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# MotorHome

MAGAZINE

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For Holiday  
Giving

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**Campground Discrimination:  
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DECEMBER 2005



# MotorHome

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Photo by Kenna Love.



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# Fire and Water



99 Days to Panama and back —  
in a Class C coach!

■ HARRIET HALKYARD





For the first time in our entire drive to Panama and back, we had parked without asking permission. It wasn't as if there was anyone around to ask — we'd found a lot that had been cleared for a home construction, miles from nowhere. Nothing but blue water in front of us, and across the dirt lane behind us were miles of dry swamp. The view was magnificent. The clear Caribbean lapped over coral between silk sand and the brilliant sky.

We maneuvered the motorhome to face out so we could make a prompt departure should the landowners request it, and settled down to enjoy the sunset, a cool drink and dinner. Everything was perfect — until 11:30PM that night, when my husband, John, and I woke up to an eerie crackling. I thought it was someone walking around the vehicle, and the hairs bristled on the back of my neck.

It wasn't a stranger — but it was strange. And dangerous. I looked out to see a wall of flames 50 feet high. The swamp was on fire.

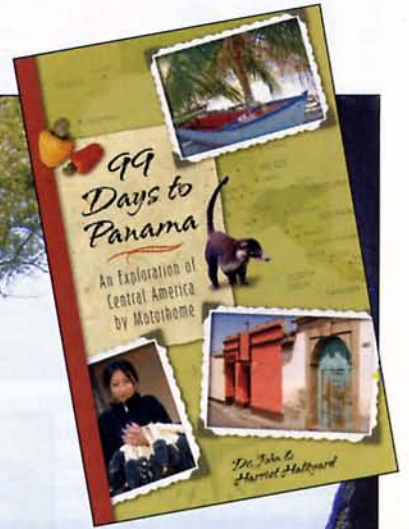
There was an offshore wind and the flames were leaping toward us, ash and sparks swirling about like a snowstorm. With our backs to the beach, I had visions of John, our dog, Brindle, and me backing into the water, watching



After getting stuck in the sand for two hours, we made our way to the Brisas Del Mar Hotel in Corozal, Honduras, where we spent the night (opposite, top). Nearby, at Cayo Chachauate, I snorkeled in the crystal clear water of the Caribbean which was teeming with fish (opposite, bottom). The town of Chichicastenango, Guatemala, was a glorious riot of colors and friendly faces during market day (above, left). In some areas of La Union, Honduras, we saw more donkeys than motor vehicles (above, right).

MAP ILLUSTRATION: SUE CARLSON

# Fire and Water



our motorhome burn.

We pulled out, driving parallel to the flames. Lumbering carefully over the sand road illuminated by the flames that loomed over us, we headed south. After a mile or so the inferno was a glow in the distance and we relaxed a bit.

Where an old burn met the brown swamp, I looked back. One palm tree, entwined with dead vines, was covered in little sparks as though it was decorated in holiday lights. A minute later it had become a 50-foot-tall Roman candle, shooting flames into the night sky. The whole marsh was igniting around us.

When there was not even a glow in the distance, we came to some habitation, pulled onto a soccer field, and stopped, thinking the open area would be an adequate fire break. There was also a sense of security having people around.

We woke up to a clear bright day and found ourselves in Sittee River Village, Belize. The motorhome was parked under a breadfruit tree just 100 yards from the Sittee River, and brightly

*The property at the Visión Azul Hotel spreads all the way to the water of Lake Atitlán, Guatemala, and offers water and electric hookups (above); you can also dump there if you have a double-length hose. Friday is market day for locals in San Francisco el Alto (below). Our dog, Brindle, jumped up on the ramparts of the Spanish fort in Portobelo, Panama (bottom). There's something magical about Lake Atitlán — the water feels as deep as the sky is high (opposite, top). You can drive your motorhome right into the parking lot at Tikal, Guatemala, and stay the night (opposite, bottom). It's incredible to be there at dawn before the tourists arrive.*



painted wooden plank houses dotted the roadway. It would have been hard to have found a prettier campsite. Or one more sedate. According to the locals, the fire had been nothing to worry about; it was just the swamp burning. It had stayed within the bounds of the swamp and caused no damage. Of course, they hadn't been as close to it as we were.

## Getting Started

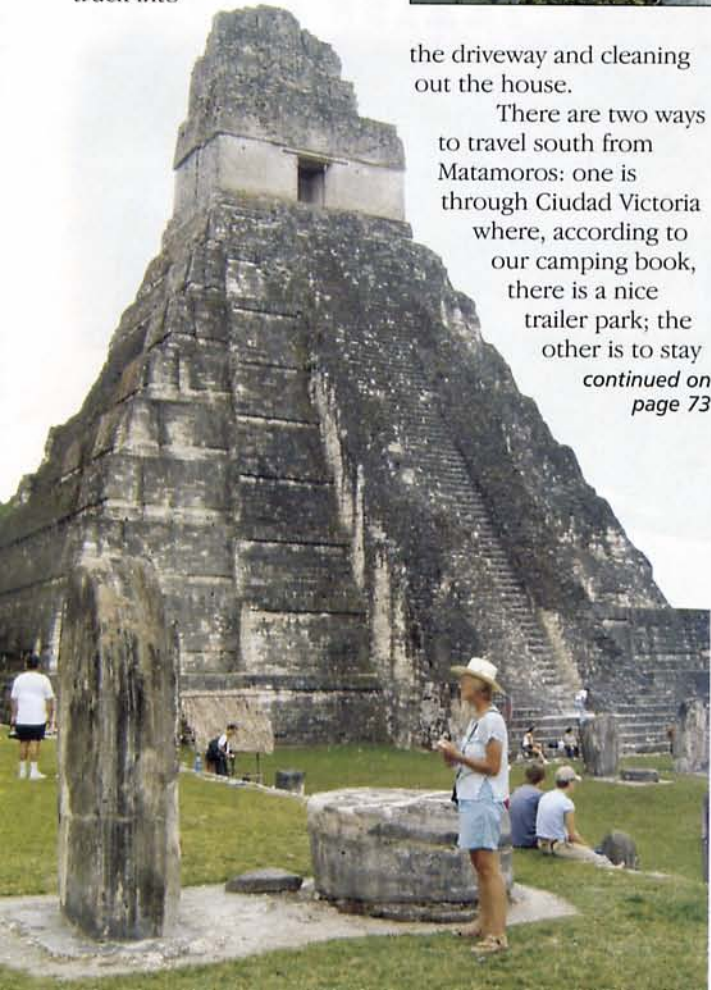
Six months earlier, back in Texas, we had driven a motorhome for the first time in our lives. After a shakedown trip to California in our new 22-foot Coachmen Class C, we decided we could go anywhere. I had seen all the states in the Union, so it seemed logical that we head south. We had taken flying vacations to Central America. Now we would see it close up.

Our first overnight stop was in the Wal-Mart parking lot near the Texas-Mexican border. I had a map of Central America fixed to the table and

# Fire and Water

covered with plastic — we ate dinner shifting our plates from one country to another and outlined our route. Little did we know then that it would change almost every day.

We crossed into Mexico at Matamoros, and immediately went looking for a present to give to a friend in Guatemala. John almost turned into the parking lot of a supermarket when I noticed steel arches over the entrance that would have decapitated the motorhome. We later learned that many parking lots and especially private homes in Latin America have similar low barriers over their entrances to keep large vehicles out. This prevents thieves from driving a truck into



the driveway and cleaning out the house.

There are two ways to travel south from Matamoros: one is through Ciudad Victoria where, according to our camping book, there is a nice trailer park; the other is to stay

*continued on page 73*

## Border Crossings

Having our papers in order is not to say that the border crossings were simple or quick, and having the dog sometimes added as much as 30 minutes to a transit. Some crossings were free, whereas others cost more than \$80 for us, the vehicle and the dog. (We spent a total of \$422.96 on the 14 south- and northbound crossings.) Two crossings took as little as 45 minutes (entering Mexico from Belize and re-entering the U.S. at Brownsville), whereas entering El Salvador from Honduras at El Amatillo took four hours.

We noticed, too, that while immigration and agriculture fees were paid directly to personnel, vehicle or custom fees required a trip to a nearby bank to make the deposit directly into an account. This pattern was repeated at every border in Central America.

Frequently at the busier border crossings there are guides to help you transit the labyrinth of formalities. Most guides are helpful and honest and seem happy with a tip of a few dollars. At Peñas Blancas, between Nicaragua and Costa Rica, they are licensed and indispensable. To cross the borders requires patience: The border agents are struggling with antiquated systems and equipment, but seem genuinely proud of their country and want you to visit. Of course, having a motorhome where we could have lunch in air-conditioned comfort while we waited was a real plus.

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closer to the coast on Mexican Highway 180. We followed the coastal route, planning to stay on the beach at La Pesca.

The road surface vacillated between OK and horrific. Often it looked good and we'd speed up to 50-55 MPH, only to encounter grim potholes or sunken patches that caused the motorhome to rock and leap like a bronco. We frequently found ourselves driving on the wrong side of the road to avoid particular obstacles.

If that didn't slow traffic, there was also the notorious *topes* (toe-pays), the Mexican version of a speed bump. They are RV killers; sometimes we had to come to a complete stop to climb over them. Not all of them are sign-posted — and sometimes there are signs and no *topes*. We realized that we couldn't just rush through, and

tried to shake the high-speed life we had been living out of us.

We also discovered that when you veer off the major highways, the roads aren't always wide enough for a motorhome. After visiting the ruins of El Tajín — where we also encountered the first RV caravan we saw on our journey — we almost got lost and stuck in the very narrow streets of Papantla. The mirrors, in particular, stuck out precariously. We nearly broke them off more than once by trucks heading in the opposite direction.

Getting lost, by the way, is a common occurrence; given the language barrier, trying to locate landmarks within small towns is sometimes impossible. Everyone is happy to give directions, but locals tend to have a different take on geography. We soon discovered that the easiest way to find a location was to drive to the outskirts of town and find a taxi — or a volunteer guide. Oftentimes, someone will be happy to show you the way for the price of a bus ticket back, plus a tip. If you're worried about letting a stranger into your vehicle, just pay the fare for a taxi to lead the way.

The alternative is that you sometimes make mistakes, and sometimes get caught making them. Our first misadventure was in Veracruz. We were struggling through town, looking for our campsite, when John decided to change lanes. This would have been OK had there not been a policeman behind us and had John not crossed a solid white line during his maneuver. After paying the "fine" on the spot, we went on to find the campsite without any further trouble. Waiting for us was the same caravan of motorhomes we'd spied at the Tajín archaeological site. As it turned out, they were from Adventure Caravans, and we spent time with them, exchanging stories. Interestingly, except for the caravans (we saw two), we encountered more motorhomers from Europe and Canada than we did from the states!

A funny thing happens once you cross the border — most everybody starts speaking a different language. We realized we would be at a loss if we didn't possess at least a working knowledge of Spanish, so after driving

## EXPENSES

TYPE EXPENSE	COST
Pre-Trip	
(Visa and dog fees): _____	\$ 290
Gas (793 gallons): _____	\$1,782
Communications	
(phone card, satellite and cell phone, fax): _____	\$ 893
Lodging (camping, parking charges & two hotel nights): _____	\$ 771
Excursions	
(admissions, tours, guides, boat rides): _____	\$ 763
Food: _____	\$ 656
Eating Out: _____	\$ 532
Souvenirs: _____	\$ 635
Tolls: _____	\$ 530
Border-Crossing Fees: _____	\$ 423
Supplies (including two new tires): _____	\$ 294
Language School: _____	\$ 234
Repairs: _____	\$ 181
Taxis: _____	\$ 160
Medical	
(includes vet charges): _____	\$ 87
Car Rental (Jeep, 2 days): _____	\$ 71
Incidentals: _____	\$ 65
Propane: _____	\$ 43
Bus Fare: _____	\$ 6
Postage: _____	\$ 4
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>\$8,420</b>

# Fire and Water

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through Mexico, we paused for two weeks in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, for a total-immersion language training at the Guatemalensis Spanish School. The school located a secure place where we could store the motorhome, and a family who would accept us and the dog. (They made more income hosting students than the father earned teaching school!)

Our tuition of \$130 a week covered full board and lodging and one-on-one instruction, as well as cultural excursions, so while in Guatemala we ventured out on weekends with the school's instructors or with our host family. One such visit took us to the marketplace in Chichicastenango and, as it was a favorite of one of our hosts, Grandma Julia, we invited her to join us. She was enthralled with the motorhome — and amazed we actually threw the toilet paper in *la tasa* as the plumbing in Central America can't handle any paper products.

Market day in Chichicastenango was ablaze with color. The Maya use different woven and embroidered patterns to distinguish villages and even families. Weaving is part of their culture and their heritage. In Chichi they translated their fabrics into bedspreads and tablecloths and bags in bright colors that were popular with visitors.

On yet another weekend trip, our Spanish teachers took us to San Francisco el Alto. This market was for the locals; they sold woven place mats in bulk alongside machetes, sheep and ducks. I was particularly drawn to the heavily embroidered antique *buipiles* piled on the ground. The craftsmanship was incredible. The *buipil* is the distinctive woven rectangle fabric with a hole cut for the head. It is tucked into a wraparound skirt that is held in place with a woven belt. The belts, too, make great souvenirs.

After our two-week stint at language school, we moved on, stopping

at Lake Atitlán. It was like a fairyland — crystal-clear air and a year-round spring climate makes this one of the world's most pleasant places. Three spectacular volcanoes watch over the blue waters and the villages that dot the shore. We spent several days, taking the ferry across the lake to visit Panajachel and Santiago Atitlan, visiting churches, monasteries and even the home of Maximon, a Mayan deity.

From here, we followed the inland route from Guatemala into Honduras to visit the ancient Copán Ruins. In the town of Copán Ruinas, we asked where we could park and were directed to Doña Belia. There was hard-packed sand (with a shade tree) between her little shop and a cemetery, expansive enough to accommodate several motorhomes. We bought a couple of cold *cervezas* that were very welcome after a hot day that included, after 37 days driving on all manner of roads, our first flat



# Fire and Water

tire. (A Texaco station near the ruins entrance later repaired it for \$2.)

We sat around making sculptured balloon animals for the children and requested a second drink — to no avail. The shopkeeper only stocked two, would a soda do? As we would discover, many of the little shops in this corner of the world have a very limited inventory. That's why it's so important to stock up on perishables when the opportunity presents itself.

While I was taking Brindle for her morning walk, we explored the cemetery and met the caretaker, eating his breakfast, sitting on a pink mausoleum. He told me that the Mayans used to sleep on the graves of their ancestors. (A month later, we would be shown the remains of an ancient Mayan home where the sarcophagus was in the middle of the bedroom!)

The dog, by the way, was probably our best security. No one went near the motorhome while Brindle

was there. Before the trip, our vet had completed the health certificate, stating that Brindle was current with her shots and healthy. This had to be verified by a representative of the USDA. The hard part was getting each of the consulates of the Central American countries to approve it, too. I'm not sure that the latter was essential, but it did smooth the border transits. Brindle barked ferociously whenever anyone approached ... and was particularly good at curtailing inspections by the *Federales*.

The dog came everywhere with us. She jumped into a variety of boats and followed us into restaurants and hotels without a second glance from the locals. Having Brindle with us did prevent us from driving into the national parks in Costa Rica, however. In addition, if we hadn't had her we could have stayed the night in the parking lot of Tikal, the granddaddy of all Mayan ruins. Instead, we left her

guarding the vehicle parked on a patch of grass with a couple of horses grazing on it, and flagged down a tour bus.

## "Cruising" the Caribbean

Forty days (and nights) into our journey, we finally encountered the Caribbean. We spent a couple days in Tela, Honduras, a town recommended to us for its casual Caribbean atmosphere and beaches, and even signed up for a trip to Punta Sal National Park that is noted for animal spotting and snorkeling. Unfortunately, when we arrived in town the next morning, the wind was up, the day was gray and overcast — and the tour was cancelled because the ride would have been uncomfortable in a small boat. The next day was just the opposite — it was glorious — and our postponed ride to Punta Sal

# Fire and Water

was exhilarating, as was the park itself.

Leaving Tela, however, wasn't as much fun. It rained the previous night — the first time we had experienced any amount of rain — and everything was refreshingly dust-free when we went out in the morning. When driving away, though, we got about six feet before getting stuck in the sand. We got out our wood blocks and dug them under the wheels and tried again ... and sank deeper.

The security guard at the Tela Beach Club, where we had been staying, radioed for help, and a minute later a team of workers (who had been building a home on one of the lots) arrived with shovels, more wood planks and even a little tractor. The team dug so deep that one man was able to get under the motorhome; he put boards down to support our jack, jacked up the RV, then placed more boards under the wheels so we could get traction. We gave the *trabajador* who had been digging beneath the coach a tip to share with his helpers.

We took another boat trip a few days later, to see the Cayos Cochinos, or Hog Islands. Where the guidebooks had failed to persuade us to go to these islands, a friendly tour guide we met, Francisco Vivas, succeeded.

The water around the islands was clear, and teeming with fish. I laid in the shallows, with my mask and snorkel on, and was in the middle of hundreds of little fish, about an inch long, twisting and dancing in the sunlight. Later we visited Upper Key, the kind of desert island you read about — wonderful sand, and nothing in any direction but clear, blue water.

When we arrived in Trujillo, we had no clue which route to take across the country. We had three maps — the International Travel Maps & Books (ITMB) travel map out of Honduras, a "treasure map" put out by the tourist office, and the AAA map of Central America — but they were not consistent. Each showed roads that didn't exist on the other. In the end, we discovered that the ITMB map was the most accurate.

The most interesting route appeared to be the eastern highway, but when we asked locals in Trujillo

about this route, we were consistently told not to go this way. There were apparently gangs of robbers lurking in the mountains of Olancho. I'm sure that one of the reasons we never had problems of this sort on our trip was that we always sought local knowledge about our routes, we never drove at night, and we always camped in areas with some security.

Not surprisingly, many of the roads we followed were unpaved, and dust is a constant companion. En route to Tegucigalpa, we stopped for the evening and I opened the drawer for a cooking pot — and found a thick layer of dust covering everything. In our drawers, the entire top layer of clothes had changed color. Every space — and there are a lot of them — was caked with dust. Near the end of the Valle de Lepaguare, we drove into heavily pined forest with magnificent views at every turn. Suddenly, we came to a stretch where the road was carved through pink rock; it didn't last long, but the road and embankments were bright pink — and, of course, there was pink dust. A few miles farther on, just as abruptly, the road and rocks became yellow ochre. Now, there was a rainbow of dust layers on everything inside the motorhome.

As we approached the town of Liberia, Costa Rica, John spotted another motorhome. We hadn't seen another coach in a while, so we decided to turn around and investigate. There were 20 of them! We had come across a well-laid-out campsite, where a caravan was staying for the night. There were water and power hookups in neat rows — which had long-since been disconnected — but there were also shade trees and plenty of space. Most important, there was a dump site. We spent quite a bit of time chatting with the gringos and their wagonmaster, topped off our water tanks (using a Hydro Life filter, which is supposed to remove most of the pathogens), and were able to empty our holding tanks in the first dump station since Mexico.

One of the highlights of our trip — literally — was the cloud forests of Monteverde, Costa Rica. Overnighting at the Monteverde Cloud Forest

# Fire and Water

Biological Reserve (established by a group of Quakers in 1951), we joined a half-dozen others for the night tour. Each person was provided with a high-powered flashlight. We saw giant tiger-striped tarantulas lurking next to their lairs, and a rare tanager perched in the branches, showing off his red chest. There were bats hanging on the underside of branches, and lizards in frozen animation on twigs.

Our morning tour started by watching a group of howler monkeys swinging in the trees over our campsite. The tour took us between the trees and ferns and other plants growing from the trunks of the trees; some sprout upward with flowers, while others have tentacles that go to the ground to become roots. The clouds draped everything like a warm, wet blanket.

Throughout many jungle areas of Costa Rica, "canopy tours" are available — a long cable is stretched high in the air over the jungle, and participants are harnessed onto it and slide over deep canyons and the jungle canopy. We wanted a more peaceful walk through the canopy, and took the Tree Top Tour of Santa Elena Reserve. The hike followed paths through dense jungle and across 13 suspension bridges that span the canyons. It is not so much that the bridges are high, just that the canyon floor drops precipitously as you walk out on the bridge. You start out at ground level, and as you progress the jungle floor falls away. You are suddenly at the mid-level of the trees, awestruck by the plant life that grows in this semi-light. As you walk on, the ground drops until you are walking over the tops of the very tallest trees, rooted in the canyons more than 200 feet below.

It actually only took 64 days to get to our destination. The book we wrote of our adventures, *99 Days to Panama*, also includes the time we spent on our return to Houston. By then, we were accomplished travelers in these lands, having learned how to navigate rough roads, negotiate overnight camping, and even work our way through border crossings with a dog — which we managed in spite of all the stories we'd heard about not being able to take a dog

into one or more of the countries of Central America (hint: remember to insist that you are only *transito*, or transiting, the country). And we saw amazing sights.

I think that's why we went to Central America: the Caribbean sun to warm us, and gentle breezes cooling us. Rustling palm trees sang a counterpoint to the waves spilling on the beach a few feet from our door. But as we discovered, there was so much more. ■

## CARAVAN INFORMATION

CONSIDERING AN ADVENTURE SOUTH OF THE RIO GRANDE, BUT WOULD PREFER TO TRAVEL IN THE COMPANY OF OTHERS? THERE ARE A NUMBER OF RV TOUR OPERATORS OFFERING OUTINGS TO MEXICO.

**ADVENTURE CARAVANS**, (800) 872-7897, [ADVENTURECARAVANS.COM](http://ADVENTURECARAVANS.COM).  
CIRCLE 213 ON READER SERVICE CARD.

**ADVENTURETOURS RV TOURS**, (800) 455-8687, [ADVENTURETREK.COM](http://ADVENTURETREK.COM).  
CIRCLE 214 ON READER SERVICE CARD.

**BAJA WINTERS RV TOURS**, (866) 771-9064, [BAJAWINTERS.COM](http://BAJAWINTERS.COM).  
CIRCLE 215 ON READER SERVICE CARD.

**COPPER CANYON RV TOURS**, (800) 206-8132, [COPPERCANYON.COM.MX](http://COPPERCANYON.COM.MX).  
CIRCLE 216 ON READER SERVICE CARD.

**CREATIVE WORLD TRAVEL**, (800) 732-8337, [CREATIVELWORLDTRAVEL.COM](http://CREATIVELWORLDTRAVEL.COM).  
CIRCLE 217 ON READER SERVICE CARD.

**FANTASY RV VACATIONS**, (800) 952-8496, [FANTASYRVTOURS.COM](http://FANTASYRVTOURS.COM).  
CIRCLE 218 ON READER SERVICE CARD.

**GOOD SAM CARAVENTURES**, (800) 664-9145, [GOODSAMCLUB.COM](http://GOODSAMCLUB.COM).  
CIRCLE 219 ON READER SERVICE CARD.

**OVERSEAS MOTORHOME TOURS**, (800) 322-2127, [OMTINC.COM](http://OMTINC.COM).  
CIRCLE 220 ON READER SERVICE CARD.

**TRACKS TO ADVENTURE**, (800) 351-6053, [TRACKSTOADVENTURE.COM](http://TRACKSTOADVENTURE.COM).  
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