



The Trail to Santa Cruz

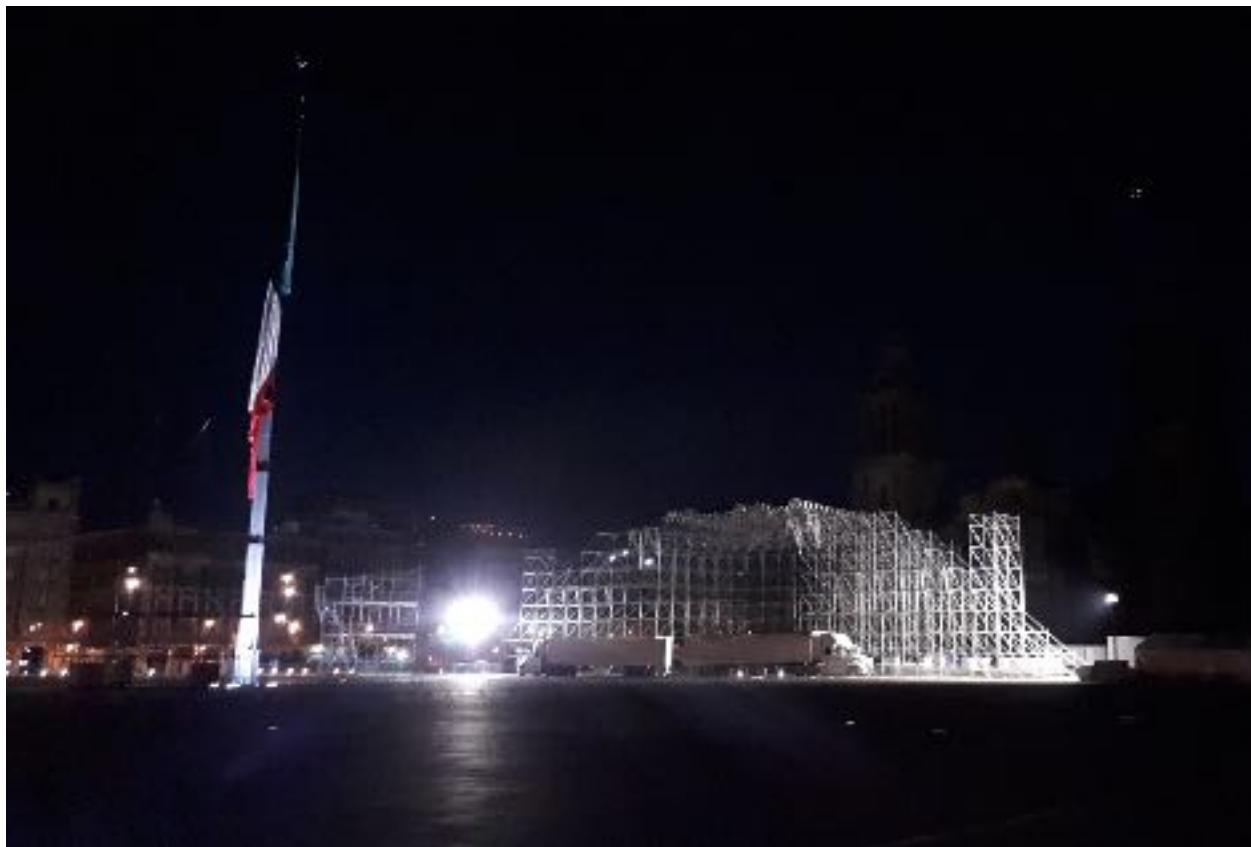
Last January I went to Guate to visit my old friend Murray Beach and to have a brief respite from the Canadian winter. Murray proposed his idea to walk the trail from Sololá to Santa Cruz next November, to celebrate his 75th birthday. Now it's November and this is the story:

My son Peter comes with me to see these places for the first time. A bus to Montreal and a red-eye flight to Mexico City, arriving at four AM; now we have six hours to kill before our flight to Guate. The Metro will open at five and the nearest station is only a twenty minute walk from our terminal; we can go and see la Plaza de la Constitución, the nominal heart of the city, indeed of the whole country.

The walk to the station passes through the narrow lanes of a street market that resembles an Arab bazaar, a place where pop-up shops have everything for sale. Nothing open at this hour, but early risers are walking with us through these passages with no lights. We can't see them and they can't see us, but when we ask, they're helpful with directions.

La Estación Pantitlán is a sprawling maze of underground tunnels and elevated passages, a place where four subway lines converge and the signage isn't very good. We ask for directions over and over; everyone is helpful. We find our ride and get off at "Zocalo".

"Zocalo" is the popular name for this grand plaza; the name is an accident of history. In the Spanish imperial era, a big equestrian statue of King Carlos stood here on a cut stone plinth (Zocalo). After the War of Independence, Carlos was melted down but the zocalo remained for many years and became in its own right the centrepiece of the plaza. "Meet me at the zocalo."



A huge sound stage is being assembled; there's always something happening in the Zocalo. Behind the stage, invisible in the darkness is the Catedral Metropolitana. In the foreground, the biggest flag in the world.

I've got my face fixed for a Starbucks and I know where it is, in la calle 6 de septiembre, but it's closed until seven. OK, one thing they can't close is the ancient Mayan ruin beside the Cathedral; let's go. We explore the ancient pyramid structures, looking through the fence. All tilted and bent, sinking into the goo that underlies the city, these ruins should have warned the Spanish conquistadores about building a city here. But imperial arrogance and perhaps a dash of optimism bias led to the construction of the world's biggest sinking city, founded on top of a bowl of muck that shakes like jelly in the earthquakes.

A glow in the eastern sky is beginning to announce the dawn.

A policeman walks by, with a take-out coffee in his hand and we ask him where he found it. He points us into a side street; we go there. The narrow hole-in-the-wall shop is closed, but they're slinging coffee from an opening in the barred door. We enjoy our coffee fix in a quiet communion with the night people, policemen, garbage collectors, street sweepers. A murmur of hushed conversations all around us; the eastern sky is brightening.

We return to Terminal 2, now in daylight; this time I can see the step where I tripped and fell on the way out. An uneventful flight to Guatemala City (uneventful flights are the best kind) and there we catch a tourist shuttle van. Guate is the city where we all have to land, but most visitors just pass through without stopping. The tourist shuttles are slightly more expensive than chicken buses but they get you out of town quickly and safely.

Antigua is our intention for to-day; we need to stop and rest for the night. Panajachel can wait until tomorrow

This town, formerly the capital of Guatemala, was abandoned by the government in the eighteenth century because of the earthquakes and volcanoes. The new capital at Guatemala City was seen as a safer place. (Don't know about that; the most recent eruption of Volcán Pacaya covered the capital in two inches of ash and killed some people.)

Antigua settled into two centuries of decay and neglect. Poverty is a wonderful preservative of heritage architecture and so the town became in our time a magnet for tourism and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It still suffers from the periodic earthquakes and most of the churches are in ruins. The Volcán de Fuego looms over the town blowing out smoke, ash and lava about once an hour. I suppose one can get used to living beside the volcano.





Posada Refugio will be our home for this night. Located in the centre of town, it offers us a very basic room, with two beds, toilet, basin, hot shower and a roof terrace facing the Volcán de Fuego, all for less than twenty dollars. A good dinner and then we crash early to recover from our journey. Twenty-four hours of buses, planes and waiting rooms and a red-eye flight, it feels now like we've been a week on the road.

Morning, we have a shuttle van for the three-hour ride to Panajachel, the first half hour being a rough ride over the cobbled streets of Antigua, picking up passengers from their hotels. The last pair of passengers have jumped in, their bags loaded onto the roof and while we're bouncing our way out of town, they discover they're on the wrong bus. Another loop through the town, we drop them off and find the right people nearby. Now we're on the road, just an hour later than the announced schedule. The lesson here is that locals have to allow for the antics of feckless tourists and travellers have to adjust to the Latino concept of time. It's a cultural exchange.

The final leg of our journey is on a boat out of Panajachel to Murray's place which is not accessible by road.



Volcán de Fuego is seen smoking on the eastern horizon

Murray's place overlooks the lake and three volcanoes; his garden is full of flowering jacarandas, bananas, avocados, lemons, coffee, aloe vera. . . . All that stuff grows like weeds in this climate.

Our hike is four days away; we settle into a gentle daily routine, morning coffee, a shopping run into Pana, a snooze in the hammock, a swim in the lake, a good supper prepared by Peter, some wine. Hangin' out in paradise.



One evening I find and kill a scorpion on the window sill in my room, just inches away from the bed. Every paradise has its no-see-ums.



Monday 13 November is the day appointed for our big hike. John Berry (JB), who lives up the hill far above Murray's place, walks down to join us at the wharf. We set off in the boat to begin our mountain adventure. Helluva way to celebrate Murray's 75th birthday. The trail is only about ten kilometres long but a lot of upping and downing make it a challenge even at the best of times.

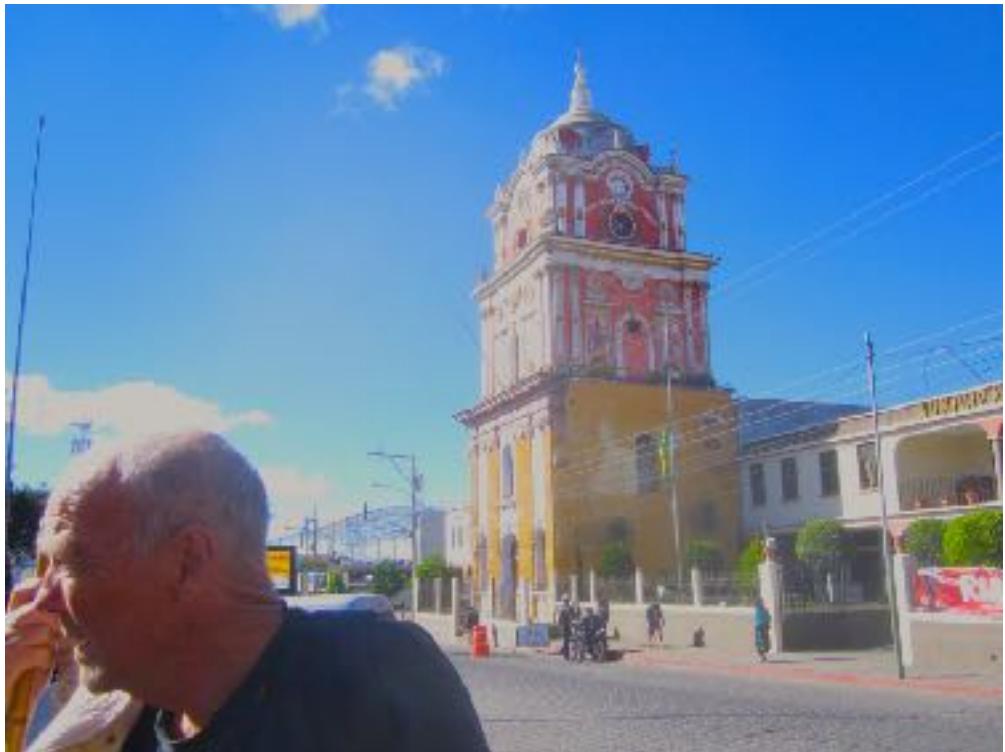
We haven't yet discovered that this minimal jeep track is now being torn up and rebuilt, nor that it's blocked by landslides since the recent rainy season.





At the Pana wharf we meet up with Kenneth Clarke (Kenny) who has come all the way from Vancouver Island and stayed over last night in Pana. Now our gang of five is all together and we catch a pickup truck going to Sololá. The pickups are a step below the chicken buses in their accommodations but they do provide a more frequent service on smaller routes. A framework of steel pipes provides lateral support for passengers who stand in the box and hang on through the hairpin turns. No need to fasten your seatbelt; there's no seat.

When the ride starts up, we take off our hats and hold onto the pipes, enjoying one of those wind-in-your-hair rides that we old bikers used to enjoy before the passage of helmet laws.



At Sololá Murray negotiates with our driver for a continuation on to the trailhead, far beyond the town, a special ride for the gang of five.





The trail starts out as an easy walk, though all uphill, on a minor road. Volcán de Fuego is blowing smoke and ash above us, but at a safe distance.



We can also look back to Sololá, now far below us.





Dramatis personae: starting from the top, JB and Murray,
middle photo Murray and Kenny,
bottom photo Bruce and Peter.

All except Peter are in their seventies, Bruce the oldest at 76, Murray turning 75 tomorrow. Peter's only 45 but he has a lot of mileage on his odometer and is still recovering from a motorcycle crash.



Parts of the trail are quite challenging. Work crews are digging into the hill to widen this jeep track into a road. In the meantime, it's closed to all vehicles and barely passable for pedestrians.

We have all had some slips and falls on the loose gravel. I have a little bobo on an elbow; JB is more seriously scraped.

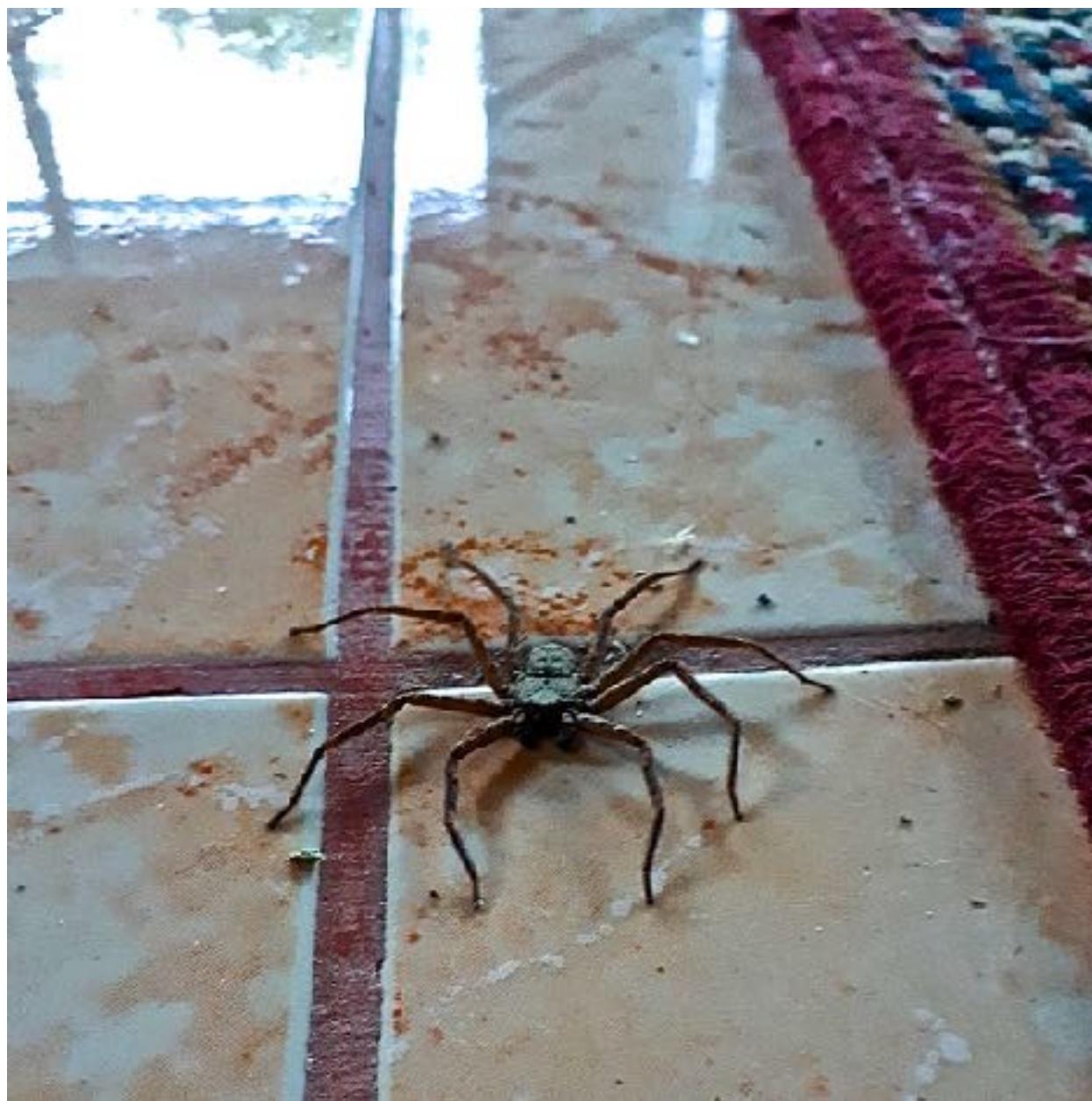


Near the end we are blocked by an avalanche that has swept away the road, leaving just a steep slope of loose gravel, very difficult to cross. We decide to go bushwhacking down through the woods, a trail that is just as steep but it has trees that we can hang onto.



Safe home, Peter prepares a supper and we celebrate the day's accomplishment and Murray's birthday.





We still have one day left here to rest and recover from our hike. Peter's room has a big resident spider that he has named Fred and a smaller skinny one that he calls Wilma. Murray has promised us that these beasts are not the deadly brown recluse, not biters at all and so we all get along together.



The warm, moist Pacific air pushes up into the mountains, cools, and forms these ominous clouds. Usually they stay away from this mile-high lake, but when they do roll over the lake they hide the volcanoes.

Now we have to move back to Antigua so that we can make it to Guate's airport tomorrow morning. Murray comes down to the wharf with us. Kenny will be staying on for a week. The chicken bus has a convenient 11AM departure time.







The rooftop at La Terraza offers good eats and beer and a dramatic back-lit view of Volcán de Agua as well as Volcán de Fuego. We have our ticket for an airport shuttle in the morning. Good-night!

(The trail from Sololá to Santa Cruz can be walked from your armchair through Google Earth)

Photos by Bruce Grant, Peter Grant and Kenny Clarke