

# Guatemala Log (IX)

---

## Travel Log

By Cristiana Grigore

January 25, 2011

March 13, 2010

*Pacaya*: When I heard my colleagues say we'd be going to the Pacaya volcano at 6 in the morning, I thought they were making fun of me. On my good days, when I fall asleep early, that's when I barely open my eyes. I'm sleepy and cranky. I'm only comforted by the thought that for about 15 or 20 minutes I can snooze some more on the minibus, but the way there takes longer than that. It's nearing 7 o'clock when we get to the foot of the mountain. That's weird; from the hotel's terrace it seemed so close! We buy tickets, meet the guide and yawn like no one's business. We're in for a touristy morning, when we'll be able to take pictures and see the smoke of the volcano even closer. Then, we'll get back to the hotel, happy that we can update our facebook statuses and send pictures to our friends.



*Winner or loser?:* After only a few hours of sleep, the last thing that I feel like doing is climbing mountains. I try to motivate myself by invoking reasons like pushing my limits and exercise is good in the morning, but it doesn't work. Not even the thought of failing right at the end works, so I give in to the temptation of travelling part of the way on horseback. Paul, the colleague who congratulated me yesterday on swimming, looks at me and says, disappointed: "You're a quitter!". Ah, I'd still like to have the horse, as long as no one would see me or I'd have to explain, to say that it's morning and I didn't get much sleep and really, I love horses, you can ask my friends... How did I end up from a winner yesterday to a loser today? Yet, isn't finding ways of making our work easier at the basis of our civilization? Isn't that what prompted the advent of machinery (especially dishwashers☺), of juicers, automatic doors, elevators, computers and technology in general? There are moments when it's good to push my limits and others when it's important to relax; in some situations it's productive to be like everyone else and in others, it's important to do what I want, no matter what others might think. Maybe there are other colleagues who would like to get up on the horse and they don't have the quetzals for it, maybe they're afraid, or maybe they think that the others will see them as losers...



*Tropical Forest:* It's barely 8 o'clock when we venture into the forest. The horse is walking slowly; I have Eli behind me and all my other colleagues in a single file, in front of me. It was drizzling for a while and the plants and trees bathed by the fleeting rain, mesmerize me with even more shades of green. I look at the vines and wild plant life; I had only seen such vegetation on TV or in textbooks. It's starting to look more and more like what I thought a jungle might look like. The fog is thin, like the steam from the țuică made in a still. It mixes with the dust stirred by the horses and the people and filters the sunlight in a fascinating way. It looks like a scene out of a folktale or an adventure movie. Here and there, a ray of sunshine squeezes

through the leafy plants and trees. I look up in hopes that I may catch a ray to warm my face, neck and shoulders. Then, I ask it to shine onto the far off spider webs and act as a velvety towel for the flowers and plants that have just gotten out of their morning shower.



*Black as coal:* We come out of the forest and in front of me stretches a mountain, black as a chimney sweep, as black as coals in a hearth. It is a bleak mountain with no trace of plant or animal life, formed out of cooled and crystallized lava. The boulders are rough and uneven. We follow narrow paths. I feel as if I'm walking on chalk sticks, which crumble under my feet. I look up, and see the smoking volcanoes. Despite appearances, I actually enjoy mountain-climbing, it's an activity that keeps me awake and alert, and especially in this case when I can see how sharp the rocks are. I pay attention where I tread, strategically plotting my next step. I think of what the best path is, what I could do to better enjoy the scenery, but also how to reach the top. I enjoy figuring out which steps to take, congratulate myself when I manage to squeeze through risky places and get away unharmed. I tiptoe and don't even notice when I've almost reached the top, on a wide plateau, where most people stop.



*Watch out, it burns:* I wonder where these heat waves are coming from. With each step I take, the heat becomes increasingly unbearable. No, no one is making a fire on the top of the mountain; it's coming from underground (or better said, from under the crystallized lava). My boots are so resistant that it takes me a while to catch on to the fact that the "burning" is coming right from under me. It's getting hotter and hotter. Now the heat has even reached my hands. If the mountain is like coal, then I'm about to become shish kebab. I'm hit by an even stronger heat wave. I look down, and through the cracks I can see the lava. If my foot were to slip through the cracks, I'd fall in waist deep. I have two seconds to decide whether to keep walking or to stop there, but how can I make up my mind when it's so hot that I feel like I'll spontaneously combust?! Wherever I turn, it's just as hot. I can almost see my boots coming out intact, and me becoming "barbecued Niculina" and I haven't even decided if I want to be cremated, let alone while I'm still alive!!!

*From Heaven to Hell:* I prick my finger. I've climbed on top of some rocks that aren't as hot, but I wasn't careful where I put my hand. The finger that is bleeding, as well as the black and unforgiving rocks, confirm the fact that I've gone from heaven straight into the middle of hell in just one day. It's like I knew there was going to be a final tally, that I'd have to stop by accounting, that the good deeds would be weighed against the bad...I'm at a loss. Who knows, maybe both heaven and hell are having a two-for one deal and are inviting us to visit them both. What I gather is that both here and there is equally beautiful - the only difference seems to be the temperature. We are truly scared, especially since some of us have gotten hurt and their hands are bleeding. We've passed through a second plateau that was so hot that I started to scream. Tourist activity?! No way!



*A river of fire:* Some are going up while some are going down. I grab the unfamiliar hands of the people that want to go down and let myself be grabbed by the friendly hands that are helping me climb to the place where you can see the lava. Working together with these people fills me with a

beautiful sense of human solidarity in moments of crisis, when it doesn't matter if we've ever said hello to each other - we all have similar fears and are experiencing the same adventures. We quickly mobilize ourselves and help each other. We don't leave until we're sure that the other person has reached a safe area; the men have made a wall that allows us to move without losing our balance or injuring ourselves on some rock. Paul burns his leg. Alison is scared and is screaming off the top of her lungs. I reach the tallest peak, from where you can look around and I'm left speechless. I look at the red lava coming in waves out of the mountain. I can hear it murmur, I see small rocks falling and melting. I can feel hot gusts that burn my face and dry my breath...and I am silent. I watch nature expose all of her secrets and I can finally see her entire splendor. The image before my eyes is so beautiful that mere mortals like me, incapable of fully comprehending this unraveled mystery, should be forbidden from laying eyes on it: fire bursting from rocks, earth and dust so close to the sky; fire that flows and transforms, burns fears, unlocks new experiences and states of mind; a fire that stirs emotions and pulls you out of your delusions of grandeur, when in reality you're small, that you're on your own when, in fact, you are so tied to nature and its laws...



*The magic staff.* On my way back I walk at a slow pace; next to me there's a man with long silvery hair, with two braids, a beard and a staff. It's as if his whole being is signaling that he's got some story to tell. His name is Bob. I find out that he's an anthropologist living in New Mexico. It's true, he's got at least one story to tell, the story of some volcanoes in Hawaii, whose lava flows right into the ocean. The mere thought takes my breath away. I tell him one of the few jokes I know, which is incidentally about anthropologists. He is amused. In return, he gives me his staff. I'm reminded of scenes from movies, when an old man hands his magic staff to a younger one, who then battles the evil fairies and the fierce ogres ☺. I'm only fighting the rocks, which seem to have become so greedy that they're trying to grab my skin in their sharp fangs. Eli knows this first-hand, she fell and hurt her left

hand pretty badly. I'm lucky to have gotten away with only a scratch. I climb down carefully, leaning on the staff and venture once again into the forest, with its mist, exotic plants and spider webs.

*Unintentional tourist:* It was to be expected that all we can talk about is the volcano. "Did you see how close the lava was?", "Where did you get burned?", "Look what happened to me...!" "Look what a great photo I managed to take!" I'd like to get some rest but I can't stand the dark and damp room any more. I walk on the streets of Antigua, occasionally taking a look at the smoking volcanoes. I can't believe that, only hours before, I was on top of one. I meet up with some of my colleagues and we go to buy ice cream. We savor the coffee and vanilla treats, while we walk down the streets of Antigua buying small souvenirs and letting ourselves be spoiled by the light of the setting sun.

*Expat club and reggae music:* Tonight I want to put together all my notes about Guatemala. If I get to the States with them unorganized, it's just going to be harder for me. I don't know how to tell my colleagues that I can't go out; I know they'll play the "last night" card. I somehow manage to dodge their (albeit flattering) requests and I stay behind to work. Two hours later, the phone rings. They've gone to the restaurant of some Vanderbilt Alumni and they tell me I must definitely come too. If I must, then I must, what can I do? At least I finished part of what I had set out to do. The restaurant is full of Americans. We also meet up with those from *Habitat for Humanity*. I dance with Kent on the rhythms of the Latin music and I'm reminded of the first night. I quickly rewind to nine days ago and images of those days come to mind. But the fun doesn't stop here...in a city like Antigua, where can a group of Americans spend Saturday night, if not in an expat club with reggae music?! ☺ We meet other American volunteers. Among them there's a Romanian girl too. ☺ We make new friends. I make my way through the crowd to get to the dance floor. I'm one with the music and I dance with my colleagues, but, once in a while, I lift my head up and smile, looking at the star-studded sky.

(To be continued...)

Translated by: **Diana Maftei** and **Mădălina Borcău**

MTTLC, Bucharest University