we caught up with the group as they were watching a large group of different birds that were feeding on a massive ant swarm.

We learned from their guide that the birds weren't feeding on the ants as ants are very acidic tasting. The birds were being opportunistic and were stealing the dead flies and bugs that the ants were carrying back to their nest. This went on for at least 30 minutes, and we got a great sighting of what the guide referred to as a rare sighting of a Panama Ground Cuckoo. All in all the Pipeline Road did live up to its reputation as a great birding site.

After eating a late breakfast, we drove back toward Panama City and stopped at the Summit Botanical Gardens. The gardens are also a zoo and were supposed to have great leopard and harpy eagle programs. Finding the leopard enclosure we were disappointed as we only got a brief glimpse of a solitary leopard before it disappeared. At the harpy eagle aviary, there was only one of the magnificent birds remaining. The zoo had rehabilitated and released about six eagles into the wild - in the Pipeline Road vicinity actually. The remaining eagle we were told had just lost its mate about two weeks earlier. The eagle was 32 years old!

Leaving the gardens, we bypassed Panama City by taking a new bridge built right over the Canal at the deepest portion of the Gaillard Cut. It was really impressive to look out over the Canal and see ships and the locks from above. We took a quick photo from the Fuso as we couldn't stop on the bridge.

We drove on to Santa Clara as we had heard about a beautiful beach to camp at. Unfortunately there was a really low hanging tree across the small access road that blocked us from driving down it. The vehicles behind us were not exactly happy when we stopped, blocking the road while we turned around to leave.



We then tried to find a beach near the site of the USA's invasion in 1989. Our guidebook described the area as a quiet village. The info was a bit outdated as we found the village only after driving through a HUGE resort. When we failed to find a beach, we stopped to talk with a police officer who went off in search of a camping place for us. She took us to a small motel on the beach, but if we had tried to get into their tiny parking area we probably would

have pulled down their electrical wires. We thanked her for her efforts, but said goodbye. We ended up camping at a campground that we had visited two years ago when we visited Panama on our way towards South America.

Jan 7

The campground, XS Memories, turned out to be a good deal as we could plug into their electricity to give our batteries an extra boost after sitting idle on the ship from Australia. They also had a pool to cool off in, great when you consider the high humidity and the high temperature. We even had free wifi to pick up our emails.

Deciding not to spend another night there, we left to find a nice beach - if we could find any that haven't been developed into a resort.

After doing some errands and stopping for lunch, we drove into the Azuero Peninsula and down to a small beach filled with fishing pangas outside of Pedasi. That night it was just us and the security guard, wonderful.

Jan 8

In the morning we were awakened early by the fishermen arriving to start their day. Some of the men were able to gather large groups of people to help push their boats into the water (they were quite high and dry on the beach) but others had to wait for a large truck to drive down and haul their boats for them. While that may sound easier, they men who muscled their boats in were down in about five minutes. It took quite a bit longer than that for the truck to work its way down the beach and to maneuver to pull the boats down to the water.





After breakfast we took out our bikes and rode down the really hard packed sand beach. We were able to go northwest down the beach until we reached a river mouth. The night before we had checked out where the road ended at a river dock and today we could see that the river was really low at low tide and that the boats would be trapped until high tide. That was why there were so many boats on the beach. We then rode back the other direction and discovered snakes on the beach! Three of them, actually. We figured they were water snakes considering they didn't seem to move very well on land and because they had flat tails, the better for

swimming. We didn't think they were long for this world either, considering the number of crabs, vultures and caracaras around.

As the fishing boats returned with their catch, we wondered over to the men and check out what they had. The first fisherman told us the day wasn't very good as he had only caught about 5 fish. The second fisherman

obviously had a more successful day as he had about 32 pounds of fish! When we asked if we could buy a couple of fish, he told us no then gave them to us refusing any payment!

We cleaned the fish then cooked them both up whole - they were so good. We then spent the remainder of the afternoon and evening relaxing, and just before bedtime the police showed up. They turned on their lights and beeped their siren a little bit so we went out to say hi. One of the officers approached Don with his hand out in welcome and spoke to him in English. He asked us about our trip and our truck and after a brief tour, the officers wished us a good night and left. Just another example of a pleasant police encounter in Central America.

Jan 9

We were again awakened by the fisherman, but today there was much less activity. We had noticed that yesterday most of the boats came in at high tide so they could use the river dock. They also would have had to leave pretty early on the high tide, but this meant that there wasn't much activity on the beach. There were a couple of tourists that wanted to take



a boat out to the off shore island and with the four people they had they were unable to push the boat out to the water. So we went down and helped them push the boat in. They used some rollers to help facilitate the effort and after some hard pushes, we all succeeded in getting it into the water.

We packed up and headed a bit further down the peninsula to the beach at Playa Venao. We later learned that this beach was a popular surf beach for the US armed forces when they were stationed in the canal zone. Today it was pretty quiet, a couple of bungalows were rented out and there were two vehicles with surfers who were sleeping in their cars. The beach was absolutely beautiful with a medium size surf break. We spent quite a bit of time in the water doing a bit of body surfing. When we got out of the water we found that the slight tingling we felt was actually some type of organism that was stinging us. Kim got a bunch of marks on her body, but an antihistamine got the allergic reaction under control pretty quickly. We spent a really quiet night on the beach, being lulled to sleep by the sound of the surf.

Jan 10

In the morning we decided to drive a loop around the peninsula on our way north. We got stuck in a traffic jam that was caused by a herd of cows that refused to get off of the roadway, they even tried to push around one of the small cars in front of us.



We drove a ways down the road to the village of Canas from where the fishermen run boats out to Canas Island to view the olive ridley sea turtles that come ashore here to lay their eggs. This is one of roughly three major beaches in the world where the endangered turtles nest. Too bad for us that they only visit here between April and November. Immediately past the town the road deteriorated to potholes with a little pavement in between. The road was so rough and slow going that we decided to turn around and retrace our steps back north.

As we returned to the town of Pedasi where we had camped a couple of days before, we stopped off to sample the cakes at Dulceria Yely. This is a cake shop made famous by the fact that at one time the President of Panama would have his desserts purchased here and sent to him. Yes, we did find the cakes very tasty, even fit for a president. Hah ha. Even better the cakes were priced for locals with a single piece costing no more than 50 cents!

Continuing back toward the Panamerican Hwy, Kim noticed a professional looking repair garage. We had been keeping our eyes open looking for a clean shop as we needed to get some service completed for our Fuso. Two and half hours after we drove in, we left with an oil change, oil and fuel filters replaced and 12 suspension bushings replaced for only \$105.00, what a great deal.

While we were having the truck serviced, Kim researched for a close spot to camp. She found that just out of town there was Playa El Aguillito which, at low tide, is a mud flat that stretches for more than 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ miles (2km) into the ocean and is home to thousands of migratory birds.

Jan 11

In the morning the tide was out and we were excited to be able to look out our window and see the birds feeding in the shallows. There were also lots of net fishermen tossing their nets in the shallows hoping to catch shrimp. About the time that we were getting ready to leave, one of the fishermen came up to us with his catch and offered it for sale. We ended up buying two pounds of shrimp for \$3.

This expedition through Panama we're able to spend a lot more time exploring the backroads than when we came through 2 ½ years ago on our South America Expedition. At that time we were in a rush to meet the ship that would take our vehicle to Venezuela. This time we have no deadline to meet.



We continued on our backroads adventure and stopped at the small village of Pese. This town has a factory that makes rum and seco (the stronger, unfermented version of rum) from the locally harvested sugar cane. We stopped off at the factory and asked if we could get a tour, which turned out to be incredibly easy and free. We met the head distiller who had worked in the factory for 50 years, and were shown the new bottling equipment that was installed as part of the factory's \$500,000 modernization.

We learned that while rum is fermented for a week, the seco is distilled and immediately

bottled. The manager was especially proud of the new plastic bottles that the seco would be sold in during this year's Carnaval celebrations. As the plastic bottles won't shatter they expect the celebrations to be safer.

Drinking is a major part of Carnival. When our tour was over the manager presented us with a bottle of seco as a gift. At 35% proof we'll have to find the right time to sample it.

We ended our day up in the mountains at the small village of Santa Fe. Located at an elevation of 1000 mts (3250 ft) the temperature was much cooler and less humid than during the past week. Along the way here we stopped off in the pueblo of San Francisco and we were able to explore the Iglesia San Francisco de Veraguas. This tiny church was built around 1727 and is a great example of Baroque art. The Indian craftsmen built highly ornate altars in the church. When we visited in 2005, the church was locked up, but now the government has decided to spend money to restore this ancient building and artwork. While carving the altars, the Indians added things that held special meaning for them that were not related to Christianity. Examples of this were the carvings of a human skull, three dice, an eagle piercing its own heart with its beak and the faces of prominent Indians of the time carved in the faces of cherubs!

In the town of Santa Fe, we set up camp next to the soccer field and the church. Later when a soccer game started, we set up our chairs and watched the entertainment until it got dark.

Jan 12 - 13

We spent a couple of days in Santa Fe enjoying the cooler climate. Saturday we road our bikes around town for a couple of hours stopping off at the house of local orchid grower who happens to also be the Mayor of town. She showed us around her garden for a bit although only a couple of the orchids were in bloom. Orchid blooming season is during the rainy season when there is more moisture. We did see other flowers that were in bloom and lots of different ferns, bromeliads and tilansias. Afterwards, we attempted to ride to one of the nearby rivers to do a float on inner tubes. I say attempted because Santa Fe is in the mountains and the river was lower and our ride was all the way downhill, very steeply down. We decided to give up and maybe try to drive down later.

When we got back up to town, we stopped at one of the local restaurants for a cold drink and the comida corrida which was rice, salad and a small piece of baked chicken in a very tasty sauce. We then visited the local

cooperative coffee plant where they complete the entire coffee process from husking the bean to roasting and grinding the coffee. The equipment was ancient but very effective.

Later on we did drive down to the river, crossing an old metal bridge that didn't look too sturdy. After we crossed, a local came up to us and told us that if we drove on another mile we would come to another river and that we could drive right to the water. So we did. This spot was so nice that we decided to make camp and spend the night. During the afternoon though, we were joined by a couple dozen people and we all went swimming in the river as there was a great swimming hole where the river got deep and the kids jumped off of the rocks into the water.

Around sunset we heard a motor coming down to the river and we were joined by another American who was living part time in town. We sat around for a couple hours talking about the community and what it was like to live in another country. It was a fun and interesting evening.



We hung out at the river for most of the next day, then drove back into town to try and meet up with another expat American who was living in town. We met Janet when we were down at Playa Pedasi and she invited us to stop by and spend some time with her and her husband John. When we telephoned she stopped by the soccer field where we were now camped and invited us over to share dinner. We spent another nice evening with them sharing stories.

Jan 14

In the morning we purchased a machete from a shop in town as Don had wanted to buy one for long time. We think it will come in handy for chopping off the occasional low branch but more importantly for opening coconuts so that we can use the milk with drinks and eat some of the white coconut meat.

We then left town and drove a few hours down the road to Playa Las Lajas, a really nice beach where we found a great camp spot just off the sand. The beach was very flat and had a large tidal range, so that when the tide went out, it was way out. We spent the afternoon body surfing in the waves only to find our swimsuits loaded up with fine silt! Notwithstanding the silt it was a fun day on the beach. It was so nice that we stayed an extra day.

We even got a chance to try out the new machete as we found some green coconuts growing low enough that we could get them. After a bit of trying we got one opened and enjoyed the clear milk. Apparently only the older brown coconuts have the white coconut meat. We'll have to look for one later.

Jan 16

The road in and out from the beach was really badly pot-holed so we did a slow slalom drive back to the Panamerican highway. Along the way we passed a small lagoon where we spotted some pink birds, flamingoes we thought. Getting our binocs out we identified the birds as Roseate Spoonbills, which look like flamingoes but they have a wide flat bill.

We continued up to the city of David where we found a good internet café and a laundromat. After a couple of weeks on the road we needed to find some washing machines so that we didn't have to wash everything by hand. In the late afternoon we headed out of town and over the mountains toward the Caribbean. We hoped to get all of the way to the town of Almirante from where the ferry to the islands of Bocas del Toro departs. However the 60 miles over the mountains was really slow going and took us about 2½ hours. So at sunset we just made it to Chirique Grande, still an hour and ½ away from the port. We stopped at the police station and the chief allowed us to spend the night camped at the edge of their parking lot.

Jan 17

We actually had to set our alarm and get on the road while it was still dark so that we could catch the ferry across to Bocas. We managed to get to the ferry port about an hour before the boat left, but we only barely made it aboard as we were one of the last vehicles allowed on.

Arriving on Isla Colon, named by Christopher Columbus after himself, we made arrangements at a Spanish language school to brush up on our Spanish for a few days, then we drove across the island and spent a calm afternoon snorkeling at Boca del



Drago. We arrived back at the school around sunset as this would be our main camp during our time on the island.

Jan 18

Our first day of class, we spent most of the time in general conversation as we needed to get ourselves thinking in Spanish again. It was fun and mentally tiring.

After class we road our bikes around town, stopping for lunch and to do a bit of food shopping. There are even two ATMs here so it was easy to get a bit of extra cash. There are many expat Americans living in Bocas together with tons of backpackers coming to hang out on the beach. The result is that the town appears to be more Caribbean than Central American and English is spoken by nearly as many people here as Spanish. Another unintended consequence of the tourist trade here is that the price of land has skyrocketed leaving many of the island's residents unable to buy land on their own island. Even the cost of rent has risen faster than their pay. This is the darker side that tourism sometimes brings.

Jan 19 - 20

Today was another great day of practicing Spanish. After class we decided that since we have tomorrow off from class we would move out of town for the weekend and drove back up to the other side of the island to our camp spot at Boca del Drago.

We spent two nights parked just about three feet away from the surf and during the day we just relaxed and did a bit of swimming and snorkeling. A couple of tourists came by with their guide just as we were trying to open a brown coconut to get some of its meat to try. It must have been obvious that we did not know what we were doing as the guide asked if we needed help. He came over and showed us how to peel away the husk and how to crack open the shell to get at the coconut milk and meat. We also realized that our machete is very dull and that we need to find someone to sharpen it for us.

Throughout the day many of the locals came by on their way to the end of the road where there is a restaurant at the beach. We decided to end our stay by having an excellent fish dinner at the restaurant, a whole fish baked in butter and garlic for only \$5 each! On the way back to the truck we got caught out by a sudden rain and ran back to pull in our towels and close the windows before everything got soaked.



Jan 21

Today was our last day of classes and the last day on the island. The teachers at the school were great and we feel more confident about conversing in Spanish after not speaking it for more than a year.

We caught the returning ferry, as it runs in the morning from the mainland at Almirante, and returns in the late afternoon from Bocas. On this trip the boat was just about 2/3 filled and we had no trouble getting on board.

Arriving back at Almirante about 30 minutes before dark, we stopped by the local Bomberos - the fire department - and asked if we could camp for the night. No problem, and they even let us plug into their electrical outlet so that we could get a deep charge on our camper batteries.

Jan 22

From the fire station we had a drive of about 50km to the Costa Rican border crossing. On the way out of town we were surprised to find tons of vultures standing on the roofs of buildings with their wings spread open. We had only seen this with cormorants and were surprised to find out that vultures would do this too.

We stopped off in the last Panamanian town to stock up with fuel as we have been warned that



the price of diesel in CR was in excess of \$5 a gallon (it turned out to be \$4/gal). We also decided to stock up at the local grocery since we plan to stop at the turtle reserve and park at Gandoca just across the border. Even though there won't be any turtles this time of year, we are hoping that we can find a spot to launch our kayak and paddle in the Gandoca Lagoon. There are supposed to be tons of birds and animals, including manatees.

We got to the border about 11:30am. This is a very small border crossing and we knew from our last trip that the office closes for lunch, so we wanted to get there before they closed. Kim got into the immigration line and Don got into the customs (Aduanas) line. Kim got the passports stamped out (they didn't even ask where Don was) and Don was still waiting in line behind several truck drivers to get the car document cancelled and the permit in his passport signed out. Fearing that we would miss the lunchtime deadline, Don pushed his documents in through the window with the trucker's, explaining that we weren't transferring any goods, we just needed to be signed out.

The customs officer finished what he was doing, did Don's paperwork first and we were ready to cross the old one lane train bridge into Costa Rica. The bridge didn't seem as scary this time around as it appeared they had replaced some of the old boards that had holes in them.

Stopping on the Costa Rica side, where it was an hour earlier, we gathered up our documents and very quickly got signed into the country at immigration. When we went to the customs office, however, the worker was out

getting his lunch (!), so we had to wait anyway. When he finally returned (after 20 minutes), he took care of all the truckers first because all he had to do was stamp them in, but for us he had to type up paperwork. What goes around comes around. We also had to run across the street to purchase a liability insurance policy (for \$16.00US). All in all it only took about 1½ hours to do both sides which is pretty typical.

As there were no banks at this border we asked around to find someplace to change our money into CR Colones. We were told that the local pharmacy changed money so off we went to find it and had no problems getting some local currency.



Leaving the border area, we immediately hit the lousy roads that Costa Rica is famous for. First there would be a stretch of pavement and then a stretch of bumpy gravel, full of holes. After making a stop at a transit police stop to show our documents, we pulled over next to a soccer field and had lunch. We then continued a few kilometers down the road to the turn off to Gandoca Reserve.

This is an interesting drive as the road winds through miles of banana plantations and you can watch the bunches of bananas being transported through the fields on a rail. The bunches are still manually pulled along the rail by workers with a leather strap around their waist. It would seem more efficient to mechanize the process, but would that then put all those people out of work? A tough question. As it stands, harvesting bananas is a very labor intensive business.

Another interesting element to this drive were the old wooden plank bridges that we had to cross. Even though we knew that banana trucks cross them every day, we still got out and checked





the stability of every one of them!

We finally reached the beach and made camp. We pulled out our chairs and sat on the black sand beach and watched the tremendous surf. No swimming at this beach as it's famous for its rip tides. You wouldn't think this would be a good beach for the turtles to lay their eggs on, as they have to get through the heavy surf, up the steep beach and into the dry sand, but four different types of turtles nest

here, so they must know what they're doing.

After a while a gorgeous full moon rose over the ocean and it was time for us to return to the truck for a delicious BBQ chicken dinner.

Jan 23

We went for our morning coffee walk and ended up walking all the way back through the village looking at birds. We found ourselves at the ranger station for the reserve so we asked the ranger if it was OK for us to kayak in the Gandoca Lagoon. We had read that it might not be allowed without a guide. He was new and didn't know, but offered to call the head office to find out.

After breakfast and breaking camp, we stopped back at the rangers' office. While Kim checked about permission, Don went off to take a photo of a great bird of paradise flower and was able to get a picture of a Long-tailed Hermit (a large hummingbird) that was hanging around the flower.

Kim received permission to kayak, so we set off to drive as close to the lagoon as possible. We still had a walk of nearly half a mile, but this gave us a chance to try out our kayak cart that we built just for instances like this. We set the kayak on the cart and we wheeled it with no problem to the put-in. It sure made it easier than carrying the kayak and all the equipment separately for that distance.

The lagoon was great and we were the only ones on it. We kayaked for over 4 hours, paddling as far as the ocean mouth and back into some of the small channels. We saw some type of crab-eating, ring tailed, raccoon-like animal and lots of birds. Some of them were herons, kites, vultures, three different types of kingfishers, toucans, swallows and fly-catchers. We spent so long on the lagoon that by the time we had everything put away, it was too late to move on so we went back to our same campsite for another night on the beach.



Jan 24

During the night it started raining and continued on and off all through the next day. This was our first full day of rain, but it wasn't too bad as it was mostly a driving day. We stopped in the village of Cahuita where we were introduced to the higher prices of food in restaurants than in Panama and continued to the town of Siquires where we were able to find a rafting company to take us out the next day and even let us camp on their property.

Jan 25

Rafting the Rio Pacure, Class 3 and 4 rapids. We were picked up at our camp by our guides and taken out for a local breakfast of eggs, rice, beans and Torrialba cheese at a small café on the way to the river put-in. After we had set up camp last night, the guide we had spoken with telephoned us to explain that the rafting company wasn't doing a trip on the river the next day and would sign us off to another company that had about 30 people going on the river in a huge group.





The guide offered us a different option, going on the river with the rafting company owned by his family. For the same cost we would end up with basically a private trip just us and the guides. How could we say no? The day was great as we spent the whole day on the river stopping at their camp for a huge lunch.

The water felt really good, a good thing as we spent the day getting drenched every time we plunged through the rapids.

Don't get a chance to

kayak the last hour and seemed to get swallowed up by some of the waves, they were so deep. Kim got soaked too even though she was in the raft. It was a fun and exhausting day so we ended up spending another night at the restaurant that was at the take out spot at the end of the day. If anyone heads down this way we would highly recommend this family run tour company. Give Manuel Amador a call at Costa Rica Extreme, 506-382-8937 in CR or go to www.costaricasxtreme.com and email him.

Jan 26

We did a bit of housekeeping work on the Fuso in the morning, then drove into town for a bit of grocery shopping and internet. We drove the rest of the day to the old river port of Puerto Viejo where we found a hotel on the Rio Sarapiquí where we could camp. At dusk the hotel manager put out a bunch of bananas for the birds who then swarmed all over the fruit. The blaze of colors was fabulous and we added several more incredible birds to our list.

Jan 27

The day started out rainy, but stopped about the same time as when we boarded a small river boat for a "jungle tour". We weren't really in the jungle although it felt kind of like a Disneyland experience. We spotted several caimans lounging in the shallows, lots of howler monkeys screaming at us from their perches high in the trees, and a couple of huge iguanas also in the trees with their back spines erect against the blue sky. We also saw a large group of Keel-billed toucans flying back and forth between the trees. They are really colorful with their multicolored beaks stealing the show.

After the cruise, we got back on the road and drove to the Arenal Volcano. We reached our camp at the Observatory Lodge late in the afternoon. This was the same camp we stayed at three years ago on our first Central America Expedition. At that time we were treated to a small eruption with lots of rocks being thrown down the mountainside. This time, we weren't as lucky as the rain that had been following us since the Caribbean coast created clouds that obscured the mountaintop.

We did get to hear lots of booms from the volcano whenever it spit out some rocks and we did see a few boulders come tumbling down its slopes. The bird life was fabulous as we identified various honey-eaters, oropendolas, robins and various tanagers. At night we took advantage of the hotel's spa and soaked away some of our tight muscles from the river rafting trip.

Jan 28-29

The day started out cloudy again, so we decided not to stick around as we still couldn't see the top of the volcano. We drove out of the mountains and down to the Pacific coast at Playa Grande on the Nicoya Peninsula. We had read that Leatherback turtles were known to come ashore here at this time of year to lay eggs. We have tried to view turtles laying eggs in many locations but have never been at the right place at the right time. This time would give us our best opportunity to witness this 100 million year old ritual. On top of that, the Leatherback turtles are the most endangered of the sea turtles with only around 50 females recorded laying eggs at this main site last year.

We arrived in time for sunset at the beach, surprising us as the road we had chosen to follow turned out to be a really rough, slow going route. We arrived at the marine park's headquarters where we were allowed to set up camp for the night. We then waited with about 50 other people as the local guides and researchers patrolled the beach in search of nesting turtles. We understood that with so few turtles coming ashore we might still not get the opportunity to witness this rare sight.

After about two hours of waiting, the word came in by radio that a female leatherback had come ashore. We all piled into the available vehicles and drove a couple of miles down to the other end of the beach. From there we walked back about half a mile following the red light of our guide's flashlight. We arrived in time to watch as this nearly 5-foot long turtle laid her eggs, covered them up and began her trek back to the surf and the safety of the ocean. The researcher told us that this one turtle had laid 82 eggs! Even though not all would result in a hatchling, it is a great thing. We learned that this turtle could come back ashore every 10 days to lay additional nests of eggs.

As we walked back down the beach talking about our experience we were all surprised, even the guide, as a second turtle crawled out of the surf right in front of us! We spent another 20 minutes standing there watching as she pulled herself up the beach past the high tide line. This was wonderful, we had finally gotten the opportunity to watch this ritual, something that could easily be a once in a lifetime opportunity for us. Unfortunately the memories were all we could have as photography was not permitted.

In the morning we moved camp down to a spot right on the beach where we decided to do a few more chores and then just relax for the day.

Jan 30

Border crossing day. We drove north to the Nicaragua border after stopping off in Liberia, CR for one last Costa Rican meal. It's surprising how fast a day passes, after running a few errands, spending some time in an internet café, eating lunch and driving about a hundred miles we arrived at the border about 3pm. We usually try to do border crossings in the morning, but sometimes it just doesn't work out that way.

Approaching the border we were stunned as we pulled up behind a line of semi-trucks that stretched as far as we could see, and we couldn't even see the border yet. From past experience we know that the rules for commercial vehicles are different from private autos so we decided to pass all of the trucks. The only problem was that the trucks were all parked blocking our lane of traffic and we would have to drive blind in the oncoming traffic lane.

Kim pulled out and drove slowly along only having to get out of the way of oncoming traffic twice. Luckily the truckers were considerate and left occasional space between their rigs that we could pull into. Eventually a police officer saw us and gave us an escort the rest of the way to the border gate.

First we had to stop at Aduanas to turn in our vehicle permit and then we stopped at immigration and got stamped out of the country. We then drove a short distance to the Nicaragua border and got into a small line in order to drive through the fumigation building so that our truck could be "cleansed".

We then drove up to the immigration/customs compound where we quickly jumped through all the hoops, getting our insurance, passport stamps and vehicle permit. By the time we crossed out of the compound and into Nicaragua we checked our clock and found that the whole process had gone smoothly and finished once again within our average time of an hour and a half.

Although tomorrow is the last day of January, tonight we celebrated our first month back in Central America by setting up camp at the ferry port for Isla Ometepi right on Lake Nicaragua in San Jorge. Our view looked out over the lake at the island with its twin volcanoes glowing orange in the setting sun.

