



99 Days to Panama



An Exploration of
Central America by Motorhome

DR. JOHN & HARRIET HALKYARD

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PREFACE

We wrote this book to demonstrate how easy it is to visit Central America. We want to encourage motorhomers to explore this fascinating part of the world. Hopefully those who take vicarious pleasure in our adventures will be encouraged to visit these friendly people someday. Whether you fly into selected destinations, or drive all the way, we know you too will return with interesting stories.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

JOHN HALKYARD was born in Syracuse, New York, attended Purdue University and received his doctorate in Ocean Engineering from MIT. He has helped develop some of the most advanced deepwater offshore oil and gas production systems in use today. **HARRIET** was born in England and traveled throughout Europe before moving to Australia, where she taught at the National Institute of Dramatic Art, in New South Wales. She then settled in San Diego where she established a Destination Management Company and worked in tourism for 20 years. Harriet and John currently reside in Houston, Texas.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Most of all, we would like to thank the residents of Central America whose hospitality made this trip what it was.

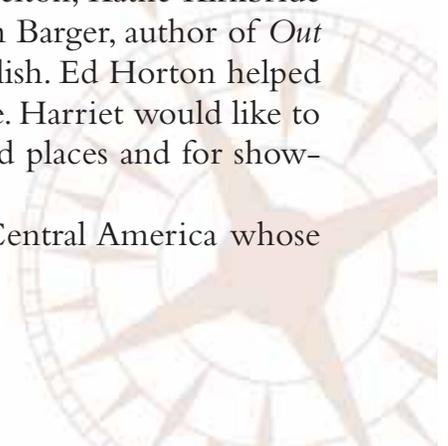


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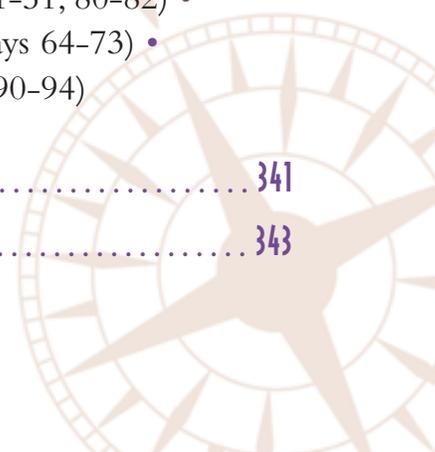
Mexico (Days 2-10, 95-97) • Guatemala (Days 11-36, 87-89) • Honduras (Days 37-50, 86) • Nicaragua (Days 51-51, 80-82) • Costa Rica (Days 53-63, 74-76) • Panama (Days 64-73) • El Salvador (Days 84-86) • Belize (Days 90-94)

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OUR JOURNEY

CHAPTER 6

Cloud Forests



MONTEVERDE, COSTA RICA

Day 53
Friday, March 7
Lake Nicaragua to Costa Rica

It was strange to have such a large body of water and no tide. People park their cars in the shallows to wash them. Pigs and horses wander in for a drink. We plan to take the ferry across to the island on our return trip north. Accounts from locals as well as friends far away say it is worth a visit.

*A lizard ran out
on a rock and looked up,
listening no doubt
to the sounding of the spheres.
And what a dandy fellow!
The right toss of a chin for you
and a swirl of a tail!
If men were as much men
as lizards are lizards
They'd be worth looking at.*

LIZARD
D.H. Lawrence

An hour or so after breaking camp we were at the border between Nicaragua and Costa Rica and being



swarmed by *transitos* holding up their licenses and offering their services to guide us through the formalities. Because this border was on the Pan-American Highway it was very busy and there were a large number of trucks. As usual, we had not rushed to get away from our overnight camp, so once again we arrived at the border so our transit would be interrupted by the lunch hour. We were eating at the *aduana*, but at least we could turn on our air conditioning and keep comfortable on the scorching concrete.

There was a couple of dollars to pay to the local municipality to exit Nicaragua and six dollars for immigration. As I had the motorhome listed on my passport, it was important that it was counter stamped saying I was taking the vehicle out of the country, otherwise I would be sent a bill for the sales tax. We also had to have the dog's papers stamped showing that she left the country. We wanted to get the formalities right for our return to Nicaragua.

To enter Costa Rica we had to pay a fee of U.S. \$4.50 to have our car disinfected.

It was like driving through a very poor car wash with a fine spray. We then had to buy car insurance for three months at a cost of about U.S. \$17. We could not find out what it covered and I hoped we would never have to learn. The Costa Ricans stamped the dog's papers with little more than a cursory glance and no money changing hands. On top of all that we paid U. S. \$14 to the *transitos*, the three young men who guided us through the maze and confusion on both sides of the border. They were worth it.

Nicaragua had been very dry with a constant wind, but almost as soon as we crossed the border the countryside became greener with sweeping hills and generally much more pleasant scenery. There were fields of cattle, one of exclusively white livestock that looked lovely against the dark green grass. It must have been part of a very large ranch, because across the road I saw the most colossal bull. There were also fields of horses, but

ABOVE: Sunrise over Ometepe Island

it was the cattle that looked particularly fine here.

As the view improved the road deteriorated measurably. Just when you want to look around you have to keep your eyes on the road. We were driving 40 mph at best.

Because of John's lack of a license, I drove across the border, and soon after we saw orange cones and we were pulled over by *federales*. We dutifully showed our papers and asked if there were more stops so we would know whether we could put our passports and other documents away.

"*Hay mas. Hay cuatro mas.*" "There are four more check stations?" We didn't believe there would be five, but there were. These young men sit in little self-constructed shelters until a vehicle comes along and then come out and check either a driver's license or the car papers or something. The last guy must have realized the futility of his position, as he just waved us on from his perch in the shade.

As we approached the town of Liberia, John spotted another motorhome in a field behind some bushes. We decided to turn around and investigate. We hadn't seen another motorhome in a while so it was worth checking out.

I made a U-turn.

A motorhome! There were twenty of them! We had come across a well laid-out motorhome campsite where a caravan was staying for the night. If they hadn't been there we never would have seen it. There were water and power hook-ups in neat rows that had long since been disconnected, but there were shade trees and plenty of space. Most important, there was a dumpsite.

We spent quite a while chatting with the gringos and the wagonmaster who gave us some useful and interesting

information. John Plaxton was the wagonmaster and together with his wife Liz, had done a trip similar to what we were attempting a couple of years earlier and had written a book about it. This experience had helped them get the position of wagonmasters. They freely shared information on what to expect and some good places to camp. We were happy to buy an autographed edition of *Mexico and Central America by Campervan* from them.

The caravan was organized by Adventure Caravans. This is the same outfit that organized the Mexican caravan we ran into in Veracruz, Mexico. All the motorhome occupants went over to the swimming pool for a meeting on transiting north into Nicaragua. They had been to Panama and were on their way home. We felt that we were just beginning.

Day 54 Saturday, March 8, Puntarenas

The caravan of motorhomes was scheduled to pull out at 6:30 a. m., and I heard rumblings at about five. I got up and went out to keep an eye on the dog. The RVs were gathering and then the leader started to pull out. Although there were only twenty, it seemed like a hundred of varying sizes from a little camper on a truck to a forty-one foot class "A" colossal coach. They all circled for their place in line. I called John to have a look, but by the time he climbed down from the bunk and came out into the sunshine at 6:33, the caboose was pulling out! We had the place to ourselves until the horses wandered over.

We topped off our water tanks and were able to empty our holding tanks in the first dump station since Mexico; we were out of there before nine. The roads

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were not good. They were surfaced but full of potholes. All sorts of vehicles overtook us, including eighteen wheelers, but we could catch them again on the uphill. I was able to use cruise control for the first time since leaving the U.S. I set it at forty mph and just steered around the holes and ignored the guys behind me. I occasionally glanced up at the scenery.

There were miles of pastureland. The animals looked well-fed, although the land was dry and the grass brown. There were herds of sleek white cattle grazing with a background of the blue volcanoes, hazy hills, and cloud forest beyond.

There were more trees here than there were north of the Nicaraguan border, which offered occasional shade on the road and provided silhouettes against the skyline. These enormous trees at one time would have needed their height to reach the light through the dark jungle. Now they spread their branches as though they were stretching their arms in the sunshine and offering shade to herds

of cattle and horses. The shadows also hid the potholes on the road!

There was some large-scale irrigation and some lush green rice paddies, providing contrast to the dry grass, and always there was something burning. Either the dead crops were burning in the fields, or the grass verges, or trash, but always you could see smoke.

We crossed over a couple of fast moving rivers where appealing rafting trips were being offered. If it were not for the boils on our butts we would have had a go. We would have to wait and do it on the return trip.

We were in a quandary as to how to plan the next phase of our trip. When we left Honduras we decided it would be best to drive directly to our ultimate destination, Panama, leaving sightseeing in Nicaragua and Costa Rica for our return trip. The wagonmasters of the caravan told us that if we re-entered Costa Rica within three months of our departure from the country, we would only have three days on the return trip



to transit the country. We had also been told that we couldn't take a dog into Panama, but we couldn't confirm any of this. John also needed to replace his lost driver's license. Our attempts to get a replacement from Texas were stalled, and the Costa Rican authorities said we could obtain a Costa Rican license in San José. We changed our plans and headed directly for San José where we thought we could find out the real story while John got his license replaced.

So there we were chugging along with about two hours to go to the capital when I saw a sign for Puntarenas and remembered our daughter, Tanya, saying something about it. This was Saturday, and we couldn't do any of our business until Monday, so what was the rush? We made another change and headed for the beach. Fifty-four days after leaving Houston we'd be on the Pacific Ocean at last!

Puntarenas is a resort community where the locals crowd during weekends in the dry season. We drove the five miles to the tip of the peninsula and meandered about until we came across *Paseo de los Turistas*, with tall palms, shade trees, and 100 feet of sand to the water. We pulled over under a tree. We put our chairs on the sand in the shade of the same tree, cracked our new bottle of rum and poured it over ice, added some coke, and watched as the sun cooled and set. A review of boats sailed past us from pleasure craft to ferries, to tankers, to a tuna fishing boat. There were a dozen families enjoying the beach and the Gulf of Nicoya. Other families and couples were strolling up and down the beach, or on the sidewalk, which had become our front porch. Is this why we came to Central America?

LEFT: Visitor at Delfin Trailer Park, Liberia, Costa Rica

After the sunset we took advantage of the convenient public lighting to continue to read and absorb the atmosphere and the sea breeze.

Across the paseo a choice of restaurants offered *plato típico* (typical dinner). We chose the closest place since the rum didn't encourage us to walk far. The motorhome glowed under the street light across the way, the dog lay under the table, and the food was good.

Day 55

Sunday, March 9, Puntarenas to San Antonio de Belén, San José

Puntarenas was a pleasant surprise. There we were on Sunday morning with the best parking spot on the strand with an expansive view of the beach.

Joggers ran along the sand just out of the waves and families swam. Yes, they were in the water at six in the morning. It was that warm and pleasant. A golfer practiced his golf swing as he strolled along the beach. He played a few balls along the wet sand just above the gently breaking waves and then gathered them up. When he reached the furthest ball, he set up his tee and started all over again. A nice way to exercise on a Sunday morning.

A bedraggled man who looked like he had not slept in a bed for a while came up to us offering a handful of cashew fruits for sale. He had probably just picked them off a tree further down the road. He had a friendly black-tooth smile. The somewhat imperfect yellow and orange kidney shaped fruits still had their nuts attached. He only wanted a few pennies for them all, so I gave him what he wanted but only took a couple. I peeled back the thin smooth skin which revealed a very juicy flesh with little black specks that might have been

seeds eons ago. They were bitter and neither of us liked them. We couldn't crack the nuts that protruded from the bottom, as the shells were like solid rock.

After lunch we packed up and drove back along the peninsula with a railway track separating us from the never-ending beach. There were other areas we could have pulled off the road to enjoy the sun and sand, but we were heading out and had business ahead.

We made the short drive to San Antonio de Belén, a suburb of San José, and to one of the few real trailer parks in Central America. What a relief to be able to take advantage of the facilities. They have a string of good hot showers. Ahhhhhhhh. My major chore was to begin scraping, scooping and brushing out the dust inside the RV. Then, with unlimited water tapped right into the motorhome, I could wash everything in the drawers, shelves, and cupboards. It was an endless chore that I never finished.

With the good electrical hookup we lay in bed and treated ourselves to another episode of M*A*S*H*.

Day 56 Monday, March 10, San José

The entire day was spent cleaning, surfing the internet, and attempting to get John's driver's license. John spent ages on the satellite phone to Houston trying to get his Texas license replaced and then gave up. He might as well get a Costa Rican one.

The proprietor of the trailer park called us a cab, which wasn't really a taxi but a friend of her son who had a car. We figured this out when the police stopped him and as Nicasio was slowing down he turned to us and pointedly said, "You are my friends. You are just my friends and we are driving together. OK?"

"No problema," John responded. We learned that there was a crackdown on private car owners making money charging for rides. We were happy to play along but were never questioned by the police.

Nicasio was a great help and took us to the correct authorities to get John his Costa Rican driver's license. Going through these formalities is not usually simple in any country, even when you speak the language. This was particularly confusing. There were long lines and people waiting in corridors at different windows with little or no signage and it was very hot. Nicasio led us from one location to another within the building and eventually to the chief of the department. He helped plead our case that it would be very nice if they issued us at least a temporary emergency license. No. John would have to take the tests, both written and practical. He paid for the written test and made an appointment to take it as soon as he could, which was two days hence. John bought the textbook of the local rules of the road, available in Spanish only, so he could study for it. Then it dawned on us that he would have to take the practical test in the motorhome. That would be quite an experience for both John and the examiner. Then Nicasio offered John his car to drive for the test. That was very generous and another example of how kind everyone was. Yes, of course we would have paid him for the use and for his time; nevertheless, I can't imagine anyone lending a stranger their car like that in the U.S.

When John visited the Panamanian Consulate in Houston he was told that the dog's papers must not be more than three days old. We had also heard more than one rumor that we could not take

a dog into Panama at all. Just to be on the safe side we asked Nicasio if he would take us to the Panamanian consulate here in San José.

I slid the papers under the glass window to the bored young lady saying, "Are these papers all OK to take our dog into Panama?"

She looked at them for a while. She flipped through the several pages, and went back to the cover page. Her face was expressionless. I don't think she had ever seen the likes before. She took a breath and said, "*Son buenos,*" and passed them back under the glass separating us.

I did not feel very comforted even though she had said they were OK, but we had done our best. Just to make sure that she was actually alive I asked her if she had any tourist information on Panama.

She raised her eyebrows as though surprised that we were really driving there. "*Momentito,*" she said and disappeared through the door behind her cubicle.

A minute or two later another lady appeared. Maria was warm, voluptuous, middle aged, and full of smiles. She presented us with a book solid with information about Panama. We wanted to know if we could transit the Canal. She repeated what we had heard about the weekly tours and found the advertisement in the book for us.

Nicasio was being such a good guide that John decided to attempt one other chore while in the city. We were passing very modern and upscale shopping areas and John asked Nicasio if there might be a computer shop close by. Nicasio knew of one and took us there. We had taken hundreds of pictures and stored them on our laptop's hard drive. John wanted a backup system so he purchased an external CD burner from this small shop in San José.

The trailer park had a washing machine and I must have done a dozen loads. What wasn't dirty was dusty. The brisk breeze dried the clothes on the line so fast that by the time I had hung up the last item I could take down and fold up the first.

John was back on the phone and internet and in the end determined that sending a replacement Texas license to Panama would be the most efficient after all. I think he was nervous about taking the tests in Costa Rica and I don't blame him. Also there was not much to do where we were, apart from cleaning, so I was happy to continue on.

Day 57, Tuesday March 11, Belén Trailer Park,

This morning John re-confirmed disappointing news, this time with the border agent of a tour operating company. He verified there was a limit to the length of stay customs would permit for a vehicle on a second visit to Costa Rica within a ninety-day period. This explained why caravans schedule their trips to tour when heading south, and passed directly through Costa Rica in three days on the homeward journey. When we later reentered Costa Rica from Panama we found this information was **completely false**. We had **no** limit put on the length of our north-bound visit.

At the time we believed we would only have three days on our home bound transit, so we needed to explore Costa Rica then. There were places we didn't want to miss, so we changed our plans once more and turned back north to the mountains and the Arenal volcano. Changing our plans was nothing new; we did it almost on a daily basis.

The scenery was picturesque and lush. Tomatoes were for sale along the road



and each vendor tried to make theirs look more appealing than the next, displaying them attractively in tiers in boxes. There were tight little fields of sugar cane edged by dark green acres of coffee bushes with their tall shade trees. There were countless shades of green.

We backtracked on CA1, as the Pan-American Highway is called down here. We left the highway at the industrial town of San Ramon and headed for the hills. I inherited from my father an interest in knowing what the crops were that grew along the roadside. Now I noticed something that amazed me. Here was a field of scraggly plants with leaves of five saw tooth fingers. It looked for all-the-world like marijuana, even though most of the leaves had seven fingers. Not marijuana in Costa Rica, surely! Who would grow it so brazenly in fields next to a main thoroughfare? I recommend our fellow travelers not to get excited and leap out of their cars to grab a smoke. We

learned later that this was the plant of the root crop yucca.

Our speed dropped to twenty miles an hour, and now that we were out of the city, cattle began to appear grazing at the side of the road. Suddenly ferns and tall trees surrounded us. It was a dramatic change. Masses of impatiens flowers created verges of pinks prettier than the lushest of gardens.

Local residents took advantage of the rich soil and had carefully planned gardens of colorful foliage shrubs; translucent royal-purple bougainvillea draped over flaming poinsettia bushes. Perhaps they were all gardeners because the fields around were filled with decorative plants. There were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of acres of ornamental plants coloring the hills in shades of green and yellows.

ABOVE: Fields of ornamental plants, Costa Rica

RIGHT: Wallowing in the hot pools of Tabacón, Arenal, Costa Rica