

Journey to Xela

I am first to board the waiting bus. But as I stand at the open door I hesitate. I pause to take a final look at what is Antigua. I hope to remember this beautiful cartoon coloured city. I'm sure I will be back. Someday. I just don't know when. Hopefully my fond memories will not fade like a dream.

As I lean forward and step into what seems like a can with wheels I wonder if there are enough seats. Our luggage has already been stored on the roof. It is stacked in the shape of a tiny Mayan pyramid. With every person that clambers aboard the bus sinks lower until, it seems, there is little if any play in the suspension. To ease my consternation I tell myself this vanbus looks to be in better shape than ninety five percent of the vehicles that I've seen in Guatemala. I pray this may be a good thing.

I have no idea if in Guatemala there are seat belt laws, or air pollution laws, or motorcycle helmet laws, or stop sign laws, but if there are no one seems to obey them, including our driver. He hoisted himself in, did not bother to fasten the buckle, and off we went.

The bus ride took the better part of a day. Thankfully I had obtained a much desired window seat allowing me a clear view of scenic Guatemala. But a window seat can have its drawbacks, for the sun, still low, shone in upon me and the warmth made me drowsy. I had slept poorly the night before. My head bobbed and I struggled to remain awake.

Gears ground and suspension clunked with every bump in the road. I fretted and worried we were overloaded for the bus groaned and moaned as we inched our way up the face of a mountain. If this is the best we can do this is going to be one long mother of a ride. As we skirted the top of the mighty peak a snore like rumble seemed to awaken me out of my drooling slumber. A volcano erupted somewhere in the distance behind us. I turned to see a mushroom cloud rising high into the sky. Lava appeared to pour across the very road we had just traversed. All around us the ground shook, pavement cracked and lifted, and yet, like the proverbial row boat, the bus merrily rolled along.

For a time the clouds were as thick as thieves and we could not see the way forward. And the air so thin we could hardly catch our breath. Then, without warning, the road began to descend so rapidly I had a falling sensation. The over crowded bus picked up speed. I feared the tread-bare tires would blow at any moment and we would hurtle over the edge to our deaths. We squealed in unison like the team we were as the rotund little vehicle dodged potholes and sped around bends so sharp, so tight, the two inside wheels lifted off the black top. Yet almost before we knew it the road began to straighten and the land began to level and soften. The bus trundled on.

We entered a vast savanna completely void of people and homes. These sprawling empty plains were carpeted with a towering grass whose pod like tips shimmered in the faint breeze. The threatening reeds caverned the road in one long dark continuous shadow and it seemed inclined to swallow our tiny caravan. Yet the bus traveled on.

We motored silently through overgrown jungle and sailed like a clipper ship over parched desert. We came to a promontory where stood crumbling old ruins constructed, I am told, by a sapient feathered Quetzal like bird that predate humans by one hundred thousand years. At some point we stopped at a roadside cafe that was merely good, certainly not great, and, I kid you not, their bathrooms were clean and spacious.

Hats off to our bus driver who was courageous if not composed. He kept his eyes on the road throughout and I never once saw his face. He was nonplussed by the journey and took it all in stride as if it was just another day at the office. A toast to you my friend, for a job well done.

We had made it, without mishap or incident. In spite of sleeping for a good portion of the trip it was still a long day of travel. I fell out of the bus exhausted. We all did. We hoisted our luggage onto our backs and dragged ourselves into our new accommodations, the hotel Casa del Viajero, Quetzaltenango. Better get used to it, it's home for the next eight days. Xela, we have arrived.