

WORLD OF WONDERS PROJECT  
Central America and Mexico Return  
2<sup>nd</sup> Month, February 2008

January 31, 2008 - Nicaragua

We decided not to go over to the island but we hung around to watch the action when the ferry and the workboats came in. The wind had come up during the night and the water was very rough. It looked like it would be a rocky crossing. We were interested in what type of ferry took the vehicles across to the island as we have shipped the Fuso on numerous boats. For the price of about \$10us, we couldn't understand why we had not read about anyone shipping their vehicles to the island.

Well, when the ferry came in to port we understood why no one would want to trust their vehicles to the crossing. To begin with the ferry was listing badly to port as they had loaded the vehicles poorly. The ferry is small, only having enough room for two large trucks and a small car. We guessed that due to the rough water the crew actually lashed the trucks to the sides of the ferry! We wouldn't want that for us. Lastly, the ferry was so heavy that the ramp to get off of it was up at such an angle that the crew had to put blocks of wood at the end so that the vehicles could drive off. For sure there was no way that we would take this boat across.



We moved off of the ferry port parking area and down on to the beach to spend the morning. We joined the local women who were washing their clothes in the lake and we cleaned our bbq. Later some fishermen came in from the lake sailing their dugout canoes. We checked out their catch and bought four fish that Don filleted right there on the beach to the entertainment of the locals. We also bought a couple of ice cream cones from a vendor that we decided to have as dessert later.



Later we drove down the road to Granada to spend the afternoon. We walked around the city that we had explored thoroughly on our expedition in 2005. We bought some groceries and found a laundry where we could drop off our clothes. On our last time through there were no laundries to be found so it was great to stumble across this one. At the end of the day we drove back down to the lakeshore and set up camp in the Centro Turistico along Lake Nicaragua. Lucky for us it wasn't a weekend as the Centro is filled with something like 20 bars which would be pounding out booming music all day and night! Today it was quiet and so was the night.

Feb 1

We drove through the hills admiring the views of Lago Apoyo which is an extinct volcano whose crater is now filled with water.



On our drive, we came across a village that was holding a celebration for its patron saint. The saint was being carried on a float balanced on the shoulders of close to 30 men. There were masked dancers and vendors selling candles, ice cream, food and sweets to the mob of villagers surrounding the saint. We were the only non-locals there but everyone welcomed us and didn't seem to mind as we took tons of photos of the procession and fiesta.





After visiting a few more villages along the top of the crater, we made our way down to the inside of the crater where we set up camp at a hotel on the shoreline and splurged on a meal in their restaurant.

Feb 2 - 4

Looking for a break from the warm temperatures, we drove up into the northern mountains to Matagalpa. The weather changed and the temperature dropped until it was actually cool enough to wear long pants and a long sleeved shirt. This was a nice respite from the heat we'd been in along the Pacific Coast. We stopped in the small town of Chaguitillo and visited the tiny museum that has been set up by the community. Local farmers over the years have found so many

pre-Columbian artifacts, that they wanted to display them. With help from the French government, they were able to put together a small museum to showcase the beautiful pieces that have been unearthed.

In Matagalpa we wandered around the main square enjoying some of the everyday activities of the people. All along the sidewalks are shoe-shiners who do a booming business as the men all appear to like their shoes gleaming.

Further into the mountains we visited the Selva Negra coffee plantation and eco-lodge. Outside of their entry is the remains of an armored troop carrier that was destroyed here during the revolution against the Somoza family rule. The fourth generation German immigrants who run the plantation have set aside over 200 acres of their land as a private reserve and tourist facility. We hiked through their forest in search of the Resplendent Quetzal but were unable to see one. We did see some other birds and heard some howler monkeys.

The next day we drove through the highlands visiting several other villages driving through rainy, foggy mountain passes. We followed old converted US school buses that now run routes throughout the country. Most of the buses were so full that people stood on the bumpers and even the roofs as the bus drove along. It didn't matter if the roads were paved or potholed, the people would just hang on!





This is Sandinista country and the area suffered terribly during the war. We stopped at a church that had modern murals painted inside and were surprised to find a mural that included a depiction of the devil with Daniel Ortega's face. Apparently in 1967 when the mural was painted, the Sandinista populace felt Ortega had abandoned them. Ortega has since been elected to the presidency, but there are people who still feel he has abandoned his Sandinista roots. After a day of interesting villages, beautiful scenery and tremendous views, we returned to Selva Negra for another quiet night.



Feb 5

Dropping back down out of the mountains we explored the town of Esteli. Esteli was a focal point during the war and we visited *La Galeria de Heroes y Martires* (The Gallery of Heroes and Martyrs) a museum set up by the mothers of the local soldiers (both men and women) who died fighting Somoza's National Guard. It was incredibly interesting. It contained the personal effects of many of the soldiers, photographs, stories and timelines. We learned a lot from that one little museum. We set up camp on the outskirts of town in a large *campestre*.



Feb 6 - Honduras

We crossed from Nicaragua into Honduras today and it was another easy border. The CA-4 program has made the immigration portion of crossing a breeze, no more stamping in and out, just an officer to check your initial stamp. We paid an 80 Cordoba exit fee (about \$2.00US each) to leave Nicaragua and in the same building, the Honduras immigration officer charged us a \$3.00US each entrance fee and we were done with immigration. As for the car, well, all we had to do was show our car permit to an officer who checked the VIN, who then gave us a slip of paper to show at the gate and we were into Honduras. We then stopped at the Aduana office where all the fees and paperwork

necessary to temporarily import a vehicle were listed in English. Unfortunately, Honduras is the most expensive of all the Central American countries to import a car (\$38.50US) but it was all very easy and from start to finish it took less than an hour.

Toward the end of the day, we passed a nice-looking campestre that listed camping on their sign. We hemmed and hawed and decided to get another hour of driving under our belt to make our arrival at the El Salvador border the next morning even earlier. Passing up that nice place turned out to be a mistake, since shortly afterward, we dropped off the highlands into the lowlands and the temperature rose considerably. And then the place we ended up at for the night, while nice, didn't have the



friendly feeling that we have come to expect in that the owner of the hotel didn't decide on a price (which was very high) until after it was dark. Fortunately we were able to negotiate a fair price, but we felt like we were being manipulated.

Feb 7-8 El Salvador

We got going early and spent some time in town looking for a mechanic (no luck) a grocery store (luck) and an ATM (luck but difficult). After a couple of hours, we were finally back on the road to the El Salvador border.

On this trip, we are using Honduras just as a conduit to get to El Salvador, so when we found that there were multiple police



stops on the road between the two borders we expected them to become rather annoying. But the police were always polite and half the time, they just waved us through without asking to see our paperwork.

Stopping just before the border to use up our Honduran Lempiras on gas, we were approached by someone who told us we had missed the Honduras Aduana office. Don walked back to where the fellow indicated while Kim finished up with the gas. Arriving at the booth, Don found an official all right, but not a legitimate one, as he asked for \$10us to sign us out of the country. Just having been at the border the previous day, we knew that there were no fees to leave the country. Don asked to see the *tarifa* (the price list) and the officer told him to go away. Arriving at the actual border, there was a very

large Aduana sign dating back to the 1940's. Believing we were finally in the right place, we wandered around looking for an actual office. There was none and we were finally directed to a small room right at the end of the road before the bridge spanning the two countries. This little room was completely unmarked, but inside was the official who stamped out our paperwork and charged us nothing.

We crossed over the bridge and entered El Salvador. A friendly immigration officer walked up to the window of the car, glanced at our passports looking for our original stamp from Nicaragua and waved us on our way. Before leaving however, we asked where Aduana was and was told it was 10km down the road and we couldn't miss it, it's where all the trucks are. Before Aduana though we had to stop and pay \$3.00US to get our tires sprayed with disinfectant.

Heading on down the road, we easily found the parking lot with all the trucks. Finding the correct office wasn't quite as easy, but we finally did. However the main man was at lunch (1:00pm) and his assistant wanted to know where our paperwork was. What paperwork, we asked? The paperwork they should have given you at the border. They didn't tell us we needed any paperwork. After going round and round for several minutes, the assistant finally stepped into the office and got Don the paperwork to fill out. Now why couldn't he have done that in the first place? Anyway, we filled out the paperwork and were ready to go, but the main man still wasn't back from lunch. So we waited, had lunch ourselves and after 1-1/4 hours, he finally returned (2:15pm). Once he returned, it only took 15 minutes to finish up and we were gone. All of this and it still only took about two hours.

After finishing, we headed off across El Salvador. It is a very small country and you can cover quite a lot in a short amount of time. We drove toward the city of San Miguel, shocked at the amount of trash and smog. We had read that both of these things were a problem, but we didn't realize how much worse it would be here than in the other CA countries we had been in. After passing through San Miguel (and getting lost of course) we headed south to Playa El Espino. We had some camping information that said there were some nice places on the beach with room for any size rig. Well, everyone has their opinion and ours doesn't really jibe with theirs, but after a very long day of driving and border crossing, we were determined to find a place to relax.

After reaching the end of the paved road, we turned left as instructed and started looking for a spot on the beach. Which was difficult because every inch of the beach between the road and the ocean was covered by private bamboo structures designed to provide shelter to beachgoers for a fee.

The biggest problem (for us) was that most of the businesses were small, narrow and had blocked the view of the ocean completely. After traveling as far as we dared down the narrow and getting narrower road, we turned around determined to find a spot. Very soon after turning back, we found one where you could actually still see the water and had a big enough parking area for us. I'm not sure how we missed it on the way down, but there it was. We negotiated with la senora for \$5.00US/night and pulled in. La senora even moved her clothesline to give us more room. As it was shortly before sunset, the first thing we did was pull out our chairs and walk down to the beach. And a good thing we did too, because this turned out to be the best sunset we have seen on this trip.

Our spot on Playa El Espino wasn't exactly what we had been expecting, but it turned out to be a nice spot to spend a day swinging in a hammock. And that's exactly what we ended up doing. It was quite warm, but there was an ocean breeze and at the end of the day, la senora brought us some Pupusas, which are the El Salvadoran national food. Pupusas are small corn tortillas filled with beans or cheese or a combination of both and topped with a pickled cabbage salad. The ones she presented us with were quite tasty and we ate so many of them that we didn't have room for the dinner that we had planned to cook.



Feb 9

In the morning we said goodbye to la senora, paid her for the pupusas we had eaten and headed out. We wanted to stop in the first good-sized town and get some money out of the ATM. El Salvador uses US dollars, which we had, but we didn't want to use up our stash. Upon arriving in Usulután we discovered it was market day and the market extended onto the main highway through town. Inching our way through, we finally found a couple of banks and a parking spot!

Kim pulled in and Don went out to get some cash. After several tries at the first ATM, Don gave up and walked down the street to the HSBC bank which has always graced up with cash. No luck there either. Both of the banks kept saying that they couldn't connect with the corresponding network, hmmm. Giving up in town, we stopped at a gas station down the road that had a *cajero automatico* (ATM). No luck there either. We'll just have to see what happens.

Heading up into the mountains, we traveled along roads with steep drop-offs and what would be gorgeous views if there wasn't so much smog.



Finally around lunch time we reached the town of Alegria, a cute little town perched on the edge of a mountain, overlooking a lake. We parked along the main square and took a stroll around town. It was very quiet and we debated about spending the night, but it was only noon and other than the fact that it was cool, there wasn't really any reason to stay. We had lunch at a great restaurant where we were treated to a band playing for tips and headed back out.

We finished our day in the town of Suchitoto, which is El Salvador's "artsy" town. It is an attractive town with a nice church, good restaurants and a large lake. Unfortunately it was also hot, but what'cha gonna do? We parked a block off the main plaza and set up for the night.



We then spent some time walking around and discovered that there was to be a free concert that night as part of Suchitoto's cultural festival. It would feature Sitar music which we had never heard live. We dressed up in our best duds and headed off to the concert. It was held in the *Teatro de Las Ruinas* (Theater of the Ruins) and that is not a misnomer. The building was empty except for the stage and it had a dirt floor. But it was full of local residents and tourists and everyone thoroughly enjoyed the concert.

When we returned to the truck, we discovered another couple studying it. It turned out that they are also overlanders and their big truck was parked down by the lake. We chatted for quite a while and said we would meet up again tomorrow.

Feb 10-11

After working on the computer in the morning, we took a local bus down to the lakeshore. We met up again with Kristian and Goodney and decided to move from our plaza parking spot to the lakeside restaurant where there was a large parking area and a pool. We spent the next day and a half doing chores, spending time with our new friends and relaxing in the pool.

Feb 12

We finally got moving mid morning and stopped in town to do some computer work. We left around lunch time and on the way out of town, saw another camper driving in, but since we were in traffic, we only had time to yell out the window that there was a good camping spot down by the lake. We continued on our way, finally making it to the Joya de Ceren archeological site late in the afternoon. This is a town that was buried by volcanic ash 2,000 years ago and preserved. Fortunately the people must have had some warning as no human remains were found, but scientists found buildings, food and animal remains that gave them an insight into how the people lived.

We had hoped to spend the night in their park-like parking lot, but we were unable to obtain permission as the *jefe* (boss) wasn't



there. So off down the road we went, looking for a spot. We pulled into a restaurant parking lot, but it was too close to the highway and noisy. Next we checked out a gas station whose parking area was a little further back, and received permission to spend the night. This was our first gas station camping spot on this trip.

Feb 13

The next morning we were off early to get to Cerro Verde National Park. The drive was quite attractive with nice views of the crater lake, Lago de Coatepeque.



We wanted to arrive at the park before 11:00am when the only guided hikes of the day occur. We had wanted to climb Volcan Santa Ana, but found out when we arrived that since the eruption a year or so ago, the volcano was closed to hiking. Our only other option was Volcan Irazzco which is a cinder cone that rose out of the ground 200+ years ago and is still steaming. That sounded like a good idea until we were standing at the base of it looking almost straight up. After the steep hike down from the parking lot to the base (whose idea was that?) we didn't relish another steep hike up, then down, then up again. So we had lunch at the base of the volcano and enjoyed the view before heading back up the hellacious mountain we had endured earlier.

We spent the afternoon recovering and hiking around the grounds of the park, before spending a quiet night in the parking lot.

Feb 14

Setting off in the morning we spent the day driving through numerous small towns. One of the more interesting sights that we saw were men on homemade carts, careening down the steep hills (on the highway), attempting to deliver wood to wherever. They appeared and disappeared so quickly that we could never get a photo of them, but imagine something like a toboggan with a stick across the front to steer the metal wheels and a huge load of wood behind the driver. Do they even have brakes?

Toward the end of the day we visited a spot called Laguna Verde. This was a quiet lagoon that we were able to hike around and view close up a coffee plantation rights along its banks.

We ended our day at Finca Leticia which is a coffee plantation that has diversified its crops and also its business by adding a hotel, restaurant and convention center. They kindly let us park overnight for free on their gorgeous grounds.





Feb 15 - 16 Guatemala

Today was a border crossing day, and it was very quick again. We only had to turn in our El Salvador car permit (we didn't even have to get out of the car) and drive over the bridge. There was no new immigration stamp and we got our Guatemalan vehicle permit in about 15 minutes.

We spent the rest of the day driving to Antigua, across southern Guatemala. From the south, our map showed two roads, supposedly the same quality, going to Antigua. Well, that isn't quite right, one is actually dirt and the other paved. After doubling back to take the paved road, we finally reached Antigua, where our map once again was unhelpful and gave us the impression we were coming in from a different direction than where we actually ended up.

After driving the confusing streets, we finally found the Hotel Real where several previous overlanders had stayed the night. We, however, had different luck when we were told that we could park, but not sleep in our truck. This happened with another hotel as well so we finally gave up on hotels and drove around the narrow, busy streets some more, finally finding a parking lot near the bus station and market that had no problem with us camping in their lot. After the buses stopped running (about 7pm) it was very quiet.





The next morning we explored the main market area, found a laundry to drop off our dirty clothes, Don got a Guatemalan haircut and then joined a bus and hiking tour up the Pacaya Volcano.

The volcano is the only one in Guatemala where you can see flowing lava. Despite statements about how easy the hike is, it turned out to be a very difficult climb up to the crater. We should have guessed at how difficult it would be as the locals rent horses to the hikers for the ride up. After about half way, with the trail getting steeper with every passing step, we spotted a horse handler coming down the volcano empty. We negotiated a price and Kim got to ride the rest of the way up.



Reaching the top, we then had to negotiate the steep and sharp lava down into the crater. Finally getting close to the fresh lava, it was quite an interesting sight. And very warm if you got too close. So warm in fact, that other tourists pulled marshmallows out of their packs and started roasting them over the lava. It was hysterical.

Then it was time to go back up the crater as it was getting dark. Once more at the top, we put on our headlamps and started hiking down. After a short distance, Kim stepped badly on a rock and twisted her ankle and fell. After picking herself up, she determined that the ankle was usable, but very sore. It took us a couple of hours to make it down with the help of our guide, but Kim did well despite the pain and the fact that she was covered head to toe in dust from the fall. Finally making it to the bus we were able to wrap up the ankle with an elastic bandage from our first aid kit and rest. We'll see how the ankle is in the morning.



Feb 17

The ankle was still very sore in the morning, so we decided to drive to Lake Atitlan to rest up for a couple of days. But as luck would have it, we were stopped just 12 miles short of town when the road was blocked by a tree that had been purposely cut so that it would fall across the road. Obviously it was some type of protest designed for maximum impact as Sunday is market day and this would make it hard for people to get to market to buy or sell their wares.



Our hope to get to the lake and set up camp for a few days so Kim can recover won't happen today. We'll try again tomorrow and hope that the police have the road cleared. Kim is doing ok and can walk a bit on her swollen ankle.

We had to retrace our steps, heading back up the road and decided to try to find a spot in Chichicastenango to spend the night. It was also market day in Chichi which is a really big event. The entire town basically turns into one huge market with people setting up shop right in the street.

We tried to get to a parking lot we had been told about, but the street was so blocked by traffic that we couldn't get through. We were able to turn around and get out of this part of town and

luckily found a hotel with a big grassy parking lot overlooking town in which we could park for the rest of the day and night while Kim rested up her foot.

Feb 18-20

The next morning, when it was much calmer, we drove into Chichi and with the help of a cane for Kim, were able to wander around the market for a while. We stopped at a small café where we ordered coffees and took our seats at the sidewalk so we

could watch the local indigenous men and women go by. It is so incongruous to watch people in traditional dress go by while talking on their cell-phones. We bought some fresh mangos and bananas in the market along with some fresh off-the-grill blue corn tortillas.

Since Kim was still limping after her fall on the volcano we hired a tuk-tuk to take us back to the gas station where we had parked the Fuso. A tuk-tuk is a three-wheeled taxi that has become a regular feature in Central America after being imported from Southeast Asia. It is basically a three-wheeled motorcycle with a cover over the driver and rear 2-passenger seat. They are very noisy and ride rough as they only have 12-inch tires. But they are cheap and easier to find than regular taxis.

We retraced our steps from yesterday and found that the road was now cleared of the tree that had been blocking the road. Apparently the people in the Solola area were very upset about something and cut down nearly a dozen trees along the 20kms down to Lake Atitlan and the town of Panajachel. The drive was very slow as we also discovered a warning light on the instrument panel warning us of low vacuum pressure in our brakes.

On the outskirts of town we made our way down to the lakeshore and found a great camping spot on the grass in front of a hotel and just above the water. Looks like home for a few days as we try to work out the problem with our brakes and give Kim's ankle some time to rest.



Using our computer at an Internet café we were able to call our contact at our local Fuso dealer who suggested some things for Don to check out to determine what is wrong.

Back at camp we were joined by a group of guys with parachutes doing practice jumps by pulling up their parachutes and running off a drop-off. If they did things right they would get a glide of up to 100 feet, if they were unlucky, they would hit the ground on their butts! They seemed to be enjoying themselves as they did it over and over and it was fun entertainment for us. We watched until it got dark and they left.

The next day we just relaxed by the lakeshore, did a bit of maintenance and found that it would be best to have the Fuso serviced at the dealership to fix our brake problem. That means going into Guatemala City. We had really hoped to avoid that, but whatcha gonna do? We called and scheduled an appointment for Thursday.

In the morning we took a *lancha*, a small boat, across the lake to visit the towns on the other side. We spent the day out and about and still using the cane, Kim's ankle seems to be improving. Don somehow lost his set of keys and after searching high and low, we couldn't find them. We will have to find someplace to make a new set.

Feb 21-22

The next day, armed with a map and an appointment, we left early and took a different (and shorter) route back towards Guatemala City. Even after getting lost once and having to figure out how to negotiate all the one-way streets, we made it to the Mitsubishi dealer on time.

We then attempted to explain our vehicle problems to David, the only English-speaking person on the premises. He seemed to understand, so we settled back to wait while our brakes were examined, the alternator belts replaced and our hub seals replaced. After a couple of hours we were informed that our brakes were in need of replacing, but that the dealer didn't have the parts. They explained that they would do their best to adjust and clean them up and we could be on our way. They worked very hard on the brakes and finished them up two hours after closing time.

We spent the night in the parking lot of the dealer and in the morning we were up early so that the brakes could be tested. While the mechanics were testing the brakes, we walked down the street to a large grocery store and did some shopping. And lo and behold there was a key-maker! We were able to replace all but one of Don's keys.

Returning to the Mitsubishi dealer, we were disappointed to find that they weren't done yet, so we waited a while longer for the "all clear".

Soon we were headed back out on the road, only to find a few miles away that the red light was back on. Turning right back around, we were soon back at the dealership. Talking once again to David, we found that they hadn't tested the vacuum pump, hoping that the problem would be fixed by replacing the alternator belts. Well, they finally tested pump and yes it apparently has a small leak. Of course they didn't have a pump and they didn't know how long it would take to order one. Not wanting to wait for days in Guatemala City, we decided to order all of the parts from the US and have them delivered to the dealer in Belize City where we'll have everything replaced.

Wanting to get as far away from the city as possible, we headed back out and drove until dusk when we were able to find a small gas station with a parking lot behind it where we were granted permission to spend the night.

Feb 23

In the morning we were able to take care of all of our chores - water, gas etc. at this great little station and we were soon on our way. Our destination for the day was the hot springs at Fuentes Georgina, billed as Guatemala's nicest springs. Unfortunately the weather turned very foggy and our drive up the narrow and winding road was a bit hair-raising. Along the way Don could see (Kim was driving and couldn't look at anything but the yellow line down the middle) that there were large tracts of agriculture alongside the road and people were working the fields, fog or no.

We finally arrived at the huge gate and were admitted to use the springs and camp for the night for only Q90 (about \$12us). We passed a pool near the entrance and parked nearby. We then headed up to the main pools to spend some time. There were quite a few people there in a number of different pools of varying temperatures. We checked out a couple and spent about an hour and a half soaking. The weather never improved, but what does it matter if you're already wet?

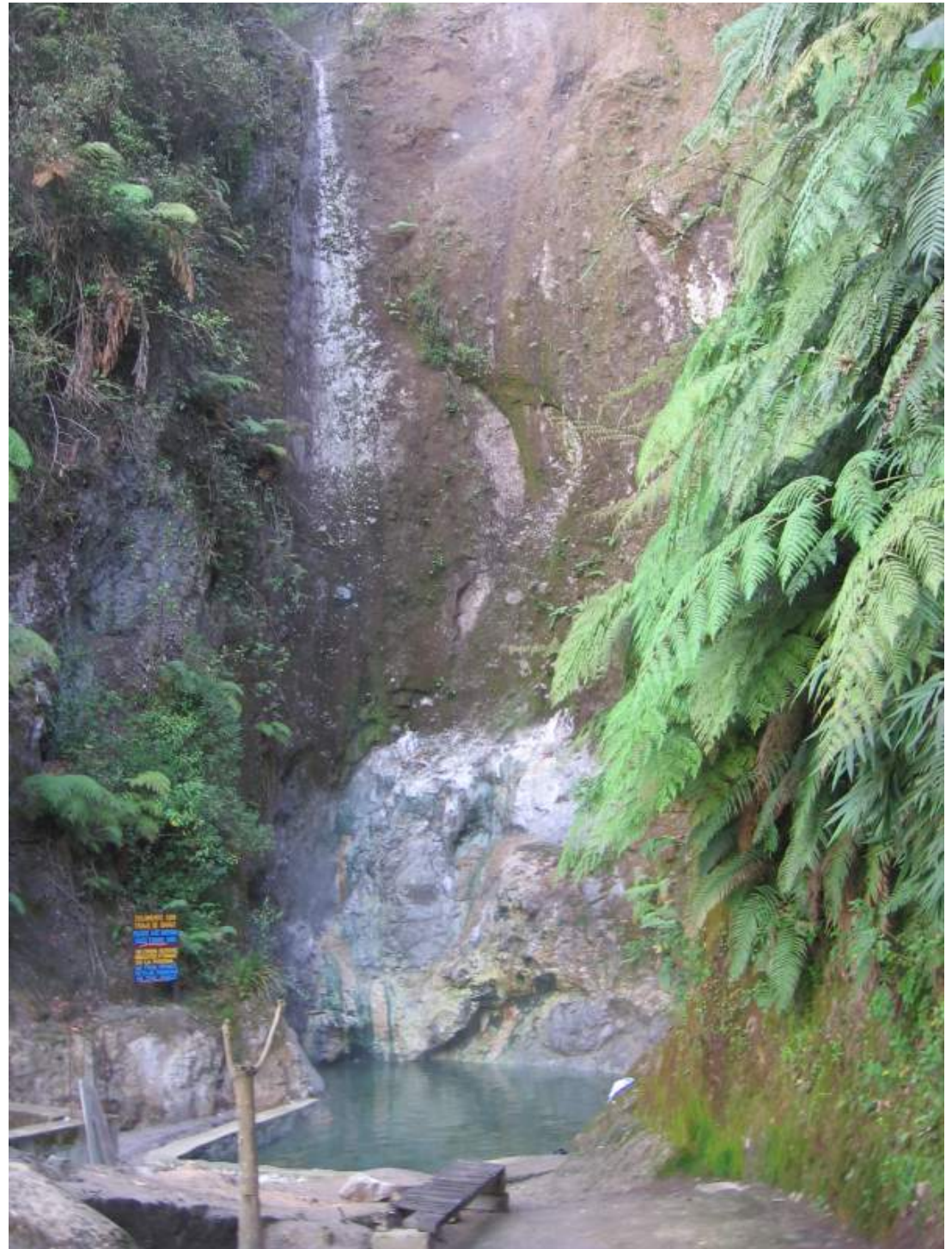
We returned to the car and relaxed for a while. Late in the afternoon, we noticed that the sky was clearing up some and there was a little bit of sunshine. We went out and did a little bit of bird watching and were delighted to see an Emerald Toucanet.

We then decided it was time to visit the springs again and checked out the pool close to the car. And it was an absolute gem. It was the perfect temperature, it was in a beautiful natural setting, it was large enough to actually swim in and we had it all to ourselves.

We soaked for another hour and a half and reluctantly got out when we were completely pruned.

Feb 24

In the morning the skies were clear and we could see the tallest mountain in Central America, Volcan Tajumulco at 4,220m (13,926ft). The view was incredible and we celebrated by taking another solitary soak before breakfast. Considering how many people were there on Saturday, we knew that it would be really crowded on Sunday. People were waiting when the gates opened at 7am so we knew that we didn't want to hang around for too long as the parking lot and road would get very busy. After breakfast





and a little more bird watching, we headed down the mountain. With the clear views we were able to enjoy the beautiful scenery and the colorful indigenous workers tending their immaculate fields. Oh, and the traffic wasn't too bad on the one lane road.

We made our way to Huehuetenango stopping at a local market for our shopping. We had our choice of several *carnecerias*, butcher shops, but didn't find anything we wanted.

In Huehue we found a great camp spot in the parking lot of a hotel near the center of town. We were away from the street, the hotel restaurant was cheap and tasty and they had free internet. It doesn't get much better than that!



Feb 25

In the morning we made our way through Huehue and visited the nearby late post-classic religious center of Zaculeu. The Mam Maya inhabited this region until 1525 when the Spanish conquistador Gonzalo de Alvarado laid siege to the area and finally starved the Mam out. The site was interesting and there were many indigenous visitors there, some of whom had laid a flower wreath and set it afire in a religious offering.



Setting off after lunch, we undertook to travel what used to be a very difficult and arduous road east from Huehue towards Coban. Fortunately these days it is mostly paved but still with lots of steep ups and downs. After lots of beautiful scenery, we stopped for the night outside of Sacapulas, on a construction turnout. It was a very quiet and peaceful spot with an incredible view.

Feb 26-27

In the morning we set out, knowing that the day's drive would be rough, but not knowing exactly when the paved road would end. We stopped for a while in Ushpantan, visiting their market and

getting some info on the road. We were told where the pavement would end and to be careful of the construction trucks as the road is being worked on. As soon as the pavement ended, the trucks started. We don't know where they came from or where they were going, but big trucks full of rocks appeared.



Immediately we were at the end of a long line of vehicles, snaking up and over a narrow, dusty, rocky and hole-filled road. Staying as close as we could behind the trucks, we were able to pass on-coming traffic that had to squeeze out of the way for us to get by.

We were lucky in this way, because otherwise we might have been the ones trying to get far enough off the road. Finally the road opened up a little and so did traffic. So while the road didn't get a whole lot better, it was a little less stressful. We finally made it back to pavement and worked our way to Coban. The 35 miles of construction took us 3 ½ hours to negotiate.

In Coban we found Parque Nacional Victorias where they have a lovely camping area and met up with some other American overlanders. We spent the next day alternating between our vehicle and theirs, sharing information and stories while it poured down rain outside.

Feb 28  
After chores and errands in the morning, we got on the road toward the Grutas de Lanquin and Semuc Champey. These are two natural areas a ways down a dirt road that make a great trip out of Coban. The road was in pretty good shape with little traffic.

Our first stop was the Grutas which is a natural cave with dripping stalactites and growing stalagmites, poorly lit and with a very slippery walkway. With much care, we enjoyed it anyway. Oh yes, there is a pristine river coming out of the rocks at the bottom of the cave entrance with gorgeous clear water tinted a lovely turquoise from the minerals. After our hike through the cave, we enjoyed the view of the river and the bird watching where we saw a turquoise-browed Motmot.

At dusk, we returned to the entrance of the cave to watch the nightly migration of the bats from the cave innards. At first there were only a couple a bats and then a few more and then thousands. And what was really cool is that we could walk back into the entrance and have them fly over us and around us to exit the cave. It was so cool and it was eerily quiet with just the sound of the bats wings flapping by.

We spent the night camped in view of the cave and the river. Beautiful.

Feb 29 (Leap Day)

This morning we continued on our journey down the dirt road toward Semuc Champey. Outside of Lanquin, the road became very narrow with steep ups and downs. Fortunately there was little traffic and we have four-wheel drive to assist with the hills. After taking an hour to go 9kms (5.5mi), we finally reached our destination.



Our guidebook tried to explain exactly what this area is, but it doesn't do it justice. I don't know that I can either, but I'll try.

Let's start with the river. The river gushes down through limestone rocks where it literally dug itself a tunnel and goes underground for 300m (390ft). This has created a "natural bridge" over the water, on top of which there are crystalline pools fed by springs coming out of an adjacent mountain. These pools tumble downhill over small waterfalls eventually joining up with the river where it comes out from underground. You may swim in the pools, playing with the fish (where the fish came from we couldn't figure out) and marveling at the gorgeous scene that you are part of. There are several hiking trails to partake of and camping is available outside the park entrance.





We ended up spending the night back in Lanquin at a hotel on the river where we had a first rate meal and the company of other travelers.