

Scheduled to leave early early Friday morning, but on Thursday Jorge discovered his passport had expired. He spent all day at the embassy downtown. Don't know what happened, but he was allowed to leave without it.

Friday, 11 April

4:30am, Jorge texted Scott: he forgot he had to be at the airport early because of the passport snafu. And by the way, the car he had coming for us will be taking just him and his family (Lynette and Camila, their four-year-old daughter) instead. We scrambled. Cab company had no vans available in the next 30 minutes. So we paid for two cabs.

Flights, groovy.

Leaving customs in Guatemala City, Jorge discovered that the large van he rented was not actually rented. So the girls ran around the airport for the next 60 minutes while Jorge and Scott scrambled some more. But when we got into the van they found, Jorge worried about the bald tires, a door that didn't close all the way, etc. We were going to be doing a lot of driving, so Jorge decided to get a different van. We drove to the agency's cul-de-sac and the six of us sat in the old van with the a/c blasting for another 45 minutes while Jorge and Scott worked their magic. Some of us started sneezing -- I don't think the air quality in the city was so great. Anyway, everything got settled and we headed to Jorge's dad's house. On the way, we stopped to get some meat stuff and root veggies for dinner. Tired.

Jorge's dad (Jorge) is a very cool guy. He constantly jokes, and while I got a lot of what he said (in Spanish), his accent was a little tough. We also met Jorge's younger (half) brother and sister, Camilo (15 years old) and Lucia (12), who are champion ping pong ballers. Seriously. They are both on the Guatemalan national ping pong team. Have tons of trophies.

Soon, their mom (and Jorge's step mom), Claudia, arrived home from work. I really really like Claudia. She's a psychologist who works in human resources, and is such a very good person. The kids played soccer in the front yard for a little bit after dinner, and then they turned on "Iron Man." Scott crashed on a sofa in a small area off the main room. Eventually, Roberto (Jorge's brother -- about four years younger I think) came in with his girlfriend Maria and the keys to his small apartment two doors down from Jorge Sr's house. This apartment is where our family was to stay while in Guatemala City. We left Scott snoring on the sofa, and the kids and I piled into Roberto's apartment. Thin walls, no hot water, but sleep overcame us all pretty quickly. We were exhausted.

Saturday, 12 April

Took everyone a while to get moving, but it finally happened by noon. Claudia had left with Lucia for a ping pong tournament. Jorge, Lynette, Camila, and our family piled into the van by 1:00ish. By 2:00, the traffic police had pulled Jorge over and busted him for driving without a Guatemalan license. Jorge gave his best argument about the American license working internationally, but his not having a passport didn't help. Scott showed his passport and driver's license and the cops let us go with Scott in the driver's seat.

Lots of traffic.



Into Antigua. Touristy. Cobblestones and ruins. Banana bread for me, Mo, and Satch, and street meat for Scott and Marx.



No cops around, so Jorge took the wheel again. We stopped by another sister's house on the outskirts of the city and met her husband and three kids. Adults had rum, kids had hot chocolate. We sat around while Jorge et al visited and caught up. Mo read, Marx drew, and Satch went to get her iPod. Not too exciting for them.

Eventually, we left and drove back to Jorge's dad's house. It was late, and there wasn't any vegetarian food to be found, so we went back out to get salads from Wendy's (!) .... and tacos I think from some meat place. Scott slept in the big house again -- only room for four to sleep in the apartment.

Sunday, 13 April

Palm Sunday. Scott, Jorge Sr., Jorge, and Roberto woke early to carry a gigantic Jesus on a cross through the city. Man's thing: no women allowed. Scott didn't have a suit, so we didn't think he would be allowed to go, but Jorge Sr and Scott wear the same size, so there you go. The girls and I missed it. Apparently, Jorge parked the van in the middle of the street (they were running late -- fancy that) and they all jumped into the procession. Got back to the van, had some breakfast, and came back.

Jorge's family had planned a reunion at a members-only park. We dropped most of his family off and then went across the street to get supplies from a grocery store, including nuts and apples and things so that the vegetarians wouldn't starve. Back at the picnic grounds, our family of five had a discussion. Basic issues: we all wanted to sleep in the same quarters; we were anxious to get out and see the country or the city or a museum or something that wasn't so touristy; and Jorge's family is wonderful, but we were outsiders, and the language was a hindrance to our understanding their conversations as well. I understood a lot, but the rest not so much. Mo now speaks better Spanish than Scott, but she still had a hard time understanding. Marx and Satch didn't get much



of it at all. Sooo, we decided to make plans for ourselves as of Monday. With that, we went toward the party, which was in full gear.

Lots of relatives whose names I don't remember. Happy that the park included a pool with some good slides. Scott met the girls and me over there after a while. Sunny and warm. A small cafe near the pool had some yummy rice and beans.

A couple hours later we walked back to the party, and they had ordered both meat and vegetarian pizza, so we ate some more! Eventually, family started leaving.

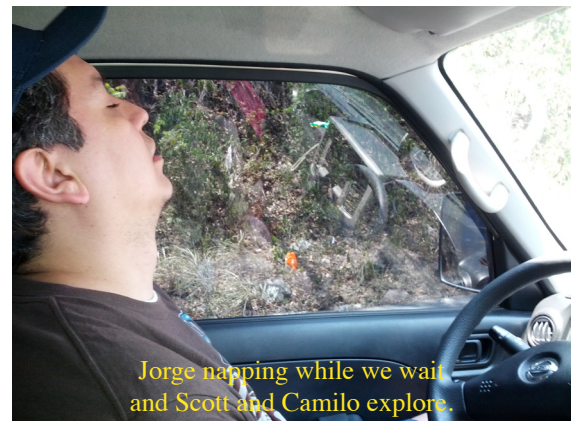
On the way back to the house, we stopped at a panaderia. That evening, Claudia and I talked for quite a while. I showed her photos of my art, and she wanted me to have a beautiful wooden necklace of hers, hand-made by indigenous women. Tequila was drunk. Discussion with Jorge that we were fine taking the van and heading off on our own for Monday, but then he told us that he had planned for us all (12 of us) to take a four-day trip to the north in the van, and we had to get up early! Another bed was moved into the apartment. Scott slept with us.

Monday, 14 April

The woman in the apartment next to ours (separated by a wafer-thin mint wall) started getting ready for work, so all in our apartment were awake by 6:45. Jorge told us via Viber to be ready in 30 minutes. Two hours later, we left. All piled in the van (our family; Jorge, Lynette, and Camila; and Jorge's dad's family with Claudia, Camilo, and Lucia). Driving. North. Stopped for a bathroom break, and a woman was selling fried food, including this bitter asparagus-type veggie. Different taste.

Two lane roads with speed bumps placed willy-nilly across the countryside. Sienna and brownish greens through these mountains and pale hills. Seems that smog overlies all even up here. Dusty leafless trees. Southern California-ish.

Then we stopped. Not just us, all traffic going both ways. Within 10 minutes, vendors of all ages and sizes appeared from nowhere selling empanadas, fruit, nuts, etc. After about 20 minutes of not moving, Scott took a walk, trying to see how far ahead the jam continued. About 10 minutes later, Camillo jumped out the back van window to join him. Then, of course, about 10 minutes later, we started moving. Scott running down the hill toward the car reminded me of the scene with Indiana Jones running down the hill toward the biplane. Funnier, though, was Camilo, who didn't have time to get in the door, so he tried to climb back in the window while Jorge drove as slowly as the honking line of cars behind us would allow him to. No room to pull over. It was pretty funny.



Finally, we arrived at this gorgeous boutique hotel on the shore of Lago de Izabal. They offered each of us a virgin cocktail before we walked through the landscaped gardens to our rooms, which had wonderful comfy beds. Short break, then into town for something to eat, not as simple as it sounds.

The shack was comfy, not far from the hotel, and right on the water. Took about 90 minutes to get served. Seriously. And no matter how many times we asked for Marx's limonada, they just wouldn't bring it. We all took breaks from waiting by walking out on the pier and hanging. I met three drunk guys, one of whom lived in Atlanta for almost his entire life -- 35 years. He was deported last year after a drunk driving conviction. He was excited to play Nirvana on the jukebox for us. Sad.



Satch and Marx while we wait and wait and wait



Jorge and Lynette while we wait and wait and wait for lunch/dinner.

Mo and I finished eating (the vegetarian options were limited) and walked back before everyone else. We jumped into the glorious pool, and eventually everyone joined us (lots of “Aye que rico!”) to watch the gorgeous sunset. The kids ran off the pier into the lake as well. After, there were lovely hot showers. Nice. Back in the rooms, Mo and Satch had a kerfuffle. Separation. And then we all slept really well.



The pool on the lake, and Satch in panorama

Tuesday, 15 April

Everyone met down at the hotel’s restaurant on the lake for breakfast, which was ok, nothing special. Jorge didn’t know how it all tasted cause something he had eaten at the restaurant the night before made him sick. Home-made cure helped.

Still, he got behind the wheel to drive us on and on. A few miles down the road from the hotel, we came to a roadblock with two kids guarding a pothole; the kids asking for a quarter.

Got hotter and more humid as we got closer to Santo Tomas de Castilla, an hour later. This is an old Spanish castle.





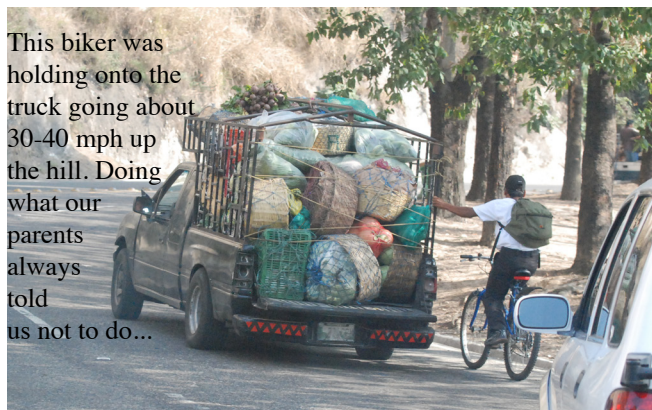
Tour guides speak only Spanish, but you get the idea in their five minute intro. Then you get to climb around and go through tunnels, ascend rickety staircases, check out dark dark rooms, secret passages.



Neatest accoutrement: the cannons. Originally English cannons, stolen by pirates, then stolen again by Spanish for the fort. On the walk out, the girls and I doused our heads in the showerhead behind the bathrooms. Felt good.



Close to the car, Claudia saw someone selling mango with lime, salt, and pepitoria, comida tipica. My new love. That stuff rocks.



This biker was holding onto the truck going about 30-40 mph up the hill. Doing what our parents always told us not to do...

We left the rank humidity of the Castillo behind as we headed north north. Now the hills rolled instead of jugged. Less rock, more green, although a very brownish green. The roads had longer straightaways because we were out of the mountains. At one point, I saw women washing their clothes in the river while kids splashed nearby. Hours later, we arrived in Flores, a city not far from the Mayan ruins. We checked into the 'European' hotel and once again went to eat at a restaurant Jorge's dad knew of.

The staff was nice enough, and our orders came as ordered. Typical Guatemalan food, but nothing really special. Options for vegetarians (a fruit plate, a vegetable plate heavy on the roots) were ok. Scott said his meat (habila) was good. Best part seemed to be the limonada, which came in a giant glass and was mixed with a soda water-type liquid.

Best part of the night, though, was walking back to the hotel. Jorge et al took the van back, but we five walked through the hopping district, saw tons of street vendors and some cool artists. Then we walked across the causeway to the hotel, about 15 minutes. The kids had their blessed internet.



Wednesday, 16 April

Our rooms were clean but nothing special. The pool area, where you get breakfast (a buffet with loads of fresh fruit and a selection of cereals/meats and juices (including watermelon!)) was nice. Ate at 6am, because we had to leave early for the ruins. It was cloudy and chilly, and we thought it would rain, but it never really did.

The road to Tikal should have been named Ruta Pothole. Loads of bumps. At the entrance to the national park, we watched monkeys swinging in the trees. Jorge and Scott found and hired a bilingual guide. Although I didn't like him personally, he was very knowledgeable and thorough.

Walk walk walk. Climbed one of the Mayan pyramids and realized we were on Endor! Scott took a loooong time lining up our shot here. Other vistas could have been from Indiana Jones. Lots of climbing. Satch got stuck once and was very unhappy for a while. The short Mayans really had strong legs and knees. We saw these raccoon-like animals, and Camila mistook it for a domesticated beast. One snipped at her finger, so they were off to the first aid tent.



Hard to see, but it's a monkey.



Endor!!!

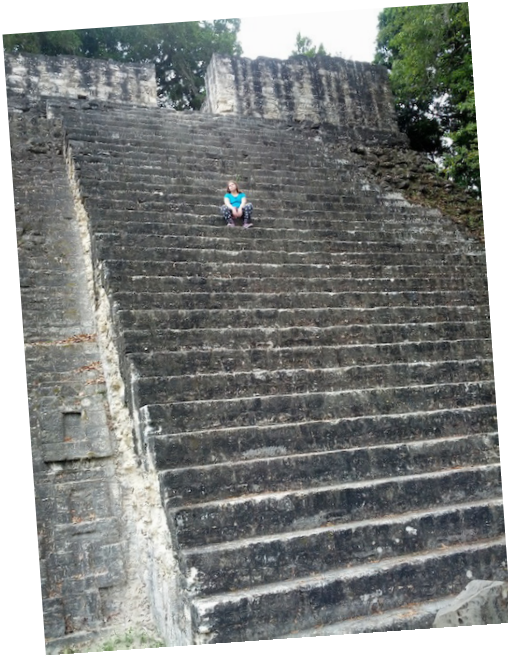


Men with their automatic rifles gleaming in the humidity. Jorge's dad said it was to keep us safe.

Our five-hour walk around the ruins ended at the Grand Plaza, where we took lots of pictures, like a wedding.







Back in the parking lot, locals had set up tents with food. Scott and Marxé got some meat stuff. Mo and Satch had frijoles in a bun. I found a nice lady and watched her cut up and season my mango to perfection.



The whole van-full, Satch, Marxé, Scott, Mo, Me, Camilo, Lucia, Camila, Jorge, Lynette, Claudia, Jorge Sr.

The temples and pyramids were very cool. Definitely worth the trip down pothole lane.

Back to hotel. Satch and Marxé swam, and then Marxé wasn't feeling so hot. Scott and I went to the grocery store down the street. Later we took Mo for dinner at a veggie place across the causeway. Brought back earrings and gifts for people, as well as some food for Marxé and Satch.

Thursday, 17 April

After the yummy fruit breakfast, we basically spent the whole day in the car for the loooooong ride back to the big city. Mo, Camilo, and I sat in the very back, and actually hit the roof when Jorge didn't slow down enough for one of the ever-present street humps. Like being on a roller coaster.

At one point, we stopped to get gas, and there was a Bravah (Guatemalan beer) tent with a cheerleader step-touching back and forth to majorly loud music. Mo and I started in on her (in a quiet, non-vicious way) and they motioned us over. Claudia said that if we danced with her, we would get a prize. So we danced! The guy went to give us a beer cozy, but nooo. We wanted our t-shirt. Got it. And then they gave Scott a t-shirt if he promised NOT to dance.

Claudia taught us a car game named Basta, that we all played in both Spanish and English. Another stop for fruit. Then, a few minutes from the house, we stopped at a large, town-center type mall, done all in white, like an Italian square. Brought take-out pizza to the house and all chowed down. I did laundry and hung it to dry overnight.





We decided to turn in fairly early back at the small apartment, but didn't get to sleep until about 3am, because there was a large party going on somewhere down the block with really loud music. And mosquitos were buzzing around. And Marx and Scott had diarrhea. Long night.

Friday, 18 April

Some of us ate breakfast (others didn't want to add anything to the stomach juices), finished laundry, and repacked. Then back to the road, minus Jorge Sr and clan. As we traveled west, the mountain roads became curvier, and meadows more agriculturally green. Blissfully free of traffic: Good Friday! Stopped to get diarrhea meds for Satch, Marx, and Scott. Nice weather.

Arrived in the quaint, non-touristy town of Chichicastenango around 2:30 I think. People were preparing the streets with multi-colored sawdust art.



The beginning, using templates



And the gorgeous end product

Also, the entire town and its environs were decked out for the religious processions. Really neat.





We stopped off for lunch at a second-story bo-dega type place.



Scott and I were running out of cash, so we checked the math on the check, which is good, cause they overcharged us a bunch. I enjoyed looking through the market and would have liked to spend more time there, but we had to leave soon after lunch/dinner (whatever it was) because our hotel reservation in another town would only be held until 6:00pm.

Only problem: we were in the town of no exit at 5pm on Good Friday. All roads were closed for the procession. Jorge drove up a mountain on a road that never came back down. So we turned around. Finally, after about an hour, we took enough alleys and side roads to get to the outskirts of town. Eventually, we arrived in Panajachel, a town on Lago de Atitla. Through the town, which seemed ready to start its own procession, and out the other side and up the mountain a little. Here were our apartments for the night. We drove up a steep hill and then walked many stairs. The apartment was divided into two levels, both accessible only from outside. Upstairs was a room for three to sleep and a bathroom. Down the stairs, there was a kitchen and dining area, where the staff had placed two more single beds. We were divided again. But the top room had large picture windows out of which you could see the whole lake and a line of volcanos in the distance. Very beautiful.

We dumped our stuff into the rooms and then took a couple of tuktuks (three-wheeled small taxis you stepped onto with moped-like engines that are similar to what we saw in Thailand) into town. Very bouncy. The tuktuks let us off when we ran right into the procession. Watched for a while and then walked through town. Really neat to see them wiping up the street sawdust art as soon as the procession passed.

A very touristy town, with bead stores and partying everywhere. Going down the street, there were little tables



filled with different tequilas and rums. Had to try a couple. Marx and Satch were feeling pretty sick, so I caught a tuktuk back to the apartment with them. We all fell asleep in the upper room. Scott and Mo arrived with Jorge and crew later and slept in the lower level.

Saturday, 19 April

Jorge had urged Scott and I to wake with the sunrise (4:30), but nah, it didn't happen. I woke up quite a few hours later and looked out my window to see a gorgeous blue bird with black head pecking for worms outside the full wall window. Everyone else woke eventually. Mo and I started studying for her AP US History exam, and then we all got hungry.

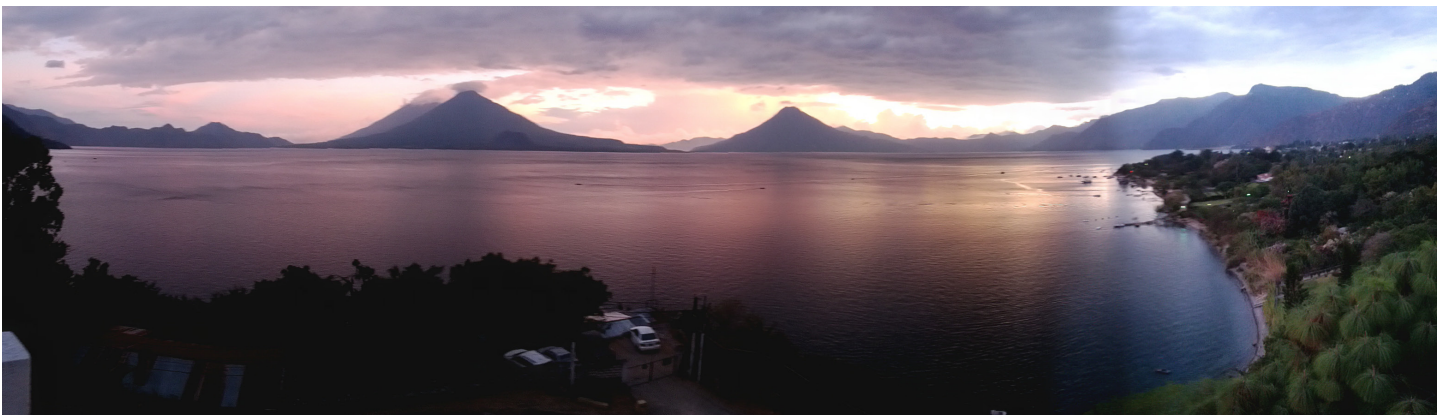
Jorge et al slept on, so the five of us tuktucked into town, and walked around a bit. Saw a neat church and had breakfast in a true hole. Usually, we have good luck with these hole-in-the-wall places; this one wasn't so hot. On the other hand, we finally got Marx to memorize the months of the year in order. We've been trying to do this for a long long time.



Walking around, we happened across a chocolate store, which made the whole morning worthwhile. Homemade dark chocolate. Yummy. Then into an outdoor market, where Satch got a headband and I found this beautiful backpack that I wasn't going to get but everyone convinced me to. It's really nice.

We ran into Jorge, Lynette, and Camila, and decided to meet each other in an hour to go back to the apartments. Another outdoor market, but this one was loud and really crowded, and made Mo anxious. She needed a break. So after watching this guy hovering above lake water with jet shoes for a few moments, I took Mo out of the area and into a nice quiet restaurant. Brownie helped the recovery. Then Jorge picked us up and we vanned back to apartments.

Jorge was planning on our heading another hour west to his sister's beach house, but she had an emergency so we decided to stay at the lake for another night. Just as well. Scott napped, and I walked Marx and Satch down down the mountain to the rock beach, where they swam in the cold water and played with snails. Too cold for me. Back at the apartments, Jorge and Scott were sharing a beer and taking pictures of the gorgeous sunset.





Down to town in tuktuks again. Dinner at a great restaurant where everyone was pleasantly satisfied. Avocado sandwich was yummy, soba noodle special was yummy, nachos were yummy, hummus and tzatziki were yummy, the pollo Milanese was yummy, and the enchiladas were yummy. Same with the smoothies.

Mo felt anxious again, with reason. Loud music and tons of people. So she and the girls and I tuktucked back to the apartment. The driver tried to overcharge us, without success. We walked all the steps again and climbed into bed. Scott arrived an hour or so later.

Sunday, 20 April

Scott and I awoke to watch the sunrise, which we decided wasn't nearly as spectacular as the evening before's sunset. We hung out for a while, went into town for brunch, and got back on the road to the big city. Lots of traffic.



At the house, Claudia had started to prepare a wonderful meal for us and a bunch of relatives who stopped by. I helped her make the caprese and salad. She had run all over town searching for veggie tamales, which is basically just the corn innards without any meat. It was very sweet of her. We enjoyed talking and hanging out, and eventually went over to our apartment to sleep.

Monday, 21 April

Early to the airport, but Jorge was just dropping us off because he had to wait another couple of days for his passport to be delivered from the States. Customs took the unopened jar of pepitorio that Claudia had given me, as well as a candle that Marxe had purchased in Antigua. Why a candle? I don't know.

Changing in Houston, we had a couple hours, so hot showers galore in the United Club. Ahhhh. It was very very nice to get home.