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TRUSTING YOUR TRAVEL INSTINCTS **by Brenda Elwell, CTC**

After traveling the world for forty years, including twenty of them as a single parent, I have come to trust my gut instincts about travel and where I think my kids and I will find a special experience for our annual family vacation. After some book and Web research, and listening to a few travelers' opinions, I present my ideas to my kids in a family "pow wow" and, with their input, we hammer out a final itinerary together.

One such example was a 1997 ten day summer trip to the Belizean mainland and Tikal, Guatemala. We had read that if we crossed the border by land from Belize to Guatemala we would be surely be beaten, eaten, robbed and raped. We also noted that tour groups spent only a day or two at Tikal National Park, flying in and out of nearby Flores Airport. I had really good feelings about Tikal; my kids and I love national parks, we are interested in history, and the animal life and Mayan temple climbs seemed to be superb. So, contrary to public opinion, we decided to cut a day off our Belizean itinerary and add a third night to Tikal National Park. We also decided to travel overland to Guatemala.

Since we would be crossing a foreign border mid-trip we opted against renting a car and instead hired a local driver and car for our side excursion to Guatemala. We inquired with the locals about the safety of an overland crossing, and, not surprisingly, found that U.S. press accounts were grossly exaggerated. As a precaution, the driver stashed our cash in four different hiding places in the car. My daughter, who had majored in International Business, made certain that each batch of cash was counted and witnessed, before it went in. We were told to keep \$20.00 on our person ready to hand over, if we were stopped and robbed. The three hour drive was completely uneventful.

Tikal National Park was everything we hoped it would be. This was the New York City of the Mayan World: towering temples that seemed to stretch on forever, all nestled in a magnificent jungle setting. It was thrilling to spot the famous ones, those that were featured in such movie epics as Star Wars and the James Bond series. Each morning we would head out for a pre-dawn hike to the top of one of the temples accompanied

overhead by chattering, colorful papagayos (parrots) and, at our feet, such critters as the curious and friendly coatimundi. By late morning we would return to our hotel for lunch and a swim in the pool, while watching the monkeys swing from tree to tree. Late afternoon we were refreshed and back at the ruins.

No matter what the advertisements lead you to believe, there are only three hotels located within Tikal National Park: The Jaguar Inn, the Jungle Lodge, and the Tikal Inn. All are similar in price, style and amenities, with each offering a meal package, a pool, and bungalow accommodations ranging from modest to spartan. You are surrounded by lush jungle with a museum, handicraft shops, and the Mayan ruins only a short walking distance away. For those seeking nightlife or more deluxe accommodations, the town of Flores is only forty minutes by car.

The Tikal generator goes off (and lights go out) at 10:00 PM. After all, this is the jungle. If you are planning an early morning hike, chances are you may not need to set the alarm clock. More than once we were wakened by the 5:00 am clamor of howler monkeys. The kids and I recognized the sound from a previous trip to the Amazon. If we hadn't, I think we would have been too terrified to leave the room until noon. It is hard to believe such little monkeys can create such loud, piercing sounds.

Rusty, but still conversant in Spanish, I quickly made friends with our wait staff at the Jaguar Inn and, on the second day, my son was invited to play in their regional tournament the following day. It was the final set of matches between the hospitality staff (waiters and hotel managers) and the security staff (park rangers, security guards). My daughter was very disappointed that she was not asked, so, with her prompting, I diplomatically explained to our waiter that my daughter was also an experienced soccer player. Without hesitation, the waiter invited her to play as well.

Satisfied with my linguistic and people-to-people accomplishments, I turned to face my two grown children, both of whom now had a look of concern on their faces. It had suddenly dawned on them that our gracious hosts might not have uniforms and shoes to fit them. My son was six feet tall, with my daughter not far behind, and, like many Americans, they have big feet. The Guatemalans, especially those of Mayan descent, although perfectly proportioned, are a petite people, with tiny feet to match.

Late the next morning we followed our hosts down a narrow trail to a huge clearing in the jungle which served as the soccer field. Surrounding the field were dozens of spectators (human and otherwise), a full marimba band, and a smiling Miss Tikal, the local beauty queen. My kids were given their uniforms and soccer shoes, all of which miraculously fit. We soon discovered that women do not play sports in Guatemala but my daughter was easily accepted as "one of the boys" because the Guatemalans had watched American women play soccer on TV. Monique was the only female playing in the tournament that day.

My kids were placed on opposite teams, and after a half hour warm-up, play began. In Guatemala the ball is much lighter than in the States. There are a lot more head shots, far less dribbling, and very little physical contact. As the whistle sounded my son and daughter came charging for the ball, and immediately locked into head-to-head, or should I say, foot-to-foot combat. There was a loud crack as their bodies met, followed by a sudden hush in the crowd, as Monique seized the ball. Even the marimba band stopped playing for a moment. This was followed by a loud cheer, once the Guatemalans recovered from the shock of witnessing a woman play sports as aggressively as a man.

I was busy running around the sidelines tending to my dual tasks of water bearer and sports photographer. After twenty minutes of furious play in the noon day jungle sun, my two kids, now red-faced and dripping with sweat, shrieked across the field at me "How do you say 'Get me outta here' in Spanish?" They were quickly relieved from play. Laying prostrate on the grass, and very respectful of their hosts' stamina under the burning sun, they decided to call it quits for the day.

That night was the monthly regional dance in Tikal National Park. The outdoor museum exhibits were moved aside to make room for a dance floor under the canopy. The national social dance of Guatemala is called La Punta. You stand close to, but apart from, your partner and endlessly undulate your hips. It wasn't hard to learn, which was good, because that was all they played. When we arrived, Monique's entire soccer team lined up to dance with her, while Greg's teammates lined up their single sisters for him. Meanwhile I was pursued by the older men in the crowd, most of whom reached only to my boobs. Not exactly conducive to cheek-to-cheek dancing. Thank God for La Punta.

At 11:00 PM my daughter and I decided to retire for the night. My son, happily guzzling beer with his soccer buddies, indicated he would stay until the dance ended at midnight. As I flopped into bed, I had some concerns about Greg getting back safely to our bungalow. Had he remembered his flashlight? Would he get lost in the pitch-black jungle and get bitten by a snake? I voiced my growing concerns to my daughter who by then was fast asleep. Deciding to let go of my motherly concerns, I did the same.

Shortly before 1:00am, I was awakened by loud footsteps, a light beam flashing about, and a slurred familiar voice saying "Grahshus (Gracias) Señor" several times over. On the way home from the dance, Greg had fallen behind his comrades and wandered off the path. Without his flashlight he had gotten lost. Fortunately the nighttime security guard, with whom I had chatted in Spanish two days earlier, came upon Greg stumbling about in the darkness. Assuming he was my son (we are both tall and blonde), he deposited him safely on my doorstep.

The next morning we said good-bye to all our Guatemalan friends, leaving with sweet memories, great photos, and happy that, once again, we had trusted our travel instincts.