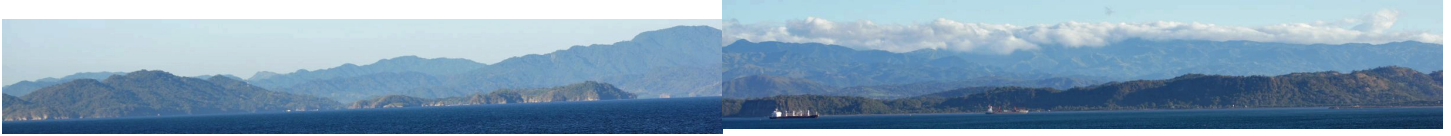


Central America

We spent Christmas Day at sea off the southwestern coast of Panama. At a brief celebration the previous evening there was a reading of the Scriptural account of the birth of Jesus and the theological content of the traditional hymns of the occasion. But the Day itself had little reference to the reason for the season in the lectures and workshops.



The next day we stopped at Puntarenas, Costa Rica. That is not the type of name that might be easy to remember, nor is the village itself very memorable. The satellite view shows it built on a very narrow sandbar. Its tallest structure is a cell phone tower. Mountain ranges are inland. A long pier extends out to ships.



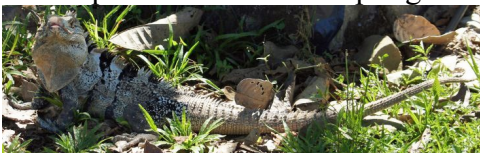
Costa Rica is important because it has protected a quarter of its territory from development in order to preserve natural habitats. Most of the organized tours were to enjoy the various environments. Gail and I had a week exploring some of Costa Rica in March 2012.



Agricultural areas raise tropical foods. At that time we saw major fields of pineapples and sugar cane. The recent photo at the left shows fields being prepared for melons. Plastic sheets covers mounds of dirt to keep the melons from touching wet soil and being somewhat spoiled. We used such a technique in the past for our vegetable garden. In an arid environment it reduced evaporation of moisture from the soil and the buildup of salt.

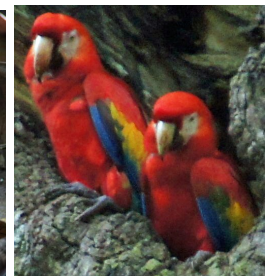
Many people chose a tour to the Carara National Park. The tropical rain forest was very dense, limiting photo opportunities. We walked on concrete trails suitable for wheel chairs. The trails

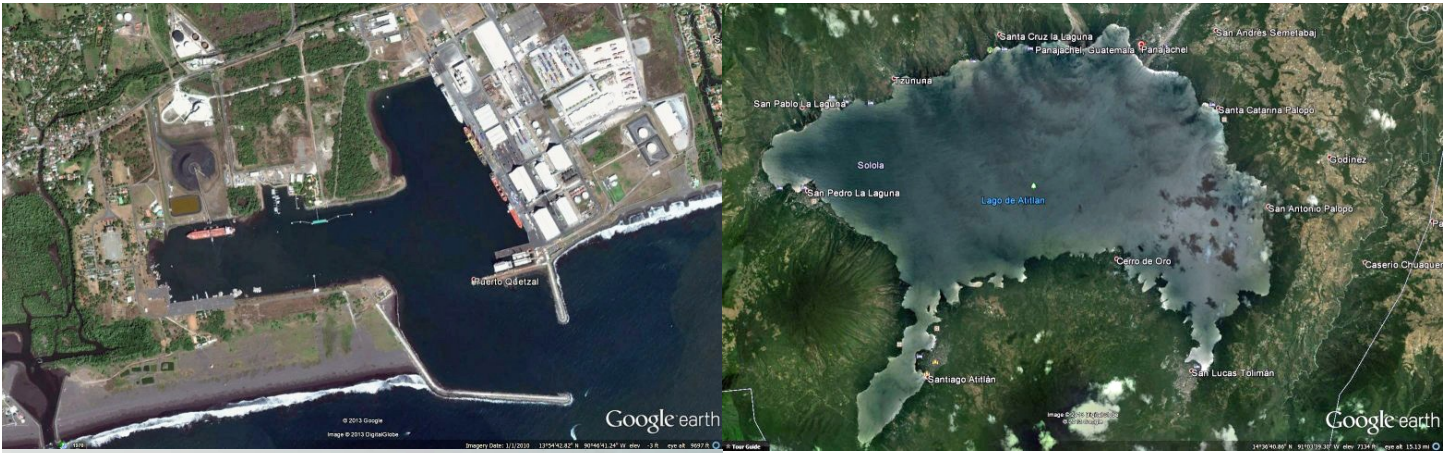
also kept visitors from trampling the forest.



We saw an iguana, Dusky

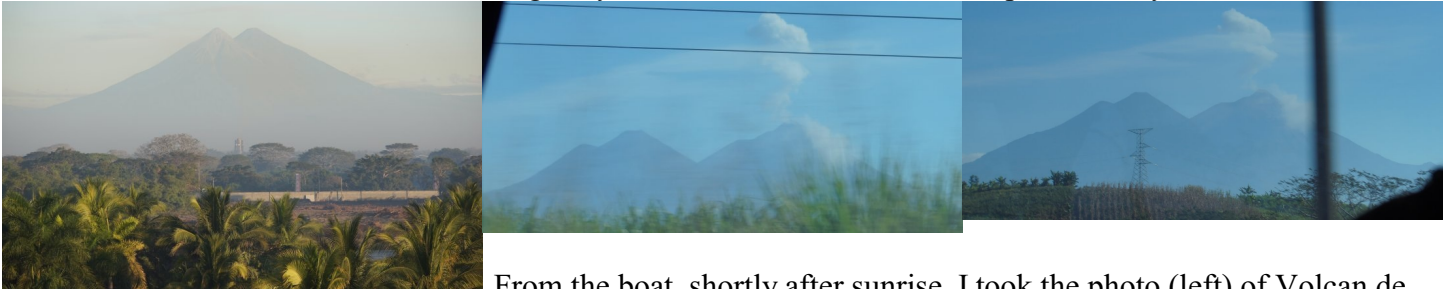
Antbird, green snake, and Scarlet Macaws.





Our next stop was at Puerto Quetzal, Guatemala, just east of the village of San Jose. It is an artificial harbor. We docked at the small blue pier near the upper center

in the picture of the harbor. To our south was the same ship that was ahead of us through the Panama Canal. It carried Liquid Petroleum Gas. We chose the tour to the highland Lake Atitlan (satellite view above), a huge volcanic caldera filled with water and ringed by smaller volcano cones. The trip to there by bus took 2.5 hours.



From the boat, shortly after sunrise, I took the photo (left) of Volcan de Fuego. During our bus ride to the lake that volcano briefly erupted with a puff of steam (tall cloud above) and an ash cloud descending down the mountain. Such minor eruptions are relatively frequent and do not worry the population. During our trip we passed large fields devoted to sugar cane in all stages of production. Some fields were bare dirt with remnants of previous crops. Some had grass seedlings. Some cane fields were mature and ready for burning. We also saw the sugar cane stalks being loaded onto trucks and wagons for delivery to the sugar factories. Later we passed forests of planted trees with diagonal cuts on the trunks - for rubber latex.



The first photo on the next page shows a field with a dark mesh covering. Perhaps pineapple is growing there and being protected from pests. Next are coffee plants in the mountains near our destination. The coffee beans ripen irregularly and must be hand picked.



Some cultural things in the villages along our route may be of interest. Corn is drying in the street.



American school busses are recycled in Central America for ordinary transport, sometimes without a new paint job. Small 3-wheeled taxis are abundant. So public transport is cheap.



At the southeastern corner of the lake we eventually boarded these two boats for a trip across the lake to the village on the north side. We got to enjoy the views of tall mountains on all sides of the lake. I was surprised by perhaps a thousand birds known as American Coot (photos shown). I had never seen that many at one time.



We had a very nice lunch at the northern village with a good view of the lake. Then we returned to our ship.