

Conquering Central America



Determined to increase their tally of countries ballooned in, the Dunningtons – bent on conquering Central America – returned to Costa Rica to log flights in Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, while managing to bag two South American countries into the bargain, as **Phil Dunnington** writes.

We were following in our own footsteps from the previous year as well as those of Paul Spellward and Chris Davies. Our Beech aircraft had dropped the lightweight Cameron O-56 in San José, Costa Rica in 2018 so it would be ready for us to return and ‘fill in’ the missing countries to the north. So it was that on our return from another winter ballooning in Myanmar, Central America seemed to fit logically into the route.

SOUTHERN START

Of course we couldn’t just go straight to Costa Rica, because Allie had dug up two of the few active balloonists in Ecuador and Colombia, South America, as well, but at least that meant we did not have to take a balloon with us.

Arrival in Quito from Miami on a Boeing 737MAX only days before the type was grounded set the tone for the trip. Only on confirming our onward flight to Bogota and San José did the bad news intensify – we would not be allowed to travel beyond Ecuador without a Yellow Fever certificate. Ours were in a drawer in Bristol and copies were not acceptable. A new inoculation would not gain validity for ten days.

Meanwhile we got on with the job of flying in a slightly jaded Lindstrand 90A from a site around 50km south of Quito and just in the Southern Hemisphere. We had hoped to repeat our equatorial crossing in Kenya from 2012, but the damned line is just in the wrong place for balloon flying. Anyway, our kind host Vladimir Stalin (yes, really!) Proaño made

Above: The shadow of Phil and Allie’s ascent near the 2,139-metre high Chaparrastique volcano near San Miguel, El Salvador.

the single flight possible in spectacular high country near snow-capped volcanic Mount Cotopaxi. We ended up on a military reservation, but nobody seemed to mind and so celebration back in the capital city was appropriate.

We eventually ‘escaped’ on a flight to Colombia with Allie posing as my ‘carer’ to avoid the Yellow Fever restriction. By virtue of my age I was exempt anyway – obviously mosquitos don’t like the taste of old flesh!

Bogota is an energetic city with a very busy airport where we transferred to a domestic flight to the valley of Machachi. Flying with the ebullient Amancio Navarro

in his rather more modern UM he shouted greetings to the groundlings below as we launched from our attractive farm-hotel and skimmed the forest in light and variable winds. More celebration (by Allie, as I had flown in Colombia some twenty years previously) before visiting a delightful Andean valley of unique 30m palm trees.

BORDER DELAYS

Onward to San José, Costa Rica, where our task was to link up with a van we had arranged with a driver from neighbouring Nicaragua. Initially we expected to simply load up our kit from the hangar at Pavas airfield, where it had been stored for the

Right: Flying with Amancio in Colombia, Phil and Allie enjoy a tippie with friend Sarita Ruiz.



Above: Allie and Vladimir Stalin Proaño after flying in Ecuador, Allie’s 92nd country.



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Above: Allie in the saddle at Esteban Elizondo’s balloon business and riding ranch, Costa Rica.





Above: Allie, post-flight in Guatemala, after taking guide Victor aloft.



Above: Guide Victor Manuel Ubau is thrilled with his baptismal balloon flight.

past year, but no such luck. A Nicaraguan vehicle and driver would not be allowed 'airside'. The answer? Hire an aeroplane to fly the balloon and me to a strip outside the capital while poor Allie slogged up with the van. It took me twenty minutes, while she struggled for three hours in traffic.

Anyway, next day, with help from our long-standing ballooning friend Esteban Elizondo at his beautiful finca, we were en-route to the Nicaraguan border. Here began our list of border delays, which eventually added up to over twenty hours in ten crossings. Despite a very imaginative set of negotiators in our driver and local guide, there was always one piece of paper (often green with a \$ sign on it) missing. Of course all the countries we passed through are on

a football pitch out in the countryside near Choluteca, landing on a cattle ranch reached by appalling dirt roads.

EL SALVADOR

Next came El Salvador, allegedly the country that boasts the world's highest murder rate. We had been by air with the Beech in 2018, but without the balloon. The Aero Club at Ilopango had welcomed us with impressive facilities, as it did again even though we were in a van not a vintage aeroplane. However, we had decided to make our balloon flight further east near San Miguel where Carlos, a helpful hotelier, arranged for us to use a sports stadium. Sandwiched between massive (active) volcanoes the flight could not have been more spectacular.

GUATEMALA

The final trek northbound was into coastal Guatemala where Allie took our guide for a flight whilst I did retrieve (I had been to Guatemala before) to a spot only a couple of kilometres from the Pacific. Her landing was fast, but uneventful and we slipped back into El Salvador for the home run, stopping again with our new-found friend in San Miguel.

NICARAGUA

The final target was Nicaragua, where I had trained a local pilot (long-since departed) on a Cameron 145 in the 90s, but Allie was trailing behind. Leon, a fascinating colonial university city, was our base and we found a sports field with supportive locals. Landing near a village amongst the sugar cane and tobacco we were suddenly surrounded by police and flashing lights. Oh dear! The 'boss' had seen our blue and white-striped



Above: Phil after landing in a rice ranch in El Salvador, his 121st country.



Above: Phil and Allie launch from a stunning location at the base of the active Chaparrastique volcano, El Salvador.

envelope – the colours of the Nicaraguan flag. Good, you might think, but political unrest had seen the flag used as a symbol of defiance, so we were definitely 'suspect'. Fortunately the rule of law was quickly set aside by the officer in question wanting a selfie with the pilots. Ah, well...

PURGED AND HOME

Back in Costa Rica after more border hold-ups we packed the balloon for shipment home. Purged cylinders, drained oil and petrol. The sequel to this only concluded at the end of July when our adventurous 56 finally arrived at Avonmouth, having been held up for several weeks because of 'cylinders'. Little did I guess that the offending (Dangerous Goods items) were not my carefully-purged flight cylinders, but two fire extinguishers I had forgotten were in the box with all the rest.

Looking at the balloon's log book for its now-overdue annual inspection, I noticed that the last seven flights had each been in a different country.

POSTSCRIPT TO THE DUNNINGTON RUNNING TOTAL

In July 2019 Phil and Allie made flights in their Cameron O-31 hopper in both Suriname and Guyana. This means Phil has now flown in every one of the twenty-one nations that make up the Americas (French Guyane is not an independent nation, so doesn't count in the tally).



Above: Post-flight in Guyana with Herman, the Indian cricket club caretaker and his lovely family. This was country number 100 for Allie and 124 for Phil.