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What I Didn't Do in Costa Rica

When I was a kid I had a set of geography cards, laminated and roughly 5x5 if I recall correctly—though because of the outsize position they retain in my memory, they very well may have been much smaller. What is without question is the way they stoked my imagination and curiosity about the world. To this day I can see myself in my bedroom, the blue shag of my late 70s carpet under my knees and those cards splayed out before me: Tokyo, Easter Island, Johannesburg, Cameroon, Cambodia, Machu Picchu, Iceland, the Bolivian altiplano—a magical, diverse, endlessly fascinating world.

No doubt my friends were waiting for me somewhere: either down by the creek—a small tributary of the Patuxent River—or at the “common area” where we played soccer and football and where we tagged racquetballs with baseball bats. It was also where we invented “kickshoe,” a game that involved taking up to ten swings on the swing set with your sneaker hanging off your heel before flinging the shoe. The person who hurtled his shoe the furthest was crowned the winner—though one had to question the designation of the word when Matt Boyd lost his sneaker (though earned the legendary status of Kickshoe King in the process) after the orbital flight of a new white Nike that landed on the roof of a house that bordered the playground. Matt was too afraid to knock on the door and ask to retrieve it, so there the sneaker sat, testament to Matt’s prowess, and hard evidence of a day that with each passing year more and more kids claimed to have witnessed. To hear it told, that shoe on its long, graceful flight birthed an eclipse as it cartwheeled through the atmosphere and landed sole down and toe forward, as if pointing its way to triumph. And there it sat, a moonshot that no one had ever come close to replicating.

Challenges such as these were always on offer. And yet there I was in my bedroom looking at cards, unable to tear myself away.

This was decades ago. In the intervening years, no more kickshoe to my chagrin, but, to my delight, lots of trips to places I first saw on those cards, intrepid journeys I managed in my 20s and 30s. But travel now is . . . different. Now, I have a wife and two daughters, and their travel requirements are not the same as mine. I require a certain level of misery to make me happy; I love to skirt that knife-edge where something terrible can happen and yet never seems to. I once managed to roam unscathed around Caracas as the city was imploding—this, after being assured multiple times that I would be mugged, at the very least. That potentiality, perversely, made it feel more like an adventure than it would have otherwise. Had I been mugged or murdered, well, yes, quite a damper on things. But I wasn’t, and so it made the experience all the better. There was the time I took a chance on a “shortcut” in Las Cajas National Park in Ecuador. Had I calculated incorrectly, I would have found myself after sundown, at 12,000 feet, without water, trying my best not to snap an ankle trudging my way to a road, where there would still be no guarantee of flagging down a ride and where, more likely, I would have been run down on a hairpin turn. Quite a few moments on that hike I thought I had it wrong and almost paralyzed myself with indecision—trust myself, or head back and try my best to beat the failing light? But after a couple of harrowing hours, it all worked out. It was the belief that I might be endangering myself with potentially horrific consequences that made it—along with the extraordinary scenery (llamas, rippled peaks, alpine lakes)—so thrilling. I had a similar experience in Iceland—a hike through driving rain along a precarious ridgeline to a spectacular

waterfall. Several times I stopped and considered the idiocy of it. I was soaked to the bone. I had to take mincing steps to keep my balance. I had no real idea how much further I had to go or how much more rotten or hypothermic the weather would become. Then I turned a corner, saw a grand crash splitting the face of the mountain, reverberating with the rush of all that volume. The sky cleared, a rainbow arced over the earth, and for the ten minutes or so before the sun was again blotted out and the rain returned, I soaked up the marvel of what must simply be one of the most sublime places on the planet. It had been worth it. It seems it always is. *Never turn around. Always go further.*

But it's different for my wife and kids, and not unreasonably. They're pretty game for outings, even rough ones, but there are limits. While I would think little of a ten-hour hike in a rugged and remote spot, this wouldn't fly with the rest of the family.

When it comes to vacations, I'm responsible for the preliminary legwork—I compile a list of potential places to visit and once we've narrowed them down, I then research specific sites and activities within our chosen destination. This year, when we talked about summer vacation, I suggested Costa Rica and identified a specific place, Playa Hermosa. The girls whipped out their phones and conducted an image search.

I hate phones. On the very day that we decided to visit Costa Rica, we went to a neighborhood party where I watched a group of eight twelve year-olds in a circle, each on a phone, sort of together, but not. No one was really talking and the glow was blue and sickly, like some demented campfire, almost enough to eradicate the fireflies that buzzed around their distracted heads. But I was okay with my kids googling images of Playa Hermosa. It heightened their excitement about going, for one thing. And, besides, seeing a place in advance doesn't obliterate the surprise of it upon arrival. From the image search, they did not get to feel the particular way the gray volcanic sand shifts under one's toes. They did not hear the guttural, echoing calls of the howler monkeys. They did not inhale the smells of the ubiquitous *sodas*, diminutive roadside eateries offering up traditional Costa Rican fare. All that would come only when we got there.

As for simply going at all, I literally could not have conceived of such a thing when I was a kid. My geography cards did not include Costa Rica, for one thing. But more to the point, the luxury of that kind of travel was simply not available to my family, nor was it to anyone I knew. We weren't poor. But jetting off to a tropical country? Inconceivable. Things are different for my kids. My youngest is twelve and she's already been out of the country four times. I was fifteen the first time I left the United States (France on a school trip); my wife was twenty-five (Nova Scotia for our honeymoon).

But here we are in Costa Rica, and my kids navigate this foreign world without trouble or hesitation. We frolic in the Pacific. We zipline through jungle canopy. We take in the birds and alligators while floating down a river near the Nicaraguan border. Our river guide slices up a pineapple and tosses the rinds into the water where fish gobble them up. It's so sweet and juicy and I'm certain I've had a pineapple just as good sometime, somewhere, but throw in the circumstances and it's easily the best pineapple I've ever eaten and, no doubt, will be the pineapple that all future pineapples will be measured against. We take a hike in Rincon de la Vieja National Park, where the girls squeal at the plumes of rotten-egg sulphur emitting from the volcanic earth. We dodge bubbling fumaroles and afterward slather on steaming hot volcanic mud, covering every inch of ourselves before sitting in the sun to allow it bake and harden, theoretically sucking out the impurities in our skin (my older daughter, three weeks into her 14th

year of life, declares that it's working, that she "feels like a thirteen year old again") before an ice cold shower to wash it all off.

It's all pretty wonderful and I've got the photos to prove it. But there's so much of this amazing country that we will not see. The national parks at Corcovado and Manuel Antonio, Monteverde Cloud Forest, Arenal Volcano—these are places whose fame and allure have reached well beyond Central America. I'm here, in-country, so close and yet I will not see them. This grates at me.

My itch is salved for long stretches of each day, however, even those days when we don't stray very far from the villa we've rented; from there, we trundle down to the beach, passing scores of immovable iguanas, skittish geckos, exotic birds, variegated squirrels (much like our squirrels at home, but white with a black stripe across their backs), and troops of howler and capuchin monkeys. Reaching the water, we take in the horseshoe curve of the cove bounded by jumbles of volcanic rock and fringed with pulsing jungle. We'll head home tanned and blissfully tired and then we'll resume our normal lives. Eventually, my wife will make a scrapbook from the photos we take and the souvenirs we pick up; I'll resist the urge to show off by posting on Facebook—*look how privileged and beautiful we are!*—and the trip itself will recede in time but grow in memory's stature. I suspect it may even warrant a mention at a wedding someday.

Still, during the entire trip I'm unable to shake the sense that I'm missing out. Knowing what awaits in this jungle country teeming with life, I get itchy while we sit at the beach, and I have to bite my tongue on the day we trudge up the hillside to spend an afternoon in the villa development's pool. Sensing my irritation, my wife tells me to take off and do what I want with the afternoon. I kiss her on the head and head out for Panama—the town, not the country, though "town" is a bit of a stretch. Panama is a jumble of concrete houses and one road, tarred for a good stretch before giving out to packed dirt and then, eventually, crumbling dirt. I park and follow the old narrowing road into a dense forest where it soon gives out altogether. The jungle closes in on both sides and things feel sufficiently wild and remote and potentially dangerous and only now does that deep internal itch start to subside.

An external itch, however, is something else entirely. If I stop for more than three seconds, the signal goes out all across the jungle that the idiot human is stationary. *It's time to attack.* Every flying, biting insect in the forest bombards. I'm even attacked by butterflies, twice, each time I've stopped to take in a congregation of them feeding on salty mud. Even a blue morpho joins in once, one of those iconic, luminescent, otherworldly-colored beauties that should connote peace, I am certain. They rise from their spot when I approach and swarm in my direction, buzzing my head and landing on my arms, face, shoulders. I've never seen butterflies act this way. It's fascinating, and annoying.

But I'll take them, as nonplussed as I am, over the mosquitos. I take no pleasure out of killing anything; one of my earliest memories is of getting into a fight with my childhood friend Kenny (who was pretty good at kickshoe, if I remember correctly) because he insisted on squashing a line of ants outside my house. But mosquitos are a scourge and I see no good reason for their existence. Perhaps they know I feel this way; perhaps that is why I am being drained alive whenever I stop.

So I keep moving. Incessant chirps and clicks and squawks and rustles are all around me and sudden bursts of riotous color flash through the canopy. When a motmot flashes by and lands on a branch, I move into place, camera poised. The motmot is unmistakably a tropical bird; its flashy blues tell that story. It's as if someone dipped its back end in a vat of melted teal crayons. A singular blue feather with black tip extends via what look like two fragile wires from

the body, creating an appendage that seems to hold no purpose other than an exclamation point: *I've got bling to spare*. Rising up the bird's body, the blues give way to wings of green and a back of orange with a yellow tinge while the breast explodes in a sunburst. A black band across the face, topped by a white splash, gives the bird an expression of inquisitiveness. The motmot is, in short, a beautiful bird.

So I get into place to snap its image and immediately the swarms reemerge. I hold out as long as I can and hope at least one of the pictures from my shaking hands, unsteady for the feel of probosces entering my ankles, has resulted in something in focus.

When I move on and the urge to pee becomes too great (I'm sucking down water at a prodigious rate) I undertake this simple act by complicating it immensely—I must keep moving for fear of the menacing bloodsuckers, so I urinate while walking. It doesn't go so easily. I'm at first irritated that I'm soaking my ankles and socks, but it's soon clear that this is working as a fairly effective repellent. And this is what I mean when I say that I require a certain level of misery to make me happy. This is difference. If I'm at home and sloshing about in urine-soaked shoes and socks, obviously something has gone horribly wrong. But here, well, here it makes me smile for the ridiculousness of it.

It's why I continue to push on, even as the humidity thickens, even as my water runs perilously low. It's why I go further away from the direction I've come, slogging over this bend and then that one and then the one after that. Because after all, surely what awaits me around the *next* bend is the most spectacular vista or another amazing bird, or . . . This is the same sickness that afflicts slot machine addicts, of course. The next one must be *the* one. And when it isn't, well, doesn't that just increase the odds that it's coming next? I mean, it has to, right? If the previous sixteen were great but I haven't been completely flattened by awe, well, it must be lucky #17. Right?

Eventually, I pop out of the jungle and emerge into a valley with rippled green peaks flanking both sides. There's a fence and an orderly row of trees with a little path next to it. Then, a herd of cows. I've wandered onto private land. It's a lovely spot, but there's no sense of misery here. My adventure is over. Besides, my family is waiting for me and I do have a long walk back and rather little water. I've managed to scratch the proverbial itch, despite the literal variety still remaining. And yet . . . *Corcovado, Manuel Antonio, Monteverde, Arenal*.

Our last night in Costa Rica we head to the beach for one last swim in the Pacific as the sun sets across the water. We stay in the ocean as the moon rises and illuminates the sand and the water as one sparkling sheet of diamonds. When we finally head back inside, we pore over World Cup scores and watch highlights and ponder knockout round scenarios. The next morning, as I have every day here, I sip amazing coffee, fresh from the volcanic, cloud-misted slopes of Tarrazu, with its deep, earthy flavor as if the very planet has been squeezed into a mug. But then it's time to head to the airport and home, back to our lives, patiently waiting for us not far from the shores of a different ocean. We're lucky; I know this. And yet . . .

I suppose that's the very balance of life with children. I distinctly recall that desperate feeling when my girls were very young and I spent the work week just trudging through, horribly sleep-deprived and miserable, trying to keep it together, and then weekends too wiped out to do much of anything, standing by a window watching my life rocket by and wondering when I'd get my freedom back. It did come back eventually, of course, and then I happily traded it for more time with them, primarily in the form of coaching their travel soccer teams, which sucked up every fall and spring weekend and had us running from school and work to practice several nights a week. They're only fourteen and twelve and they still live at home and yet I find more

and more that I miss them. They're branching out now, as they should, and are more interested in spending time with their friends than with their old man. It's all good—they're healthy and kind and, for the most part, quite sweet. They are socially well adjusted and athletic and good students. So they will continue to grow and they will leave the house soon enough and if my wife and I did our jobs well, they won't need us very much anymore. And so on those inevitable days when I will sit in their old bedrooms, the spaces where they grew into the people they will eventually become, I'll miss them terribly.

I'll think about Costa Rica, I'm certain, and what we did together. And I'm guessing now that I won't think so much about the things I didn't get to do there.