



***Many things to celebrate***

Three years on the road is definitely worth celebrating and what better way to do it than head towards the mountains, camp amongst the splendid nature of the Colombian highlands and reflect on the last 1096 days of travel; taking us along 37½ thousand kilometres of road and up and over 280 thousand altimeters.

While this is cause enough to put on a silly hat and blow hard on the party whistle, we are also incredibly excited to now be in South America. We have heard from other travellers and read in so many cycle blogs that this part of the Americas is the most spectacular and rewarding pedalling experience of all. And since our journey through Central America was far from our best travelling episode, we are looking forward to the next leg of our journey with plenty of eagerness.

***Many treasured moments***

Newsletter #08 was written from San Blas in Mexico during our two month stay and longest break to date. On reflection, our most treasured moments in our Mexican adventures were when we either: stayed anywhere for any length of time; spent time in the little villages in the middle of no-where; or set up camp under a palapa to watch the sunset at one of the undeveloped beaches along the Pacific coast. Additionally worthy of adding to any travel itinerary, is the province of Chiapas: with its contrastingly cool mountain landscapes and uniquely prominent Zapatista influence. This environment oozes rich in culture and history. So much so, that you find yourself wanting to know more about the region and the indigenous folk's struggle towards autonomous reform.

***Many reasons not to visit***

Firstly, before elaborating on our not so pleasant time in Central America, I have to say that our point of view is entirely relative to our travel mode and furthermore our stance as vegetarians. For example, if you fly directly from Europe and are prepared to fork out 20 euros per night for accommodation, you'll get something pretty fancy. Unfortunately, our budget doesn't quite stretch that far which means we, more often than not, ended up in a grotty little hovel infested with some sort of crawling critter or fungus walls, dirty bed linen and either the water or electricity out for the length of our stay. Another issue which plagued us continually was eating out. While restaurants are in plentiful supply, the chefs are far from versed in the world of cookery where people choose not to slap a lump of animal flesh on the plate.

After a little more than 5 months, we left Mexico via the back road border crossing at Nuevo Guerrero with an additional cycling companion and completely energised for new adventures in Central America. The Guatemala we saw, though not so beautiful to look at, was indeed full of happy friendly faces, but our initial enthusiasm waned when our room was broken into and all our bags searched in Flores. As well as realising that we could not let our guard down for a moment, it had also become apparent that our choice in cycling associates was perhaps a big mistake.

Non-neighbourly actions in Belize, when we were turned away from accommodation because we somehow weren't worthy enough of a room there; having rubbish and abuse thrown at us in Nicaragua; and a fisty-cuff fight with an arrogant truck driver on a Panamanian highway, who nearly ended both our lives with one intentionally narcissistic manoeuvre: all added to the long list of disagreeable encounters. Furthermore, the cycling was tough work through the incredibly undulating terrain in the relentless sun. And we can't let the opportunity pass, to express our dismay at the phenomenal levels of rubbish in Central America and also Mexico for that matter.

It gets quite depressing when all you see roadside is the local populations discarded household and personal toiletry.

Of course, not everyone we met was disagreeable. As always, when travelling through side villages and towns, we connect with genuinely enthusiastic folk completely overwhelmed at what we are doing and eager to help us in any way they can. Still, by the time we were halfway through the region, we had basically had enough of the place and what with the imminent threat of the rainy season, we planned to fly as fast as our legs could pedal us through the rest.

Our three day cycling tour in rural Honduras was extremely pleasant, however vibes in Nicaragua were dubious to say the least. The verdant nature and quieter roads of the Nicola Peninsula in Costa Rica came as a perfect surprise, but just like Mexico, where tourism has distorted many of the countries natural assets, Costa Rica's attractions are also overrun with sightseers, touts and painfully tacky souvenirs.

Finally we came to rest in Panama City, after 45 days of zipping across eight border crossings and through seven countries in total. And we couldn't wait to get into South America.

### ***Many reasons not to want to leave***

The Colombian Tourism Board promotes: *"the biggest danger you'll face in Colombia, is not wanting to leave"*. As with much corporate advertising, we initially found this statement quite pretentious, but honestly, it couldn't be more accurate. For us, Colombia has taken on number one position on our most favourite places to travel. It has everything except for an abundance of nutritious meat-free cookery.

While the cities are, well, big over-populated cities and hell to cycle into, they are bustling and vibrantly rich with culture. Even the smaller villages have so much to experience and the mountains and surrounding countryside are just plain and simply: drop-dead gorgeous. So far, wherever we have rendezvoused: from the mayhem of Medellín to the seclusion of the Del Ruiz Volcano, it has been a totally different, but stimulating sensory overload and just what we yearn to get out of our travels.

### ***Many points to reflect on***

One of the most obvious points we contemplate on a daily basis is the multitude of cultural differences from our own backgrounds. Machismo, corruption and a high risk of thievery, we have stumbled upon in many countries, but having something stolen and then blatantly returned for a pay-back price is way beyond the limits of our values. And as hard as it is to accept, this is the way things are done in Latin America.

The other side of the coin is the exhilarating thought about continually meeting new faces and foreign places on a grass-roots basis as well as being able to scrutinise a country from such a close-up perspective. Observing people in local situations that can only be envisaged if you have actually been there; appreciating new smells and acquiring bizarre foreign tastes further sharpens your awareness of diversity. And all the while we are weaving a slow path through each continent, adding the colours of the entire world to our visionary palates. Good and bad; challenging and trouble-free; cheery and stressful: we get it all and quite often heightened to extremes, but it all has to be there. It is the whole picture that counts and we still think we are incredibly lucky to have the opportunity to immerse ourselves in it.

### ***Many people to thank***

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