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Flowers, Fauna and Firearms

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I've heard travel broadens the mind and that there's always something to be learned. Several years ago we went to Bolivia to visit friends. What did I learn on that trip? My husband can sleep through anything; and getting home alive can be the best part of any vacation.

After staying two relaxing weeks visiting our friends in Cochabamba, Bolivia, my husband and I caught an international flight to Miami, which required a connection in Santa Cruz. Our friends stressed that there was only one Miami flight daily and that we shouldn't stay in Santa Cruz any longer than necessary as it was the cocaine and crime capital of Bolivia.

From the air, Santa Cruz looked normal enough. We collected our luggage, and headed for customs. We were the only ones there: no other passengers, no customs agent, just the two of us. I went to the airline counter and asked where the customs agent was. The woman shrugged her shoulders. "When will he return?" I asked hopefully. I got a big smile: "Manana."

Even my husband knew that much Spanish. No customs agent meant no Miami flight for us today. We watched the plane being loaded and the doors closing. We called our friends who helped make reservations for us at a small hotel hidden behind a high whitewashed wall covered with purple Bougainvillea. It looked safe enough. We spent the day reading and napping, and after dinner fell asleep to the scent of flowers coming through the louvered window.

I woke to the sounds of heavy footsteps stomping down the concrete stairs outside our room; the clock glowed 2 a. m. I could see through the slightly opened window and noticed several pair of boots stopped on the lit stairwell. It seemed their owners were listening to something.

They began to whisper. Trying to translate when you're half-asleep and hyperventilating is very difficult, but I managed to hear a deep voice say, "Quickly, follow me and for God's sake be quiet!" Then more running, then quiet. My heart was beating so loudly I was sure everyone in the hotel could hear it, except my husband.

I got out of bed, waited for more sounds and peered through the peep hole in the door. I saw nothing! I knew I would have an indentation around my eye I was pressing so hard. When my feet felt like ice on the tile floor I went back to bed and to my still-snoring husband.

I ran through the possibilities: college kids having a good time, drunks trying to find their room, a police raid on known drug lords, robbers looking for the stranded American tourists. I vowed to stay alert until sunrise.

I was jolted awake by what sounded like, Pop, pop, pop! I shook my snoring husband and whispered that I thought I heard gunshots. He sat up, looked around, and said, "I don't hear anything." Then he rolled over and told me to go back to sleep because we had an early flight. Yeah, right! How could I sleep? How could anyone sleep?

I thought about calling the desk and asking if anyone had heard shots or been killed lately but didn't know the Spanish word for gunshots. I decided to take a shower, get dressed, repack my suitcase, and wait for daylight. A shower seemed the most sensible thing to do at least if they shot me I would be clean and dressed.

A few hours later, I was surprised to find no blood, no chalk outline, and no dead body in the hallway. Believe me I looked everywhere. I decided not to ask anyone at the desk if there had been a problem and carefully eyed everyone's footwear. The clerk asked if we had a good rest; I almost wept. I wanted to leave immediately. My husband opted for breakfast since we had the time and the hotel food was great. Men really are from Mars!

When we finally deplaned in Miami and passed through U.S. Customs, I was happy to see those serious-looking, uniformed agents. "How was your trip?" one agent asked.

"I'm happy to be home," I said with a smile - and my brain silently added - alive. No wonder the Pope kisses the ground on his return to Rome. Wonder if he's ever been to Bolivia?

Jo Mele is a Moraga resident. The opinions expressed are those of the writer and not necessarily those of the Lamorinda Weekly.

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[back](#)

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