

Costa Rican Odyssey IV



This is my oldest picture of the front of the library. It was taken on Thursday evening just as we prepared to depart. I believe the people for left to right are Louise, Amelia, Tamara, and Randall. We had been cleaning and hoses were still strewn on the ground. The exterior still has its initial oil base white undercoat.

Of interest in this holiday season is the vegetation to the right in the image. It is a beautiful poinsettia

tree!

So on to Friday morning. We got out of our van and I took a shot toward the Gulf of Nicoya. It is faintly visible if you travel up the telephone pole about 10 feet from the ground. Above the gulf is the land of the peninsula that cradles it. There was no rain, but plenty of wind in this AM. As we started our work at San Luis, the color of the moment was light green. Roughly it was the same crew of Global Volunteers as on Thursday, except that Anne Marie replaced Tamara.



We continued to slap on paint all day. It rained a bit during the mid-morning and again there were some sprinkles during lunch. Here is a shot of what the clinic looked like on Friday noon. It is the same color scheme as intended for the library. It did look like they had used thicker coats of paint. Brush marks were not noticeable.



Oh, yes. I heard that the doctor comes to San Luis once a week on Mondays.

Several of the young men working with us had dirt bikes – appropriate name for their use on Costa Rican roads.

Gina was with us for lunch today at the clinic. I had “put my foot in it” last evening when I had expressed how strenuous the return walk was after

lunch. I was trying to figure how I could stay with the locals at the library during lunch on this last

day. Gina talked to Chepé and he very graciously went down the road, got his car, and gave Anne Marie and me a ride up to the library.

I remember painting the peak in the back of the library just when I got back. Then most of my final painting was in the little office room. Most of the office was just like the rest of the structure. However, the top half of one wall was thatch – very Cambodia-like -- which we still painted. Some of the other crew members painted the masonry around the building a dark green. Trim around windows was also beginning, but that effort only got started. More trimming remained for next week or for a later project. Regardless of what additional work is needed, the library had been rejuvenated in just a few days.

Our crew diminished in the afternoon. Lucie left around 2 to go to the weekend activity at the beach with Tamara, Jennifer, and Barb. I noted that Leo, Randall, and Adrianna were still with us. Maybe others locals too. Our volunteers, Ashley, Louise and Amelia, remained.



Near the end of that afternoon, we put a considerable effort into brush cleaning. I used thinner on my boots and that cleaned off the white primer, but it did not do too well on the green water-base stuff. So the boots were slightly polka dotted when I finally returned them to the hotel cupboard later that evening.

Chepé arrived during the afternoon brush cleaning. He went around and through the library examining the status. Then outside we all stood in a circle while Chepé gave a nice little speech in Spanish saying “Thank you and we were always welcome

in San Luis whenever we return.” Very nice. Makes one want to stay and work more!! Chepé was a good spokesperson for the village – very sincere and believable. His sincerity came through in spite of my hearing in Spanish.

I asked Chepé to say farewell to Juan.

Walking to our ride, Ann Parker invited me to go with her family who was going to tour CASEM and other places back near Santa Elena. However when we got back, Bev was sitting out waiting for transportation from our van to go back to the hotel. We quickly decided that we would let the van go, she would show me CASEM, and then we would walk back to the hotel. It was not raining. (“Famous last” thoughts.)

CASEM is an acronym for something. It is fairly large facility which is part of a cooperative for selling the arts and crafts from local producers in the San Luis Valley. The main building contained many items for sale such colorful tee shirts, lots of carved wood objects, and butterflies under glass in picture frames. There was also handcrafted jewelry, beads, etc. Some of the locals had their paintings for sale.

It is interesting that CASEM is off the beaten path of most tourists in Monteverde. However, when I was there, there seemed to be quite a few shoppers browsing. The management had devised a scheme to keep a good flow of tourists. Each year they designed a special tee shirt – very nice colorful design. The shirt was not sold, but given only to tour bus drivers who brought their riders to CASEM. Possessing the shirt had become a sort of status symbol among the tour bus drivers. The scheme worked and has been employed for several years.

Myron spent all of his three days at CASEM. He managed to paint the three washrooms there and a hallway as well. I saw his work and it looked very well done.

Beverly did multiple things in her two days of volunteering at CASEM. She had dusted some shelves. That is probably an endless task since CASEM is not on the paved road and I assume that is a source of lots of that dust. Bev pruned some flowers – cutting out dead pieces. On Friday, she and other cleared away limbs of a fallen tree – a victim of the severe wind. At some point, she spent several hours changing the price tags on tee shirts from U.S. dollars into Costa Rican colons. That change was the result of the fact that the U.S. dollar is losing value and consequently continuing the sales in dollars caused CASEM to lose money.

Outside the main building, there were at least a couple other enterprises. The coffee coop from San Luis operated an outlet and next to it was a small grocery store.

After my guided tour, we went across the street to the Chocolate Factory for a short time. There the Parkers were having something to eat. As usual, we assumed that we would leave early because we would be slower than the others walking back. Outside we started down the road toward Santa Elena. Ultimately, it started to rain; and, with the high wind, the weather conditions duplicated those of my walk on Wednesday. Sometimes the wind just had its way with you. In gusty conditions, you would stand still because raising a foot to take a step might weaken your being bracing against that wind. All I can say is that we successfully made the trek to the hotel in about an hour.

Along the way we marveled at some of the new real estate – a couple big motels/hotels on the side of the hills. We wondered how the San Luis we had seen could survive if the pavement that graced these chalets ever extends down to the valley only a few miles away. Also, at one point, a young boy and his sister came up a steep back with a young calf in tow. We were all being poured on. Bev and I had some raingear and I don't believe they had anything other than maybe long sleeve shirts.

Just after we had passed the frog exhibit nearing the last curve before the World of Insects, we encountered a girl (probably U.S.) in her twenties who asked us if we had seen the frogs. Since we couldn't tell her anything about that exhibit, she went on and supposedly explored further. Except for our Saturday tour at the La Paz attraction, we had not hit any of the tourist sites. Santa Elena had quite a few covering frogs, snakes, butterflies, and insects. We had planned to invest in a night walk tour that was reportedly good for viewing wild life, but no night was without the terrible wind and rain. We never ventured out after New Year's Eve.

The evening dinner had fewer volunteers since a foursome had left for the beach. We ate, paid up our bills, completed our evaluations, bid farewell to Gina, and went back to our rooms for packing and our last night of sleep in Hotel Amanecer.



We rose on Saturday to the wind but thankfully no rain. As per Gina's expectations, the driver arrived slightly late. Once he arrived the driver had lots of work putting our luggage on top of the van, covering it with a tarp, and tying it down.

I took a last shot from the front of our hotel toward the hills that were northeast of Santa Elena. It provides what had become the common sight of a hovering cloud atop a "mountain." The cloud would change slightly in shape, but never leave the mountain. If we had stayed longer that morning, I expect that

rain would have come from the cloud.

Note two more things. There was a very nice pattern of potholes in our road outside the hotel. Also, if you look at this and other pictures, you'd see that street lights were fairly up-to-date – even in San Luis.

We finally left for Alajuela. It was to be a long and scenic ride taking us until noon. Our driver as I recall had U.S. roots and spoke Midwestern English. During our drive, he explained a number of things that had puzzled me and often provided commentary on what we were seeing.

First of all, gumbo-limbo trees. On our trip down from Monteverde, I saw the stubby trees being used as fence posts just as I had seen them on the way up. I asked about them and our driver had the answers. The trees were gumbo-limbo trees. The Internet had articles that indicated that they are found even in Florida. I include a bit of what I found before telling you the driver's information:

Gumbo-limbo is a tropical tree that is native to the southeastern United States. It adapts to a variety of habitats, from dry to moist, and is fairly salt-tolerant. It is also considered one of the most wind-tolerant trees in south Florida and is recommended as a good, hurricane-resistant species.

Gumbo-limbo is planted for shade and ornamental use on backyard patios, or along streets and highways. It readily sprouts from branches stuck into the ground and is sometimes used to plant natural, living fences.

The gummy, turpentine-scented resin has been used in the West Indies for making glue, varnish, liniments, and as a coating for canoes. The aromatic sap is also used as a treatment for gout, while the leaves are brewed into a medicinal tea. The light, soft, spongy wood is used for fence posts that have been known to take root in the ground and grow! Other small wood products such as matchsticks, toothpicks, charcoal, boxes, crates, and interior trim have also been made from gumbo-limbo.

Well, maybe it is all above. The tree can be planted and fence run by the tree so that the wire becomes embedded in the bark. When the tree gets tall enough, its branches are cut and shoved into the ground by the fence. The cut branches take root in the rainy season. Voila! You have new trees and ultimately new fence posts. Most of the time the top of the posts were stubby and bulbous from having been trimmed so much. Out of the bulbous top grew new shots – like maple tree sappers -- that would someday be harvested for fence posts.

As we came down the mountain, we were treated to many beautiful vistas. We were coming down from about 5000 feet to the highway at sea level. To get back to the Central Valley region and Alajuela, we would be going back up to 3000 feet. Deep wooded valleys were around every curve in the road.



Looking back, I took a shot of one such valley – maybe San Luis. The hills/mountains were crowned with clouds.

The climate warmed and became much drier within a couple hours of travel down the bumpy road. We may have been on good pavement but not to the Pan-American Highway when the driver volunteered another ecological issue. On our left was a rather rough looking pasture with cows grazing. On the right was a relatively smooth grassy field. He pointed out that that grass was a “new variety” of grass that was able to remain green

and grazable farther into the dry months than local grasses. Supposedly that was fine for the cattle ranching in that region. However, the jury was still out since trees that grew on those grassy fields mysteriously died.

In one town through which we passed while still off the pavement, we drove over a spout of water coming from the middle of the road. Infrastructure. A water line from one side of town to the other runs under the road and it ruptured. As simple as that.

The driver showed us teak trees that had been planted for harvest. He showed us cashew trees. Those trees produced a fruit that the natives ate. Again from the Internet:

Cashew apples and cashew nuts are excellent sources of nutrition. The cashew apple contains five times more vitamin C than an orange and contains more calcium, iron and vitamin B1 than other fruit such as citrus, avocados and bananas.

Below the fruit, there hung a single nut which was originally discarded. Well, that has changed! But it explains why cashews are expensive – each fruit yielding a single nut.

The driver also pointed out soaring birds which he called caracara. They were big black birds with some white wing feathers. We saw them quite frequently after he pointed them out. Although we were told that they were a type of vulture, they are really in the falcon family and come in about a dozen varieties. Since they are not fast flying aerial hunters, they are often scavengers. That is probably where the vulture connection comes.

Down on the Highway, we stopped, as on our Sunday drive, at a Shell station. No gas was purchased. We were just allowed to use the facilities and purchase treats. Beverly – the naturalist – quickly spotted the only iguana of the trip. A beauty that only a mother iguana could love.

That wasn't enough Bev located the largest grasshopper (3 ½ inch?) we had ever seen perched on the side of the gas station. While we were there, a blackbird of some





type showed up and spied the grasshopper. It flew up and attacked. The bird made only one attempt to get its prey. It seemed to be unable to hover and peck at the same time. One attempt failed and the bird flew away. The grasshopper didn't look like it was even touched by the encounter. It remained safe on the building as we left.

Back at the Orquideas Inn, Bev and I had lunch, dried out our clothes, and vegged out for the afternoon. To the right is the view of that I had as I lay by the pool. Not bad.



It is seldom that we stop moving on our odysseys.

At supper, we had our last meal with the remainder of the volunteer group. It was quite enjoyable, lots of talk about the trip and other topics. Plus, the red snapper was great. Everyone else had an early flight on Sunday AM so we enjoyed a lot of hugging as we finished dinner and returned to our rooms.

Bev and I slept in on Sunday and got to the breakfast just when it was closing. We had already ordered our taxi for 1 PM so after eating we took a walk. This time, instead of turning left to Barrio San Luis, we went right. We took the first turn off the main road to the left. We found a row of relatively nice houses. They must have been homes of middle class Costa Ricans. They were behind metal fences and some gleaming razor wire. The sun was hot and for a while we would without the usual wind that had kept us cool. An older woman walked by us and smilingly complained that the sun was "calenti"(sp)!



I saw the building at the right. It was built just below the road level so that its shiny tin roof was visible. Just like we had seen in Santa Elena, the solution to floppy roof panels was sometimes big rocks and here concrete blocks.

Seeing us being obvious tourists in the neighborhood, a fellow by the name of Tom stopped as he drove by in his black SUV. He was from Florida and had lived here for seven years. He had started a language immersion project. Also, he was into real estate, day adventures, rafting, etc. He had a web site called costaricanresource.com. Interestingly he parked his car in the left lane of the road in order to converse with us. On coming cars had to go around him, but they never tooted.

Well, that is about it. We got on the plane for Charlotte about 3:30 PM and my only complaint about the trip was the long long lines in Charlotte to get through U.S. Customs. Once through we had to claim our bags and get them on the flight to Minneapolis. Those activities made us rush to our next flight, but we made it. Fini.