

Wednesday, January 9th 2002

Dear All,

The last great adventure in Costa Rica involved white water rafting (WWR) on the Pacuare River in the eastern part of Costa Rica. That was my first, and certainly not my last WWR! But perhaps I should start with a proper introduction of my trip mates, as I described them too briefly so far. First comes Mor Naaman - the social focus of the gang, and my friend from Algorithmic Research. I turned him from the savage that he was into the distinguished member of society that he is today, and he, in turn, became my "guide of the perplexed" regarding using technology (computers, cameras, light switches - you name it). The debt that we both owe each other made us close friends, even through a 5 week trip in India last year. Today - he's PhDing in the CS (Computer Science) department at Stanford, where the word "PhDing" really means "having a 24/7 fun". Tonya Putnam is his girlfriend, who currently works on the completion of her law degree at no less than Harvard. Unlike Mor, who rests on his laurels as a basketball player of the past, and his height of the present (2.04m), Tonya is an active athlete that finds pleasure in crazy physical activities, including the marathon, God forbid. She also has some geographic and linguistic resume - you name a country, she probably has lived there and speaks its language. The third member of the group was Mor's friend from the CS department at Stanford - Rachel Kolodni. As you can see, even though I was the only PhD there, I was also the only one that never attended any of those prestigious schools. Rachel is first and foremost a Jerusalemite. Then she is a ceramics lover. And she is also a person of well defined opinions thanks to which we were able to pass many hours with ardent discussions on diverse topics such as "Sushi - is it possible not to like it", "Modernism Vs conservation", or "Religion - do we really want to allow it?". She left a day earlier and during that day we discovered that we miss her a lot since it's a bore to agree on everything!

So at 5:45AM on Dec 30, this merry bunch woke up totally wrinkled, depressed and spiritless from a sleepless night in the noisiest hotel in San Jose. When the Israeli-looking guide Daniel showed up at the reception at 6:30AM sharp, all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed with annoying bliss in his eyes, we had to ask for a 5-7 minutes delay since we decided to switch rooms. Daniel was just "easy, take your time". He turned out to be one of the nicest persons ever. Together with his good will, good spirit and good guidance and explanations - he received from us a score of 10 on the questionnaire later on. That score repeated in almost all questions - what shows you how good that company was and how much we enjoyed ourselves.

We were 15 people, all very nice and good trip mates. When we got to the river we split into 3 boats of 4 (us, the "Israelis"), 5 (the "Germans") and 6 (the Americans, no quote sign). Our guide was the fantastic Alexandro! Being a psychology student, he knew how to push us, encourage us, entertain us and give us the highest sense of security, and he did all that from the back of the boat, effortlessly. True, the river was angry that day my friends, but not furious, and I believe that we were never in any serious danger. But still, there were few moments where we could easily find ourselves in the troubled water and who knows what then. But throughout the entire ride, even through the hardest rapids of levels 3 and 4 (there's a scale that goes from 1 - calm water, to 7 - sure death), I felt nothing but fun and joy mixed with the right amount of very little fear to spice things up, and tons of cold water! If at the omega trip I was smiling and laughing

quietly, here we all screamed laughter! Alexandro sat behind and kept giving orders quietly - "Forward", "Stoop", "Forward hard", "Left backward" - and it worked pretty well. In the many quiet sections of the river (level 1), we could speak, enjoy the beautiful scenery (so so beautiful) and wait anxiously to the next rapid in the river. Those were really the fun parts, and we have pictures to show that. Other fun parts were waterfalls that fell into the river from great heights - and Alexandro didn't miss an opportunity to guide us exactly under those falls for exhilarating showers. In mid-day we stopped for lunch on the river bank. The team of guides pulled one of the boats to the bank, upside down, threw a map on it and prepared a delicious cold lunch. The best thing was ceviche - a dish made of raw fish, lemon, herbs and I guess other stuff. So damn good! If only the Japanese could learn from them what could be made from raw fish...

When we ate there, a young dark boy stepped quietly out of the jungle. He was barefoot, had long smooth hair, brightest and most quiet eyes, and he sat on a rock in a safe distance from us and fell into ponder, so it seemed. He was an indigena, i.e., a native inhabitant. There are few of them left (few thousands), and those that still didn't mix with the rest of the ticos live in tribes in the forests and speak their native tongue (e.g. Bribri), as well as Spanish. Now, I must say that the above description of the young man may sound a bit like "The noble savage", or like a typical way in which native people would be described in a hideous Disney movie (that actually reminds me: twice, during this trip, I had to watch Pocahontas - once in English and once in Spanish). But, what can I say, this is how he looked and behaved!!! When we finished eating, the young man was invited by the guides to enjoy the tons of food that was left and to take with him as much as he could carry. I asked Alexandro some questions about that tribe. It was very interesting for me since I never had the chance to meet people that belong to lifestyle so different from ours and even so different from their surroundings (those tribes are quite isolated from the rest of Costa Rica which is a pretty modern country). After asking Alexandro if it would be OK to approach that kid, I did. His name was Aluejo (I hope that I got it right), he was 13 years old, has 4 siblings, goes to school 1.5 hours away from home, but not every day, and what he liked best from our lunch was the ham and cheese sandwiches (for me it was the cookies). Not a deep conversation, but a rare opportunity to meet someone else. Completely else. It doesn't happen to us very often, does it?

We spent the last 2 days in driving to, staying at and coming back from Puerto Viejo - a village on the Caribbean shore, which has a majority of Jamaican-originated population. Like a little jump to Jamaica. In the last evening in Costa Rica (1/1/02), we went to the San Jose corrida. That night featured the final show for the year 2001. We bought tickets to the upper seats (cheaper, but more action) and went up there already at 7:30PM, to get the best seats and to enjoy a first class people watching experience. At 9PM the show started. What can I tell you - boring, idiotic, senseless and nothing that comes even close to the real thing (oh, Madrid, Madrid). The best part of the lame show went like that - in the center of the arena they had a little football court (namely, they stuck on each side two goal posts and drew by chalk some meaningless lines on the ground). Two teams of 5 people each got in. And then they sent in the ridiculous bull (size S). Each team had to piss off the bull and to make it run through the goal posts of the other team, as though the bull was the ball! The score was 5:1. At least they recycle the bulls and not waste them on just one lousy show. We left after an hour to enjoy the much more interesting activities outside (giant wheels, roller coasters etc., food vendors, and tons of people, mostly youngsters).

The next day it was Adios Costa Rica, Adios Amigos. I flew to New Orleans, where I met my friend Jake, who flew in from SF, for 3.5 days in that beautiful city on the Mississippi. It was fun, as well as educating (thanks to Jake, who is a history-addict, I managed to learn some American history, as well as few good words in English). As always, I had a devastating effect on the weather and global economy: I brought to "The Big Easy" (as New Orleans is fondly called) the coldest temperatures ever - in our trip to the Bayou marches, we could see a thin layer of ice covering the swamps! And I made the dollar soar by something like 5% in 5 days with respect to the Israeli Shekel. I don't think I had such a great success since my 98 visit to the US or the 95 visit to Japan (when the Yen reached legendary rates that make Japanese long so much for another visit of mine).

And now I'm back at home. Lehitraot.