

Nicaragua's Update – October 3, 2003

Cobb's Family Nicaraguan Stories

Dear Friends,

I write this update tonight having just returned from the Bolshoi ballet. Now I'm not a ballet fan by any stretch of the imagination, but I have to admit, it was quite good. Truth be told, I probably would never have gone in the states, but here, it's easy. A 10-minute drive, inexpensive tickets, no lines and great seats. Parking costs 10 cords, or \$0.66. Carol has informed me that she would like to go to a Nicaraguan Folkloric dance now that I admit I like it. I don't think I said I liked, it, just that it was quite good.

A year has now passed. Its hard to believe that we have lived here a full year. I remember folks talking about a honeymoon period for 6 months and then you start to find things to dislike and pick at. The reality is that we have grown to love this place more and more every month. Sure there are things that annoy us, but they exist everywhere.

In some ways we are becoming very spoiled. When we have to sit in traffic for 5 minutes, we get upset. When I get behind a horse drawn cart on the road, it bothers me. But then I have to remind myself that I used to sit on a 4-lane highway going slower than the horse drawn cart on a very regular basis.

We never wait for a table at a restaurant. The closest thing to a wait is the new Sushi Ito and you have to wait for 15-20 minutes. We haven't gone yet. The waits too long. We really are getting spoiled.

Amanda turned 3 last month and we had a grand fiesta for her. She wanted Barney and Winnie the Pooh for her birthday, along with Pipo the clown. Pipo is a household word here in Nicaragua. He's the most famous clown in Nicaragua. Booking Pipo is done 3-4 months in advance to ensure you can have him. Carol made sure this was taken care of and reserved the Burger King for the party. Over 50 kids showed up with lots of Moms and Nannies in tow. The party went very well and the BK was trashed. Glad we had the party there.

Amanda and Carol are racing for Spanish supremacy in the household. I have accepted my fate as the laggard. Amanda is learning Spanish in a way I can't even fathom. It goes from ear to mouth with a "lock in" in the brain. It's incredible. Her ability to use correct pronouns and tenses is scary. Carol now hangs out and speaks Spanish with her friends. We went to a baptism of a good friend's daughter last night, and Carol spoke the entire night in Spanish. It's wonderful to see the success in their language skills. I know it makes them feel much more comfortable with everything.

We gave our car the ultimate test a few weeks ago. We decided to take a trip up to the top of the Mobacho Volcano to hike in the cloud forest. The lady at the check in station

questioned whether or not our car would make it up the steep climb. I assured her it would, being 4WD. We made it up about half way and then it starts to get really steep. 90 degree steep (almost). The car just would not go. I revved the engine and released the clutch and the result was nothing but the smell of a burning clutch. We had to back down to a spot we could turn around. Unfortunately we had missed the last of the big Russian Army surplus trucks that ferry visitors to the top for the day. When you come to visit we'll take the truck ride.

Another car note, Carol had a flat tire one day. Carol called me and as I was preparing to get a cab over to where she was, she called me back to let me know a man had stopped to help her. He recruited 4 or 5 people standing nearby to help change the tire while he supervised. Our friend Enrique Zamora passed by and stopped for a minute to make sure everything was OK before calling me and letting me know it was. After tipping the workers and thanking the guy who stopped, Carol was back on her way. People here are wonderful.

By the way, our car is finally legal. One year later we now have Nicaragua plates. It's kind of a bummer though because now we don't have a yellow plate. For everyone in Shepherdstown, you'll be pleased to know that the yellow "Founded in 1762" plate on the front of the Honda saved us several tickets. The diplomatic plates here are yellow and as soon as they saw the yellow tag they would waive us through (most of the time) Now I have a white front tag. No more special treatment, but it was nice while it lasted. Next process is to get a Nicaraguan driver's license. We're not in any hurry to do that.

We finally saw some howler monkeys. There is a festival in our neighborhood for Santo Domingo at the beginning of August. We were told by everyone around to get out of here, because they close our street off and it becomes one big party for 3 days. Sure enough on Wed night at 4:00am the fireworks started and the party began. They really love fireworks here. Big ones. M-80 and up. We were glad we had made plans to leave and go back to the mountain retreat of Selva Negra. We got up, packed the car and took off for the hills.

Carol had read about a new butterfly farm near Selva Negra and we spent one day going to visit. It was great. It too is a coffee plantation at the top of a mountain with beautiful rushing streams and waterfalls galore. Lots of butterflies too, although the best season is December to April. While on the hike we saw a tree full of howler monkeys. Must have been 15 to 20 of them. Playing and eating. We were on the side of the mountain and they were in a tree down the hill but at eye level for us. Very cool. Amanda looked for about a minute and was done with it. It was all we could do to keep here there for 5 minutes to watch.

There are incredible colonies of ants here. Some of them are cuter ants and they make these trails in the woods 2-3 inches wide and you'll see 10,000 of them marching on it. Half are carrying pieces of leaves 10 times as big as they are and the other half going back to get more. Well we stopped to admire them for a minute and low and behold some of them who weren't directly on the path took a liking to our shoes. We stomped

and cleaned them off. Or so we thought. Ask Amanda sometime about Mommy and ants in her pants.

The next day was my birthday and we had invited some friends to come up to the mountains to celebrate with us. We met them at a neighboring town, Estili, about 2 hours away by car. As the crow flies it would be 30 miles, but by car up and down the mountains it's a hike. The guidebook Carol has for Nicaragua has never let us down. They listed a restaurant that specializes in exotic foods, iguana, deer, rabbit, wild boar, gibbon and its specialty of the house is Boa Constrictor.

I had been prepping Amanda for a month about going to Estili to eat Iguana with Daddy on his birthday and she was ready. When we arrived they informed us that they were out of iguana. I asked Amanda if she wanted to eat snake and she accepted. 2 big plates of boa constrictor arrived at the table and Amanda dug in with Gusto. After we both had finished, she looked up at me, face covered in BBQ sauce and a big smile and said, "Happy birthday Daddy". It truly doesn't get any better than that.

(I know you're curious. Tastes like chicken. (Ha ha) Actually tastes like and has the texture of pork)

Amanda continues to enjoy school. She and her friends play together quite a bit and now have dance lessons a couple times a week at the school. The girls have dance while the boys play soccer. I'm not too crazy about the sexism, but she loves to dance and doesn't care about soccer, so for now we'll let it ride. Amanda is also taking horseback riding lessons a couple times a week. She loves that. They do all kinds of trick on the horse. Standing up, lying down, sitting backwards, other activities while on the horse.

Carol takes her to these things and is reminded from time to time of just how different things are here. For example, at the dance class, she is the only mom who waits there. Every other kid is brought by a driver and a nanny who waits for them during class. The school has a policy that the people waiting must wait outside the school grounds. So Carol goes and sits with the maids and nannies and practices her Spanish. Well one day the head of the school come rushing out to tell her its OK if she waits inside. She "understands" that we don't have a nanny. The guy who gives the horseback lessons also thinks that Carol should send Amanda with her Nanny.

It's a different way of thinking here. If you can afford lessons, you can obviously afford a nanny. And if you can afford one, why don't you have one? Hard questions to answer cross culturally.

Another interesting thing that happened that highlighted the assumptions we make. Carol and I (with the help of friends and family) have helped to sponsor a meals program at a school in the hometown of our Spanish Teacher Dona Chilo. Well we visited a few weeks ago to help with the food distribution and had this enlightening experience. A woman heard Amanda speaking English and asked Dona Chilo how this could be. She was absolutely amazed that such a young child could speak English. When Dona Chilo

explained that her parents were from the United States, thinking that the answer would settle it, the reply was even more astonishing. The maid thought that all kids learned Spanish. I guess she thought that it was hardwired into them at birth.

When we hear things like this, we just begin to get an understanding of the basic level of assumptions we take for granted. I find it hard to believe that someone could think that, but after reflecting on it, see how it can occur. But it immediately begs the question, “what else do we take for granted that is not?” This is one facet of life here that I am now just beginning to scratch the surface of. The more I learn, the less I know.

(The school has about 2000 kids and there are about 200 kids who are very poor and don't get enough to eat. \$15 feeds 200 kids breakfast. Let us know if you want to sponsor a breakfast or two. 100% of the money goes to food.)

I'll close with another funny language story. I am trying to practice my Spanish as often as I can and do so without any fear of saying stupid things. Good thing too, because I have said a couple doozies.

There is a small store at the turn off the main road to the project site. The owner is very nice and I try and speak Spanish when I see him. Marvin and I had arranged to meet a guy coming in another car to drive back to the property together. I greeted the shop owner and proceeded to tell him in my best Spanish. “yo espero un hombre.”

For those of you that know Spanish you can stop laughing now. Basically I said I was gay and waiting for a man like one waits to find a wife. The look on the guys face said it all. Many thanks to Marvin for jumping in and translating what I had meant to say.

Lots of fun things happening here. Love to hear what's going on in your life and all the news from your neck of the woods.

I know a lot of you have an interest in the project and if you e-mail me, I'll send you the latest project update. Check out the attached photos of Amanda at my party and hers.

Be well and be in touch.

Mike