

Well, it has been a long time since I was in touch but that is the way it goes sometimes.

Right now, I am very comfortably settled in to my room at the HOTEL LA AMISTAD with wired internet access, air con, free breakfast and free laundry. What more could I ask for (well, maybe having Wendie with me now instead of tomorrow). I arrived yesterday after a very comfortable flight from Guatemala City (my travel agent booked me in business class – the first time in my life I got privileged security clearance – but I still had to take off my boots). But I am a way ahead of myself. Let me begin at the beginning.



Feb 11th – arrived at YVR in lots of time and cleared US Customs with no problem. United started to board the flight and then announced that the flight was cancelled because of snowstorms in Dallas. Then we were told that the flight was on again but because the bags had been taken off, we had to reclaim them, clear Canadian customs and check them in again, clear US customs again and then board. As a result of all this, I missed my flight to Guatemala City by about 15 minutes. The airlines gave us a hotel room at a reduced rate. The next day it was back out the airport to catch the next days flight to Guatemala City but it was delayed because of storms in Miami (where our flight originated). Finally (3 hours late) we are on board and taxiing down the runway when we come to a stop and the pilot announces that the flight cannot continue because we will arrive too late to land at the airport in Guatemala City, This time the airlines gives a free room in a hotel that I can only describe as TEXAS BIG!!!!!! It is called the GAYLORD TEXAS and must have had 2000 rooms. I have never seen a hotel this big. So much for my two days to visit Guatemala City!!!

Feb 13th – Arrived in Guatemala City and was taken to our meeting hotel. The rest of the team arrived throughout the day and evening. Everyone was tired but glad to be here.

Feb 14th – up at 8.00 AM for breakfast and an orientation and on the road by 9.30 for a very long drive to Champerico (7 hours with stops). The volcanoes quickly came into sight and we saw them for a great deal of the trip as well as various crops including pineapples, rubber, coconuts, corn and lots of other ones that I couldn't identify, Finally we arrived at our hotel and it was HOT!!!!!! There were fans in the room but no air con. So the shape of our time there was taking form pretty quickly. The temperature in one room was recorded at 33 in the hottest part of the day and 28 (the lowest) at 3.30 in the morning.



Champerico is a very poor coastal town (Pacific Ocean) about 100 miles south of the Mexican border. There are some attempts being made to encourage tourism (a huge jetty and marina were under construction) but if there is a mainstay it would seem to have been fishing and farming.

This affiliate has few teams (only about 2 per year) so our arrival was greeted with great enthusiasm.

The team was divided into two groups with one team working on the foundations for a house about 20 minutes away and the other team working on a house that was completed up to the roofline. This is the team that I was a part of. So that will be what I will describe.

We were very fortunate to have a lovely shaded yard behind the house where we could take refuge from the sun. Did mention that it was HOT!!! For me (and some of the others) it was hard to work in the sun for more than 10 minutes at a time. The matron of the home took care of us wonderfully well. Our water was carefully iced each morning and every afternoon we had fresh fruit .Our work included mixing concrete, hauling concrete blocks, moving sand and tamping it to go under the concrete floor and passing up buckets of mortar to the masons who were laying brick.

To make mortar and concrete, sand and cement were put in a pile in the street, mixed in the shape of a volcano, pebbles were put in the middle, water was poured in, left to soak, then people went at it with 3 shovels. Then into buckets or a wobbly wheelbarrow, and moved it into the room where it was needed..

On the last day we actually got to lay cement for the floor in one room which was exciting for me as this was the first build I had been on where I saw how a floor was actually done. The leveling of the floor was done by hand. We were just one bucket short of finishing the floor when we left.

Throughout the week we had the help of 4 -5 neighbourhood boys (8 to 10 year olds) who each afternoon after changing out of their school uniforms would come to help carry sand and mix cement, all in their bare feet.

Unfortunately I got the trots and drank too much water without compensating for sodium loss about ½ way through the week. The result was electrolyte deficiency and I had to take a day off from the site. However a gater-aid equivalent and lots of rest got me back on my feet the next day (not exactly spry but present)

The hotel was very simple but they worked very hard to provide service. They provided good meals and responded very quickly to requests (we asked for more vegetables and had platters of them every night after that.

There was a beach a few hundred yards from the hotel which was a very popular destination when the teams returned from the sites. There were big enough waves for surfboarding. The really big event in the evening was to walk a couple of blocks down the main street to get ice cream. However on the last night we were there we did see a procession through the streets with the statue of Jesus carried on the shoulders of several men (it was the first Friday of Lent) with singing and praying at several spots along the way. It was an interesting cultural experience.

Earlier on the last day we had a celebration with the masons, the families, and the local Habitat staff in a pool at a local motel. We had hamburgers, pop, speeches (with tears of thanks from the homeowners) and presentations – all in all a most gratifying and heartwarming time.

I think that this was the hardest build I have been on, simply because of the heat. It was so draining and there was no relief at night. For me and I expect others it was a constant tension between feeling like I was carrying my load and needing to take care of my own needs.

Saturday we left Champerico for the R & R part of our trip. Jon Carrodus has done a great job of describing our first stop: *On the way from Champerico to Xela we stopped for an hour at a lovely hot spring, huge hot pool with natural cliffs as the walls; we floated and looked up at the jungle ferns and vines hanging down towards the pool. We soaked for an hour. At this point we'd already climbed over 1000 feet so the air was much cooler.*

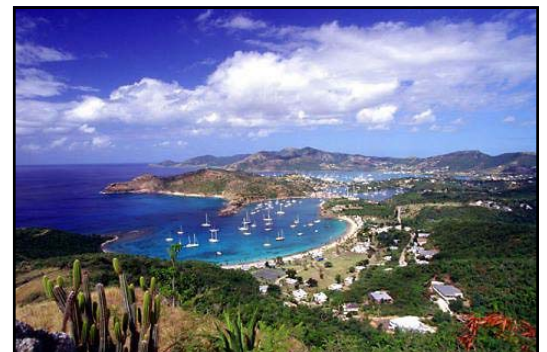
We were definitely in the highlands and it was amazing how the smallest piece of land even on the steep hillsides were cultivated. Human endurance and persistence can indeed pay dividends.

When we got to the hotel in Xela some of us had high hopes of a warm shower (the heating system is a kind of coil which required a fair amount of patience and understanding). Some of the others mastered it but I never did but at least it was cool. No, change that to cold. I actually wore a long sleeved shirt and my vest when we went out for dinner. What a contrast.

The next day it was on to Panajachel (Pana for short) and a boat trip on Lake Atitlan which is surrounded by 7? Volcanoes. Unfortunately it was misty so we did not have the advantage of seeing the lake in its full glory but we did get glimpses. It was good to get out on the lake and we visited a village for an hour or so which was a change of pace.

The next day we set out on our final leg of our trip and drove to Antigua. We arrived in plenty of time for everyone to get lots of shopping and sightseeing. Three of the female members of the team even managed to find a spa. We stayed in a wonderful small hotel that was build around four beautifully landscaped courtyards.

We had some wonderful meals along the way. In fact by the last day people were saying – no more heavy lunches – we will eat on out own! However by dinner, everyone found their appetites and we



enjoyed one of the best meals I have had in a restaurant that is located in an old fortress and monastery. It was a great way to end the build.

Well that brings me back to where this letter began. Tomorrow evening Wendie arrives here and Friday we begin our 9 day tour of Costa Rica. So more in the days to come.

Cheers for now from Bill Dyer

Greetings from Antigua, Guatemala!

(Jon and Simone Carrodus)

Its now two weeks since we left Vancouver and so much has happened, and at last we can get some time with an internet connection. Here we are in Antigua -- Because we were so exhausted after the Habitat for Humanity build, we decided not to go by bus from Antigua to Chichicastenango today to visit Emilie, but rather to rest up in Antigua and head back to Guatemala city for tomorrow night at Sandra's.



The last few days we've been in Xela, Panajachel (Lake Atitlan) and Antigua, all several thousand feet above sea level and much cooler -- livable in fact, which Champerico on the Pacific coast was NOT!! We suffered majorly for the five days of building in 35 degree heat, mixing concrete, hauling concrete blocks, moving sand and tamping it to go under the concrete floor. All without any electric tools, not even a cement mixer. For concrete, we pile up the sand and cement in the street, mix it then shape it into a volcano, put pebbles in the middle, pour in water, let it soak, then go at it with 3 shovels. Then into buckets or a wobbly wheelbarrow, and move it into the room where the bricklayers level it by hand.

Work was from 7 am to 3 pm every day. Sun almost directly overhead. Then back to the hotel, 5 min by bus, and under the cold shower (no hot water in the hotel). Except the shower isn't really cold, which is good. The shock would kill us! Then the fan in the room has a digital readout; the temperature in the room, with the fan and windows open, stays at 33 till about midnight; by 2 am is down to 30; and with any luck is down to 27 by 4:30 am or so.

Wednesday night was the absolute worst; consider that our windows face onto the main street. Need to be open. Diesel trucks etc. roaring by whenever, stinking; dogs raising ruckus; and some very noisy birds like crows only better, and loud croaks like frogs, etc. But at 2:30 am 'wed night, 2 pickups pulled up across the street, and about 20 people got out for a little leg stretch and visit. Lotsa little kids. Annoying, but hey, everybody needs a little break. Then they started making themselves at home; and kept it up the whole rest of the night. As in, kids crying, being fed, running around, people laughing and enjoying themselves; people sleeping on the sidewalk... it was just unreal.

And to top it off, Jon had the trots, and electrolyte imbalance, from the day we arrived till the day we left. Simone had it earlier but only for a day and was better when we arrived.

Bill Dyer, who's on his 8th build, says it's the hardest one he's been on.

Fortunately, on the way from Champerico to Xela we stopped for an hour at a lovely hot spring, huge hot pool with natural cliffs as the walls; we floated and looked up at the jungle ferns and vines hanging down towards the pool. We soaked for an hour. At this point we'd already climbed over 1000 feet so the air was much cooler.

And despite the sweat of the build, we did get lots of breaks, sitting in the shade of a tree behind the house and chatting (brokenly) with the family members and habitat staff. They were very pleasant people and that was most enjoyable. And four or five young kids of the neighbourhood, 8-10 years old, dropped by after school each day to help after changing out of their school uniforms, carrying sand or mixing cement in their bare feet!

And our team worked very well together. Six of us at this house; the other six were assigned to another house in a different part of town, not room for 12 on one site.

We also had a great time in Guatemala city before the build, staying at Sandra's Hospedaje and meeting with six different groups of women who are doing amazing work, helping women to organize to improve their situation economically, health, education, etc. We also visited Rigoberta, went to her home for lunch, she was so pleased to see us and had many fond memories about the time she stayed with us in 1987. We met her husband and son, and heard about the Mayan political party she's established.

On Thursday were off to Puerto Barrios or Livingston, and into Belize Friday for some extended R&R.

Love to all, Jon and Simone.

