

An exceptional trip to Guatemala in 2022...

Background

In some ways, every trip I make to Guatemala, my country of birth, is special. But this one, a little over 3 weeks spanning the second half of July and early August 2022 ... was exceptional. It had been 8 years since I visited. The last time in Feb. 2014, it was to honor my father's will, to bury him at the family mausoleum in Guatemala City. Between work, Covid, and every other possible excuse, I had not made it back post funeral, even though I have a wonderful extensive family in Guatemala.

It started in earnest when both of my sisters, who had made recent visits, mentioned that my twin aunts were getting on in years. Covid-19 still raged, variant after variant appeared, and I dithered. The final kick, was a short email from my dear cousin Sofia, to POR FAVOR come to the wedding of her eldest son. She had a problem. One of her younger sisters, my brilliant cousin Lucia, did not have a dance partner for the wedding party. My services were REQUIRED, or so I was firmly told. I was to show up, and dance at Sofia's son's wedding all night, as Lucia's partner. I don't dance particularly well, but at a wedding with 100+ people, where I would slink away and be forgotten, I could safely gyrate without rhythm.

First week



Tia Blanca



Tia Laly

I travelled to Guatemala in mid-July 2022. The first week I spent carefully visiting families, dodging Covid, less I be the one to infect Johannes, the groom. Worse yet, would have been to infect my elder twin Aunts, who suffered a range of medical problems. (For those who read this in the future, the Covid-19 pandemic was particularly lethal to older folks. Millions died.) One particular pleasure, was to enjoy a traditional Guatemalan breakfast, eggs, refried beans, plantain, and tortillas, with my aunt Blanca and her nurse. I would entertain them with happy

stories of my previous day's activities, from the far end of the table. Another pleasure was to visit in the afternoon, her twin sister, and repeat some of the same wearing a mask.

The first weekend in "Guate", I was invited by my cousin Sofia to see a private art exhibition of works by her daughter Eileen. Eileen is a 19 year-old prolific artist, who started painting when she was 13. She is now working on a self-designed degree, encompassing graphic arts and more at a university. I was pleased but self-conscious when she asked me to mentor her with photography. Apparently, as part of her art program, she has to find mentors for various subjects. I agreed to mentor her.

On Saturday, we went to the exhibition. Eileen presented the 22 paintings on exhibit. My sister commented on a number of pieces after each presentation, but I stayed silent. After the exhibition, I told Eileen three things. First, I was speechless, completely blown away by her art. Second, I was very impressed by the depth and maturity of her work. I'm not sure what I expected, but both technique and subject... were way beyond what I might have imagined. Third, I was not sure what I could offer as a mentor. Chatting with my brother-in-law, we agreed that at best, I might be able to share some mechanical, photography techniques. But artistically, I would more likely learn from Eileen, than the other way around.



the artist and her works

After the exhibit I rode back with Sofia, who was understandably stressed by the upcoming wedding. One stress resolved itself, her son the groom, tested positive for Covid-19. Rumors swirled about a bachelor's party, hanging out with infected friends, but hey, at least it was not that got him sick. Fortunately, he had a mild case, with just enough time to recover prior to the wedding. In one way, it was funny. His mom, was much calmer the day after he tested positive. In typical clever fashion, she had already calculated that he had just enough days to recover. Additionally, the priest had still agreed to marry the couple, albeit it with masks. One bitter-sweet photo I was shown, was the groom and bride practicing their wedding waltz, separated by a glass window. She moving gracefully outside in the garden, him in a room in isolation.

My sister, my brother-in-law, and my niece were not so lucky. They tested positive for Covid just days before the wedding. They also had to isolate. One sad memory from the trip, was seeing my sister walking around very much alone, avoiding family members. I know she would have loved to visit and hug.

One of the ways I dodged Covid, was to bird alone within the family compound during the middle of the week, as family members worked, attended school, etc. For me, Birding is not an activity. It is a state of mind, where I try to learn as much as I can from the local avifauna. Birds are a continuous source wonder as they go about their daily life. Guatemala, with 670+ species recorded species in 2022, was birding territory that I had not really soaked up. In the roughly 2 weeks that I was on the family compound, we identified roughly 30 species, of some 40 that I saw. One morning, I chanced upon my cousin Maria and Jose birding. It was quite fun to bird with them, and later with other family, to jointly try to identify species.



Cinnamon-bellied Flowerpiercer



Lesson's Motmot

Although I did not leave the family compound much, one weekend my cousin Ana Luisa invited me to lunch at their home in the city. But prior, she had promised her son and daughter that they would visit a bookstore. I was invited to come along. It was a pleasure to talk with Ana Luisa while we browsed books. I did not know that such a fine bookstore existed in Guatemala! Another surprise was the intellectual depth of her university age son Nacho, who was interested in books by Naom Chomsky and other philosophers. Nacho later also showed me some clothing that he had artistically altered, exhibiting a creative side that I had not imagined.

The Wedding

Once the wedding day came, it was time to prepare for my task. I dutifully put on formal shoes, a suit, long sleeve shirt, and a tie, (I hate ties!) and attended the wedding. I accompanied Lucia and her two sons. Her husband is no longer with us, so I helped her son with the knot in his tie. We attended a very formal, solemn Catholic wedding. The priest explained the sanctity of the occasion. A very nice ceremony, although the rain came down hard at times. I felt bad for the young friends of the couple. A few had been evicted from the church, relegated to a windy tent outside. Older family members like myself had been given preferential seating. Once the service was over, an impromptu photo session developed. Eventually, the couple walked out of the church to cheers, congratulations and white petals thrown from the crowd. A very happy ritual!



Bride, groom, sisters, and brothers

Following the church wedding, came a fancy, delicious dinner and then my assigned task. I danced with my cousin Lucia as much as I could. Additionally, I set a goal to dance at least once, with ALL of my 7 cousins present. Grade: B-. One cousin got away, and most I danced with very briefly, although I even danced with the daughters of some of my cousins! However, Lucia got the bulk of my attention. The general impression from those I asked, was that I fulfilled Sofia's order. I did not ask Sofia directly, but I caught her smile of approval once, as I enjoyed pirouetting with Lucia. Let's hope I met Sofia's expectations! I'll put it this way, my shirt was completely soaked with perspiration from dancing. After a very fun time, Lucia, her two wonderful sons, and I left shortly before midnight.



Lucia with her sons Sebastian and Francisco

Yaxha

After the wedding, it was time to go to the Mayan ruins of Yaxha and Tikal. Both complexes of ruins are in El Peten, which lies partly in the Yucatan Peninsula. El Peten is the largest "Departamento" in Guatemala, equivalent to a small US state or Canadian province. Peten is hot (>32 C / 90 F in daytime), muggy (~100% humidity), and in the north-east, a dense jungle, albeit shrinking due to development pressure. There are over 60,000 Mayan structures located throughout the Guatemalan Yucatan. Most are unexcavated. However, Tikal is one of the most impressive, best-known, and most restored Mayan cities. It has many pyramids, ceremonial centers and more. It is an impressive UNESCO World Heritage Site. By comparison, Yaxha is more compact, less touristy and in some ways feels more authentic to me.

Due to my sister's family health status, I flew alone in the morning to Flores and then on to Yaxha by car. I spent about a half day on my own, birding near a rustic ecolodge we stayed at, on the edge of a natural lagoon. It was great to be very confused by a myriad of birds, with no idea what the bird family was, much less species. I resolved to get up early next morning and take pictures for future research. A pleasant surprise at the ecolodge: it was mostly occupied by 15+ folks attending a workshop given by "Grupo de Cocodrileros de Guatemala". A tiny (5? person) new organization working to preserve crocodiles, an important keystone species. I knew my sister would be pleased by this development. One happy side effect, our rooms had been upgraded, so the lodge could accommodate the "Cocodrileros" and workshop attendees.

Another notable at the ecolodge, was my introduction to an all-natural pedicure. This was my first pedicure ever. The fish in the lagoon nibbled on dead skin scraps on my feet, when I dipped my legs in the water and stayed still. I remember my aunt Blanca mentioning something decades ago, about having experienced this in the "Lago de Izabal", when she was much younger. My only complaint was when the fish attempted to eat flesh, where I had fresh scrapes. Dead skin they could have, bleeding flesh not so much!



prey / author



predators / pedicurists

Around 8:30pm, my sister and niece showed up. I kept them company as they enjoyed a late vegetarian dinner, but said nothing about the Cocodrileros. I did promise my sister to wake her up to go birding the next morning. I tried twice but she did not stir. However, when I left to bird around 5:45am, one of the attendees of the Cocodrileros workshop was already starting his own bird walk. I asked if I could join. Turns out, he was a professional bird guide! In short, I got my own bird tour for about 2 hours. We saw, heard, and/or identified some 30+ species of birds, most of which were "lifers" for me. (A "lifer" is a new bird species that a birder has never seen before.) We came back roughly at 8am so he could continue his workshop.

Having now caught up with my sister and niece, we enjoyed an ~8:30am breakfast. Our choice was "tradicional" (eggs, plantain, black beans, and homemade bread) or "americano" (some

fruit and toast). Tradicional was the way to go! The Cocodrileros launched into the next presentation of the workshop as we ate. It was a joy to see my sister's huge grin, as she realized what was happening. After breakfast, she stayed on to listen to their talk for a bit.

The ecolodge was located on a stretch of land sandwiched between two lagoons. One of the lagoons has a small island with a few Mayan structures, with some three restored. Around 10:30am, my sister hired a "lanchita" to visit the island and explore. We saw about 5 crocodiles on our way over and back. After visiting the ruins, our boat driver mentioned that he had seen a tiger heron on the other side of the island. He took us around, but we did not spot the heron.

As a light rain began to fall, I remember feeling so happy. I was in the middle of nowhere in Central America, with my sister and niece on the "Laguna Yaxha". We returned to the ecolodge for lunch, which my sister grumbled was a waste of time. My niece and I both objected! Eating WAS a good use of time! Once fed, we began the hike to the Yaxha archeological site, about 3 kilometers away. My sister sought out a guide on site, and we enjoyed an afternoon learning about Yaxha and its structures. As the sun set and night settled in, we walked back to the lodge, serenaded and visited by Common Pauragues (a nightjar species verified via recording), cicadas, and other creatures. The next morning, I birded a bit more, ate, and checked out for Tikal.

Tikal

The ruins of Tikal are situated in a large, protected national park. As we crossed into the park, the vegetation changed from fields cleared for agriculture and cattle, into dense jungle. At the park entrance we confirmed the good news. My brother-in-law would be joining us in the afternoon at our hotel in Tikal. Tikal is an impressive world heritage site. However, like many tourist spots in 2022, it was still recovering from the pandemic induced collapse in travel. Part of the reason I guess, for the poor roads in. We met with my brother in-law, and agreed to visit the ruins after lunch and hotel check-in.



Tikal Central Plaza

We walked into the ruins through a less travelled road, bordered by thick jungle. As expected, birds were initially sparse in the hot afternoon. But I still managed to pick up a number of lifers, some of which I still need to identify as of this writing. The structures in Tikal are imposing. The central plaza, about the size of a football field, is bordered on four sides by many very large stone structures, including two tall pyramids facing each other, aligned east to west. My sister and I climbed up the pyramid that tourists are allowed to ascent, and spent time looking out over the expanse of jungle. Many structures and birds were visible from on high. One particular treat, was eye level views of multiple Collared Aracari, a black, colorful toucan, found throughout tropical lowlands in southern Mexico, Central America and northern South America. As the afternoon set, I left the group to bird, working my way back to the hotel.



Collared Aracari



Keel-billed Toucan

The next morning, my sister and family woke up early at 3:30am to join a sun-rise tour. I stayed behind, ostensibly to sleep. But by 5:30am I was back in the field birding. The park pass I had, was apparently only good with a guide, so I birded the various accessible grounds, photographing a Keel-billed Toucan among others. As the morning wrapped up, my niece and brother in-law found me on the hotel grounds, photographing Montezuma's Oropendolas! This large black bird, has a colorful face and yellow tail. I've thought about this bird for decades, but did not know if I would ever see one.

After breakfast and checkout, we left Tikal grounds around 10:30am to ride back to Flores. Flores is a small island town in an offshoot of Lake Peten Itza. We walked the perimeter of Flores, stopping along the way for fresh drink. I enjoyed freshly made "tamarindo". Then it was on to the airport for our flight back to Guatemala City. I had mixed feelings leaving Peten. The birding, ruins and company, was some of the best I've ever enjoyed. But I would not miss the heat and humidity of the Central American tropical lowlands.

Back in Palo Alto, the last week.

We found out a bit of bad news during our visit to Tikal. My aunt Blanca and her nurse had tested positive for Covid. Fortunately, neither was seriously ill. I firmly believe that their being

vaccinated helped. However, one minor side effect, was that I could no longer have breakfast with them. Even though I regularly tested for Covid during the trip, (negative results three times), and wore masks outside the compound, I feared that I would become a disease vector, as I visited different families during lunch and dinner. All of my family hosted me at one point or another for meals. Renata on Monday, Elvira on Wednesday, ... I thoroughly enjoyed those visits. The food was wonderful, and the company even more so. Breakfast, I took alone the third week, in the A frame casita on the compound. This property is owned by my cousin Ana Luisa and her fun husband Pepe. They very generously let me stay there for more than two weeks. So comfy. Twice I even hosted my cousin Lucia and two sons for dinner!

We returned from Tikal Thursday afternoon. Friday morning, Johannes, the husband of Sofia, asked me if I wanted to see a beach in El Salvador. Sofia also encouraged me to go. Johannes is on the board of directors of a modest resort on the Pacific coast of El Salvador. He was driving to El Salvador Friday afternoon, and would drive back Saturday afternoon after morning meetings. I felt torn. I had a dinner invitation from Ana Luisa, Pepe and one of their daughters. I wanted to go to El Salvador, but I felt bad for my cousin's daughter Carla Maria. Although immune compromised fighting cancer, Carla Maria was making an effort to host my sister, her family, and I for dinner. Given their bout with Covid, my sister's family understandably did not feel comfortable attending. Now, I would be bowing out. However, after a frank discussion with Ana Luisa and Pepe, they felt I should take the opportunity to visit El Salvador and skip dinner. Another concern was that I had promised Helmut and his girlfriend Gemma (Helmut is a son of Sofia), that I would take them birding around 6:30am Saturday morning. I asked if we could delay until Sunday morning, which they graciously accepted. So, I was clear to go to El Salvador.

El Salvador

Before this trip, I had only landed in El Salvador's international airport on the way to other destinations. Otherwise, I'd never been in country. El Salvador is well known for great beaches, but I had never been on them. I'd also never driven by car from Guatemala City to El Salvador's coast. We left around 2:30pm on Friday. Traffic was rough leaving Guatemala City, and around the city of San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador. The roads varied from kilometers of excellent modern four lane highways, to potholed messes near and through towns. The trip took about 6 hours. We arrived at night, had dinner and went to bed.

The next morning, I got up early and birded as was my custom. Still more lifers to identify from images. A great problem to have! A fun highlight birding was a Ferruginous Pygmy Owl that I've know from the US. Around 8am, I enjoyed breakfast and chatted with the wife of another director. We ate pupusas, beans, plantain, and more. Yum!! After breakfast I strolled down to a black sand beach on the Pacific Ocean. Ah... warm ocean water on my feet! What a luxury! I'm familiar with the cold California Current, which flows from Alaska down the western coast of the US, along with the cold-water upwelling on the Monterey Bay where I live. In my experience, the Pacific is COLD, but not in El Salvador. I could have dived into the water, but was nervous about leaving my hotel key, passport, wallet, and more on the beach.



Beach on the Pacific in El Salvador

I met up with the others for lunch. We enjoyed a leisurely delicious meal on a promenade above the Pacific. Then it was time to drive back to Guatemala. The ride to Guatemala was uneventful. Traffic was a bit lighter. Similar to our drive down, formalities on the border were minimal, about 5 minutes long. There is a bridge over the border, which is a deep ravine and river below. El Salvador is physically smaller than Guatemala, and felt more densely populated. Jose later confirmed that with data from the internet.

Birding with the next generation.

On Sunday as promised, I met Helmut and Gemma to bird the family compound around 6:30am. It was a pleasure. I lent Gemma my binocs and we saw various species. When birds were sparse, I entertained with birding factoids and techniques. After a few hours, I took them to the casita, where we researched in books what we had seen. With the books and photos, we confirmed the identification of several species, and reviewed their ecology. Helmut asked if we could bird again. I was pleased. Repeat business is one of the best indicators of a good experience! We again met the next day and saw even more species, including a lifer for me, two Black-vented Orioles. All in all, we saw over 20 species in two days. One species I was particularly glad to share, was the Northern Emerald Toucanet. Different family members had seen and mentioned this species to me. I was happy to share it with local family, and point out the exact tree where it occasionally fed.



Northern Emerald Toucanet

Last day

My last full day in Guatemala was bitter-sweet. During the trip, I had mentioned to Ana Luisa that I wanted to visit my father's grave, when an afternoon looked available. The last day, my cousin Elvira, asked if I wanted to accompany her to the cemetery in the morning. I very gratefully accepted. It was an hour drive with traffic. By my choice, we only stayed about 10 minutes, but I was able to visit not only my father's grave, but also my grandmother's, my uncle/godfather's, and Lucia's husband's. I'm not religious, but to me, these family members still live in some of my most cherished memories.



Pa's and Lela's grave



Tio Luis and Rodrigo's grave

The afternoon was spent with Lucia doing needed paperwork. She helped enormously for many hours. Dinner was with my cousins Maria and Louise and their families. The food; beans, plantain, rice, squash, and stewed fruit (dulce), could not have been better. However, the company outshone the food. The next day, it was an early ride to the airport, with many thanks to my cousin Elvira. Then unremarkable flights home.

Aftermath

As I wrote at the beginning, every trip to Guatemala feels special. This trip was the first time that my Uncle Luis was no longer with us. I'd been warned that the trip might feel very different. My aunts are both over 80 and deal with health issues. Some of my generation of 12 "primo hermanos" are grandparents, or in my case, a grand uncle. However, I still felt an extraordinary, hard to describe, warmth and generosity from all of my family in Guatemala. To put it mildly, I was "muy, muy, consentido". I've been home for a few weeks, and words still fail me. I can't thank all the family enough. Among many, Felipe deserves a shoutout for picking me up at the airport and various other rides. Muchas Gracias Felipe!!!

I wrote these words to safeguard these wonderful memories. They may not be 100% factual, but they are what I remember. A few times these last few years, I've thought about how to detach from humanity. Humans are not my favored species. Yet family members repeatedly reminded me, of the wonder and warmth that can still be found in the human condition.

Oh, and there are still over 700 photos to review and edit from the trip!

Pete Solé
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