

March 31, 1998

This is Irma Kackert writing, I am starting a journal of an international trip, from Thousand Oaks, California, to Costa Rica, in Central America. I expect to return on April 9, just before Easter. I am free this week from teaching the Adapted Aquatics classes through the school district, for it is Spring Break time, no classes are held. I am 82 years old now, and feeling well after recovering from a flu virus in January and February. I also have a healed cut on my right lower leg, which kept me out of the water for 5 weeks, had to teach from the side of the pool. On advice from my Doctor, I am keeping the leg dry until the scab is about gone. An antibiotic Ceftin, helped with the healing.

I am using my big suitcase with wheels, it pulls easily, and I checked it through to San Jose, my destination. I have the large, green soft bag over my shoulder, and carry no purse. From previous travels all over the world, I have found the simple ways to handle luggage and personal items. I tried to change some money in the LAX terminal, but they did not carry money from that country.

As I was awaiting departure from LAX, met a lady who was going on the same flight. She was American, but now lives in Costa Rica, she told me many things about the country, even knew about a small hotel, moderately priced, and in a central location. It was named "Dunn Inn" and owned by an American named John Dunn, I'll try for a room there. I changed money at the Currency Exchange in Dallas, where I had to change planes. A lady standing there heard me asking about the currency, called "colon", (\$1.00=about 221 colones). She had just returned from Costa Rica, and said it was beautiful! My plane left on time, had no trouble boarding. A young man sitting in my row was friendly, he was from Arkansas, a college student, but is taking a 6 month job on a small cruise ship. He will meet the ship in Costa Rica, it will go through the Panama Canal, then north up the Pacific to Alaska, and return. This will be a new experience for him, and a new adventure, he had not traveled much. I wished him good luck.

Later – Just had a very good shrimp dinner, accompanied with white wine, which is complimentary on overseas flights, we were also given free headsets, to listen to and watch the movie "The Full Monty". Travel is very nice! We arrived in San Jose, the capitol city, at 7:45 p.m. C.S.T. It was easy to get through immigration, and the lady whom I met in the Dallas airport, Diane Kralik, helped me at the baggage area. Then she called the Dunn Inn for me, and made a reservation, that was helpful, I don't speak Spanish. The exodus of passengers, after customs, was quite unusual: luggage was put on a conveyor, then you had to walk away, up a flight of stairs, and claim your bag again, which was checked with your tag. It was a good security check, but hectic, there was pushing, and shoving. The young college student, Paul, waited with us outside the terminal, then someone came to meet him, and he was happy and relieved. Diane secured a taxi for me, and I was driven in the dark, to the hotel in town. The taxi fee was \$10. The hotel was quite nice, for the moderate price of \$49.50 plus \$6.00 tax. My room had wood paneling

on walls and ceiling, private bath, TV, telephone, and ceiling fan. It is named "Gavadus", the key given me was on a small chain attached to a piece of wood, on which was carved "Gavadus", instead of a room number. A plaque inside the room explained that the room name is Indian, and means the cultivation of corn, beans and rice. How unique! That is why I like to stay in the small local hotels, and learn some of the culture. After I was settled in my room, I went down to the restaurant and had a glass of beer to quench my thirst and relax. The room, with partial open ceiling, was filled with rain forest plants, small trees, and foliage of many kinds, it was very nice. The proprietor, John Dunn, was there and greeted me. He is American, talked to me a bit, was friendly and offered me any kind of help, to see the country. He even offered me a complimentary beer, but I did not want any more, soon went to my room, showered, and then to bed.

WEDNESDAY APRIL 1

I felt good in the morning, did my exercises in bed, and on the floor, laid on a large towel. The complimentary breakfast was fresh mango juice, slices of a good banana bread, toast and coffee. Needing to change a larger amount of money, I found a bank nearby. I learned that 1000 colones = \$5.00. I changed a \$200 travel check into 49500 C, and some coins. Then, having a map, I walked a few more blocks to the business district, and a little park there. There are many trees around, bushes and flowers in the parks. The streets are paved, but not always in good repair, sometimes curbs are broken, had to be careful walking. I stopped in a little café called SODA, and bought a local sopa, dough with cooked meat inside, it was flavored well and tasted good. San Jose is a large, bustling city, much old architecture is present, and there are new multistory buildings also. The traffic is fast moving, the driver sits on the left side of the car. Often there are deep ditches at the sides of the streets, for drainage, making it a little difficult walking, at street corners. Street repair is often lacking in the poorer countries of the world, with not enough funds to cover that cost. After an introductory survey of the old part of the city, I walked back to the hotel, and arranged for an afternoon tour of the area.

I was driven through all parts of the city, and suburb area, and saw so much. It sits in a broad valley, there are mountains on both sides, the climate was comfortable, warm, and hot in the direct sun. This is the dry season, a pleasant breeze was blowing, as we drove around. There are high-rise business buildings, but not as many as I expected for a large city. The wealthier people live on the west side, the embassies for different nations are also here. We passed the U.S. embassy grounds, they occupy a whole block, the building is beautiful, other countries were represented nearby, and I also noted the Vatican embassy building. All the houses and yards have iron fences around them, I was told that crime is a problem in the country, I did take a picture of a nice fenced and gated residence. We made a stop at the National Theatre, explored the interior. It is a beautiful edifice, kept in good repair, was built 100 years ago, a symphony concert will take place there tomorrow night. We passed the Congress and Parliament buildings, then made a stop to go through the Natural History museum. It was very interesting, showing the different tribes of Indians who lived here in years B.C. The center area was open, and had multiple plantings of trees, bamboo, and flora, which was not native to this area. Also there was a room full of religious items that were brought here from Spain in the 1600's, when the Spanish conquered the native Indians. Another room had many objects which the Indians created

out of the gold found here, they were unique. Following the museum visit, we were delivered back to our hotels, I arrived at mine at 5:30 p.m., and felt good about seeing so much of San Jose. At the hotel I arranged for an all day tour tomorrow, to see the volcano Poas, some of the rain forest, take a trip on a jungle river, and have lunch at a resort in the forest. I later had dinner in the dining room, quenched my thirst with a glass of beer, and selected the fish almondine and tomato soup from the menu. The food here in the hotel has been very good, and sitting in the restaurant surrounded by all the tropical foliage and small trees, makes one feel refreshed.. At the table right next to me was an American lady, we spoke, and she told me that she and her husband have been living in Costa Rica for the past 8 years, they have a house on the Pacific ocean, south of here, almost to the border with Panama. We had interesting conversation, they had lived on a 45 foot long boat for 15 years, then settled here and built a house right on the beach, where they are happy. She had come to San Jose yesterday, for a medical checkup.

On the tour today we went through the University of San Jose campus. There were very many buildings and the enrollment is 20,000 students. Education is free here, high school students wear uniforms. University costs go according to previous academic grades; excellent students may get free education, students with lower grades pay according to a scale. Costa Rica has an 89% Catholic population We were also driven through the market place, it consisted of several blocks of stands, and carts, where fresh vegetables of all kinds, and fruits were sold. It was filled with people, the guide said it was not a very safe place for tourists to walk through, as thieves like to mingle with the crowds We were returned to hotel Dunn Inn about 5:30 p.m

THURSDAY APRIL 2

I left a call for wake-up at 5:30 a.m., but my phone was askew on the holder and it gave a busy signal, so a man knocked on my door at 5:40 a.m. to wake me. I replaced the phone properly I was picked up at the hotel at 6:35 a.m. by a driver with a van. He also picked up a young French girl, at another hotel, her name was Veronique and she spoke English, Spanish, German and French Then we picked up an older man, age 93, he spoke Spanish and a little English. The driver spoke both these languages. In my travels I meet so many people fluent in several languages, I get along with only English, often I use sign language, and it works.

We headed out of San Jose on the Inter-American hiway, and going through the city was really a mess! The early morning people were going to work, children were being taken to school, there were cars and people everywhere, traffic was slow. We headed up toward the mountains and soon were in higher elevations amidst the coffee plantations. The scenery was beautiful as we rode higher and higher in the mountains. The coffee beans are picked by hand, then sorted, and the whole process is a hand operation here. In India I was in the tea plantations, and a processing plant, that too is also all hand work. Our first stop was at a small, pretty stand of native wood, where they sold hot coffee and also bags of the local beans. I enjoyed a cup of the local brew and it really tasted good, the view from here was also very nice looking down into the valley below. The sun was hot and the air was very pleasant. I had on a sleeveless shell and a long sleeved cotton topper, for I did not want to get sunburned today: I also had applied sunscreen to my face. After more

riding we stopped at an open air restaurant along the road, and ate a BIG breakfast on the roofed patio area. First there was fruit juice, then slices of papaya, melon and pineapple. Next, a big plate of scrambled eggs, dark beans and rice, a soft tortilla with melted cheese, slice of tomato and a big slice of grilled pineapple. It was all so tasty, and more sliced fresh fruit was offered also. The people were so pleasant, and cheerful, made you feel happy.

Then we drove on, still seeming to go higher all the time. The roads were kind of bad, were very bumpy, and if they had blacktop on them at one time, a lot of it was gone, in big chunks, pieces stuck up like a scab on a healing sore. But the scenery was wonderful, the land was either forested, or cleared, to raise different crops. We saw many hills covered with some kind of light netting, the driver said they were raising ferns here, for export. In one area there were fields of strawberries growing, they had strips of clear plastic over the plants, held up at each end by wire framework, to keep the burning sun off. There were many smaller areas of flowers growing, and at small houses alongside the road there were gardens of vegetables, and flowers. Often we encountered mothers and small children walking on the road, taking the child to school. Once in awhile we would pass a small stand at roadside, selling drinks and produce. The only large town on our route was Aleluja, we passed through this shortly after leaving San Jose. Finally we came to the Poas Volcano National Park. There was a visitation center there, a very nice building. Also, a sign giving instructions, to walk up the wide path, then there would be two craters, one with steam and gasses coming up (though it had water in it), and another one also filled with water, but it had erupted many years earlier, and forest growth was now growing right to the edges.

It was a long, hard climb up that path, even though it was wide and small logs had been placed on the steepest parts, to make steps. I had to rest a couple of times in that 20 minute walk, so did the other man, but we made it. The sight then was spectacular: a huge crater with a lot of water in it, and steam coming up from a few places at the edge. The viewing area was well laid out, and I got several pictures here. Next we went up another path, higher again, to view the second crater. There was no steam here, just placid water filling the crater, and forest around 3 sides. After enjoying the view, and resting, we walked back down the trails to the park center, and met our driver. Costa Rica has quite a few craters, from volcanoes, one of them regularly spews hot lava and fire. They have had many earthquakes also, in fact the large Catholic Cathedral in San Jose is undergoing a huge amount of repair now, from a past earthquake. There was the smell of sulphur gas, in the area of the craters. Leaving here we drove down through fantastic mountain views, into the lower area. There were many plants, dense growths of big trees, and bushes. One of the unusual plants was as much as 8 to 10 feet tall, had very large green leaves, and a deep wine colored blossom hanging down, like a spike. I later learned it was a cousin of the rhubarb plant, and the natives call the plant "the poor man's umbrella", they use the leaves for shelter, when it rains suddenly. I am so glad I made this trip today, it's interesting and cost was so reasonable, only \$69 , with all meals, fees into parks, boat ride, etc., all included.

After driving awhile we came into an area that was cleared, for miles and miles and here cattle, and dairy cows grazed on the grasses. The hills were so steep, going almost

straight down, I don't know how the cows managed to walk on them. There were houses along the road, people were walking, children coming home from school were walking, or riding bicycles. It seemed very dangerous to me, as we sped past them. One unusually large spread of buildings, with lovely white fence all along the road here, was the headquarters for dairy farming in Costa Rica.

About 12:30 p.m. we arrived at a lovely lodge, right in the tropical forest. We were now on the Atlantic lowlands side of Costa Rica, and the air was very warm and humid, we had come down from the high mountain area. At the resort we were advised to relax a bit, in the patio area behind the restaurant, where there was white wicker furniture with pillows, a hanging "basket" swing, also of white wicker, and there were nearby paths through rain forest, and tropical foliage where you could walk a bit. There were some plants with leaves about 6 feet long, and shaped in different ways. One of these had a brilliant red and yellow blossom that hung down, it was beautiful. Our lunch was in the dining room, on the second floor level, it was open on the sides and it seemed you were really up amongst the trees, was lovely. The buffet style meal: mixed fresh fruit drink, pork chops, cabbage salad, rice, grilled pineapple chunks, a cooked vegetable, like sweet potato, but firmer, fresh fruit salad and coffee or tea, all very tasty.

After eating and resting, we drove on for many miles and crossed rivers several times. There is much rainfall here during months between May and October, hence the lush plant growth and rain forest. I felt no bugs or mosquitoes, but this is the dry season.

We stopped to view a waterfall, dropping down 120 feet from the forest above, and there was a lovely looking bridge over the water there, the sides were of wide, curved arches, it really was beautiful. I took pictures of the waterfall, then noted a man stood in that area selling local strawberries, plums, and some baked goodies. Riding on, we passed banana plantations, a lot of them, also many fields where the "heart of palm" plants were growing, the fruit is used in salads. There was bouganvilla in many places alongside the roads, with brilliant blossoms showing. I also noted many datura plants, about 10 feet high (they have the poisonous white trumpet shaped flowers), I remember a picture I

have, taken of me kneeling down in the desert examining one, in Saudi Arabia, it was just a foot up from the ground – the rainfall here makes the difference in growth.

We passed a few small villages in this very rural area, and finally turned off the main road at Puerto Vieja (Old Port), on the Selapiqua river. There was a landing here for boats, we went down some steps, carefully, and got into a small motor launch. There were several along the shore here, that take passengers out on this jungle river. Now we had an hour or more ride, looking up into trees for monkeys or birds, or along the river banks for water creatures. Our guide was in the boat with us, and first he pointed out a bright green iguana, sitting on a dry tree branch that had fallen into the river. He was small, only about a foot long. Next, was a white egret sitting along shore, then the bird anhinga, quite large, he was spreading his wings wide as he sat on a dry branch in the river, there was also a kingfisher bird, sitting and waiting for food to appear in the water. We saw 2 or 3 more iguanas, either in the water or near the shore, one of them was swimming, and it was interesting to see them. Then, a small caiman at water's edge, and now our boatman spotted a large caiman, about 4 or 5 feet long, lying on a large branch, just above the water. He maneuvered the boat quite close so we could get a good view. An orange butterfly was

flying nearby and it settled on the caiman's nose, then alighted on it's lip, the caiman didn't even move. I said maybe the butterfly was cleaning the caiman's teeth, like cleaner fish do to larger fish, and which I have viewed while scuba diving. Through the field glasses I could see how big those front teeth were – WOW! The caiman never moved, though we were quite close to him. After a bit we turned around and headed back; at two places, boys were swinging from trapeze-like ropes that were suspended from trees, they would swing out over the river, and drop in. It looked like fun, but I remembered that the guide said there were alligators in this river – and we saw that it was inhabited. I also saw a woman washing clothing in the river, while her 2 children played in it. That looked dangerous to me. I also saw a pipe discharging sewage from a “bano” (restroom) along the banks, into the river, and there was a bad smell here.

After returning to the dock, we drove back through rural areas, to San Jose. We passed villages and I noted often the names were of a religious nature, such as “Jesusmary” and “Nazareth”. The majority of Costa Ricans are Catholic. On the return trip we saw large trucks carrying huge logs out from the forest, where they are cutting so many trees down, depleting the rain forest. From our guide I learned that Costa Rica has no army, no military, since 1943. He said they feel the United Nations will protect them from any invasion. Coffee, sugar, bananas, pineapple, and many types of plants are exported and they feel the economy is good now.

FRIDAY APRIL 3

This day I spent walking about in San Jose, after I had a breakfast of juice, muffins, and coffee in the hotel dining room. I had 2 maps, and studied them a bit, then set out to explore. It was a bright, sunny morning, the air was very pleasant, and I walked down 11th avenue, the street the hotel is on, a couple of blocks to Calle 3. There was a park there, I had seen it before, and I sat on a bench for awhile, studied the map a little more. I had been told I would find a supermarket on Calle 3, but I did not see it. The traffic was very bad, cars drive fast, and one must be careful crossing a street – I try and walk across with other pedestrians. Seeing a 12 story building across from the park, I walked there; a doorman said it was the Insurance building, with offices, but there was a museum on the entire 11th floor. I bought a ticket and went up in the elevator. It was a museum of Jade, from areas in Costa Rica, though the thought was that Indians from Guatemala located it first. It was very interesting, I never knew there were so many different colors of Jade, many shades of green and also brown and grey. Many pieces were intricately carved. There were also a lot of ceramic pieces, created in the past by natives, I enjoyed seeing everything, also there was an entire glass wall in one of the rooms and the view from there, of San Jose below, was great. Leaving there I made my way through a few neighboring streets, and found the park extended further than I thought. A man there was selling “coconut water” (I had sampled this often in Thailand), the top is cut off a fresh, shelled coconut, you put in a straw and drink the coconut water inside, it tastes so good. He asked 150 colones for one, and I rested on a bench as I drank it. The park had lovely big trees, many flowering plants and bushes, and birds were plentiful, flying amongst them. On the way back at the hotel, I stopped in a local eating place, they call these a SODA, and had one of their native delicacies called a sopa, and some milk. The sopa is made with cooked beef placed inside a circle of soft dough, and baked, it's very tasty. Back at the

hotel I inquired about a tour to the Carara Biological Reserve, and booked it. In the lobby I met Barbara Powell, the American lady who lives in Zancuto, Costa Rica now. I met her at dinner here the other night, she was checking out, and gave me her phone number, in case I decide to go to that area. She was a very pleasant lady.

I rested on the bed for awhile, then later in the afternoon went out again. Nearby was a travel office and the clerk there showed me a small mission church, very close to the hotel. He inquired for me, the time of masses, 4:30 p.m. on Saturday and 9:30 a.m. on Sunday. I plan to attend mass on Sunday, but being in the vicinity, I made a visit there now. An hour of adoration to the Blessed Sacrament was going on, and I said some prayers. Then 5 nuns came in (all in white habits) and 6 young postulants, dressed in black jumpers and white blouses. They prayed, and sang, one of the nuns played a guitar. It was pleasant, very peaceful, and I felt privileged to be there, in church. I gave thanks for this trip, and for good health. Tomorrow I'll be going out on the tour, to the reserve, and then on further west to the Pacific ocean, where we will have time at a resort, also have a meal. The price of the tour was 17485 colones, and pickup time is 6:10 a.m. I don't find it as easy to get around here on the streets, as I did in Guatemala and Panama City, even though the Avenidas and the Calles are laid out in squares. The streets are not marked well, I never did find the supermarket as I walked this morning. I find it exciting, and interesting to explore cities in different countries, and learn their local foods.

SATURDAY APRIL 4

I was picked up at 6:00 a.m. today, by the guide Luis, and a van driver. Another American couple named Bob and Ludmila Beckman, were already in the van. The trip was west, out of the city, to the Carara Reserve, take a walk in the forest there, have breakfast, then continue on west to the Pacific ocean. So let me tell you about driving there and back, and the events of the day. Going out of San Jose we were on the Pan American highway, toward Alejuela, then turned west and north. The van was old, it rattled, shook, shuddered, and almost gave up on the high grades of the road, and there were many of them. We had to go over the mountains between San Jose and the Pacific, and this is the dry side of Costa Rica, though they will have a rainy season soon. After driving awhile and observing green hills, we noted as we drove further west, they turned to brown, dry vegetation. We progressed over the twisty road; steep hills, hairpin turns were constant, and like the old van, the road was worn out too. The uneven road surface, pot holes, detours where road work was going on, made the combination of the van and road, a disagreeable situation. The temperature outside grew higher as we went west, and as we continued on our way, the air-conditioner stopped working!!! We opened the windows – then breathed in not only hot air, but also the fumes of the many huge trucks and busses on the road, and dust from traffic going over the newly scraped surface. We were told this area has had drought conditions recently, and the earth really looked dry. Yesterday, on the trip to Poas, we headed east out of San Jose, they had more rains, the coffee plantations and vegetable gardens were flourishing, and very green. On the dry west side, cattle are ranged on the hills, mango trees flourish, with some irrigation, and watermelons must grow well also, for we saw them for sale, alongside the road. At our breakfast stop, in a roofed, open air restaurant, they displayed old sugar cane pressing wheels, made of wood, also a very large mortar, carved out of a tree trunk. This was filled with ears of corn; in olden days

fresh corn was crushed with a pestle, also carved of wood and displayed here, and this was then used to make their corn tortillas. I took photos of these cultural objects.

Then we stopped at the forest, home to toucan birds and macaws, which we hoped to view. We walked the dry, leaf covered paths, didn't see anything but "carpenter" birds, a species of woodpecker, that pecked away at tree trunks, we did hear the toucans, high up in the canopy of trees, didn't sight any. I heard rustling of dry leaves near the path, and saw a large armadillo as he rooted his way under them. We saw some very big lizards too. It was really very hot in the forest, we all perspired. The hot, shaky van didn't feel too good either, as we continued our way west. The driver stopped after we had crossed a bridge, we walked back to the center of it, looked down at the river and saw 8 crocodiles, lying in the shallow water, sunning themselves. The largest must have been 15 feet long, the others were of varying lengths; it was an interesting sight. Continuing west, we finally came to Jaco, and the resort on the Pacific. We were so hot, were ready for a cooling dip in the nice pool. They had a room for us to change in, and to shower afterward. A dip in the pool felt so good! As we relaxed in it, Bob was floating on his back and his hips and legs dropped down, sinking him. I showed him how to keep legs elevated, and float comfortably, by slowly extending arms back underwater, behind his head, and his legs would come up. He did this, and said "I can't believe it, I've never been able to float", and "I'll buy you a cold drink", which he did. Following the swim we kept our suits on, with a cover-up over them, and had a very nice lunch on the patio facing the beach. Afterward I had a dip in the ocean, the waves were smooth, and I noted the sand was very dark, almost black. When I showered there was black sand in my suit.

Leaving the resort about 3:30 p.m. we started the uncomfortable ride back. The same situations existed, only now we were bumping, wiggling, writhing, shaking, in the opposite direction. Traffic was heavy, and police were on the side of the road here and there, I guess to keep the speed down. There was much cattle ranching in the area, also noted the light colored Brahma cattle being raised here; they stand the heat well. Our driver told us the people here use the white blossom stalk of the yucca plant (we saw them blooming on hillsides) for seasoning foods. Men sold them at stands alongside the road. I wanted a picture of this, so the driver stopped at one place, and I got it. The man also had small watermelons for sale, and mangoes, I bought part of a small melon and ate a lot of it when back at the hotel. There was a metal tray under the water pitcher, in my room, and I used this for my plate. I always carry plastic fork, knife and spoon with me, when I travel, so am prepared to eat. I felt that, despite being uncomfortable on the ride, the other experiences of the day were interesting, and different cultures observed today made everything worth while. No toucans, no macaws, but then, when have I seen an armadillo out in the open? Jaco is about 100 miles from San Jose. The watermelon was very good, I will finish it tomorrow morning.

Costa Rica has no train at all, so everything is hauled in big trucks, on the highways. Also, there are a lot of busses to carry people. It reminded me of riding on the roads in Saudi Arabia, there are also no trains there, however their roads are very good. There are houses here along the highways, and every yard has flowers and colorful bushes growing, the yards are clean and neat. I must mention the garbage pickup in San Jose: there are large iron baskets on stands, about 4 feet high, one in each block. The household garbage

is put in plastic bags, these are tied shut, bags are placed in the baskets, and streets and roadsides are not littered with debris, as I have seen in some countries. After arriving home I showered, washed hair, and washed out my bathing suit, which still had some black sand in it. I need to let it dry thoroughly, in preparation for packing, in a couple of days. Tomorrow is Palm Sunday and I will go to the 9:30 mass in the nearby little church. Since I travel each year during the week before Easter (because school is not in session that week, and I work for the school district) I have heard mass on Holy Thursday in Seward, Alaska, and on Palm Sunday in Guatemala, also in Panama. In this country they announced time for Sunday masses on the television. Tonight, as we were passing the cathedral in downtown area, stretched across the road, way up high was a sign in electric lights and a cross, reminding people of Palm Sunday.

SUNDAY APRIL 5

I'm sitting in the park right now, observing people as they stroll by. A father with 3 children was on a nearby bench, watching 2 of them playing – the youngest just fell off the bench onto the cement walk ! I heard her head hit the cement, she cried loudly as her father tried to comfort her. These same happenings occur all over the world, don't they? The temperature is lovely, about 82 degrees, and a great breeze blowing, it is sunny but there are a lot of shady benches. I slept so well last night, awoke at 5:45 a.m. as the birds were singing outside. I did my exercises upon arising, dressed and ate the rest of the watermelon, it was so sweet. I attended the 9:30 mass in the small church nearby, it was in Spanish of course, but that was all right. It was a simple service, the priest blessed the palms in the back of church before mass, they were given to the people attending. The nuns and postulants I observed yesterday, were present, two nuns played guitars and everyone sang. Leaving here I walked toward the park. On the way I passed a bakery, which was open, I went in and selected two items. No one spoke English, I just pointed to them, she rang up 2000 on the register, I started to give her money, she said "mucho, mucho", I was taking out enough for colones, she meant that amount for the small coins, and I have not learned their name. Like all merchants in my travels, she was honest and took only the small amount from my outstretched hand.

When I first arrived here, I tried to locate the Holiday Inn Aurora, which was shown on the map. Now as I am sitting in the park, I see a building about 15 stories high, right across from me, it says "Holiday Inn" way up on top, I have found it! Families walk slowly through this park, all are dressed nicely. I saw one pair of lovers embracing, on a park bench, I get the feeling the Spanish custom of visiting, and enjoying the plaza or park area, prevails here. I see some people carrying palms, they must have attended Palm Sunday services and are now relaxing here amongst friends. Some few shops I passed walking here are open, most all are closed. My right knee was a bit painful today, (maybe from all the walking and climbing paths I've done) so I am resting today and relaxing. I feel no flies or bugs, a nice feature.

I left this park and walked to Avenida 3, making sure I kept track of the number of blocks I traveled, then came to the very large plaza, across from the National Theatre. The Grand Hotel borders this, and also some shops. Many people were walking about here, visiting with families. The little girls were dressed so pretty in fancy dresses, one in yellow with

ruffles and lace, another in pink, one in lavender. They could buy bags of feed, and were tossing it to groups of pigeons. I sat down and watched the birds, the males would puff out their neck feathers, spread tail feathers wide, and walk about near the females; this is their display for mating, carried out all over the world. There was a McDonald's at the edge of the plaza, after awhile I went there and had a hamburger, price was 150 C, and some ice cream. Then I walked back to the hotel, bought post cards and addressed them, also wrote in the journal. In the evening I had a "Cervasi" beer down in the bar, and some food. I learned that during Holy Week here, businesses slow down, on Holy Thursday some few stores will be open, but on Friday, Saturday and Easter, everything shuts down. That is similar to Saudi Arabia, where after the month of Ramadan, the whole country shuts down for a whole week, banks, stores, post office, etc.

MONDAY APRIL 6

This was my godmother's birthday, my aunt Lena Esser. I always remembered her on that day, she was very good to me. Today I am going on a tour to the Arenal volcano and hot springs, we leave at 9:30 a.m., return about 11:00 p.m., staying into the night time so we can see the eruptions from the top of the volcano. I have also decided to leave here on Wednesday, instead of Thursday, as everything will be closed down, and I have now seen a lot of the country. There was no problem changing the date, with American Airlines. I called from the hotel.

I was picked up at the Dunn Inn for today's trip, by the guide Bernardo, the same one I had for the city tour last week, and taken by taxi to a huge, air-conditioned bus, at the Hotel Gran Oro. Other people were picked up at the Costa Rica Palace Hotel, the Marriott, and another one. We proceeded north and east from the city, noted the land was green, not dry and brown as it was going toward the Pacific side of Costa Rica. We passed coffee plantations again, also papaya and banana fields. The elevation rose, and roads were crowded with busses, trucks and cars, but they were in better shape than those on the last trip. I must mention the "living fences" in some places, they plant small, thin trees very close to each other, that have no low branches, later on some will grow at about 5 feet above the ground, spread out, and now you'll have a living fence. Soon the road became narrow, we went higher and higher, there were steep hills with sharp drop-offs in the yards behind houses. There were cows grazing on nice green grass, I guess they have learned not to roll down those steep hills. Continuing on our route, the air became foggy, the twisty asphalt road had sharp turns, I didn't think it was appropriate for the busy traffic of all kinds, including huge trucks (18 wheelers) carrying cement blocks, lumber, bags of cement, etc. A couple of times we had to wait at a sharp curve, to let a truck pass by.

In the town of Zarcero we made a stop to see a wonderful park-like area, right in front of a large, beautiful church. Bushes of some kind of Juniper tree, had been trimmed and shaped to make a set of archways, about ½ block long, and leading right up to the church entrance. It was a beautiful sight. There were more trimmed bushes on each side of the center rows, representing animals, and also some flower gardens. I took photos of the area, then went inside the church. At the rear was a large wood and glass enclosure with a life sized figure of the crucified Christ, lying in it. Long poles at each of the 4 corners, showed that it will be carried on the shoulders of 4 men, in the Good Friday procession,

through the streets. This is an old Spanish tradition. Next we passed through small towns of San Carlos, and San Ramon. Rural life is evident here in the central highland area of Costa Rica.

Our next stop was for lunch in a restaurant, that was of a circular formation, open sides, and a thatched roof that went high up to a center point, similar to a tepee. The food was plentiful: pieces of beef (it was a bit tough) and chicken, mixed vegetables, black beans, rice, mashed potatoes with cheese, a piece of sweet potato, cabbage slaw, slice of tomato, and a large glass of fruit juice. After consuming a good part of this meal, we rode on and suddenly could see the Arenol volcano in the distance, sticking up in the sky. Before coming to the volcano, we stopped at a very large, man made lake, which was formed after the volcano erupted in 1968, and the village of Arenol was destroyed. The lake now takes up the area that was the village. It is 26 miles long, and an electrical power plant has been built here, to serve the area.

Now we proceeded to the Tabason Resort, at the base of the volcano. Here there are several thermal swim pools, set in lovely gardens, the hot water comes from under the ground. We walked around first, along paths in the gardens, observing tropical plants; the manicured flower gardens, and very large trees. There were several spas situated in the garden area. We were given a key to a locker and a towel, if you wished to use the pools. There was a large, rectangular one, also a natural setting pool, where water flowed from above, a waterfall of hot water, into a pool below. I got into the large pool first, found the water was so warm that it tired me easily as I swam back and forth. Then I went into the natural pool, water was also very warm. The bottom was natural, had hard rocks in it, made it difficult to walk, and I was careful not to scratch my ankles against the rocks, which were hard to see. Some people sat on rock ledges, right under the waterfall, which comes from springs on the mountain, it was really hot! There was a foggy haze over the mountain, don't think I got a good picture. I then dressed, and just as I was finishing, there was a tremendous rumbling sound, just like heavy thunder – the volcano had spoken!!!!We were told this might happen. While strolling in the gardens I heard the howler monkeys, high up in the trees. At first I thought it was the volcano sound again, but a young couple near me said, no it was the monkeys, and she pointed some out to me. They moved so easily, from tree to tree. I also heard bird sounds, way up high, but did not see any large birds. The monkeys sound something like the bark of a large dog, sort of a “hugh, hugh, hugh”.

After it got dark, you could see red places on the volcano sides, this was lava and hot rocks rolling down. There was no eruption from the top, that we could see, but the red spots were evident in many places. This was quite a thrill, to be near an active volcano, which has been active steadily since the 1968 eruption, and may “blow” again at any time. If it happens, and I read about it, I will say “I was there”. The sight of red hot lava rocks coming down the sides continued. There was a buffet dinner served in the dining room, it consisted of salads, vegetables, chicken, fish, beans and tapioca pudding. There was a drink, white, and banana flavored, that tasted very good. We left the resort shortly after finishing our dinner, about 7 p.m., and now had a 3 hour ride ahead of us, back to the hotel. I felt lucky today, heard and saw the howler monkeys, heard the volcano rumble, and saw the red embers coming down the sides of this huge, high mountain, with it's top blown.

I forgot to say earlier, that we drove through many, many miles of sugar cane fields on both sides of the road, on our trip today. Sugar is exported from this country.

TUESDAY APRIL 7

Good morning to a relaxed day, my last one in Costa Rica. I slept very well, but missed hearing my usual bird song because I slept past my usual 5:45 a.m. wake up time. After stretching exercise, on the bed, I put a big towel down and did floor exercises, which always make me feel good. My body has behaved very well; one knee was a little sore on Sunday, but is all o.k. now. Going down to the breakfast room, I brought a muffin, juice and coffee up to my room, and imbibed leisurely there. Later on I decided to walk to the Plaza culture area and find the post office, the desk girl at the hotel sold me stamps, but said that mail is only picked up once a week, very possibly twice! So I decided to find the post-office. There are no mail boxes on streets, throughout the city, as we have, this country does not have all the conveniences we have in America.

I walked down Avenida 3, to the Plaza area, and found the supermarket that had been described to me, but I had never found it. Now I would not have known it was a market, except for seeing people come out, carrying bags of groceries. I went in and looked around, it was hard for me to compare prices with our groceries, because everything was marked in "colones". I just got the impression that prices are high here, compared to their income. Walking on, looking for the post office, I heard a group of men close to me, speaking English. I excused myself, (por favor señor) is the Spanish, and asked if they could direct me to the post-office. The answer was "yes, just 3 more blocks, then turn right, it's the green building you will see". I had my travel hat on to protect me from the sun. It has many patches on it, one of the men said "are you from Florida?", I answered "no, from California". The other one said "so am I, which part are you from?" I answered "Thousand Oaks", and he exclaimed "I'm from San Fernando valley, very close to your town" and he reached out and shook my hand. I've had this happen before, in my travels, meeting someone from my own town way over in Australia. I found the post-office, and had to ask inside where to mail the cards. The attendant pointed to a wall, held up 3 fingers (after he looked at the cards) and pointed to the middle slot there. It said, in crude letters, North America, South America, Central America. I dropped the cards in, wondering where they may travel, before they reach their destinations

Now, back to the Plaza I went, noting several fast food chain eating places, Burger King, Hardee's, McDonald's. But I decided to eat lunch at the big hotel there, a very big, local one. There were tables outside with large umbrellas over the tables, also a covered patio area and I decided to sit there. There was a nice breeze blowing, the temperature was pleasant. I ordered tortolini in cream sauce, since I've had local type food every day and thought I would like something different. The local food here is not spicy, as it is in Mexico. There was music by a male trio playing marimba, a wood instrument and guitar. It was very nice, and I gave them a tip, as I finished eating and walked away. Next I walked 2 blocks to the large Catholic cathedral, but found a sign "No Entrada". It was surrounded by high metal fencing, is now being restored after earthquake damage, so walked back to the Plaza. It was very busy today, not at all relaxed, as it was on Sunday afternoon, no families sitting around, or pretty little girls in fancy dresses. People were shopping today. Now

feeling warm in the sun, I went into McDonald's and got an ice cream cone, ate it leisurely there in the air conditioned comfort.

Walking back toward the hotel, I passed fruit stands, and flower stands with beautiful blooms, took a picture there. Also passed a stand with local merchandise for sale, and bought 2 vests that will go well with black pants. Passing the bank, I went in and changed money, 15000 colones into U.S. \$59.00. I know 2500 colones equals \$10, \$5 is 1250, one colone is worth about U.S 2.5 cents. They do not have any "cents" coins here, just colones, paper notes and coins in denominations of 100, 50, 20, 10 and 5. Now that I am about to leave, I have learned the money, it takes several days in a country, for me to be familiar with the monetary values.

Back in my room I freshened up, it was warm walking, then talked into my recorder about today's happenings. Now it is "Happy Hour" and I am having a cool drink down in the dining room, before dinner, as I write in this journal. I have paid my hotel bill and left a call for a taxi to the airport in the morning, and just have to organize my suitcase and shoulder bag, then will be all ready to leave here. I had thought earlier, that I might leave the San Jose area for two days, and go to another area, but the roads are so bad, and bus transportation is a bit difficult when you don't speak the language. This hotel is very nice and I have been comfortable, so have just stayed in the city and taken one day trips to other places. Also, if you stay 7 days in this hotel, they give you one day free, so why leave? The dining-patio area is surrounded with bromeliads, all kinds of tropical plants, ferns and trees: a fountain is running and makes a nice sound, fans above cool the air – my bathroom is spotless, maid service daily in my room – need I ask more??

I didn't obtain a picture of the deep purple flowering bush that one sees along the roads and in people's yards, similar to the bougainvillea, but it is not a vine – I hope the memory of it stays in my mind forever. Also lovely to see here are the flowering trees, covered with pink blossoms, I was told it is the cashua tree. I did much of my walking in the business district, and there were no flowering trees there, so no pictures. Costa Rica does have many beautiful tropical plants, flowers, bushes and trees.

WEDNESDAY APRIL 8

I am now in the airport at San Jose, having a last cup of Costa Rican coffee, frothy at the top, and called "blanco". It is delicious. I arrived at the airport early, so passed through check-in and immigration quite easily. I received my wake up call in the hotel at 5:30 a.m., but was awake before that and heard my usual bird song outside at 4:55 a.m. I had packed my suitcase last night, so only had to put in the last things, close, and belt it. The hotel man carried it downstairs, the taxi was waiting. The airport is about 20 miles outside the city, almost to the area of Alajuela. Departure tax here was \$17, or 4264 colones, a man stood outside the terminal, and collected the tax before you entered; it was a good thing I had it all ready. After checking my suitcase, I went into the gift shops, looking for a Costa Rica patch for my travel hat, but no one had such a thing.

We took off on time, lifted from the ground at 9:30 a.m. and were told our flight time to Dallas was 3 hours 50 minutes. The customs slips were passed out shortly after takeoff,

one must fill them out and have ready for customs department in Dallas. We must identify our luggage there, clear customs, and then board a plane for Los Angeles. The pilot just announced that we would fly over Tegulagulpchi, Nicaragua, Belize, Yucatan, the Gulf and Huston, then land in Dallas. It was very clear as we flew over San Jose, then north over mountainous areas, and large cuts could be seen below in the forests, they have really ravished many, many trees. Then clouds appeared and no more visibility below. My seat partner was a lady from Vancouver, British Columbia, she was very pleasant.

We changed planes in Dallas, claimed my suitcase in the baggage department, went through customs, then an agent took it for the next flight, and I just walked to gate 27 and boarded my plane. I guess daylight savings time started last Sunday, while I was in San Jose, for it is one hour earlier in the U.S., than my schedule states. We were shown a movie "The Mouse Hunt" (kind of a ridiculous thing) while in flight, also drinks were free on international flights, but they charge \$4 for one in the states. The pilot announced that the temperature in Los Angeles is 66 degrees F., that is cool.

As we crossed the Colorado river, I could see Lake Havasu City below, the wide part of the river, which is the lake, and I could even pick out the tiny line which is the division of the island, (where my son Tom has his vacation home), from the mainland of the city. I have never been able to see it from the air before, though I have flown from Dallas to Los Angeles many times. The air was very clear today. The time at this point was 4:38 p.m. I noted. In another 45 minutes we landed at LAX, we were a bit early. The temperature was 61 degrees F. On arrival in the terminal, I secured my suitcase promptly in the baggage department, then went outside to the intercity bus stop right in front, to catch the 6:05 p.m. bus to Ventura County, and Thousand Oaks. That was a good connection, I did not have to wait very long. I had put a sweat shirt in my carryall bag, so put that on, and I was not cold as I waited for the bus. On arrival in Thousand Oaks, I called my daughter Mary, from the hotel where the bus stops, and her husband Steve came right down and picked me up.

No matter how nice the area is, wherever I make a trip, it is always good to get home!!! My back yard is full of blooming plants, calla lilies, nasturtiums, sweet peas, California poppies, and the last of the Bird of Paradise blossoms are all open. And, best of all, I feel great !! The scab came off my leg (from a previous cut) while I was in San Jose, it is well healed underneath, and so I'll be teaching classes in the water on Monday. I still teach Adapted Aquatics water exercise classes for the local school district, using the YMCA pool. I have had to teach from the deck, for the past weeks, while leg was healing. I am 82 years old, still a certified instructor, and enjoy my work.

Irma M. Kackert