

Around the World 900 Days - By Robert Kleffel - 2007 February – Ajijic - Mexico

The Girl

Maria Isabel Lopez Castillo, age 12 of San Antonio Tlayacapan, placed her blue painted hand on the hood of the white Citroen ambulance. There were 20 other hand prints from 20 different countries around the world. Maria Isabel will represent all of Mexico on this world tour, but first she had to answer three questions.



The Man

Three years ago, Manuel Boileau, 35 years of age, a Parisian dreamt of making a trip around the world – by car. He is a professional industrial designer in Paris where he has designed everything from washing machines to corporate logos. One year of planning and 19 months of travel has brought him to Ajijic. After eleven additional months and 35,000 kilometers, Manuel will return to Paris.

The Car



For a world tour, traveling the back roads of 42 countries, I think most people would select a rugged SUV, perhaps a Range Rover. The trip calls for a vehicle able to cross the trackless deserts, the Himalayas as well as the jungles of Southeast Asia and of Central and South America. I would choose a vehicle marketed throughout the world where there might be a prayer of finding parts and repairs. I asked Manuel, "Why did you choose a 1971 Citroen ambulance?" This vehicle looks like a small station wagon which might be appropriate for zipping around the Champs Elysees with small injured people. Another thing, the Citroen is quirky. When the car is started, the hydraulic system kicks into action and the body of the car lifts off the frame of the car, about four inches. This is a crowd pleaser. His answer to my question was, "I like the modern styling of the Citroen, I have had some experience in repairing them and it was cheap." With the exception of an overhaul in India, the car has proven to be remarkably durable.

The Tour

The plan was to travel by car through 42 countries, a distance of approximately 80,000 kilometers. All countries have roads and cars so there should be no problem. Getting approval to travel willy nilly through 42 countries over next 2 ½ years took one year and even then he did not have all approvals. The Iranian Embassy in Paris refused permission. Nevertheless, he began his trip in May of 2005 heading down through Eastern Europe across Turkey and to Iran. He was finally given a Transit Permit (\$20.00 USD) for ten days. As the crow flies, Iran is about 1,500 kilometers long. As the road goes you can double that number. Then he traveled on through Pakistan and into India where he had a three week layover with car trouble. Southeast Asia was next. He spent weeks in exotic Thailand where affairs of the heart held him captive. (Oh the joy of foreign travel.) In Vietnam he was deeply touched by ex US soldiers who were working to rebuild that country.

Manuel avoids the highways for the byways. With the exception of a few nights in a hotel in Da Nang, while his car was loaded on a freighter for shipment to Canada, he has not slept in a hotel on his entire trip. He sleeps each night in his auto. He prepares his own food purchased from local markets or eats from the world's roadside taco stands. To date he has not been sick. Along the way, he has developed a catholic pallet after dining on a fricassee of whole toad, a sauté of snake or Asia's favorite, poached pooch. Of Mexico's ethnic foods he managed to finish six tacos adobada at Rubin's in Jocotepec and loved them.

The Purpose

Manuel loves people. As a major part of his travel he is making a video of children, ages nine to twelve, in all of the 42 countries he visits. He is funding his trip but he has an arrangement with UNICEF (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund). He is making the video for distribution in France and then to other countries. The concept is for young children to learn about the children of other countries so as to develop a sense of world unity. The video picks up much more than words and ideas, the most important part is in the smiles and laughter, the shyness, the concern, the fear and love. The children are beautiful.

The Three Questions

Each child is asked: What is your dream? What do you want to be? And. What does it mean to be an adult? There seems to be a consensus about what it means to be an adult. Adults take responsibility; they take care of the family and the community. What do children dream about? In Europe and North America, children dream about flying like Superman, or talking with fairies. In Asia a common response is, "I dream of getting a good job."

The Good Bye

Manuel was with us for six days. He washed and cleaned the ambulance (first time since Vietnam), and used two days to edit the video and update his website. On Tuesday evening, I had just finished teaching and adult English class, he said, "Its time for me to go." It was eight o'clock. Five minutes later he was gone. He planned to pull off on a back road to sleep somewhere between here and Mexico City, then on to Tierra del Fuego, up to Brazil, across to Africa and then home - to Paris.

Having met Manuel, I feel better about the world. Despite wars, hate, civil unrest, terrorism and all the rest – the 900 day trip around the world would be impossible without the goodness, kindness and generosity of the people in 42 countries of the world. You can follow his progress at <http://www.lunaya.fr/index.html>. The site is in French but there are photos and video.