

Mexican Diaries

At the start, our path wove its way through pine groves. But we quickly gained altitude. The first hour was a struggle for me but I only stopped twice for just a few minutes ...

In 2017, I had travelled all around Tusheti by horse. It was an unforgettable journey. Once, when crossing a mountain pass, as we climbed a near-vertical slope, Lasha Gagoidze, who was walking ahead of me, suddenly stopped his horse. 'Why did you stop?' I asked. 'The horse's heartbeat - I can feel it through my feet. We'd better take a break for a few minutes.'

I've remembered that lesson only too well, as I'm having to walk more often, and when going uphill my own heartbeat thumps in my ears. When the pounding gets too much, I stop for a few minutes and, so as not to be idle, take photographs.

After all, in the Western Sierra Madre there are endless photo opportunities.

Unlike the so-called protected territories of Georgia, Nevado de Colima National Park is managed properly. Nature here is preserved. Nobody cuts down old, wizened trees. Even after death, they remain an important part of the ecosystem, and it's in these trees that woodpeckers, owls and other birds build their nests. Though it's as obvious as two plus two, many do not understand this simple rule. I remember that when the Polish government planned to "cleanse" and "beautify" the Białowieża forest in Central Europe by ridding it of dead trees, there was an all-out war between witless officials and Polish environmentalists.

Leaving the woods behind us, we cut across a white, sandy slope where only yellow flowers and juniper bushes grew. We made it up to the ridge where the fiery massif was revealed in all its beauty. That day, however, the volcano was asleep. There was no smoke to see. We rested there, I drank water and ate some chocolate. I knew it wouldn't be too difficult for me to reach the top. We looked out at a lunar landscape. I called them the "dusty mountains". In the Caucasus, when you walk across the ground after a brief drought you throw clouds of dust up into the air, particularly when going downhill. Now imagine standing on thin, sandy soil untouched by a drop of rain for seven months. Dust coated the beautiful red and yellow flowers and hung in the air. As a result, the photographs I took in those mountains were distorted; you needed to be there at sunset or sunrise to get a decent picture.

When we made it up onto the ridge, we found a man wearing a helmet and woman who had also stopped to rest. Most of the people I met that day were wearing helmets, rightly so, because although the route was simple enough, we were still in the mountains - and mountains are dangerous. We left the couple on the ridge and continued along the path. We were approaching the summit from the rear as this was the easiest path. Pablo told me that although there was a second, shorter route that cut a narrow corridor directly to the mountain top, landslides were frequent.

The path continued, sometimes running through loose earth and sometimes getting lost among the rock formations. But Pablo knew the land like the back of his hand – lithe and sinewy, this was a young man at peak fitness. There were places where, although not exactly climbing, we needed the help of our hands to scramble across the rocks. All in all, though, it wasn't too taxing. From where the route began to the mountain top, we only had to ascend eight-hundred metres, and so, from the car park, we were at the summit within three hours. Pablo praised me, saying that three hours was a good result. I agreed. My best years may have past, but I am no stranger to mountains.

In truth, I was delighted that I'd managed it, and could now gaze at the dormant volcano from the mountain top. It was only five kilometres away. And although I was only several hundred metres above the crater, it felt higher than that.

It was the seventh of May – the birthday of my son, my grandfather and two of my friends. A day which, in the Old World, would either have already finished or be about to end, but here, in Mexico, it was still afternoon.

I thought we'd be the fastest to the top, but we'd been beaten by a small group of young people ascending the peak. Others arrived after. They took food from their backpacks and everyone offered us something. It was gestures like these that made me fall in love with Mexico and it was because of them that I would miss it so. Bread broken and shared among strangers... what could be more important than that? If that is lost, what is left for us?

On the summit stood a wooden pole with a hermetically-sealed wooden box attached. Inside was a notebook containing autographs and messages left by previous climbers. It was suggested I write something. I really wanted to, as I was sure I was the first Georgian to have stepped foot on that mountain. My heart sank when I saw there was no pen in the box nor was I able borrow one.

The altitude, the sun and the food made me feel dozy. I looked at Pablo and he nodded. It was time to descend. We walked carefully down to the ridge and then continued on at what was almost a run. I knew my arthritic knees would not forgive me for galloping downhill and that they would bother me for weeks afterwards, but it was worth it for the pleasure it gave. As we ran on, we were enveloped in such a cloud of dust that I regretted not having a mask in my pocket. My face was so caked in dust that by the time I reached the car I was completely white. That night I put my dusty boots in a plastic bag and tied it tight: not to be opened again until Tbilisi.

At the campsite we were met by a lot of people, mainly youngsters from Guadalajara. They were pitching their tents and preparing a picnic. I would have happily stayed there for a few days but I had neither the time nor, as usual, the means. After the jiggles and jolts of an hour's dusty descent we reached the motorway and took the road home. On the way back, we passed the same places where, in late November, I'd seen countless waterbirds on the numerous lakes and pools fed by the waters of the rainy season. It

was now a yellow desert, with the surface sands being lifted and swirled into whirlwinds.

I had given money to Pablo earlier. Of course, I had given him more than he asked for, and now I told him I wanted to invite him for dinner. I suggested that we stop at a roadside restaurant somewhere. But in the lowlands Pablo struggled to assert himself and couldn't decide where to eat. I suspect he was just shy.

So we descended all the way to Guadalajara without eating a bite. I begged him not to take me home without us having dinner together. In the end he stopped where he usually ate – a fast-food stall in the street. We basked in the sun, sprawled on plastic chairs, ate enormous burgers and drank coke. Afterwards he took me back to San Felipe 266, which I had to leave that night forever.

I had said goodbye to Angel the previous evening as he and Mariam needed to go to another city for a wedding. Martin Solares was in Monterrey to see his mother, but I was due to see him the next day in Mexico City, and ended up staying with him for three days. I had already said farewell to everyone else. Those I couldn't see, I called. It felt as if I'd paid my dues to them all. Now, before the flight, I needed to sleep for a bit. They told me that a car would pick me up at 2:30am and take me to the airport.

Time to sleep now, then get up at midnight to get ready.

I bathed and then lay down but, despite my tiredness, sleep eluded me. Time passed and, as I lay there with my eyes wide-open, I thought 'this won't do'. While the ascent to Nevado de Colima had been a thrilling adventure, this journey to Guadalajara was not turning out the same way. Night fell. I got up, dressed, and went to "La Fuente", which was only a ten-minute drive away.

Though the place was full of people there was no-one I recognised. The waiter was darting between tables and was oblivious to my presence. I sat down at the bar and asked the surly bartender to give me a beer. He opened it and put it in front of me. I emptied it. Now tequila! 'Which one would you like?' I told him I didn't mind – whichever. He made a gesture as if to say I was clueless, but then gave me one. This, too, I downed quickly. Then I went outside and walked across to the stage set up on the main street. There at last I saw someone for as I arrived the concert was just ending, and I heard a voice call me.

It was Dolores, a colleague from the "Book Capital" project – a lovely woman who had been the first to share the "La Fuente" subculture with me. Her jazz-playing husband – a reserved, bearded Swiss man – was there helping her pack up the chairs. 'We thought we wouldn't see you again' they said. 'I thought so, too', I replied, 'but given that I'm here, I'd like to invite you for a drink'. So after helping them pack up the chairs, I shook hands with them both and we returned to "La Fuente."

Everything was now in place. I was with good people. A beer, a few tequila shots. Great! The environment felt familiar but it was shared with people I'd probably never meet again – and this, for some reason, warmed my heart deeply.

Dolores was always complaining about her teenage daughter who, she said, rebelled without any rhyme or reason. 'Last night she came home with a Swastika tattoo! She says I'm making a fuss about nothing and that it's just a nice decoration!' Then Dolores took a book from her bag and put it in front of me. 'Look what I bought', she said, 'It's for her to read, so she understands just how much evil is hidden behind that "nice decoration"'.

I looked at the book. It was "Anne Frank's diary".

I almost began to cry.

We said goodbye in front of the canteen. I hugged them both tight and returned home. After packing most of my things, I set my alarm clock and slept for an hour and a half.

This time I really did have a hard time waking up. Below, the car had already been waiting for 15 minutes. The driver had been told not to leave me until my luggage was checked in and I'd got through passport control. This probably wasn't a bad idea, given I could barely function from the lack of sleep.

On the plane, I think I nodded off.

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