

A Report on the Berea College Dancers Tour

El Salvador is a land of extremes. The Country Dancers experienced the generous hospitality of people who have good paying jobs and the generosity of those who had little to share but their friendship.

Our first two days were an overture to the total experience. On Saturday night, January 9, we arrived at the Tesoro Beach Resort. Nelson Garcia, the new manager, is adding interesting programs to the hotel's modern beachside facilities and is attempting to make a success of the resort now that peace has come to the country. He had publicized the Country Dancers as part of a special weekend package and welcomed us warmly. We were treated to a bountiful, delicious, and attractive buffet supper, were given rooms for the night, and were even offered surf-side horseback riding on Sunday morning before a tasty and varied breakfast. We performed for the guests under palm trees with the ocean behind us.

Supper Sunday evening was in significant contrast. It was prepared by an impoverished community surrounding a Lutheran orphanage. It was simple fare: a fried egg, refried beans, a tortilla and sweetened coffee. The hosts were thoughtful in providing sanitary paper plates and styrofoam cups for us. Jason Nicolai was already infected by some intestinal bug and others were not feeling up to par.

Our performance at *Fey Esperanza*, the Lutheran Center, was also in contrast to the setting at Tesoro Beach. No palm trees set on an island here. At the orphanage we danced for neighboring families and the orphans. We invited them to dance with us. Then they sang and danced for us and finally gained enough confidence in our relationship to invite us to dance with them. We concluded Sunday evening by sharing the Lord's supper and showing our ritual, solstice sword dance as a symbol of universal light and life.

At Tesoro Beach we enjoyed ourselves. At Fe y Esperanza we enjoyed others.

The major social condition in El Salvador is that a small segment of society is affluent but most Salvadorans are desperately poor. There are not many people in between. This situation led to twelve years of civil war and the destruction of the country. The dichotomy persists today even though there are signs that prosperity is possible; the potential is certainly there. Both sides want peace and the United Nations is playing a vital role in monitoring the peace accords which have been in place during the past year.

The land is lovely with volcanic mountains, fertile soils, abundant lakes, and productive coastal plains. There are lots of people—a higher population density than any other Central American country. There is enough for everyone's need but not enough for everyone's greed.

The wonderful advantage we had during our tour is that folk dance was as welcome when we visited Mr. Cotto's exquisite colonial home on the bluff at Suchitoto as it was at Valle Verde a few miles away where people scarcely have material with which to construct even the most rudimentary huts.

The whole community turned out in Suchitoto when we danced in the nicely decorated central plaza park. There were speeches, national anthems and a wonderfully responsive audience as we left the stage to invite them to join in a Grapevine Twist. Mr. Cotto generously served us an elegant dinner in his home following the presentation.

The people of Valle Verde were equally impressive. The military offensive, which ravaged the valley, took them to the depths of despair where people come to see clearly that love and compassion are not mere niceties but are essential for human life or they become beasts. The eloquence of Marricio as he spoke to us in the Forest of Reconciliation moved us deeply. The people of Valle Verde are healing the land as well as their souls by planting 75,000 trees, one for each compatriot who died in the massacres and the struggle for basic needs. The village has no electricity and has had a sanitary community water station for just over one year. Still, the children, dogs, pigs and even the chickens are riddled with parasites from living without sanitation. It will take major support as they work to improve conditions in their village. We have much to learn about commitment and community from these valiant Salvadorans. They know that peace comes only when people are compassionate, responsible, and work together. The people-to-people work of Companion Communities is enlightened and deserves your support and participation. Berea is acting as a companion community with Valle Verde and, since we have been home, students have collected school desks and supplies, seed corn, money, and other materials to send down with the Pastors for Peace caravan.

We saw a good deal of Salvadoran character during our tour. The dedicated efforts of Partners of the Americas in scheduling a number of events for us and their friendship gave us our first contact with Salvadorans. They remained friends throughout the tour. Our closest friendships developed with our three bus drivers. AT&T hired a bus for us (three cheers for AT&T!!!). Their choice of Tomas Melgar's company couldn't have been better. And Tomas' choices of Eliseo Rivera and Julio Queredo were equally inspired. These three men became full fledged members of our troupe. They were with us daily for three weeks, got the bus into almost inaccessible locations, helped us change money, helped us bargain in the market place, advised us what to eat and what not to eat, prepared a seafood dinner for us at a beach house, taught us Spanish, took care of upset stomachs, sprained ankles, and suffering egos. They loaded and unloaded our PA system and baggage at every stop, never complained, supported us in the most helpful way and kept us laughing the whole time. They made a profession of service to others and will forever will be our model of Salvadoran character.

Our trip to Guatemala and Honduras was memorable. It took more time for the bus to negotiate the difficult roads because dust and pot holes were a constant problem. We had to spend one night at Hotel Payaqui in Esquipulas because we couldn't reach Copan, in Honduras, before dark. But we had a great time shopping among the hundreds of stores and stalls which were selling everything from coconut candy to hammocks and hats. Galen Combs and I stood in line, along with Guatemalan pilgrims and tourists, to go up and touch Christo Nega in the cathedral.

Border crossings were an experience in bureaucracy, and were expensive. It took a full 2 hours to leave one country and enter the next. Officials wanted to fumigate the bus at each crossing even though pigs, birds and dogs wander about with impunity. We escaped by pleading medical problems but had to pay a bribe once (I guess that's what it was).

The National Geographic specials on the Mayan ruins at Copan will be very special to us because we not only had a guided tour of the ruins by Hector Cardonna, a native, but also because we danced in the town square for the villagers and were provided with accommodations—the male dancers and I in the home of Saul Molina, the others gratis in local hotels.

We spent a night each in three Guatemalan towns: Zacapa, Gualan and Rio Hondo. In each case we were hosted in private homes and gave an evening show to which the entire community turned out. Host families quickly became personal friends. My host in Zacapa is an Agricultural Extension Agent specializing in drip irrigation. The people of Gualan had a cookout for us along a rushing river. Rio Hondo was wonderfully clean and scenic with modern street lights along paved streets. It is a small town where everyone knows everyone and people walk to town. Galen and I stayed with Mario Marin, the mayor, and his family. He and his daughter took me to a community sugar cane mill much like those where we have stir-offs for making sorghum molasses. We have left part of our hearts with the people of that area.

Another important aspect of our tour was our visits to other colleges. We exchanged dances with dance classes and gave a stage show at the Jesuit University, the University of El Salvador, the Cultural Center and the University of the East. These schools are making the best of poor conditions. The University of El Salvador suffered considerable damage to buildings, still in disrepair. A visit to the garden where the President and five of the best teachers of the Jesuit University were slaughtered gave some insight into the insanity the Salvadorans have experienced. It was good to make student to student contact.

Our performances at two Mormon churches were amazing events. Both churches were crowded to standing room only. At AESUD Mormona we moved our morris dances outside where we had a larger area and then the possibility of inviting the audience to dance with us.

Two other performances stand out. We danced on the lawn in front of the Ambassador's residence at the United States Embassy and were invited in for refreshments. Mrs. Ruth Esprey Romero, wife of the Deputy in Charge of the Mission (D.C.M.—we have no ambassador at this time), is from Ashland, Kentucky! Our final show was at the National Theater and was televised live on the national cultural station. Partners of the Americas gave us a lovely farewell reception following the two hour program and accompanied us to the airport Sunday morning for the flight home.

Here are some of the comments given to me by our troupe at the close of the tour:

Mike Greenway I was taught ... in life (to)...strive to be better than others. In El Salvador...to take what (you) have and make the best of it...not (to) step all over each (other) to get ahead.

Kristi Rupert I discovered a generosity of the human spirit that hopefully I can carry with me and emulate...

Emily Oaks The people are wonderful and were so happy to have us here.

Jamie Hammell ...my new friend. Patty Castro,...spoke of war as a conversation piece, whereas I would find it hard to talk about (it) comfortably. I now very much appreciate what I have. It has all given me a new meaning of taking things for granted.

Haskel Rose. It wasn't until our visits to the orphanages that I realized the importance of love. Many of the children were sick and very poor. However, this never really affected their compassion for each other.

David Witherspoon. Sustainable development...means voluntary simplicity...we may begin to be willing to lower our standard of living in order to raise the quality of life.

Jenny Nelson ...happiness lies in simplicity...breathing, laughter and love. This is what El Salvador taught me.

(nameless). ..people are people anywhere. There can always be a bond no matter what languages are interchanged. Love and peace are what the people of El Salvador want.

Martha Shaw I used to be afraid to go into a truck stop... now I'm not afraid anymore..I've walked past a bunch of men with machine guns and I'm not afraid.

Ken Dewire. ..well worth a return visit...We only touched on the guerrilla world, the Army world, the returned refugee world, the 3 to 4 major cities, the orphanages, the Universities, and the US Mission community.

Patsy Layne. ...the troupe met the test like professionals, overcoming diarrhea, the language barrier, collapsing stages, strange food, and insect bites to perform with excellence, energy, and love left over...

Only three of the students had been overseas before. Seven had never been in an airplane. All are now confident world travelers, ready to do their part in making the world a better place.

Thanks to all the host families, including those in Georgia and Florida, for sharing their homes with us. It is this personal experience which makes the tours so meaningful. A special thanks to all who undertook to organize the tour for us and to help us on our way. And thanks to Berea College for making such experiences possible.

Sincerely, John M. Ramsay and The Berea College Country Dancers