

Happy Holidays - Merry Christmas - Happy New



Year 2004 - 2005

The wheel of life goes round and round, taking us all to unexpected places at unexpected times. That is certainly true for us. We began 2004 by attending midnight mass in Puebla, Mexico. The year was to have ended in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Instead we welcomed in 2005 near our old stomping grounds in New Jersey. If you haven't already learned why from our blog read on to see what happened.

Puebla was the midpoint of our third visit to **Mexico** in a year. We had made a short, two-week sweep from Texas to Arizona in April, 2003 and then a three month deep sweep from Arizona back to Texas from August to late October, 2003. After a month in McAllen, Texas, which sometimes seemed more like an extension of Mexico than an American city, we spent a month getting to Puebla via six charming colonial cities and many interesting pre-Colombian sites, very often driving through mountains with long vistas through crystal clear air.

From Puebla we headed almost due south to Oaxaca and there began a series of visits to the greatest of the greatest of the pre-Colombian sites, starting with magnificent Monte Alban, situated on a fantastic hillside overlooking the city. Oaxaca itself was charming; the dwindling days on our visas made us devote only four days to it. From Oaxaca we went down to the Pacific coast and then turned east and visited the great 1000 m deep Cañon de Sumidero before entering Mayan country and seeing Palenque, Uxmal, and Chitzen Itza. Jan's convinced that of these, Palenque is by far the greatest, but Gerry isn't so sure. Our last few days in Mexico were spent at Lake Bacalar, a small town close to the Belize border where we spent our time pool side and admiring the eponymous lake.

We spent the next six months in **Central America**, chugging along in our Ford Escort, having a pretty easy time of things. **Guatemala's** Tikal, we agree, is the ultimate in Mayan sites, combining romantic ruins, thick jungle, and abundant wildlife. Gerry celebrated his birthday the day after our visit on the shores of nearby Lake Peten Itza. After a month, and only because we were too lazy to extend our visa, we went on to **Honduras**. The high point was

another wonderful Mayan ruin, Copan, followed by the mountain town of Gracias. We skipped El Salvador and went on to **Nicaragua**, which has great tourist potential but is still suffering too much from its Sandinista heritage to yet achieve it. Our best memory is of Franz Orschel, a wonderful man who in his retirement years runs a bed-and-breakfast in Managua. For a week each morning we had a delightful conversation with him and once were his guests on an excursion around his old haunts.

From the length of our stays in Costa Rica and Panama you might think that we drove into the Sea of Molasses. Our intent was to mostly breeze through them. But first in **Costa Rica** we found a wonderful beach hideaway where we stayed a week. Then we found a more beautiful mountain lake hideaway where we stayed a week. Then we got ourselves into the warm embrace of the Aronson family who (thank heavens) wouldn't let us decamp from their oh-so-comfortable home on the outskirts of the capital with its terrific Franco-English library. Eventually we left Costa Rica after six weeks and went on to **Panama**. There we alternated time in the cool mountains (great) and steamier coasts (not great at all). In Panama City we fell into another embrace: that of swimming at the 1930s Olympic pool across from our hotel and attending events at STRI (Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute). We had a great time getting to know the Panama Canal and loved McCullough's book on it, "Path Between The Seas." Near the end we celebrated Jan's birthday with a trip to TGIF's and had a taste of real America while watching ships enter the Canal.

Eventually we said we had to go on. After two serious weeks of looking we decided it was impossible to drive across the break in the Pan American Highway called the Darien Gap and too expensive to ship our car. So in the same week we sold it and found passage on a six-passenger yacht, the Lady Kis, going from Colon to Cartagena. For Gerry it was meant to be the trip of a lifetime. For Jan it seemed to last a lifetime. Constant seasickness rendered unbearable all activities but one: sitting up on deck. Imagine four days of that. Making it even worse our expectations and those of the Spanish owners/crew did not match; we had too much culture clash.

Finally, in the second week of August we arrived in Cartagena, **Colombia**. A magnificent city with a magnificent history. It attracts a lot of international conferences, and with good reason. Having carefully sought local advice we set off south by bus to explore Colombia. We'll just have to say that the Colombian Andes (eastern branch) and the colonial cities of Mompox, Barichara and Villa de Leyva, the churches of Tunja and Bogota, and the many hours looking at Andean scenery were marvelous. As was sitting on the balcony of the Mansion Santa Maria in San Gil and drinking the owner's lip-smacking Colombian-style hot chocolate. **Bogota** was not marvelous, though we have some pleasant memories: we attended an opera and two concerts there, and met some interesting people. The view from the hill above Bogota is marvelous. The most unpleasant memory was Gerry having his pocket picked; fortunately the monetary loss was small.

Ecuador, our next destination, added to our surprise with and enjoyment of the Andes, so much of the highlands being in perpetual spring. We had decided that it was too dangerous to go over land south of Bogota so flew to **Quito**. For us it was a much more pleasant city than Bogota, with several fine squares, many churches, and several very good museums. And, our pleasure was heightened, if you can call it that, by not getting fooled by a potential pickpocket team in Quito; we had learned their *modus operandi* well in Bogota.

From Quito we first went north and saw the province of Imbabura, home to some beautiful volcanoes. We had three good walks, the best being around a high crater lake, all blue. At the end we were greeted by grazing llamas. South of Quito there were more volcanoes, unfortunately usually shrouded by clouds, but we did get views of them and they were magnificent. Most memorable was a three-day trip through canyons to and from Chugchilan and the one-day hike we made there around its mini-Grand Canyon. Coming back we had magnificent views of Cotapaxi, nearly 6,000m high. Perhaps the next most memorable stay was in Baños, a resort town very popular among Ecuadorians. While the town embodies the opposite of architectural splendor it is set among beautiful mountains and we had one of our nicest hotels in a long time. Gerry had a nice morning in which he bicycled down a canyon for 22 km. If he'd continued he would have got to the Amazon. Too bad there wasn't more time.

Throughout the year we were always on the lookout for information on the developing **US presidential race**. First, last, and always, we were Bush supporters. Not blindly, we hope — for example, we didn't approve of the Medicare drug program or unfair tariffs — but we certainly applauded his efforts in Afghanistan and then Iraq, and were

certainly unlikely to support any of the usual anti-competitive economic policies of the Democrats. When it seemed that Howard Dean might get the Democratic nomination we looked forward to a spirited fight in which truly contrasting views would be presented. When John Kerry got the nomination it seemed to us that most Democrats were supporting him because he wasn't Bush. Some of our support for Bush was because he wasn't Kerry, given that we didn't approve of everything Bush did.

A few days before the November 2 election we were in Riobamba, Ecuador, laying plans to make sure we could follow the election coverage on CNN. We surveyed hotels, found three that had CNN, and then went off to Guaranda, in the shadows of 6,310 m Chimborazo, Ecuador's highest mountain. When we found that hotels in Guaranda didn't have cable TV we went back to Riobamba on November 2. We started watching coverage at 7 p.m. As the first east coast polls closed and the hopes of Kerry supporters rose, ours fell. As the evening wore on, and Bush's chances became firmer and firmer, we got happier and happier — we'd escaped the great defeat. At 2 am we went to bed confident.

Ten days later we were farther south in Cuenca, Ecuador, a mid-sized city with lots of charm. After a wonderful day out to see our first Incan ruins, at Ingapirga, we returned to our hotel room to find that **thieves** had stolen our two laptop computers along with all associated cables and accessories from our hotel room throwing our plans into confusion. A moment of great relief came when Jan found her precious jewels and cash stash had not been found by the thieves. We spent hours and hours over three or four days in internet cafes trying to pre-empt any identity theft based on the data on our laptops and then continued our trip south. But fear overwhelmed us and we concluded that the only sure way to protect our assets and the cheapest way to replace our losses was to come back to the United States and take care of as many things as possible in person.

As a result, we flew from Guayaquil, Ecuador to Miami on the Monday after Thanksgiving (Nov. 29) and then on to **Jersey City, New Jersey** where we stayed with our friends Moshe and Cris and their ten-month-old son Uri. While we don't like what brought us here we are happy to be back "home" and even happier to renew old acquaintances and to get to know little Uri. For us he is a charming individual whose enjoyment is not dimmed by our problems. Our time is split between renewing old friendships, indulging in our usual pastimes of TV, newspapers, and books (with Spanish and South American politics suddenly replaced by English and American politics), and battling with the after effects of the theft of our computer.

Just the day after Christmas one of the greatest natural disasters of the last half century took place: the earthquake off Sumatra and then the great tidal wave that struck most of the shores of the Indian Ocean. We, as most of the world, were slow to guess and then slow to learn how great the disaster was. Initially our concern was personal, for Jan's brother Dave and his wife Jhap, who were making their annual year-end trip to the beach at Pattaya, Thailand. At first our worries exceeded our knowledge of geography. Dave and Jhap were on the other side of Thailand and very safe. What happened to those who met their fate in the form of the Tsunami reminds us how lucky we are and makes our small financial setback seem unimportant.

The writing of this letter has extended into January, 2005. In that time we have sorted out our lives a bit more, including getting two sweet new laptops. We have bought a 1GB compact flash card for the multi-card reader we have used since the theft to store Gerry's photos; we now also have a tiny 1GB. password-protected jump drive where Jan stores all of our sensitive account data as well as our website.

Early in 2004 when our minds drifted to coming back to the USA at some unknown date, Gerry thought that he might look for a job. Once here, with the help of Moshe and his friends, Gerry's resume did go around, sometimes to what looked like promising places. But nothing came of it, to Jan's (and even Gerry's) relief as we aren't yet tired of traveling. Now Gerry will get another wish: to celebrate his birthday in Berlin (three years after doing same in Jerusalem). We've arranged an apartment in **Berlin** for February and March. That will be followed by a stay in **Paris** for March 24 through June at our "old digs" — the place where we spent the first part of this journey that started almost six years ago.

And after that? We hesitate to make predictions. We are prone to sudden shifting of course as well as spending much more time than predicted in many places. Since we have never got to southernmost South America, South

Africa, Indonesia, Australia, and Russia, you can easily guess what is on our mind. But the nearness to the Baltic Republics of Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia might draw us in that direction and then on to Russia. Whatever it is, we'll try to inform you via our web site and blog. You can find our website at **www.chandlerbates.com** or just do a search in Google or Yahoo on "chandlerbates xxx" where "xxx" is whatever interests you, e.g. Egypt, our blog, or our car, the Escort. Once we get our new computers organized and settled in Berlin, we'll bring the website up to date.

We hope that you all have had a splendid Christmas and New Year Holiday and that your prospects for 2005 are as promising as ours. As you go down what ever roads lie ahead of you, and take the forks of life, remember that we are wondering about you too and wishing you well. Enjoy 2005.

Jan and Gerry