â??Whatever happened to â??that girl?â?? Traveling while older offers challenges but nothing this former tour guide couldnâ??t handle

Description

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SENIOR BEAT COLUMN

Whenever I go through airport security, I light up their machines like a Chernobyl chicken.

â??Female Assist!â?• the cry goes up for a pat down and I get *that look*.

I explain that a car wreck in my youth left titanium holding my knee and hip together, but somehow my images show me riddled with hot spots all over. Some â??female assists â??are gentle, some not so much.

Air travel was stressful for me before Covid. So, before flying to a small Central American country for a wedding I had to consider, letâ??s see: TSA, Customs, Covid, Masks/No Masks), proof of vaccination, bottled water only, and my own recent Covid infection and continuing shortness of breath. Plus being suspended 5,000 feet above sea level.

And finally, being, well, older than I was before the pandemic, the question was: To go or not to go.

What happened to the intrepid tour guide I used to be? The Naomi of the 1980s who took tour groups on the Trans-Siberian Railroad, and to Azerbaijan, Tashkent, and Samarkand on rickety Aeroflot planes

that smelled of sour cream and rode like amusement park rides?

Naomi Marcus, left, found her visit to Antigua, a small colonial town in Guatemala, to be relaxing and refreshing despite some minor obstacles. Here she chats with a family of sisters in the town square. (All photos by Colin Campbell unless otherwise indicated)

That Naomi, who got dropped by helicopter into a yurt village in the Gobi Desert in Mongolia. I was an interpreter accompanying American geologists there to study the rocks. â??When are you coming back for us?â?• I screamed at the pilots over the roar of the blades. â??What if I get a toothache?â?•

â??Maybe in one day, maybe in two, depends on weather,â?• they yelled back and waved goodbye. I shrugged and waved, too. OK, whenever.

Whatever happened to *that girl?* Decades, thatâ??s what.

Normal travel hell

I worried but went anyway. Off to Guatemala. And no suspense, it went off without a hitch. No mechanical plane issues. No bad weather. No nutcase passengers. Not lost. Not kidnapped. Just the normal hell of modern-day international air travel. And it was totally worth it.

I caught Covid in December. One symptom, shortness of breath, has remained with me. My pulmonologist assured me it would pass, eventually. â??Go on your trip,â?• she said. But it hit me at the Dallas/Ft. Worth airport, where we changed planes.

With my husband looking on askance, I headed to one of the, oh, thousand airport bars and had *dos* gin and tonics. It helped. Breathless in Dallas. Was it being in Texas or being post-Covid? You decide.

The Fuego is one of three volcanos that loom over Antigua.

When we landed in Guatemala City, we were met by a well-dressed, 60ish driver and I asked how his tourism business survived the pandemic. Franciscoâ??s stories of eating rice and beans for a year and the humiliation of asking his adult kids for money were so absorbing, I forgot to worry about breathing as we drove higher into the mountains. I was fine.

Antigua, our destination, is a beautiful small colonial town in southern Guatemala, nestled under three volcanoes: Agua, Acatenango and the Fuego, still active. Founded in the early 16th century, itâ??s a UNESCO heritage site and the former capital.

February weather is sublime; the air kisses your skin, so sweet and mild. Sapphire skies are studded with frothy clouds. The sun is gentle. Soft Jacaranda breezes drift around you.

Stepping carefully

Road crews (above) get a kick out of Naomiâ??s husband, Colin Campbell (below) trying his hand at their large wooden mallet. (Photos by Naomi Marcus)

Picturesque but NOT gentle are the cobblestone streets. Many streets, being dug up for repairs are trip hazards galore, with gaping holes unmarked with cones.

Sidewalks are also being repaired. Curb cuts are uneven, and as you delicately step on and off to avoid construction potholes, you risk moving into the path of zigzagging â??motosâ?• (motorized bikes) that careen and barrel through intersections that have no stop signs or stoplights. Some drivers stopped so close to me, we could have embraced. Or died in each otherâ??s arms.

How old are you when doctors start asking the question, â??Have you fallen recently?â?• My husband and I â?? we both boast ankle, knee, and hip replacements â?? are always super cautious pedestrians. Antigua required another level of *atencion.*

And another source of fascination: My husband was impressed that the road repairs were being done with hand tools. No machinery: just picks and crowbars and shovels. He asked to try out the mallet they were using to tamp down dirt. The road crew laughed like hell at the gringo grandpa wielding this huge mushroom-shaped tool.

I texted a photo to his ankle surgeon: â??Thanks Dr. Thullier. Colin at work with road crew.â?•

We never took a taxi or a tuk tuk, the sputtering, three-wheeled scooter-taxis. We walked everywhere on those uneven streets, and it was totally worth it. Antigua is small, laid out in an easy-to-navigate grid, and there are lush green parks and squares, benches under shady trees, and fountains in hidden courtyards.

Weâ??d rented a cozy bungalow, adjacent to the ruins of an old convent, with bougainvillea creeping up the walls, and birdsong all morning. Our second-floor terrace looked out onto the volcanoes and the crumbling pink stone ruins of Convento San Agustin.

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Old town, modern problems

Mornings, we breakfasted on pineapple, rolls, and coffee on our veranda. Days, we explored Antigua. Itâ??s a small town of antique beauty but modern-day challenges.

We met a March of Madres blocking the main highway from Antigua to Guatemala City. They were protesting the planned closing of an open-air market in their village nearby. More than 100 vendors would be displaced for the construction of a soccer complex. â??We are not Criminals, WE ARE NATIVE ANTIGUANS,â?• their banner read.

Women from a village near Antigua (above and below) block a main roadway to protest the planned closure of an open-air market that employs more than 100 vendors.

They marched to Antiguaâ??s City Hall and asked to speak to the Mayor, the *Alcalde*, who never came out. Their stoic, quiet patience was heartbreaking.

Evenings, we found rooftop bars at sunset to watch the illuminated sky, the air so pure the colors poured across the horizon like spilled paint: magenta, peach, pink tangerine.

We also attended pre-wedding festivities. The bride, Ana, is a Guatemalan American we met as volunteers tutoring newly immigrant kids at San Franciscoâ??s Mission High School.

The generous, thoughtful 30-something bride and groom had planned some activities: racing around the volcano in All Terrain Vehicles for the guys, and, for the gals, aerial yoga (poses on a trapeze) at a yoga retreat.

Taking it easy

We declined. Maybe 10 years ago. No, maybe 20 years. Maybe never.

Instead, we meandered. Up a lush hillside on a switchback trail to a tall cross, El Cerro de la Cruz, in a forested area with views down onto the sun-washed town. But there, suddenly, a tall pine tree toppled down in front of us.

Naomi and her husband escaped injury when a tree suddenly fell across their path while on a hike along a hillside. Locals were there almost immediately to cut the tree up for firewood.

It could have taken us out, but it only blocked our path. Still, it could have been one of those traveling-while-old disasters. It could have happened anywhere, but what wouldnâ??t happen anywhere is the family, including grandma with a machete, who appeared out of the forest to hack that tree apart in less than an hour. They needed the firewood.

Did trees often fall so suddenly, we asked a juice vendor with a stand under the trees. â??Si, the roots are so dry they pulverize,â?• he said.

â??And you keep your stand up here?â?• I asked. He shrugged, â??*Si, si dios quiere*.â?• (*Yes, if it is Godâ??s will*).

Kind of my attitude to traveling now.

La vida local

A street vendor, loaded down with items for sale, checks her cell phone. Below, Naomi relaxes for a chat with another woman selling handicrafts.

When we met locals, such as wait staff or the ironmongers, silversmiths and jade jewelers with workshops tucked away throughout town, we asked about their jobs. A waitress makes the minimum wage in Guatemala: 3,000 quetzales a month, or $400.

In a town chock full of curios, (birds and beasts carved in brightly painted wood, pendants and bracelets and earrings and ceramics, intricate embroidery and shawls and colorful fabrics), we bought nothing. In a country famous for coffee and chocolate, we brought home nothing.

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I apologized to peddlers. I explained I am too old to want more things. Their faces fell, but I always gave money, thanking them for their time talking to me.

Eventually, I forgot to be anxious until, around 2 a.m. a week into our stay, we were awakened by the sound of bloody murder just outside. â??*Ay, ay, ay, Ayudame!*â?• *(Help Me!),* then Bang! Pow! Shriek! I was breathless all night after that.

A hard-of-hearing neighbor, we learned the next day, returns from his Chinese restaurant at 1 oâ??clock every morning and cranks up the radio volume. What weâ??d heard was a crime drama blasting through a nearby open window.

â??Ah, si,â?• she said,â?? he is used to being alone here. This casita is usually empty. *Yo le digo***.â?•** *(I will tell him.)*

The one thing older travelers are often warned about but we didnâ??t experience is crime. Do not carry money, we are advised. Do not walk about late. Donâ??t get kidnapped. Donâ??t get robbed and donâ??t get murdered.

Call me naÃ¯ve, but common sense carried me through this world before COVID and I couldnâ??t summon such fears now.

What *is* different: My bandwidth is not as wide. I am less able to take in and absorb impressions. I am slower, physically and emotionally. I donâ??t want to change places every few days: We demurred on side trips our bride and groom had arranged.

We stayed in Antigua, dodging trees, motos, tuk tuks, and potholes. And it was totally worth it.

Category

1. All Posts

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