

INTRODUCTION

"The sweetest fruit is at the end of the branch!" has always been one of my favorite sayings. The way I interpret it is, "In order to taste the very best of life, you must be willing to take some risks." That saying seemed to apply when the thought of experiencing Central America first popped into my head a number of years ago. I don't know quite how many years it was there before the adventure finally happened in 2004. But I do remember that those years were full of stories of terrible roads, war, banditos, military and police brutality, rapes, and the financial rapes against the people by some of the various dictator-type governments. There were also the stories where people said how beautiful the countries were, how friendly the people were, the delicious foods, and great music. Definitely the stories seemed contradicting. I made up my mind, and I was finally ready to take the risks. I was hoping that we would find the better of the experiences. But in a motorhome, for ten months?

I suppose I should start at the beginning. Being a Sagittarius, I've always had traveling blood in my veins. It all began a few days before my eighteenth birthday, in 1958. I joined the United States Navy and went off to "see the world." I was only in for one hitch. Being very independent-minded did not fit well with the requirements of military life. But during that time, I did travel extensively throughout the North Atlantic where we crossed the Arctic Circle. We also cruised in the Mediterranean Sea, and the Caribbean Sea areas.

While in the Navy, I had gotten married. In the early 1960's, I came by my first "RV." It was an International panel delivery-type truck that I converted into a camper, complete with beds, stove, a porta-potty, and, even a homemade generator that used a gasoline lawnmower engine, belted to an automobile generator. It was pretty basic, but it worked just fine. I had the "RV" painted a pretty dark metallic green, and had a sign painted on both sides that proudly proclaimed, "The Weekend Wanderer." Thus named because I had to work during the week, but on the weekends it was "get-away" time. I used it for several years exploring the New England States where we lived.

The early 60's also marked the time RV's were first being manufactured commercially. It was also the time of when John Steinbeck built a homemade camper on the back of his pick-up truck. He hit the road with his dog traveling around the United States and wrote his wonderful book, "Travels with Charlie."

In 1970 I got divorced, and somehow the "Weekend Wanderer" found a new owner. In that year, I made a new friend at work who taught me how to ride a motorcycle. So I continued my RV'ing on my motorcycle with a tent and sleeping bag. After all, it was still "camping." Throughout the decade of the 1970's, I took extensive motorcycle trips all along the eastern coast of the United States and Canada, all the way from Newfoundland down to Florida. In late 1979, I moved to Southern California in search of "new horizons."

In 1980, while I still had a motorcycle, I acquired a tent trailer and shortly after that took a job in the State of Washington. Because of the rainy climate, I traded the tent trailer for a used 11 foot, hard-shell trailer to tow behind my pick-up truck. In 1987, I bought a new 18 foot travel trailer, a used Chevy Suburban, and continued my explorations of the western coast of the United States and Canada.

In September, 1995, I made a rather quick decision to retire. I put my home and business up for sale, turned 55 on December 5th, and on December 22nd, 1995, I hit the road. I began my full-timing life style of wandering around the United States.

In 1997, I joined WIN (Wandering Individuals Network), the youngest average-aged and most active RV singles group in the United States.

In the winter of 1998-1999, I spent six months with some WIN friends in Baja California, Mexico. Several had small four-wheel drive, jeep-like vehicles, which we used to explore remote areas. I found out in a hurry that my Chevy Suburban was not a four-wheel drive---and I wanted one! It was then that I knew it was time for another change. The small four-wheel drives are not strong enough to pull a trailer, so I began my search for a new rig-combination that would ultimately make a trip to Central America---as soon as I found the courage to do it! In August of 1999, I found a mint 1983, 23.5 foot, Class A Suncrest Motorhome that suited my needs perfectly. Then I found a mint 1984 Ford Bronco II that also suited my needs perfectly. I was now ready to do some serious deep-country RV'ing.

In 2001, I did another six month winter in the Baja. All the while, I continued to hear all these conflicting stories about Central America. Somewhere along the way, I realized I could not stand this unknowing feeling any longer---I had to go to Central America!

At our WIN Thanksgiving Gathering of 2002, I stood up in front of about 150 of my fellow WIN'ers and announced, "I'm planning a trip to Central America and if you're interested, come and talk to me." **The die was cast!**

In the audience was a fellow WIN'er by the name of Bob Gambol who came to me, and we started talking. I found that in addition to being an experienced RV'er, he had also backpacked around the world alone for six years. Over the next few weeks, we continued our discussions, and in January of 2003, we decided, "We can do this," and as they say, "The rest is history!" It was decided that I would assume the responsibility to research the routes we would take and the associated scheduling. Bob assumed the remaining responsibilities of finding out information about insurance, medical and visa requirements, and border crossing information, as well as recruiting some fellow travelers. We decided on a departure date of January 2nd, 2004, from Gila Bend, Arizona, and a return date of November 1st, 2004, crossing back into the United States at Douglas, Arizona.

On December 26th, 2003, the caravan of adventure-bound persons assembled in the Elks Lodge parking lot in Gila Bend, Arizona. Bob and I spent the next week meeting fellow travelers, holding classes, and inspecting vehicles in final preparation for our departure.

We departed the Elks Lodge parking lot at 9 AM, January 2nd, 2004. It is at this point the book begins, with a day-by-day accounting of our experiences on our "once in a lifetime adventure."

Join us, as we wander through Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, and 14 border crossings in 343 adventure-filled days!

Jim Jaillet aka Marcos.