

March 25, 2013

Travels with Anzie – Manzanillo, Mexico

Meet Jan and Dan. Dan Parker and I were classmates at Hamilton College. We see each other every five years at class reunion. Anzie and I met them both at our 50th last June. Somehow our conversation ran to the subject of vacation spots. We mentioned that we've spent the last three winters in San Miguel de Allende in central Mexico. We were delighted to discover that Jan and Dan also spend their winters in Mexico, in Manzanillo on the Pacific Coast. We had a good time together at the Reunion, and left promising to be in touch.

Sometime in January we get an e-mail from Jan asking if they could come over and stay with us for a few days. We responded that we would be delighted. So, in late January, Jan and Dan take the two-day bus trip and arrive in SMA. We welcomed them to our not-so-humble abode with rose petals strewn on their bed.

We had a wonderful time with them; we couldn't stop talking. Dan and I learned a lot more about each other than we had ever uncovered at the reunions. Dan recently sold his chain of dry cleaning establishments located in the Minneapolis area. Jan just retired from her position as Councilwoman in their hometown. I guess with just the four of us, instead of one hundred, we were better able to focus our conversation on personal matters. Three nights went by fast. We can't say that about all houseguests.

During their stay in SMA Jan and Dan invited us to use their condo in Manzanillo. So, in early March we traveled west to the Pacific Coast. Six hours later we passed by the Colima volcano, which stands at 13,300 ft. Friend Rich suggested we climb the volcano just to experience the constant rumblings underfoot. We spent our first night in Colima, a university town one hour east of Manzanillo. It's considered by many to be the most livable town in Mexico. We stayed in the **Hotel Ceballos**, which is located in the main square. The hotel exudes old world class, undoubtedly due to Sr. Ceballo's foresight back in the '30's in acquiring four large adjoining houses and combining them.

How often in our travels do we become the playthings of the most delightful of gods, Serendipity? It happened again in Colima – twice! We always like to do a little research before our travels. We googled "Colima entertainment". Up popped "Bindu Gross – Jazz saxophonist". Bindu, an African-American born in Baltimore, has spent the last 23 years in Colima. The website neglected to say where he played; however, we figured that we could uncover that info when we got there. After we were ensconced in our hotel, we decided to explore the downtown area. Apart from the main square, whose arcaded buildings shout Spanish Colonial, the rest of the downtown is fairly modern. We checked out restaurants and artisanal craft stores (dancing terra cotta dogs are a popular item. They hark back to the ancient indigenous Indian tribes). We were strolling down a pedestrian mall, when we

heard the melodious tones of a saxophone. Walking further we came upon an older black man dressed in a sport coat and a porkpie hat. We listened until he finished his lovely piece. I then asked him if he knew Bindu. "I'm Bindu," he said with a warm smile

"No kidding! I can't believe it! I read about you on the internet..."

We talked for about a half hour about his life, how he ended up in Colima, what his life has been like here, etc. He met his Mexican wife in New Orleans. After a couple of years there, they moved to Mexico City where he taught music at the University. After they began having kids, they decided that perhaps Colima might be a better place to raise a family. Bindu couldn't be happier. His kids have received a good education. He teaches Music at the local university.

How he got the job at the university is worth repeating. He was invited to play there during a visit by the President of Mexico. After the ceremonies he was introduced to the President by the university president as "a member of our Music faculty". Before that point there had been absolutely no discussion between Bindu and any member of the faculty about a possible position. After that, it was a *fait accompli*.

Bindu explained why I found him playing on the street with his sax case open for accepting donations. "I try to play at least two hours every day. That's how I keep my chops."

"How old is that sax?" I asked, glancing at the well-patina-ed instrument and the vintage leather case with a velvet lining sorely in need of replacement.

"Over forty years."

Judging from the music they made, one could tell that they knew each other well.

The second act of the god Serendipity took place right in front of our hotel. We asked the reason for the stage that was erected there. "The Music Festival", was the response. We ate at a restaurant on the square. Sure enough, at 8:00 the music started – a quartet of saxophones -- two bass, a tenor and an alto. They played a mix of classical, contemporary and jazz standards. They were followed by a troupe of folkloric dancers. The men wore white mariachi outfits; the women wore gaily colored long dresses, the hems of which they constantly held and swung back and forth with great affect. All of the dancers wore shoes with wooden heels that they pounded on the stage floor sounding much like Flamenco. It was still going on when we left at 10:00.

The next morning we traversed the mountain range that separates the inland from the coast. What a dramatic change in climate. Colima is temperate. The air is dry and comfortable. Pines and deciduous trees abound. Whereas, the coast is immediately tropical. The air is like warm, wet velvet. Coconut palm plantations stretch as far as the eye can see.

We arrive in Manzanillo on the port side. It is huge and bustling. We hear that shippers have found it cheaper to ship to Manzanillo and truck goods to Southern California instead of shipping direct to California. A half hour later we arrive at the **Las Hadas Peninsula**. Jan and Dan's condo is located in Las Hadas Hotel and Condominium Resort. The entire complex is all white – it looked like a Greek village, cascading down a steep hill. We park in a covered parking lot, which is just steps from the condo. The condo looks out over the Yacht Club and the bay. The Yacht club contains an impressive inventory of vessels.

After we got settled we went exploring. A walking path hugs the bay and takes us past several resorts and restaurants. Just beneath our condo are three nice restaurants that overlook the yacht basin. Jan sent us a long treatise on where to eat and what to do. We discovered the condo swimming pool, which is perfect for swimming laps. I swam laps every morning. The pool overlooks the ocean, the sandy crescent beach on the landside and at least three large container ships at anchor. Another restaurant/bar adjoins the pool area. The soothing sound of waves crashing on the rocks just below the pool area completes the perfect atmosphere.

Manzanillo sports one huge sandy crescent beach after another. Sunday we went to **Las Boquitas Beach**. Here is where local Mexican families spend their Sundays. We parked under an umbrella at water's edge, and just watched the stream of humanity flow by. We talk a walk and were amazed to discover that the beach sand glittered like gold. Upon closer scrutiny we determined that what glittered like gold was, in fact, gold-colored mica. Every wave carried the mica, which is lighter than sand, to the surface, giving the beach a mysterious golden sheen.

We spent two days on **Miramar Beach** – another long, sandy crescent. The waves were good for bodysurfing. Watch out for that ninth wave. It's ten feet high and throws you at the sandy bottom; could be a neck-breaker. At all the beaches you can park yourself all day at a table under an umbrella as long as you buy lunch. At **Tablao** the fish and chips are fabulous, and the staff is accommodating.

Places to eat: Jan's recommendations really helped.

Friday nights **La Pergola** offers an excellent prime rib with horseradish sauce, which is difficult to find in Mexico. An excellent guitarist accompanies dinner.

La Paradise is located down the beach path from the condos. Good cuisine. We danced to the music of a singing guitarist.

La Toscana is located downtown right on the beach. Waves are breaking right underneath our table. We celebrated my 39th birthday again there. The kitchen staff made a big fuss, surrounding our table, singing "Feliz Cumpleano", presenting a delicious cake, and forcing me to down a large shot of some sort of creamy tequila. Excellent Italian. Another highlight of our stay was lunch with close friends of Jan and Dan – Sonia and

Miguel and their lovely daughter – at the **Hotel Playa Santiago**. This rather large resort has been in Miguel's family since the 1930's. It's located at one end of the Miramar beach. Sonia teaches English and Mandarin. The daughter is an architect. I mentioned to her parents that I'd love to introduce her to son Rowan. Just might be a good match.

Another friend, Jimmy, runs a charter fishing boat, which he docks just below our condo. One morning we look out and spy a huge marlin being hoisted from the boat onto an overhead bar. I ran down, congratulate the two fishermen who caught it, and asked if Jimmy's wife would be so kind as to take my picture next to the 260 lb. monster. Okay, so I didn't catch it. So, who's gonna know?

Thanks again to Jan and Dan for a wonderfully memorable week. Thanks also to next door neighbor, Orin, for great happy hours.

Hasta luego –

Chuck and Anzie