

WAS SHE OR WASN'T SHE?

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05.07.2014

We were a seasoned travel group that gathered in the shadows of Costa Rica's Arenal Volcano. You could tell by our clothing and gear: multi-pocketed travel vests, wide-brimmed sun hats, expensive cameras and telephoto lenses. We were ready to join a trip coordinator and instructor on a 10-day tour to photograph Costa Rica's flora and fauna.

Then, something strange, stumbled into our midst.

It was a "raw recruit." Her shirt tail flapped outside her trousers. Her body leaned forward under the burden of an overstuffed back pack, causing an expensive camera to swing recklessly back and forth below her neck. A rumpled hat appeared undecided if it would stay perched on the side of her head or flop off. We looked at her and then at each other as if to say, "This does not bode well."

And, it didn't. During the next 10 days, our inner tensions rumbled and quaked resembling Costa Rica's Arenal Volcano as our raw recruit violated the unspoken rules of photographic expeditions. Here are a few transgressions:

1. Thou Shalt Be Punctual.

When she admitted she forgot to bring a watch, we knew there would be trouble. Every morning, we bided our time sitting in the van waiting her arrival. The few times she was on time, she asked for more time to get something in the hotel's shop or to run back to her room for camera gear. Her antics frustrated but, somehow, did not delay the day's activities.

2. Thou Shalt Know Your Equipment.

"Do you know what button she's talking about," she asked me when the instructor explained the camera's exposure compensation control. I referred her to the instructor whom she glommed on to for the remaining tour. Her questions for the instructor were so elementary that we began to wonder if she leased the thousands of dollars of photographic equipment she possessed. It was evident she had not used it before.

3. Thou Shalt Honor Thy Neighbor's Sight Lines

Her inexperience became more evident when she walked in front of our cameras and spooked three birds lined up in our viewfinders. Hearing our groans as our pictures vanished into thin-air, she looked back at us puzzled and said, "If I'm getting in the way of your shots, just let me know. OK?"

4. Thou Shalt Not Covet Thy Travel Mate's Time With the Trip Coordinator

We made a scheduled stop solely to use an ATM. The trip coordinator stood at my side to guide me through the process as I didn't speak Spanish or know the local currency's exchange value. I had just entered my PIN when the raw recruit burst into the ATM area, "I need to go to the bathroom. Show me a place where I can go."

The trip coordinator left the ATM to see to her needs. I was left to figure out the transaction. Perhaps, the trip coordinator should have planned to stop in an area that offered both an ATM and accessible restroom.

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5. Thou Shalt Prepare for the Day's Activities

It was our final day in the field and we met to review the tour's photograph lessons. Before starting, we heard a familiar voice, "Please," the raw recruit pleaded, "Can I borrow a pen and paper? I forgot to bring mine."

After ten days of these antics, I bowed my head and stared down at my pen and paper. My neck muscles tightened. I felt my face turning red. Like the Arenal Volcano, I was ready to erupt.

But, then, two thoughts helped me calm down. First, I wondered if the trip coordinator could have provided emergency pads and pencils. Next, I remembered one of the theories a travel mate had about our raw recruit.

That participant, a retired teacher observed, "I've been in enough classroom training situations to recognize our raw recruit is pointing out situations that the coordinator should be better prepared to handle. Perhaps, she is some type of quality control evaluator or assertiveness trainer."

While our "raw recruit's" shenanigans were frustrating, they did not prevent us from enjoying our Costa Rican trip. Still her actions were so eccentric that they left us with unanswered questions:

Raw recruit? Or, quality control evaluator. Or, assertiveness trainer? "Was she or wasn't she?"

Only the tour company knows for sure.