

Our Trip To The Butterflies

Written by Kay Thompson

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Touted as one of the natural wonders of the world, the butterfly sanctuary in the mountains of Michoacán has long been on my life list. Finally this year, my husband and I signed up for a three day, two night trip to Morelia, the capital of Michoacán. The second day of the trip was a trip to the monarchs sanctuary- the winter home of millions of Monarch butterflies. These lovely creatures fly all the way from Canada and the US to spend the winter procreating. They also procreate on their trip north so the same butterfly never makes a round trip. Friends have been there and exclaimed over the wondrous sight of seeing millions of butterflies flitting around in the sun. This is for us.

So off we go to Morelia with 19 others. Morelia is a 4.5 hour bus trip; at least it is that long on the bus we had which had major clutch and engine problems. Our driver wisely kept the speed down and he struggled with the gears the entire way, often stopping as the only way to get into first gear. The city of Morelia is a gorgeous colonial city that makes you feel as though you are in Spain. Wonderful plazas, courtyards, a cathedral, churches, schools, government buildings all built from 1547 on in stone and in the Spanish style. The town is lively, with many students and a sophisticated ambiance. We had a nice walking tour.

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The next day we were to meet at 8 a.m. for our trip to the butterflies. No one mentioned that it would be a 4 hour bus ride to the sanctuary. It was interminable. After two hours on the freeway, we spent two hours on minor roads with topes (speed bumps) every few yards. In Mexico anyone who would like traffic to slow in front of his property so he can try to sell a taco or a Coke, can build a tope on the road in front of his place. Hence, there were topes every fifty feet in some stretches. And for each of which our bus had to come to a complete stop to ease over and to try, once again, to find first gear.

After almost 4 hours we were going through a tiny scrappy little town and came to a little hut on the left. Several men were standing around. One man was holding a rope that stretched across the road. A sign in English and hand-lettered said "Welcome Toll. Small car 40 pesos, big car 50 pesos." If you paid the toll, the rope was lowered. We wondered what happened to the tolls collected. Ah, but that is thinking like an American. Better to just accept that the guys probably split the tolls at the end of the day. The area is very poor so they have to be creative to bring in revenue.

On we went - always "Just ten more minutes." We learned years ago that in Mexico ten minutes is probably an hour and it was. Finally we are at the sanctuary parking lot. No one is around so plenty of parking. Unfortunately, it is now cloudy and we have been told that the butterflies do not come out unless it is sunny. Well, it might clear up. Off we go.

We climb a curving dusty little road that is lined with shacks selling souvenirs and food. Most of them are closed today. We reach the entrance and enter the turnstile with our group. We are the only folks around. Now it is raining! Although a few on our trip came prepared such as the two women from Montreal who whipped out raincoats, scarves, gloves, rain ponchos and umbrellas, most of us have just jackets on. My husband and I have on shirts and fleece vests. We begin the long climb up the mountain led by our local guide who smiles but speaks no English so we follow his hand directions which are always pointing up the mountain.

It rains harder; we continue climbing but I get one half of a dirty trash bag from a young man who is helping our tour leader, Miguel, who is bringing up the rear. The trash bag is filthy but I use it as a tarp and the rain spills off of it and runs down my hands as we continue. My spouse has no rain protection and he has a short sleeved shirt. A few people are turning back but we've gone quite a way and I hate to give up knowing that then the clouds will clear and the beautiful butterflies will appear. So we continue past the turning back point.

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Now it is raining harder and . . . it is sleeting! This is cold! Soon the sleet gathers in piles and covers the rocks. It melts a little and it is just like the slippery snow I came to Mexico to avoid! Then comes the lightning and thunder. We wonder if this is safe. As we traverse a rather open meadow area and the thunder is crashing, I wonder if the lightning will seek out my tall husband. Our guide indicates we are close. My hands are numb; we are soaked; the rain and sleet continue as we pick our way around the slippery rocks.

After about an hour and a half of this misery we arrive at the butterfly area. It is too dark and rainy to see anything but we can make out big black clumps of things hanging from many of the tree branches. The butterflies! There are millions of them there; they are just resting all hanging together. They wisely do not go out in this kind of weather. One woman in our group is telling her husband she will never make him go on a trip again. We are all laughing. We take some pictures of the black clumps and pick our way back down the treacherous path. I haven't been so miserable since a canoe trip in the boundary waters of Minnesota when it poured rain as we searched for a campsite.

We stop at a little restaurant on the way down for quesadillas, rice and beans. Some people have bought sweaters and heavy scarves to help with the chill. If only they had rain ponchos for sale! Our group is now bonded by the experience and we brace for the four hour trip back to Morelia, soaking wet on a bus with no heat. Later, after our return to the hotel and hot showers, we went out to eat with new friends. As we lifted our wine glasses, our new friend John said, "Here's to tourism!" Ah, yes, tourism.