

Belize If You Please

Valerie and I spent ten days in Belize. Daughter Leslie was going, but couldn't due to surgery and an amoebic infection. Valerie's little sister, Judy, whom I have known since she was in the third grade, went with us. And I should not forget our Scottish friend, Liz, who went with us last year to the Peruvian Andes. "If it isn't Scottish, it's Crrrrrrrrrap!!!" as the skit on SNL used to do.

To begin with, it will stretch credibility to know that the fastest way from central Mexico to Belize is to go from Guadalajara to "W" airport in Houston, two hours flight time north, then to Belize City, three hours south. All other options involve three changes of planes, overnight stay in some godforsaken place or expensive. Against my natural disinclination to have anything whatsoever to do with anything "W", I booked the flight.

Arriving, we stayed in a hotel for a day, boated to an island, Caye Caulker, where young folk hang out. It would be great for a month of lolling, partying and sleeping. We were picked up the next day by Israel, a driver sometimes employed by MET, Mountain Equestrian Trails, our hosts for the week. The lodge is large, thatched roof, big bar, nice lounge area, no electricity, no TV. Ahhhhhh! The huts we stayed in, also thatched, were large and comfortable. We lit kerosene lamps each night, there was a full moon while we were there. The proprietors were living off the land, next to a large Mennonite farm, a interesting and courageous young couple with three wonderful small children. Daniel, a friend helping out, is an artist and Chicano originally from East LA, moving to Belize to pursue his artist ambitions.

The next day another couple showed up, Bob, a retired paper factory owner in his seventies and his younger, fiftyish, bride, Cindy. Over cocktails, Bob expressed his belief that Valerie was intellectually challenged because she voted for Obama. As it turned out, all others both staff and trekkers including the Scottish one, were un-American too, being Obama fans. This provided a challenge to Bob and Cindy when it came to conversation. You are in pretty close quarters on a trek like this, so we decided to limit our discussions to non-political issues when talking to them.

Later, on a protracted horseback ride through the jungle, he sidled up to me and whispered like an old spy movie, lest my wife overhear his question. "Pssst," he hissed in my bad ear, "What do you think of people who go overboard on the environmental issues?" I looked around furtively lest my wife be listening, and hissed back: "Not much. I think wackos on all sides are

basically wacko. Like the Right Wing Nuts who insist on making gay marriages a constitutional issue and justify their position on some scriptural quote taken out of context.” I didn’t have many conversations with Bob the rest of our trip, try as I might to discuss off-shore drilling, torture and the supply-side economic principles involving the availability of cheap labor in Mexico.

We went to limestone caves, once inhabited by Mayans, caused by what was once an inland sea. Drawings on ceilings, caused by man or nature, who knows for sure, were everywhere. We swam in pools below lovely waterfalls, cool but refreshing. My horse, *Mariposa* (butterfly in Spanish), was impervious to any of my commands, verbal or otherwise. She did what the horse in front did. Most of the time that was walking or trotting but once or twice a real canter. This was a learning experience for me. I basically have no ass and it is difficult for me to get the rhythm the horse makes....so my posterior and the horse’s back are in direct conflict most of the time. I learned, though, so no further removal of substance from my backside occurred.

We went to three Mayan ruins, the most spectacular of which was Tikal in Guatemala. It was once a 35 square mile metropolis inhabited by around two million people. Our guide said that there seemed to be consensus on the ‘disappearance’ of Mayans. It seems they needed huge amounts of wood to bake the soft limestone that made up their temples. So over a period of a couple of hundred years they deforested their place of habitation, built amazing structures, some of them ten stories high. Eventually this caused a climate change: much less rain, drought, famine...so they moved on to repeat the process. Our guide, a young man named Luis, was a native of the region, spoke English, Spanish and Creole fluently, apparently knew a few bad words in Mayan too. He is going to the University of Texas as well as making a living as a guide. I asked him what he thought when he took people on tours here (he tended to be a little condescending in some of his explanations, perhaps justified by experience, I don’t know). He looked at me for a long moment and said slowly, “Immense pride.”

I confess I immediately thought of that night in Blessington, Ireland, July 21, 3:00 AM there, when Neil Armstrong landed on the moon. I had been a part of the Apollo project....IBM had both the guidance computer on the Saturn V booster and the moon landing navigation computer. I thought President Kennedy was full of it when he announced a moon landing before the decade was out, but this stupendous feat was not only a miracle of technology for the time, but a miracle of cooperative management: hundreds of companies, dozens of countries, uncountable governmental agencies, underappreciated (by

me) brilliance of the astronauts....I felt, like our guide, immense pride that morning. Just after the “One small step for a man, one giant stride for mankind” comment, the doors to the common room in that little hotel burst open and a handful of Irish well wishers came in with beer and Irish whiskey, slapping us on the back and congratulating us as if we had somehow done it too. Amazing.

On our last day, we went to a cave owned by a young man, Bol, who had bought several acres some years before. He had accidentally discovered the cave which was covered by a large boulder, while walking on a hill one evening. He found many artifacts, bones, pottery, drawings. I asked him the same question and he got misty eyed. “My ancestors lived here,” he said.

That afternoon and evening was spent with cocktails, exchanging views on our trip, the Mayan ruins, our horsemanship or lack thereof...except for a verbal assault by Bob and Cindy over dinner. We had avoided political issues since they seemed to have volatile reacts over any difference of opinion, even minor ones. But when the subject of travels came up, Valerie told a story about a time when someone asked a group what they most loved and what they most hated. Most, she said, mentioned people or places. Valerie said she had answered, “My passport....I love it because it allows me to travel and I hate it because the government decides where I can go and not go.” It was not meant to be a political statement, just an observation about our original passports when we lived in Europe. Bob stormed up from the table saying, “Oh, great, there’s an intelligent observation: everyone can go anyplace. The world would be in chaos!” He wouldn’t talk to us the rest of the evening and there was an embarrassing silence in the room at his overreaction. Cindy remained at the table to declare we were not only un-American since we live in Mexico but pagans as well since we didn’t openly profess Jesus as our personal savior. I was fed up and went to bed early. Bob had been so openly rude to Valerie, it was either that or knock him on his ass....which is normally not a reaction calculated to promote good feelings at the end of a week long adventure.

So it was back to Houston, then to Guadalajara, arriving at midnight. A good trip in spite of Bob and Cindy, not as spectacular as the one to the Andes and Machu Picchu in Peru last year, but good nevertheless. Judy and I have always been close and had a lot of fun together. Liz, the six foot Scottish lady (she definitely isn’t crrrrrrrrrrrapp!) talked non stop, splendid company. There were three children of the proprietors hanging around and we both had a lot of fun with them, precocious kids and home educated. I helped Katlin with her math,

built Leggo structures with Logan and teased the 18 month Cyan unmercifully...she apparently liked it since she giggled all the time.

I presume Mariposa was indifferent to my absence, but you never know.