

Napa Valley *Register*

El Salvador: Something new -- and great -- is emerging from a country once marred by global conflicts

Eric Althoff | Jun 2, 2019



The final resting place of Archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdámez in San Salvador's cathedral. The bishop's 1980 assassination fueled El Salvador's civil war.

Eric Althoff photo

In the lower level of the San Salvador Cathedral in El Salvador's capital city, Archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdámez is entombed in a

sarcophagus marked with a red circle at the approximate location where an assassin's bullet entered his chest as he celebrated Mass March 20, 1980.

His murder would help plunge this Central American country into an ugly 12-year civil war, with Soviet-backed leftist rebels pitted against government forces — heavily armed thanks to CIA support. El Salvador would effectively host one of the final proxy conflicts of the Cold War, ending with a gasp as the USSR fell, and suddenly vacant support for the rebels forcing a negotiated peace.

To this day, that truce has held, and on a drive north from San Salvador into the mountainous countryside, across rocky and bumpy roads, our guide, Dionisio Mejia with the outfit GreenBlueRed, points to nearby hills, where the rebels once hid. “Dio,” as Yankees often call him, says the former soldiers live among the villagers who once opposed them—former enemies side by side raising the next generation.

Our driver, Carlos, negotiates a narrow road that suddenly opens up on Hacienda Los Nacimientos, an indigo plantation. So valuable was indigo during colonial times that the Spanish conquerors of this once-Mayan land called it “azul oro” (blue gold).

Indigo boasts an incredible smell, not precisely awful but incredibly pungent, especially when baking in the hot sun. It is also, when extracted from Xiquilite plant, incredibly effective at dyeing fabrics, and we are each invited to affix various stones and pieces of wood to a fabric that, when dipped together in an indigo bath, will emerge with intricate patterns when unfolded. Rubber gloves are a must as the blue extract stains skin as easily as cloth.

In broken Spanish, I am able to converse with a staffer for advice on how many times to dip the cloth (three) before washing the excess off with vinegar—a different smell entirely.

As my scarf dries on a clothesline, a farmhand inquires about my “Sopranos” T-shirt. I do my best to explain the premise of the seminal HBO show, about a “familia de criminales” that happened to be filmed in my home state of New Jersey.

Heading east to the mountainous town of Suchitoto, Dio shares more about his country, such as that of the approximately 6 million Salvadorans, 1 million of them live and work in the United States at any one time. And since El Salvador uses the U.S. dollar as its own currency, working abroad not only gives them a chance to get to “el norte” but also to send money back home without conversion penalties. This foreign-worker pipeline is largely a product of the ’80s, as parents sent their military-age sons out of the country before either the rebels or government forces could impress them into their soldierly ranks.

However, in addition to those seeking legitimate employment, criminal gang members also took the opportunity to head north, mostly to Los Angeles.

An unfortunate side effect of the U.S. get-tough border policy, Dio says, is that deported gang members brought back home not only hardened criminal skills but networks in the drug trades. The end result is that though El Salvador is a much safer country than during its civil war, certain areas are controlled entirely by gangs, working in conjunction with the cartels. In a country as poor as this, the temptation to work in the drug pipelines can be difficult to resist, thus putting some pressure on the United States to aid the country’s legal industries. (President Trump has vowed to cut such aid.)

Tourism is key to its growth.

But in the sleepy mountain town of Suchitoto, that unfortunate confluence of geopolitics and black market forces seems a world away. Shopkeepers wave cheerfully from doorways and bars and restaurants spill out onto the streets. Vans roam the streets, announcing in Spanish their complement of local fruits, especially papayas.

I ask Carlos, our driver, if he has ever felt unsafe walking Suchitoto at night. But as soon as I inquire, the question seems foolish, and something only an American would wonder. (For the record, he said the city is very safe.) But as both he and Dio leave us for the evening, I'm reminded that I'm the only American in the tour group who speaks any Spanish, requiring me to order drinks and dinner for our group at a streetside cafe. This leads to one rather surreal moment when, after asking for clarification, I am finally able to discern from our waitress that the restaurant only has one bread bun left, yet all of my companions have selected sandwiches and thus need to reorder.

I've only barely dozed off at the nearby Los Almendros de San Lorenzo plaza-style hotel when I am awakened by the distinct impression of a presence in my room. If it is there, it is not malevolent, and I say out loud, "I know that you're there" and somehow manage to fall asleep without fear. It is only in the morning, when several of my tour-mates, unbidden, talk of creaking sounds and strange phenomena in the night, that I'm convinced I didn't dream this.

One final stop before leaving Suchitoto is the home of "the cigar lady," a rather elderly woman with many cats who has been rolling her own cigars, by hand, for decades. She guides us in the process of packing tobacco into leaves and then tightening it so the tubular structure will hold. It takes me several tries, and several smiling admonitions from her, before I get it "right."

Rain, and lots of it, is a fact of life in Central America, and it arrives with a force that seems ungodly. An afternoon monsoon scuttles a lengthy buggy tour, but not before a complete drenching on its first mile. But rains are also why this is such a great place to raise coffee beans. At a plantation in Ataco, I see firsthand the entire process from harvesting to roasting and finally to the drip. The beans in fact are white before sent into the furnaces, after which they will be packaged and sold. It is supposed to be among the world's best.

Much of Central America's soil is volcanic, and the evidence of its volatility is everywhere in the perfectly shaped conical volcanoes that dot the landscape in El Salvador. One of them, called Santa Ana (or "Iamatepec" in the native Nahuatl dialect), can be accessed via a steep and difficult, but ultimately rewarding, hike. It last erupted in 2005 following a 101-year dormancy, and the sulfuric content from deep within the earth expelled outwards now colors the crater lake inside the caldera a deep greenish tint. It is peaceful to behold, and since we started up the trail so early, we have the caldera to ourselves — the only evidence of man's having ever been up here a trail-side sign or two.

The same geologic forces that gave rise to the volcanoes are also in evidence at the beaches of La Libertad — some 45 miles from Santa Ana but of a whole other topography. The sands here are black as obsidian — pleasing to the eye but somewhat hard on the soles of the foot. Surfing at this spot on the Pacific Ocean is good for beginnings given the relatively small waves, but falling from the board causes scrapes a-plenty when skin abrades against the sands beneath the water's surface.

Falls are both assured and plentiful, but the surf instructors offer a rather simple rule: "uno tiempo mas," meaning try one more time. (Fortunately, the locally made beers at Cadejo Brewing Co., on a bluff overlooking the ocean nearby, offer a balm to bruised skin and egos.)

One more time: It's a great way to look at this Central American country more generally, which has risen from brutal internecine conflict to have new life in the 21st century — its jungles no longer host to the battle between Eastern and Western bloc ideologies and its people having laid down their arms. Much like the fabrics I dipped in the indigo vats days prior, something new and great has emerged in El Salvador, colored by experience and in need of being shown off to the world.



An elderly Suchitoto woman known as "the cigar lady" hand-rolls tobacco by hand into the tell-tale tubular cigar shape.

Eric Althoff photo



Workers at the Hacienda Los Nacimientos mix indigo extract to create the liquid dye, into which clothes and garments will be dipped.

Eric Althoff photo



Visitors to the Hacienda Los Nacimientos, an indigo plantation, dip their garments in an indigo "bath" under the watchful eye of a staffer.

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