

Mike Cobb's Gringo Life – June 2005

Dear Family and Friends,

As usual, there is plenty of good news to report about Nicaragua and the Cobb Family. Carol and I continue to be amazed at our life here and the wonderful experiences we live daily. In this report, I'll cover the family update and a short piece titled, "Monkeying around in Nicaragua." There are 2 vignettes from recent weekends and the first one is in this issue.

The long dry season is over and we are officially in the rainy season now. Lots of plusses associated with the rainy season, first is that the 100+ degree days are over. Granted the humidity went from 10% to 80% almost overnight but the temperature dropped from 100 to 85 as well. Not a bad trade off. The first rains of the season tend to wash the dust off everything and almost immediately, the entire country greens up from the dormant golden season. The rains bring lushness with them that refreshes the parched earth and ushers in the beginning of the new growing season.

Speaking of growing, Amanda is definitely growing up in a different culture. Part of what makes this fun is to see her and the things she considers normal and to realize just how foreign it is for Carol and I. For example, maids and servants. I don't know about most of you, but I did not grow up with servants, and quite frankly still really don't know how to deal with them. That is an entirely different story that I'll reserve for a later edition of the Nicaragua Report, but in short, Carol and I don't have a clue. Amanda, that is a different story.

Carol regularly takes the girls to the sporting club to swim, 3 or 4 days a week. It is a nice club similar to any in the states you might imagine, with racquetball, tennis, weight rooms, aerobics area etc.... The only thing different is that you see maids and nannies with the families. A few weeks ago, at the request of Amanda, Carol took our babysitter Rebecca with the girls to swim. Amanda wanted to go take a shower after swimming and in an act as natural as asking someone to please pass the salt, Amanda handed Rebecca her towel and took off toward the locker room, with Rebecca in tow. Amanda, mind you, is fully capable of carrying a towel.

Another example is that Amanda wants to get a puppy since Bailey died and keeps on asking. Carol and I (mostly Carol) keep explaining how much work a puppy is and that we don't want to get a new dog until Emily is a little bit older. Amanda's answer. Get a nanny for the puppy.

Quite honestly, it is difficult to have someone in your home if you are not used to it and even after two and a half years, we are not used to it. However the benefits far outweigh the psychological costs, and we are very happy to have the help cleaning so we can spend more time together as a family. That is the reality. We have more quality time together because we have no chores to do. However we do laugh and wonder why all the poppy seeds in the spice cabinet are gone. Sometimes you just gotta say, "Whatever!"

A good friend, Greg Ambrosio, who was here for 2 years as part of a U.S. Treasury initiative to assist Nicaragua with it's stock market, has now moved on, but at his going away party imparted the best idea yet of the coordination of North American desire for privacy in the home mixing with the Central American lifestyle of servants to take care of the cleaning. Instead of having a live in maid and someone there after the occasional late night party, Greg would take all the dishes and put them in the well freezer until the next day. What an idea. The perfect blend of ingenuity and culture. Thanks Greg. We are going to miss you.

Amanda is also becoming very proficient in Spanish. A recent example was a couple weeks ago while we were cooking dinner. The phone rang and Amanda answered it. She proceeded to have a complete conversation in Spanish and then hung up. It was about the power being out in the neighborhood. She handled it. We think it was the power company.

Emily is getting bigger and is very mobile these days. She has been cruising around furniture for a few weeks now and has taken a couple one step moves unassisted. We figure she'll start walking this week, just in time to be in planes and airports on Friday. Balls are a big hit especially rolling them back and forth. Gravity continues to be a fun concept these days and she has discovered how to maneuver stairs in both directions. Only have 2 steps in the house, but she enjoys tossing stuff down them and climbing down to retrieve them.

Monkeying around in Nicaragua (Part 1) A close encounter

Nicaragua is an incredible gem. My family and I, even after two and a half years here continue to be blessed by new and wondrous events that deepen our love of our new home. Take the most recent weekends for example.

Two weeks ago, we decided to drive to Granada for lunch on Sunday with a friend of ours, Juan Carlos Pereira. His wife is back in the States for 4 weeks and we knew that rather than sleeping in, that there was nothing that he'd like more than to come with me, my wife Carol, and 2 daughters, Amanda 4 (and a half as she likes to remind me) and Emily 10 months (and teething) for the 45 minute care ride each way. That's what good friends are all about.

While in Granada we wanted to try a new restaurant that we'd been unable to locate on a previous trip. The name is Casa Vivaldi and it is owned by a Lidia Vivaldi and her husband Magnani Pablo, a couple from Italy who settled in Granada 6 years ago. They are building a wonderful tourist hotel about half way between the main plaza and the lake on the street that runs from the square to lake. Look carefully to see the sign on the right hand side that announces them, because the restaurant is set back from the street, providing an almost unbelievably quiet atmosphere amidst the bustle of Granada.

You enter through a long arched colonnade covered with a flowing vine. Then like a secret garden, the oasis opens up and you are presented with a magnificent pool with waterfall and open air restaurant along 2 sides. Lush plantings provide a feeling of enclosure while the architecture is open and airy giving room to the space.

It was all we could do to keep our daughters out of the pool while we ordered and waited for our food to be prepared in the open kitchen next to the tables. Watching chefs prepare a fine meal seems to captivate me, but less so my 10 month-old so we took to crawling under tables together. The complimentary appetizer was a super thin slice of eggplant grilled with garlic and olive oil. It dissolved on your tongue like ice cream. Exquisite.

Lunch was over the top too. All four entrées were fantastic, but I'd vote my wife's risotto as day's best. First time any of us had seen risotto with a red sauce, and it was perfect. My pasta "Paola" with a carbonara type of cream sauce was excellent and since Amanda had filled up on bread, salad and the chorizo frittata appetizer, her untouched fresh tomato "salsa" over homemade pasta was also delightful.

Strong espressos by the pool completed the meal but before we could head out and visit "Monkey Island" in Lake Nicaragua we had one more stop to make. No Italian meal would really be complete without an authentic gelato. Good thing that just 3 blocks away is a gelateria run by another Italian who serves up the finest gelato this side of Rome.

Now totally stuffed, we headed down to the 10th largest freshwater lake in the world, to board a small panga (the local bass boat) and begin winding our way through the lush islands that are part of a 360 island chain nestled at the foot of the 4000ft volcano Mombacho who's explosion a few thousand millennium ago created them. Monkey Island sits in a virtual lagoon created by another 15 or so islands surrounding it. It is a small island maybe 50 feet in diameter covered with

dense vegetation and trees.

As we approached the island our guide asked us if we'd brought bananas or oranges for the monkeys. Why he didn't ask before leaving the dock where we could have purchased some is a question with no answers. But oh well, he assured us that we'd see the monkeys anyway. Sure enough, as we pulled up close, we were greeted by a monkey sitting at the water's edge. The only food in our possession were cheerios for Emily. Good thing Emily can't vote yet. Feed the "O's" to the monkeys.

As soon as Amanda began throwing "O's" to the monkey at the water's edge, a mama and her baby clinging tightly to her back came swinging through the branches and hopped right onto the boat. For the next 3 minutes, we enjoyed watching up close and personal the mama and her baby flitting from side to side picking up cheerios and looking back at the weird humans studying her every move. Knowing that monkeys can be mischievous, especially when the food runs out, our guide took the opportunity to shake some water out of a bottle at the mama who took that as the signal to reenter the trees with her baby.

Our capitalist guide upsold us a tour through the remaining islands. The additional portion included passing by an old Russian fishing trawler that according to my daughter really is a pirate ship and 800 person ferry boat under construction on the boat building island. We passed an island resort and also by many homes on built on islands, some of them spectacular getaways for the country's elite, others small and simple. Grand old trees create natural colonnades between islands, their branches intertwining high above. Water lilies and other water plants give a splash of color to the hundreds of shades of green around.

The ride back to the marina turned out to be a "MasterCard" moment for dad. Dad and Amanda enjoyed the passing scenery on the bow of the boat and then watched as an approaching thunder shower came across the open lake and enveloped us. Renting a boat and touring the island gems in Lake Nicaragua for a few hours, \$24.00 Soaking up the warm rain while slipping through the narrow channels between jungle islands with your four year old snuggled in your arms.... priceless.

For a sneak peek at Monkeying around in Nicaragua (Part 2): A close encounter of a even more interesting kind, read on to the next issue.