

REFLECTIONS ON LIFE IN SOUTH AMERICA

DIPLOMATIC LIFE - A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

by Beverly Valentine

Beverly, her husband Doug and their three children recently returned from Bogota, Colombia. Being a person who picks up languages easily (French, German and Spanish so far) and who makes the absolute most of every posting she is on; Beverly was approached and asked if she could possibly give us an overview of what life is like in South America.

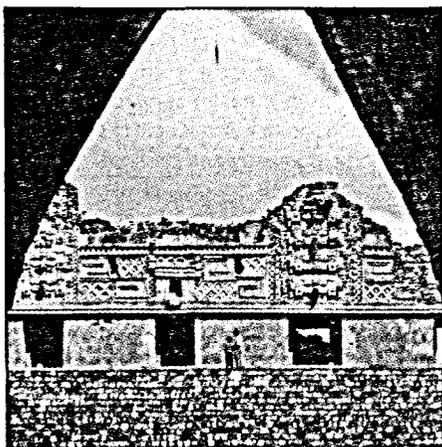
Victor von Hagen in "Four Seasons of Manuela", traces the journeys the liberator, Simon Bolivar endured in his attempt to unite the countries of Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. These journeys create an impact because of the astounding feat endured in traversing the sprawling, impressive Andean Cordilleras. In the late 18th, early 19th centuries the horse was the only possibility. Fortunately, the beauty, the magnitude, the variety, the hidden treasures can now be appreciated by following an artery of highways.

Travelling is learning. When there is something to discover, how exciting a post becomes. Shall we approach this vast continent through its physical characteristics? Shall we touch some of its hidden treasures, its archaeology? Its cultural colour?

The peaks and valleys of the Andean Cordillera, besides being magnetic in their beauty, allow the traveller to appreciate vast changes in climate and vegetation. At 9:00 a.m. it is Bogota - cold, altitude 2,640 meters, roses, azaleas, cynerarias. At 10:30 a.m. it is Villeta - 800 meters, warm, tropical, bananas, mangoes, oranges. The mountain ranges appear endless. Persevere. The archaeological parks and burial sites of Pre-Columbian tribes, San Augustin and Tierradentro are the reward. History abounds in the colonial cities such as Villa de Leyva and Popayan.

Market day, especially in areas of Colombia, Ecuador and Peru where the Indians arrive in their typical dress, is a splash of colour and activity difficult to equal. Silvia, Otaválo, Pisac are some of the most enchanting experiences - a blend of colour and smells. At the market in Chincheros one can see the barter system in process - a handful of coca leaves for a handful of peppers.

The mighty Amazon conjures another image. Envision a hotel houseboat docked in Manaus - a perfect spot to appreciate the river traffic and a true torrential tropical storm. A small boat makes trips into the



Nun's Quadrangle seen through the Mayan Arch. Uxmal, Yucatan, Mexico.

inlets of this river in order for the traveller to see the Victoria Regia.

Lunch is a "peixado" - a Brazilian bouillabaisse made with the thick white fish (piracatu) of the historic river. Other excursions show one the colourful bird life that haunts the thick vegetation. Not to be forgotten is the Opera House - if only it could recount tales of the past. For the adventuresome, the possibility exists to go by boat the length of the Amazon from Manaus to Belem.

Cities too have magnetic qualities. Rio de Janeiro is a foregone conclusion. We know that God created the world, on the last day he created Rio. However, do not bypass Bahia in the northeast of Brazil. Salvador da Bahia awakens interest and fascination for music, carnival, maculele, capoeira, black

magic, macumba and the spicy cuisine of vatapa, shrimp a la baiana.

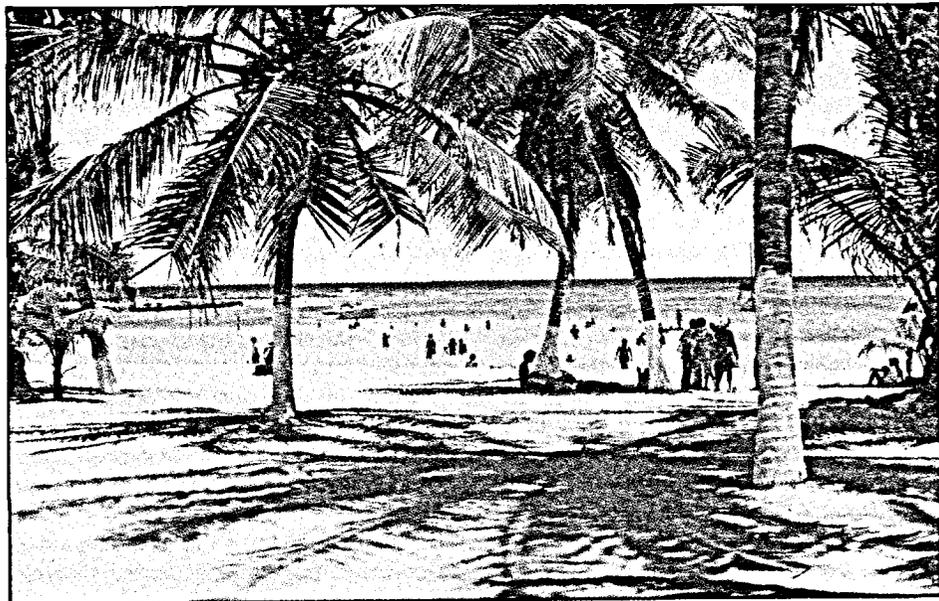
Jorge Amado, whose sense of humour and Brazilian interpretation of life is unequalled, is compulsory reading. In Portuguese, it is even spicier.

In Southern Argentina the mountains provide excellent ski facilities and the lakes such as Nathaniel Huapi, a scenic and recreational haven. On an island in the lake the famous Arrayanes trees were the backdrop for the film Bambi.

How these countries gained their independence from Spain and Portugal is a way of appreciating and respecting each country's heritage. As important, are the Indian civilizations who achieved a remarkable standard of living. This immediately brings to mind Cuzco and Macchu Picchu and the Valley of Ollantaitambo. A camera does not even come close to capturing the totality of these last cities of the Incas. One visit stimulates the desire for more visits, for more knowledge.

Fluency in the language opens avenues that should be explored. It is easier to blend into the culture and is a complement to our hosts. Being able to read the language is an unrivalled feeling. Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Mario Vargas Llosa are very different in style but their short stories and novels provide perceptive insight, politically and socially.

A focus on what can be discovered makes a country come alive. Alexander Pope emphasized "Living is learning". A diplomatic assignment opens so many avenues of possibility.



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