

Log of High Drama



Acapulco to El Salvador

This log of *S/V High Drama* describes events along the coast from Acapulco, Mexico to Bahia de Jiquilisco, El Salvador including side trips inland. Highlights include more history, negotiations with a nine year old street vendor, observations about sailing at night, and our delightful "discovery" of a beautiful secure marina up a jungle estuary in El Salvador.

Taxco, Mexico



Santa Prisca Church

Before leaving Acapulco and at Ann's urging we took a two day trip inland to Taxco, a place where Mexican artisans fabricate wonderful silver jewelry. Nestled in the mountains at about 5,000 feet, Taxco provided welcome cooling from the tropical climate we have been living in for the last several months. Cortez' troops found the silver at Taxco in 1524 while looking for tin to alloy with copper to make bronze for canons. They appropriated the land for the Crown and worked the mines with generations of Indian forced labor. In 1716 Jose Borda decided to actually pay the miners for their labor and he increased both production and profits. Borda reinvested some of the mines' profits into the community. He built streets, public arches, and a church that is still standing. Unlike previous churches, the church of Santa Prisca allowed and even encouraged the miners to worship

After the revolution in 1821 the mines ran out. In 1929 William Spratling moved from the U.S. to Taxco and began working with local artisans to revive the jewelry fabrication. Now reproductions of the work of Spratling and his students are sought after and command handsome prices. Today Taxco exports many pieces of silver jewelry to places like Scottsdale.



The Mayan Ball Game

The name "Taxco" is derived from the Mayan term "place of the ball game." Tlachtli was a Mayan team game played in a sunken court shaped like an "I". The players batted a small hard rubber ball back and forth and scored by putting the ball through round disks mounted at center court. Although the players wore some protection, they were often wounded by their opponents' shots and sometimes victory went to the team left standing. While the winners could win fortunes, the losers, according to one authority, "had their hearts ripped from their chests on

the centerline stone, and became food for the gods." Indeed, the NBA would be quite a different league with those rules.



The Rules of The Game

Street vendors in Taxco appeared in all ages selling hats, weavings, beads, and items woven from straw. They have a very tough life as far as I can tell, and are very persistent. "No, Gracias." is viewed as "Yes, I definitely want to buy something." After exercising my best sales resistance all day, a young vendor nailed me having a beer in a tavern near the Church of Santa Prisca. This brazen nine year old girl approached seeking to sell a woven straw finger trap. She asked 2 pesos for the trap and would have been delighted to get even a single peso. I told her that I would not pay two pesos and that two pesos was outrageous. I looked at her sternly. Just as she was about to drop to one peso, I told her that I would, however, pay 3 pesos. She very slowly smiled and then looked down, not quite knowing how to respond. Just as she was about to accept 3 pesos, I told her that I would not pay 3 pesos because that amount was outrageous. Now she was visibly confused; she didn't quite know what to say. I told her that I would pay 4 pesos and that was my last offer. She smiled again, looked down, and paused. I sensed that she was weakening. I then said that 4 pesos was too high, but that I would pay 5 pesos, and I really meant it, that this was absolutely my last offer. She grinned from ear to ear, grabbed the 5 pesos in my outstretched hand, handed me the finger trap. She skipped away, no longer confused, content that she had just met the dumbest gringo in all of North America. And perhaps she had.

While we visited Taxco the entire fleet of WV taxis paraded by the church. Each taxi driver decorated his cab and then piled as many of his

family members as he could into the taxi. Then the priest in the church came out and blessed the cab, driver, family and all. This once a year activity should be extended to other forms of transportation in all parts of the hemisphere!



Blessed Taxi

The Sail to Huatulco, Mexico

Describing sailing on a passage has challenged far better writers than me through the ages. But nevertheless, the sail down from Acapulco to Huatulco was special. South and east of Acapulco the population diminishes greatly so very few lights appear on shore. Plus we sailed about 12 miles out. We had very little moonlight, so at night we could not discern the horizon. The haze made the stars dim and the water was inky black. But, the phosphorescence in the water made the wake behind the boat and the mid-ship wake shine a bright white. The only visual reference for where we were going was a compass.

Ann had taken the toughest watch from 12:00AM to 3:00AM while I slept. When I took over I knew that this inkiness would soon cease in a few hours. My eyelids were heavy. All of a sudden torpedos came shooting straight for the boat. We were making 6.5 knots and these torpedos appeared to be closing with us at 20 knots or more. The first four torpedoes headed for our mid-ship. At the last second they swerved and paralleled our course and shot ahead of us. I heard a whoosh and saw the shiny black outline of a jumping dolphin about ten feet off to port. She snuck a breath while she was up and then rushed on ahead. More and more dolphins charged the boat, only to veer off and run parallel for a short distance. Then they peeled off at a 45 degree angle in formations of two to four at high speed in front of us, only to return again. The show continued for over an hour.

On a moonless hazy night you can't make out the dolphins themselves, only the phosphorescence that they excite. That night the phosphorescence was brilliant. Their trails continued to shine for several seconds after they passed. The boat ghosted along making almost no sound. The dolphins made a smooth whooshing sound when they surfaced and snuck a quick breath.

I've never had a show like that before. While we have had dolphins come and play in our wake, I have never seen so many for so long. And that is a taste of the mystery of sailing at night.



La Roja & Dredge

Huatulco, Mexico

Huatulco, Mexico, has nine beautiful bays. It is hot, but the primary bay in which we are anchored is not great for swimming. The Mexican Navy is dredging this bay, and the only reason that we have stayed is that this bay is most convenient to the trips into town that we have had to make. We received some oil and fuel filters for our Mercedes Benz diesel engine from DHL and we also sent our watermaker pump back to Sausalito, CA for repair. We know the area quite well now, especially the DHL office. The young woman who works there, Mary Lou, has a world class smile.

The Trip Around the Tehuantepec

We left Huatulco, Mexico and crossed the Golfo de Tehuantepec, a bay formed at an isthmus where Mexico narrows. It can be a rough two day and two night passage. The gap in the Sierra Madre Mountains at that

point venturis the trade winds coming across from the Caribbean. Just as we reached the head of the gulf, at a valley carved out by a river, the wind started to pipe up. By about midnight it was blowing 30 knots in the direction we were heading. The strategy for crossing this gulf is to have "one foot on the shore", which is an exception to all generally accepted sailing rules, all of which mandate that sea room is desirable in a gale, and one should be as far from shore as possible. That means you travel according to the depth at 30-50 feet, less than 1/4 mile off the beach, a bit hairy at night. This is not a lee shore, however, because the wind is blowing away from it. When we moved in closer to shore in early light, the heavy swell from the Pacific rolled into the beach from the west, broke on the beach, and the 30 knot wind from the east blew foam and sand back out toward us. At daylight we set sail (double reefed main). We had a great ride with no waves that close to shore. We arrived safely in Puerto Madero with a sense of relief that although we had 30 knot winds, we did not have a real Tehuatepecker, which produces huge seas, and 35-50 knot or higher winds.

We spent our last night in Mexico in Puerto Madero and had a celebratory happy hour with the other four boats (***Adventures***, ***Catmandu***, ***La Roja***, and ***Orinoco Flow***) who had crossed at about the same time.

Easter Weekend in Puerto Quetzal, Guatemala

We fortunately sailed most of the way from Madero Mexico to Puerto Quetzal, (near San Jose), Guatemala. Just as Ann was raising the new flag on the Guatemalan border, we caught a good sized sierra, a fish that looks like a Northern Pike with measles and tastes even better. After an overnight sail we anchored in the Guatemalan Navy base at Puerto Quetzal. Ann served delicious sierra dinner to ***Orinoco Flow*** and we went to bed for a good 10 hour sleep. These overnight passages deprive us old farts of our badly needed rest.

Next we robbed a cash machine for some local currency, quetzals, which we promptly spent to sample the local brew known as Gallo.

Antigua, Guatemala



Definitely not a Mercedes!

The Bus Ride

For four and a half hours we rode a chicken bus inland to the colonial city of Antigua, Guatemala. The price was 14 quetzals, or about \$2 US. I was disappointed because the token chicken on our bus was already dead. The chicken resided in a lady's lap in the first row, however, so there was no doubt that we were on the right bus! Of course, it was a little crowded. There were 11 people in my row, if you count the suckling infant. I was standing in the aisle, occupying the area of two one dollar bills. After the first block, I started to feel a bit claustrophobic and asked the driver to stop so I could get off. Neither the driver nor his two assistants would acknowledge my request. Maybe it was just my bad Spanish, but I rather think that once they have a live fare on board, nothing will prevent them from collecting it. They ignored my request and we pressed on with considerable speed.

Buses comprise the primary means of transportation for the masses in Mexico, and Central America. Entrepreneurs buy U.S. school busses and then paint them in all manner of bright colors. A Crucifix is always painted inside above the driver's head, and frequently outside on the back of the bus. The windshield is always painted so that the driver can only see out of a six inch slit. Classic icons such as Woody Woodpecker and Bugs Bunny, adorn the remainder of the bus. Quite often the imagery is intermingled, so that Bugs Bunny may be adjacent to a portrait of the Virgin Mary, or a Christ on the Cross.

Each driver has an assistant, whose job it is to hawk passengers, collect fares, and convince people that there is lot's of additional room. Some assistants work their way back through the bus collecting fares, then exit onto a ladder out the back window, crawl forward on the roof over a four foot deep layer of cargo, and then pop back into the bus again through the front door after climbing down stepping on the rear view mirror. This trick is done while the bus is in motion.

The City of Antigua

When the Spanish arrived in the area in 1521, they established Antigua as their Colonial headquarters governing Chiapas (now part of Mexico), Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. There is still much colonial architecture left in the city. The 23 tribes of Guatemalan Indians, are still getting the short end of the economic stick, however. They comprise 70% of the population and did not become nearly as integrated into the mestizo population group as in Mexico where only 10% of the people are Indians.



Mask of Devil

Antigua is an international destination for tourists, particularly those who want an immersion course in Spanish for a month. There are more than twenty language schools.

Antigua had the best bookstores since San Diego and some very good restaurants. (I bought "*I, Rigoberta Menchu; An Indian Woman in Guatemala*." Menchu won the Nobel Peace prize in 1992 and was active in framing the peace here in 1998. The book provides an excellent primer about the plight of the Indians and their alliance with poor ladinos to try to get non discriminatory treatment.) Actually, the city feels like Florence, Italy with very old streets and each hotel and

restaurant is built around a small courtyard, usually with a statue of the Virgin overlooking the fountain.

I left Antigua thinking that we have to return to this beautiful place and learn more about it. Not only the Mayan culture and the recent political strife, but I'm also fascinated by San Simon. He is a rum drinking cigar smoking Indian with a cowboy hat and dark glasses who actually is an anti Catholic effigy worshipped (well, they put candles, rum and cigars in front of his alter and pray to him- I think that's worship) by a small but vocal number of Mayans and a few burned out hippies.

On to El Salvador

We are through Tehuantepeckers and firmly into Papagayo winds now. They hit 25 knots on the nose today. Oh well, sailors either have too much or too little wind. Or in the wrong direction.

Marina Barillas in Bahia de Jiquilisco, El Salvador

We arrived in Jiquilisco Bay, El Salvador today. You won't find it in the cruising guides, because Marina Barillas just opened in February. What a beautiful spot! You call on the radio and they send a panga to guide you through some really hairy breakers on either side of a sand bar. The water becomes calm and you look up at volcanoes in the distance. You travel up a jungle estuary about 12 miles and there are some mooring cans out in front of a small restaurant. The staff has a "typical" meal of tortillas, chorrizo, and cheese waiting for you, as well as a cold Salvadorian beer. You just know that you will like it here.



***High Drama* at Barillas Marina**

El Salvador, like other Central American countries, seeks tourism as a means of acquiring desperately needed currency for use in foreign

trade. Since the country has only been out of armed civil strife for a few years, the people with some property to protect do so with guns. The army still patrols municipalities, but it appears that people do not regard the army as a sufficient deterrent. When we stopped in a remote mountain village named Berlin at a tiny tienda (small grocery store), there was a fellow at the check out counter carrying an Israeli sub-machine gun called an Uzi. Of course, we counted our change quickly and then moved on!

On April 29 we went ashore for a potluck with the marina owner's family and a few friends as well as a few other cruisers.. The assembled group was delightful and they sang happy birthday to me in three languages! Ann made a chocolate birthday cake that was an enormous hit with cruisers and Salvadorians alike.

More Bahia de Jiquilisco in El Salvador

A Visit to the Pentecostal Church

Of course, we have befriended the marina staff as well as the owners. There is quite a social gap between the staff and owners in Salvadorian terms, but nomadic American cruisers seem to move among different social groups quite easily. Yesterday we rode by van to Usulután, a town about 10 miles away, to do some shopping. Returning, the driver took us by his house and next we stopped at a Pentecostal Church where there was a birthday party going on for a fellow who turned 100 that day. The locals, very poor by most standards, deluged us with fresh sandwiches and baggies containing fresh strawberry juice and milk all mulched together. We were the first Americans to visit the town. The locals stared at us and some snuck pictures. They received us royally outside of the church while the rhythm of the preacher rocked on over the loudspeaker inside.



Juan at Marina Barillas

We are currently waiting for a part for our watermaker. The couple on **La Roja** wants to rent a car and tour the coast and then some inland spots for a week. We think that we will do it. That will mean that we will break our buddy boating with **Orinoco Flow**, a boat with whom we have travelled since early April.

The rainy season is arriving in the tropics. Last night it rained for a couple of hours or more. It is cooler this morning. It is Sunday and the tradition on High Drama is Beethoven and Bloodies.

Hope that all is well with you.

Jeff & Ann Brooke

S/V

High Drama

