

It Really Does Happen: The Five A.M. Airport Shuttle

By Daryl and Leslie

Leslie stood outside the Marriott in Guatemala City in the pre-dawn darkness waiting for the five a.m. shuttle to the airport. Daryl finished checking out and joined her at the curb, kissing the top of three-month-old Alexa's head as she snuggled against her mother's chest in her Bjorn Baby carrier for the long trip to Michigan. The baby was awake, but content after her morning bottle, in a fresh diaper, and bundled for her first airplane flight. First-class, thought Daryl, with the Easter holiday travel rush, Leslie decided separate seats in coach just weren't going to be adequate for this special trip.



“I wonder if I will ever get her in coach, again?” he thought. The flight attendant announcing, “No pretzels in first class. Warm nuts, anyone?”

So much to pack, so nervous about having all the right papers, so worried there would be some flaw that would cause someone to try and take this baby out of our arms. So happy, so much accomplished, hearts bursting with parental love. This was a seminal moment in our relationship; in our family-life. Yes, family.

We had decided on the five a.m. shuttle after taking the six a.m. shuttle on our first visit and finding the small Guatemalan airport swarming with people. There had been such long lines to check-in. We didn't want any delays to cause a problem so we smiled at one another in the pre-dawn coolness of the tropical country having surmounted the logistics of moving the entire family and all our gear to the curb at this early hour. Leslie, by the way, is not a morning person.

The baby was a people magnet. We had chatted at the hotel with a flight attendant we met on the plane down, she ready for her return flight, her smile warm, and her congratulations sincere as she cooed over Alexa. Finally, the van was loaded with suitcases and carry-ons and we squeezed inside the dark interior. Two female tourists from California leaned over the back of the seat in front of us, drawn to the baby. We talked about their touring Mayan ruins at Tikal and about our experience of becoming a family. Just about the length of a “normal” pregnancy, we told them, we had started with Hands Across the Water nine months before.

Tired, but elated to be taking our baby home with us, we had completed our crucial trip to the U.S. Embassy the day before. Looking like a concrete fortress and bristling with post-9/11 razor wire and “Do Not Photograph” signs, the Embassy had one line for hundreds of Guatemalans hoping for a visa and a separate line for adoptive parents. Our escort, Fifo, knew everyone in this part of the Embassy as he visited there nearly every day. Inside we waited with probably eighty other people, the room swaying as almost every couple, and single moms too, rocked their babies. Leslie read a sign on the wall: “Capacity 52 persons.”

Fifo met his brother with another couple and we talked to other parents from around the U.S.A. We saw a woman we had met at HATW classes and her infant was also three months old. In talking to other parents, we realized many had older infants six, or seven months old and their referral and trip had involved more waiting than ours. With Hands Across the Water's dossier service, our paperwork was spotless and we were able to clear PGN and meet all the legal requirements with Homeland Security much sooner than people we met from Atlanta, Utah, and North Dakota. One mother was at the Embassy without her husband, due to a paper snafu they had been waiting over a week and he had

to return home for his job without them. What a nightmare that would be. Leslie and I held each other up through the whole process our love for one another growing as our family grew. We nervously waited to make sure nothing tripped us now. Months later, Leslie and I talked about wishing we had realized how smooth the whole process would be so we could just relax and worry less and savor the experience at the moment more.

Just as explained in orientation classes in Ann Arbor, we were soon called to Window 8. Fifo held our hand during the entire process, explaining what we would do next, what we would need, paperwork or money-wise, and always offering the helpful reminder, “.. and take the baby, too.” Like we would forget.

We sailed through the process, despite one diaper-changing episode on the floor, when Leslie did pretend she didn't know who we were. “Not my baby crying, that's for sure, never saw those two before in my life.” In any event, the whole thing was caught on the security cameras. The video will surface, I am sure, during Alexa's confirmation hearings decades from now.

Smiling in the bright sunshine afterward, Fifo told us one of the things he enjoyed most about driving in Guatemala City, “No speed limits!” No car seats either, but we arrived back at the Marriott safely and could not thank him enough. Lissette and her family in Guatemala are as experienced, competent, and caring as Kathi and her colleagues in Ann Arbor.

Walking through the hotel lobby, having succeeded at running the bureaucratic gauntlet, I was convinced it must be near Noon. “Want to get some lunch?” I asked Leslie. “Daryl, it's ten after nine,” she answered. What had seemed half a day had been about an hour and a half.

Inside the poolside open-air restaurant, we saw five families we had seen at the Embassy sitting at one table after another after another. The smiles were as bright as the Guatemalan sunshine. What a wonderful breakfast that was! Taking pictures of our new daughter, talking to the other families, beaming now that the legal process was complete, that was surely the best cup of coffee I have ever had.

The next morning we drove through the dark, deserted streets to the airport, talking with our fellow passengers about the baby. The van pulled up to the small terminal, the airport about the size of a small American city, say, Grand Rapids, or Des Moines. With only one terminal, La Aurora is not a huge place like LAX or JFK, but with a sea of people swelling outside the one security checkpoint for departing flights. Before stepping into the flood, I glanced at the clock on the dash, it was 5:04.

Everything seems slower and happens faster than you realize at the time. And, yes, it really does happen. Enjoy every moment.