

Mike Cobb's Gringo Life – Sep 2005

Dear Family and Friends,

As usual, there is plenty of good news to report about Nicaragua and the Cobb Family. The family enjoyed 6 weeks in the States and Europe this summer as part of meetings and conferences I was a part of. It was wonderful to see so many of you one place or the other over the summer and I do hope that some of you will get down here before it gets too developed and you won't see how "rough" it is here.

I'm going to start with the family update and then the second part of Monkeying around in Nicaragua. This one is Amanda's favorite and you'll see why at the end. We also have some new Gringos here, Kurt and Peggy Long who are heading up Pacifica Concierge Services, and they are compiling a list of observations and thoughts you may find amusing about transitions from the US to Nicaragua.

The family spent a wonderful summer mostly in the US. While I traveled off to meetings and conferences, Carol, Amanda and Emily spent the largest part with Carol's folks in Western Maryland, where the raspberries and blueberries were plentiful and so were the fireflies. Emily learned to walk while we were in the US and she also celebrated her first birthday. Since we are becoming more and more Nica everyday, we brought a piñata for the occasion to the delight of about 10 kids many of whom were used to the "pull the string" kind of piñatas. Nothing beats using a stick to whack a paper macheted clay pot with candy inside.

There is always a kind of reverse culture shock going back the US for any length of time. It's mostly nice things like great roads and unlimited choices of restaurants and foods in the grocery stores, although the glare of unbridled consumerism does strike us as obscene in many ways now. For me, I notice that I am only homesick when I am in the US, and based on Amanda's comments before coming back to Nicaragua, I'd say she feels the same way.

Amanda, and now Emily, gobble up libraries and playgrounds. These are things that we take for granted in the US and when they are missing from your life, it becomes obvious. Amanda enjoyed the story night at the library and checking out 20 new books each week. She and her sister also enjoyed the great playground equipment at any number of close-by playgrounds. By the end of July she was convinced, she did not want to come back and liked living in the US better than Nicaragua. Now 3 weeks back, she has resumed her routine, reacquainted with friends here and is glad to be back.

It is almost as if we have 2 lives, one here and one there. The one here in Nicaragua is primary and dominant, but the US life, although shorter in time, holds a richness of family and the familiarity of comfort that is unmatched in any way by the quantity of time and experience here. Experiences in the US are refined and expected, whereas life here is always a bit raw and one always watches out for the unexpected pothole or pig in the road. We don't have plastic playgrounds with every kind of climbing apparatus, but we do have hikes through coffee plantations and jungles.

Sometimes you want pancakes and sometimes you want nacatamales. The real trick, and I think subconsciously we tend to live this way, is to want pancakes when you can have them, and enjoy nacatamales when they are on the menu. The story below is the second of two about Monkeying around in Nicaragua. It's about as Nacatamales as it gets.

Monkeying around in Nicaragua (Part II) - A close encounter of a different kind

In early June we decided to road trip to one of our favorite places here, Selva Negra. This is another of the hidden gems in Nicaragua. Eddy and Mausi Kuhl and their family have turned a working coffee plantation high in the northern mountains into a wonderful resort. As often as possible, we enjoy the refreshing alternative to the heat of Managua. This was the original reason we started visiting on a fairly regular basis. But now our daughter Amanda, and Eddy's grand daughter Raquel, who is five, have become the best of friends so our visits are becoming more frequent.

Raquel enjoys a most unusual and delightful life. Her mother, Vickie, is Eddy and Mausi's oldest daughter. Vickie was largely raised in the US and then she and her husband Roy moved to Nicaragua to help run the farm and resort 10 years ago. Raquel was born in the States but has lived on the farm since she was one month old. There she is home schooled in the traditional subjects, while living an education of experience on the farm and developing an incredible awareness of her environment and the natural beauty of her surroundings.

I grew up in the country side of Western Pennsylvania and it's enjoyable to see my oldest daughter Amanda, now almost five, experience the things I remember doing as a kid. She and Raquel recently spent an afternoon catching tadpoles in the lakes and streams that adorn this mountain top paradise. Raquel is quite a natural at this and was happy to show Amanda the tricks in tadpole catching. Dad was able to lend a hand and show them a new trick or two, and soon enough we had cups full of tadpoles. But nothing beats stomping and splashing through the creeks. Watch out tadpoles!!!!

Back at the farm, which by the way is an ecological wonder, Amanda and Raquel made the rounds of visiting the baby piglets, petting the calves, and playing with the chicks. A favorite activity is entering the quail pens to collect eggs for the pickled quail eggs that garnish the salads at Selva Negra. While the girls collected, Vickie, Carol and I talked about how they are utilizing every single by-product of the farm in some productive way. Everything, from the coffee husks composted by 50,000,000 worms to the waste water and manure collected for the production of methane, is used and nothing is wasted.

Because we are considering wind power at Gran Pacifica, Vicky and I spent a long time talking about their plans and the details (oh the details) of their proposed implementation. First step is the construction of a tower 90 feet tall to mount a wind station for a year to collect data. Later in the day when talking to Mausi, she told me that they may have too much wind in the site originally selected. Too much wind, go figure. Mausi and I agreed to share data as we get it knowing that two heads are always better than one.

On our most recent trip last weekend, Raquel's older brother Cory was graduating from the American High School in Managua and we only got to see Raquel for a few minutes on Saturday morning. Amanda was upset and Carol decided to head back to the room and let dad and Amanda hang out. We spent an enjoyable time throwing sticks and leaves into a fast moving creek and then chasing them downstream. Amanda wanted to follow them to the sea, so I promised that we'd look for them the next time we go to the beach. (I realize as I am writing this, that the Matagalpa river flows east to the Caribbean so it is even more highly unlikely that we will see them anytime soon on the Pacific beaches at Gran Pacifica. But we are going to look anyway. I promised.)

After playing leaf boats, we decided to take a hike up into the cloud forests that stretch from the top edge of the coffee plantation to the ridge summit another 700 feet up. We'd heard the deep haunting grunts of howler monkeys earlier in the morning, but not since, and we'd assumed that they'd moved higher on the mountain. The ridge line was in and out of visibility, frequently shrouded in low wispy clouds as it is most mornings. Periodic drizzle fell from time to time creating a glistening freshness to all the surfaces of the forest.

No matter how many times I visit and walk the trails, seeing the diversity of plants is astonishing. Plants that we call house plants in the States climb up the trunks of trees and disappear into the heights. Giant ferns with one inch thorns create the feeling that there could be a dinosaur right around the next bend. Orchids and bromeliads of every type imaginable cling to the branches and tree trunks creating a rich texture of life. And even on the ground, as Amanda pointed out to dad, mushrooms and toadstools of equal variety spring forth from the fruity loam of the forest floor.

Selva Negra is blessed to have this virgin cloud forest when so much of the forests have been cut for planting. Just over the ridge, the entire line of trees to the ridgetop was cleared for the production of cabbage. This is not a criticism of those who do the clearing. They do it because they have to feed their families. The solution to the ecological destruction is the creation of jobs that take the pressures off the land, but that is another discussion for another time.

One thing that is apparent when you study the cloud forest is the dual canopy. Unlike a mature forest in the northeast United States where I grew up, a mature forest here has dense growth at all levels. At the ground level are the "houseplants" and other species of a viney and bushy nature. Above them are trees averaging 50-75 feet in height that form a mostly closed canopy, and then above them are the majestic climax trees stretching upwards of 200 feet in some cases. These are where the monkeys spend a great deal of their time to living and feeding.

On this particular hike I wanted to spend some quiet time in the woods. As anyone with a 4 year old knows, it can be difficult. We made a game of it and Amanda was fascinated to learn about how her dad hunted as a boy and that if you are very quiet in the woods you may get to see the animals. Luckily, we had some great and immediate examples. Two large groups of high school kids on a field trip approached us from the opposite direction and "drove" game towards us. In both cases a grouse type bird ran close to where Amanda and I were standing listening to the kids noisily make their way through the woods. Amanda got a big kick out of that. But nothing compared to what happened next.

After the second group of kids passed us, we stopped to listed to them trail off. As we stood silent, we began to hear noises that were out of place so to speak. Noises of things dropping through the leaves above, like large water drops, but a few too many since the rain had stopped at that moment. We looked up and studied the canopy. Then the high canopy, sure enough, there was a family of monkeys eating the fruits of the trees and dropping the large seed pods.

Amanda and I stood and studied them and after a couple minutes the large male moved to some branches nearly above us and started pooping. Needless to say, we were amazed. Amanda didn't see the first set that landed about 10 feet away, but she did see the second set as it fell 150 + feet and landed with a thud 6 feet from us. That made her day needless to say. A monkey trying to poop on us. Imagine that.

Two great weekends and two great monkey stories. Two great sets of memories that we will cherish forever. For dad, it will be the boat ride in the rain with Amanda snuggled up in his arms. For Amanda, almost getting pooped on by monkeys. It just doesn't get much better than this.

New gringos in Nicaragua: The observations of Kurt and Peggy Long

You don't have to watch the stop lights – someone will tell you when it is green (honk, honk)

One a day – you can plan on getting 1 thing done per day, maybe more, maybe less – probably not more.

The beaches in Nicaragua are open to all – but that doesn't mean you can't plant cactus along your fences.

Tail lights and head lights are apparently optional in Nicaragua

When driving in Nicaragua, watch the people in front of you. The ones behind you are probably watching for you. Always watch the buses and taxis no matter where they are.

It doesn't matter if you tell someone No Hablo Espanol, they will continue to speak and it will be in Spanish.

You may be able to say it in just a few words in English, but in Spanish it will take a couple of paragraphs. Many words have multiple meanings and you need to explain which meaning you want. Rio Grande – is it the river or a huge laugh!!

When you don't speak Spanish, answering the phone can be a real adventure.

When you get to the markets (like Masaya) you will most likely acquire "help". Generally they are actually helpful but when you leave they will ask for money and they will always say they need money for shoes for school – Always

If you make a mistake writing a check, crossing it out and initialing it doesn't work. Get out a new check

Really, there are spaces between their spoken words, just not big ones

If the stop lights are out, the taxi drivers will let you know when to go (honk, honk)