



NEWSLETTER

THE ASSOCIATION OF FORMER PAHO/WHO STAFF MEMBERS

VOL. XXXV No. 3

OCTOBER 2024



Signature of a Memorandum of Understanding Between PAHO and AFSM

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By Hernan Rosenberg



This issue of the Newsletter is late. Blame it on me: I thought we had news that could not wait another quarter to be shared.

For the last couple of years, we have been informing you about the efforts of AFSM to be institutionalized, that is, considered as a part of PAHO/WHO in the same way as the Staff Association. Both former and active staff have self-interest in following the developments of health insurance and the pension. Although we have an excellent relationship with PAHO, it has been totally dependent upon the good will of PAHO staff, since technically AFSM does not exist in the official eyes of the Organization.

After years of trying, and with the support of the DG and our own RD Dr. Jarbas Barbosa, I am happy to report that this week we have taken some big steps forward:

- We were formally invited to participate in the March for Health held on 29 September, as well as to serve on its steering committee. Several of our members took up the challenge, serving as part of the volunteer group. I captained the

welcome committee; other former staff were guides, and we all had a great time. We also invited our peers from our other former staff associations in Washington (like the IDB and the IMF). We were recognized and thanked by the organizers as well as by Dr. Barbosa.

- For the first time ever, AFSM was formally invited to attend PAHO's Governing Council. Again, some of us had attended previous Councils as individuals, but this was the first formal invitation to AFSM. I and our Vice President Hugo Prado received proper credentials and went to all relevant meetings. The Secretariat enjoyed a smooth meeting, having the plans and budget approved with no hitches. Of particular interest to our membership was a presentation on the budget showing that the health insurance in the Americas is still not covering costs. We will monitor events and keep you informed about developments. We also had a chance to exchange views with the Staff Association and look forward to closer relations in the future.
- Finally, on Friday 4 October 2024, in a simple but solemn ceremony, we signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between AFSM and PAHO, under which future relations will be managed. This is not the place to offer detailed plans, other than to indicate that we started this discussion over four years ago, and thanks to the support of the Regional Director, we finally have reached the desired outcome. The document will be posted on our website.

As has been noted before, we take seriously Dr. Tedros's word "Once WHO, always WHO". While individuals may have specific interests, most of us want to know what is happening with public health in the Americas, in the world in general, and especially with PAHO. Many of us have related activities in our countries, in academics, or in consulting. AFSM is actively involved in supporting PAHO on the UN Decade on Healthy Ageing, as well as on several administrative tasks. We look forward to increasing our relations with PAHO and to inviting all our members to actively join us in this exciting endeavor.



Welcome to New Members of AFSM

Maritza Ortiz from Nicaragua

Health Insurance and Pension Update

By Carol Collado and Rolando Chacon

Health Insurance



This article will bring you up to date on several concerns expressed in recent newsletters, on new alerts from PAHO and WHO, and explore some recent research and discussions on a topic of great concern for most of us who have arrived at the retirement age ...dementia. Since it is still on the radar, we will conclude with the latest on COVID-19.



In the last newsletter we discussed **Bird Flu**. The news on that front is that it continues to be of concern. Some evidence is showing that it is now spreading to additional animal species, although fortunately human cases continue to be low. Remember, human cases are almost always fatal, so there is a good reason to be careful if one is in areas where it is prevalent. There is a small effort to develop a vaccine, but it is not surfacing as a priority. WHO has estimated that at present it is a low public health risk.

Dengue continues to be a serious risk in the Americas, with 11,614,190 cases reported in the Region so far in 2024. The Southern Cone countries have the highest incidence, followed by the Andean countries and Central America. Although the more northern regions have fewer cases, the incidences are increasing as environmental conditions and climate change are more favorable for transmission. Therefore, prevention is the best answer for all: covering exposed skin, using mosquito repellent, and eliminating mosquito breeding sites such as standing water.

Respiratory Illnesses will soon be on the rise as the majority of the countries will shortly be entering either summer or winter. Flu and Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) often follow a seasonal pattern. RSV, although often just presenting with cold-like symptoms, is considered dangerous for older adults. So again, prevention is the best answer and both Flu and RSV vaccines are available. Recommendations for the RSV vaccine have changed as a result of Canadian studies of effectiveness and risk, with the beginning age for overall vaccine administration now starting at age 75 unless the person has underlying health concerns or sensibilities.

Other Health Concerns

WHO has posted an alert about **mpox** (formerly Monkeypox) and is spearheading efforts to avoid having a global situation with this disease. Information on this can be found in a previous newsletter. Of concern is the resurgence of Polio in several regions, and of Cholera that has shown a 13% increase in cases and a 71% increase in deaths so far this year.

Shingles, the painful neuralgic rash, is estimated to affect one out of every three people during their lifetime. Ninety per cent of those over 50 years-of-age have the herpes virus in their bodies, the shingles causing agent, for most coming from having had chicken pox during childhood. For as yet unexplained reasons, the risk of incidence increases five-fold from those aged 50 to those at age 80. It is highly recommended that anyone who has had the disease should seek out the effective vaccine Shingrix.

Dementia is a term used to identify several different diseases, with the common factor being destruction of nerve cells in and damage to the brain. Typically, memory loss and cognitive decline are the noticeable symptoms. It is often accompanied by mood and behavior changes, and as it

progresses, the affected person increases the level of assistance needed to perform the normal tasks of daily living. As longevity increases globally, the number of affected persons is also increasing with 10 million new cases yearly. WHO estimates that more than 55 million people are affected globally, with 60% in low- and middle-income countries. A recent July Lancet article *Dementia prevention, intervention and care 2024*¹ gives an up-to-date summary of the Lancet Commission's report on the subject.

Factors identified as increasing the possibility of developing dementia include being over 65 years-of-age; smoking; having hypertension, diabetes, obesity, excess alcohol use, physical inactivity, social isolation, and depression. There is new evidence that additionally untreated vision or hearing loss, high LDL cholesterol, less education, traumatic brain injury, and air pollution are also risk factors. Diet is also seen as important as it plays a key role in reducing the risk of chronic diseases affecting dementia. Contrary to common beliefs, dementia is not usually passed down in families, although some of the risk factors may be.

An important estimate is that 45% of dementia cases are potentially preventable with action on the identified factors. The Economist² developed an age-related chart as to which of these identified risks occur in different age groupings. In later life, social isolation, vision or hearing loss, and air pollution are significantly higher causes. There is evidently an economic factor. The incidence of dementia has declined 13% in rich Western countries over the past 25 years.

There are advances in the medical fields. There is preliminary work on the advancement of blood tests for Alzheimer's, the most common manifestation of dementia, with encouraging 90% accuracy in predicting potential for disease development. Finding problems early will enable using some of the pharmacological substances under development to delay symptoms. Diagnostic education for health professionals is increasing, and work on identifying biomarkers is beginning to show some insights. Something else to think about is that in a previous study, a number of people who demonstrated several types of neuropathies usually associated with dementia showed no signs of having developed the diseases. So, there is a lot more to find out about this debilitating entity. One exciting conclusion of the Lancet group is that it is never too late to reduce one's risk at any age!!

With that in mind, what should we be doing? If you look at the 14 identified risk factors, you will see that many have to do with healthy lifestyles, such as diet, exercise, obesity, alcohol use, social isolation, smoking, among others. Look over the list, see if there are things that need adjustment in your life. Other risk factors, such as those affecting the higher age groups, include hearing and vision loss. WHO estimates that only 10% of the global demand for hearing aids is currently met. Do you or your significant others show any signs of depression? Is your blood pressure under control? Are you doing what you can to develop and maintain your cognitive reserve? This may be the clue as to why some people, having neuropathologies do not exhibit symptoms (more on cognitive reserve in a future column).

COVID-19

The latest identified variant KP-2 has been used to formulate the upcoming vaccines offered. It is always useful to establish and maintain immunity levels and especially as the newer vaccines will provide protection against the variant predominately circulating in recent times. So far in 2024, the Region of the Americas is number two in incidence of reported cases, after Europe, and as mentioned above, respiratory problems will be increasing in both summer and winter for the majority of AFMS participants. In the US, testing has begun on humans for the nasal version of the vaccine, thought, in animal testing, to be more effective. It does not use a synthetically produced virus, but an attenuated

1 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28735855/>

2 <https://www.economist.com/science-and-technology/2024/08/05/how-to-reduce-the-risk-of-developing-dementia>

live virus. It will take some time for this version to make its way through the research, testing, and approval stages and we will keep you informed.

As we have mentioned in previous newsletters, YOU are the controller of your health. Prevention is critical, and doing what you can will enable you to enjoy your remaining years!

Pension Update

UNJSPF Hosts 15th Annual Global Pension CFO Forum

On 3 to 5 September, the UNJSPF hosted the 2024 Global Pension CFO Forum at the United Nations headquarters. Eighty finance executives from over 40 pension funds attended the event, traveling from Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, Qatar, Singapore, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

This diverse group of pension leaders shared perspectives, challenges, and lessons learned on topics including artificial intelligence; benchmarking; sustainability disclosure; and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) integration. Attendees and speakers exchanged ideas and discussed best practices, all with a shared interest in organizational success and the long-term wellbeing of their beneficiaries and retirees.

Spread across three days, the Forum offered a mix of structured programming and networking events. Wednesday, the fullest day on the agenda, featured two keynote speakers. In the morning session, Shantanu Murkherjee, Director of the Economic Analysis and Policy division at the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, shared insights on global economic trends. That afternoon, New York City Comptroller Brad Lander spoke about confronting the rising anti-ESG movement.

The day concluded with remarks from Mr. Iaderosa, as well as an interview with Ms. McClean and Pedro Guazo, Representative of the Secretary General at the Fund, who shared their perspectives on the evolving role of the CFO and what it takes to be an effective leader.

“The most important thing is to ask questions, be willing to listen, and be open-minded to doing things differently than perhaps the way it’s always been done,” said Ms. McClean. As an example of this lesson in action, she described the work at the Fund to develop the CARE strategy, with its three pillars of improving the client experience, modernizing pension services, and strengthening stakeholder relationships.

Underscoring the broad and influential role of a CFO, Mr. Guazo said: “I don’t think there’s anyone besides the CEO that has more visibility into the entire business than the CFO.” This purview, and its associated power and responsibility, extends into the daily culture of an organization, he noted. One aspect of the UNJSPF culture that Mr. Guazo spotlighted is how all staff members at the Fund are both employees and beneficiaries.

“This is very important for us because you can feel in our staff a sense of ownership. We have invested a lot in creating a culture that is aligned with recognizing this,” he said, highlighting among other efforts the drive to increase transparency.

The event marked the 15th year of the Forum, and its first in the United States since 2015.



Musings of An Ageing Woman – Number 12

Heed your own advice

By Yvette Holder



I think that the first piece of advice that I should heed is “Heed your own advice”. In a previous newsletter I mentioned my techniques for arising elegantly from an armchair and from an armless chair. To refresh, from an armchair, one presses down, not too obviously, as one slowly and gracefully transfers one’s weight onto the feet. The technique for the armless chair is less graceful but still very practical, especially for restaurant situations. One presses down on the table, first ensuring that it is sturdy enough to accept the transference of weight.

Recently, we (one daughter and her family and I) went to see the matinee show of Swan Lake, performed by the Miami City Ballet, followed by an early dinner treat at a location of one well-known restaurant chain. We dined well and prepared to leave. I used my armless chair technique to rise from the table, except that I forgot my own caution – to verify that the table could take my weight. Catastrophe was averted by a keenly observant and quick-thinking grandchild who steadied the table just before everything crashed to the floor.

And that’s when it hit me! Restaurants’ offers of early bird specials to the elderly may not be as altruistic as they seem. I had assumed that this was one of the concessions made by the business sector to the limited resources of the elderly. But that evening, it occurred to me that perhaps this was a way to have patrons who may cause mishaps or be an embarrassment, served and dispatched before a more agile and profitable clientele arrived. This may not be the case and yet, I wonder...

But speaking of advice, I have received and learned so much from living in a 55+ community.

Lesson#1: If one is too subconscious about using a cane or walker but equally fearful of losing balance and falling, then one should walk alongside a wall, wherever possible. This allows for a quick and surreptitious steadying or recovery from a momentary or impending loss of balance. Strategically placed pieces of solid furniture around the home serve a similar purpose for recovering from a fall if there is no injury. Instead of crying “I’ve fallen, and I can’t get up”, the fallen person is advised to roll onto the knees, crawl to that sturdy piece of furniture, and haul oneself up.

And about falling, here's some additional advice for those of us who don't have access to LifeAlert¹ or some such device. After my first fall when I was in one place and my phone was I don't know where (it's favorite place to be!), I took to wearing my cellphone in a neat holder around my neck. That way it is always within reach.

Lesson #2: Embrace your increasing deficiencies and use them to your advantage. This I learned from my dad and my new community friends. He really did not need the cane, but he said that it allowed all the lovely young ladies to notice him and offer to help him, offers that he would not refuse as that would be very ungentlemanly of him! My kids love to have me accompany them to the shopping mall, to dinners, and to shows. I am sure they appreciate my company, but I am also certain that the handicap sticker plays some role in that appreciation. I am even trying to convert my limp after my hip surgery into a swagger, and I shall be taking lessons from my 103-year old Auntie Dolly, a former model, on how to catwalk. One is never too old to learn.

I have also adopted a technique used by my community friends who have lost their hearing. It is to repeat what the speaker says. It serves three purposes – it ensures that I have correctly understood what was said, it gives the speaker the opportunity to fill in any missing blanks and, best of all, it defuses any potentially volatile situations. How can anyone be angry with someone who does not appear to have heard what was said?

Lesson #3: However, perhaps the best lesson that I have learned is to “Live fully until you die”. It was a lesson that I had half learned from my dad's life. At 80, although he had most of his teeth, he decided that he did not need to spend any more money at the dentist since he did not have much longer to live. He died at 90 so he should have continued his visits to the dentist. My community friend, Grace, and her partner, lived with this motto. He was diagnosed with terminal cancer and given three months to live. She determined that the end would come soon enough, and they would do all the things that they had planned until they couldn't. Three years later, they were both dancing at one of the community's shindigs.

So, my final word – “Live!”



¹ Life Alert Emergency Response, Inc., known as LifeAlert, is a nationwide American device service company that provides services to help people contact emergency services.

Chicago, Showcase for Everything

By Juan Manuel Sotelo



I just visited Chicago for the first time. Getting to the midwestern capital was for me an urgent task, especially after living in the United States for a significant number of years.

I found it to be a remarkable city on the edge of *Lake Michigan*, with a fairly navigable river running through it - the *Chicago River*, along with unique and animated *metal bridges* that cross every block.

I arrived at O'Hare International Airport, one of the busiest in the country, and took an Uber so as not to waste time. This was a mistake as the best thing would have been to take the train since the road traffic was intense early in the morning, and the train does not have that problem.

The background on Chicago led me to think in short about the Obamas, Oprah Winfrey, Eliot Ness, Al Capone and Prohibition in Chicago, and the Untouchables. It is an economic and cultural center with almost three million inhabitants in the urban area and nine in the suburbs. A third of the population is of Latino origin, surpassing African Americans.



“The Bean”, City symbol in Millennium Park along Michigan Avenue.

The city is well known as the windy city, not because it refers to the wind that blows from the lake but to a dispute between the Big Apple and Chicago over the venue of the 1893 World's Fair.

Another antecedent of interest is the great fire of 1871 that destroyed 17,500 buildings and meant a new beginning for the city with architectural styles that marked the end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. Chicago is the glory of art deco.

Millennium Park extends along Michigan Avenue and reaches the lake. In addition to *the Bean*, you can see the *Jay Pritzker Pavilion*, a large open-air auditorium with concerts at all hours. *The Buckingham Fountain* is another important attraction.



**Pavilion Jay Pritzker.
Millenium Park.**

You have to be very selective to cover in a short visit a sample of what Chicago offers the visitor. I decided to include *the Art Institute*, one of the best museums in the United States. I was lucky enough to see an exhibition by Georgia O'Keeffe called "My New Yorks".

The Shedd Aquarium is quite large, larger than the *National Aquarium*

in Baltimore. What impressed me the most were the belugas, enormous white whales, weighing 2,000 pounds and trained to perform for the public with a thousand agile pirouettes that show them to be very funny despite their great weight.



Sunset cruise. Lake Michigan

Another landmark is the *Skydeck* on the 103rd floor of the *Willis Tower*, offering an historical tour of the city, and then you take an elevator to the highest floor from where you can see the city in 360 °F.



Chagall Window. Chicago Art Institute

Then it was time to leave, so I took the train to O'Hare, and all went well. The flight was on time, and I had the satisfaction of having just a taste of the city of Chicago, where I want to return to experience everything it has to offer, including its people with jazz music on every corner and their good vibes.



Traveling to Iceland

By Maristela Monteiro



Retiring allowed me to plan travel just for fun, not attached to any duty travel or conference, and accompanied by the people of my choosing. It's wonderful! I love to plan, and I planned this trip to go with a friend, a neighbor who has never been to Iceland either. Traveling during the summer would give me the chance to live the experience of the 24-hour day! The weather is not hot, temperatures are on average 50 °F, but it can rain, be cloudy or sunny or windy, all in the same day, and most days were like that. So, it is a good idea to dress using layers of clothing, and to bring a hat, gloves, good socks, hiking shoes, a raincoat/wind breaker, and/or warmer jacket that covers completely.

Going in the summer also means you need to book everything in advance or take the risk of not visiting an attraction. I booked everything in advance. I did so by using Booking.com, wherein I booked a direct flight on Icelandair (good airline), and rented an entire place from Airbnb, that was in a perfect location (to be honest I did not know how good it was until we got there!). From our place we walked everywhere, including to the bus terminal from where all the tours leave (BSI terminal).

We got to Reykjavik early in the morning, easy entry, no big lines, and I had booked a bus transfer to the center of town - to the terminal that was walking distance from our place. We had the whole day to explore, after shopping for basic groceries (for breakfast only).

Our first stop was the Perlan Museum, which I highly recommend. It provides an overview of the natural wonders of Iceland, including an ice cave through which you can walk and take plenty of selfies! You can see a show of the Northern lights, a film of the last volcano eruption in Iceland (the only place you can see this film in the world) and learn about the geology of the country. The restaurant and café on top are also worth a visit. We spent ½ day there; it was amazing, and then we walked back home.

The next day was the first one of our bus tour - a ten-hour guided tour to the **South Shore of Iceland**, visiting the village of Vik, the Seljalandsfoss and the Skógafoss Waterfalls, the Reynisfjara Black Sand Beach (volcanic), and beautiful rock formations (Reynisdrangar). The wind was blowing at 50 miles an hour or more, a common phenomenon almost unpredictable as to when it starts or ends. One can literally be blown off the path! We also walked up to a lake around the Sólheimajökull Glacier.

The next day we stayed in town, did some sightseeing, and visited two amazing shows. One was the **Fly over Iceland show**, where we were suspended in front of a 20-yard screen, able to enjoy an immersive footage of Iceland's rugged terrain, volcanos, geysers, waterfalls, and other natural wonders, including special effects that recreated the weather conditions and smells of Iceland's wilderness. Close by was the **Live Lava Show**, the only one in the world where you can safely get

up close to real molten lava in a controlled environment. It is truly a one-of-a-kind experience that is unlike anything else, and it is not cheesy!

The fourth day was a 'spa' day! We spent the afternoon at the **Sky Lagoon**, a new spa where one goes through a **7-Step Ritual** for about three hours. The Sky Lagoon is a geothermal lagoon, all about that Icelandic feeling of warmth and wonder. We started swimming in hot spring water, in an infinity pool overlooking the ocean. Then we plunged into very cold water (quickly) before entering a dry sauna with a full view through a protective glass of the same ocean. From there, we were given volcanic salts to rub on the whole body before entering the wet sauna. After that, we showered and returned to the lagoon where we stayed for as long as possible. There is also a bar where you can order alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks. All is paid for at the exit.

Icelanders like to socialize in the water - they have literally hundreds of public swimming pools and people go at the end of the day as if they were going to happy hour...; this proved to be a very relaxing and convivial experience. I guess the tradition comes from the long winters where nothing outdoors would really be happening... But I love the idea of relaxing by the water.

The fifth day was another full day of our sightseeing tour to Snaefellsnes Peninsula and Mountain Kirkjufell in the Western region. We visited the Snaefellsjokull National Park, a 700,000-year-old glacier-topped stratovolcano¹, with moss-cloaked lava fields, spectacular mountains, black sand beaches, charming little fishing villages, and sea cliffs. We spotted sea lions lying in the sun. In the national park there is a cafeteria run by a 19-year-old chef, son of a top Michelin chef from Iceland, who offers only four typical dishes: seafood soup, cod fish, lamb shank, or a vegan option. I had the lamb, delicious!! It is my favorite meat, it melted in my mouth, and it was served with an artful presentation. The lamb in Iceland is considered to be the best in the world, as they are not only grass fed and graze freely, but the quality of the soil and water makes the meat delicious. There was no strong smell or taste like I have experienced elsewhere. Mount Kirkjufell is 1,500 feet above ground, the biggest landmark in a village of about 900 residents. It is imponent and it lies alone in the landscape of the region.

Our last long tour (11 hours) was the one considered to be the top attraction in Iceland; one not to be missed! It was a tour of the **Golden circle, Kerit Crater, and a soak in the famous Blue Lagoon**. The first stop was at the **Thingvellir National Park**. In this rugged landscape, we came close to the line where the Eurasian and the North American Plates collide. There is a path in between, and on the left is the North American plate and on the right is the European plate. It is also where the first Parliament was set up, when previously there were no cities in the country. The people decided to organize a two-week event every year open to all, providing an opportunity to share information about who was born, married, and died. That was also when people were taken to trail - men who were sentenced to death had their heads chopped off, and women who were sentenced to death were drowned in the nearby river. Everything was resolved, debated, and celebrated in the same spot. Only hundreds of years later the Parliament was moved to Reykjavik, where it is still considered the longest standing Parliament in the world. We then headed to a huge and very beautiful waterfall, very much like the one in Brazil (Iguaçu). Next, we headed to the geothermal area of Haukadalur to visit the **Great Geysir**, where there are several active hot springs and where Strokkur hurls up water 90-100 feet every five to seven minutes. It is quite amazing.

¹ A volcano built up of alternate layers of lava and ash

Next on the agenda was **Gullfoss Waterfall**, where we watched the roaring Hvítá River fall 105 feet into a gorge, cascading down in two steps. We went to the top, climbing about 240 steps each way, but it was doable! Continuing the tour, we visited **Kerid**, an aquamarine lake flanked by the steep red walls of a volcanic crater, perfectly preserved for over 5,000 years. We ended the tour with another perfect treat, soaking in the naturally warm waters of the **Blue Lagoon** before heading back to Reykjavík. It was very different than the Sky Lagoon. In this one there were a lot of silica in the water, so the color was a milky blue. There, included in the entry price, you can get a face mask made of silica and a drink. The views are not as spectacular as the Sky Lagoon; you are looking over scenes more like volcano rocks.

Our last day was fun too! We took a boat tour to **Flaxafloi Bay for whale and marine life watching**. The weather was perfect, and the ocean was flat after days of tours being canceled due to the wind! We saw only one whale from a distance, but we were lucky to see dozens of dolphins jumping and playing close to the boat, as well as the adorable puffins! After that we took a **city walking food Tour** where a local takes you around the city, explaining local history and stopping in five different places to serve an array of delicious and traditional dishes, including the most famous hot dog in the world! It was made famous when President Clinton visited the country and tried it, raving about it. It is made of lamb meat, super light, with mayo, fried onions, and pickles. The other dishes were a fine crepe served with blueberry jam and whipped cream; finely chopped cod mixed with smashed potatoes and served with a tiny piece of bread and butter that they say is a perfect accompaniment to the rest; a lamb chop with broccolini; and *hákarl*, one of the oldest and most unique dishes in Iceland, prepared with putrefied shark meat. The preparation of this unusual dish is quite long: the shark meat (Greenland shark) is buried in a pit and fermented for three to six months. Since this particular shark meat is very toxic to humans if consumed fresh this was a way they found to eliminate its uric acid. The shark is then cut into thick strips and dried for more than 5 months. You have to chew it at least 8 times, and each bite has a different taste, and keep chewing until you can feel the ammonia being released from the meat with some tingling in your mouth. You can then swallow, usually while sipping the national drink (that is very strong, like vodka), and saying *Skol!* Finally, there was the happy marriage cake (a rhubarb pie with the unpronounceable name of *hjónabandssæla*), with the local tradition of wishing someone good luck. It is served at all types of celebrations, not only at a wedding.

From the tour, we walked back to the bus terminal, where we had left our luggage early that morning. We took the bus back to the airport and checked in for our flight back to the US. We did not see a single person, with all transactions done on an electronic terminal, and no lines – it was a breeze! If you buy stuff in the city, you can claim the VAT (tax) back at the airport, and this is also done quite efficiently. I truly loved everything I saw, and I loved the country! There were nice, friendly people, and the safest country in the world! They also do not have an army and just three cameras to guard the house of the prime minister (considered their White House), with no fences nor guards. Oh, how I wish the rest of the world was like that!



My Spanish Language Immersion Adventure in Bogota

By Mena Carto



I have always wanted to do Spanish language immersion, ever since my days at PAHO Guyana, 24 years ago. So, at the ripe age of 68 and retired, I finally enrolled in a two-week program at New Language, School of Spanish and Tourism (*Nueva Lengua, Escuela de Español y Turismo*), in Bogota Colombia, in April 2024.

Arrival in Bogota and the Nueva Lengua School

Upon arrival, I was warmly welcomed by the Colombian family that I was to live with, as part of the immersion. So Elssy became my ‘mom’, Charlie my ‘dad’ and Jay (Hawaiian), another student, became my travel companion to and from school.



My Colombian ‘family’



New Language



Myself and a Korean student

At school, I was placed in the Intermediate/Advanced level class because of my prior knowledge of Spanish. The program comprised classroom hours, site visits, and cultural activities. And the students were a cornucopia of nationalities – from the US, New Zealand, Germany, Korea, Brazil, United Kingdom, Switzerland, Bolivia, Syria, you name it... I was the school’s first ever Guyanese student in its 20 years of existence. Most of the students were young enough to be my children and even grandchildren, but bonding was 100% - especially during site visits, cultural activities, and break periods when the lively ‘mob’ congregated and different forms of Spanglish emanated.

The teachers were a joy to work with and extremely helpful – especially when we had to revise the dreaded imperative, imperfect, and subjunctive tenses – the bane of my life. During the comprehension exercises and open communication, I was especially tickled by certain Colombian expressions such as ‘tener pajaros en la cabeza’ which translates literally to mean ‘to have birds in the head’ while in Colombia it means ‘to be naïve’.

Cooking class and dance class

For the cooking class, we made ‘platano tentacion’ (a sweet item with ripe plantains) and meat empanadas. After donning aprons and head scarves, we had great fun playing chefs while we cut up ingredients, stirred the pot, and finally tasted the end products.



The dance class was hilarious! Our amateur attempts to practice the salsa and merengue revealed who were born dancers and those whose body parts were unable to move in harmony to music.

Colombian cuisine

I was anxious to try the local food and there was a wide variety of restaurants from which to choose. So, I feasted on the local delicacies that were actually quite cheap – a meal of meat, rice, beans, guacamole, and plantain cost as little as 8 US dollars, while an arepa with sausage, meat empanada, or chicken tamale cost as little as 2 US dollars.

‘Ajiaco’ is a sort of soup with a myriad of things in it – potato, chicken, plantain, corn, cilantro and other condiments, and was eaten with rice and avocado on the side.



Ajiaco



Bandeja paisa



Colombian bowl



Patacones and sausage



Empanadas



Chicken tamale



Arepas



Coffe Bar Juan Valdez

Bandeja paisa, typical of Colombia, is comprised of meat, rice, beans, chicharron (crispy fried pork skin), sausage, plantain, arepa, and then topped with a fried egg. Then there was the Colombian ‘bowl’ containing rice, black beans, plantain, salsa, guacamole, and topped with falafel. The empanadas were mouth-watering as were the different types of arepas (flat round bread made of ground maize), patacones (flat cake of twice fried green plantains), Colombian sausage, and tamales (corn dough, stuffed with meat, wrapped in banana leaves, and steamed).

The preponderance of Juan Valdez cafes sold Colombia’s signature coffees, teas, and a wide range of pastries while the numerous ice-cream shops sold many a ‘sinful’ sweet item in which I indulged.

Outings planned by Nueva Lengua

We had a very scenic view of the city when we journeyed by funicular to the top of the **Montserrat** mountain (10,341 feet high) that overlooks Bogota. The 17th century church on the mountain top houses a shrine devoted to ‘El Señor Caído’ (the fallen Lord, Jesus) of whom we encountered various statues while climbing, showing the different stages of his crucifixion.



Montserrat



Montserrat



The Tropicario



Inside of Tropicario

The **José Celestino Mutis Botanical Garden**, **Colombia's** largest botanical garden, was founded in 1955 in honor of botanist and astronomer José Celestino Mutis. The Garden is both a recreation and research center that depicts the Andean and Páramo ecosystems, the main water source for Bogota. The Tropicario (a collection of domes) was a fascinating simulation of an artificial wetland that reproduced six different collections: humid forest, dry forest, special collections, useful plants, supermoors, and biodiversity.

The **Paloquemao Market**, Bogota’s largest local market, was neatly sectioned according to greens and spices, meats and fish, and fruits and flowers, and its traders were meticulously uniformed. The array of colors among the fruit displays was artistic and the service impeccable! We sampled previously unknown fruits such as gulupa (a variety of passion fruit), uchuva (golden berry), lulo (a citrus-like fruit), among others. As to the range of orchids, they were to die for – a profusion of colors.



Our 'farewell' was a three-hour excursion on **Chiva Rumbera** (Rumbera – a rhythmic dance) on a brightly colored refurbished Colombian **Chiva** (goat) bus by which we traversed the city, while jiving to Latin music, amidst sips of aguardiente (a sweet anise flavoured liquor).



My personal excursions

My 12-hour trip to Guatavita and Cathedral de Sal was on a tour bus with 16 tourists of 5 different nationalities. Our first stop was the majestic **Lake Guatavita**, 57 km north of Bogota. The Lake was said to be a sacred place where the indigenous Muisca people made their offerings of gold, that later led to the belief that there was a lost city of treasure underneath the lake – El Dorado.



Lake Guatavita



Entrance to Catedral



Cardinal cross



Inside of the Catedral

The next stop, **Catedral de Sal** (Zipaquirá Salt Cathedral) 50 km north of Bogota and 190 meters underground, was carved from 250,000 tons of salt. In addition to the Cathedral with its huge Cardinal Cross, there were also 14 chapels that depict the Stations of the Cross.

Gringo Tuesdays in Bogota, are evenings of cultural and language exchanges (different languages) among foreigners and locals, followed by partying. My classmate and I ventured out and thoroughly enjoyed hob-nobbing in our halting Spanish in the friendly atmosphere.



Shopping

I was totally impressed by the beautifully laid out **Unicentro Shopping Mall** and the **Avenida Chile Shopping Centre** in Bogota, with their tasteful décors, cozy seating, food courts with wide-ranging cuisine, and even live entertainment. But my favourite spot was the Sunday **Usaquen Craft Market** where I bargained to purchase the most delightful selection of Colombian jewelry.



Usaquen market



Usaquen market

My long-lasting memories of Colombia

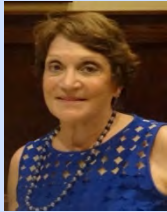
Among my indelible memories of Colombia are the exquisite restaurants in the up-market area of Parque de la 93, the ubiquitous Juan Valdez cafes, the beautiful malls, and the lovely Colombian countryside. But most of all, I will remember my adopted ‘family’ of friendly teachers and the ‘melting pot’ of students at Nueva Lengua, who I may never see again. I enjoyed every minute of the immersion and I would do it all over again!

Hasta luego...



My Journey on the Silk Road – Part 6, Food and Markets

By Marilyn Rice



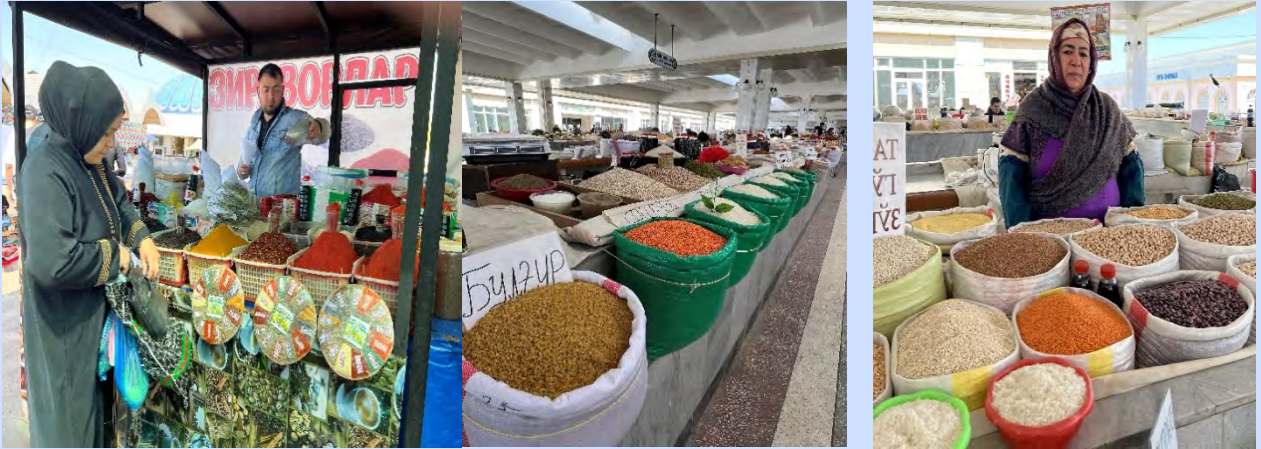
Outdoor markets are still the staple of all foods for every village and city. There was a wide variety of fresh and dried fruits, vegetables, meats, and spices. There was a wide diversity of faces, demonstrating the result of the mosaic of people crisscrossing Asia over the ages; some looked Chinese, Iranian, Russian, Turk, and Mongol.

Universally, everyone seemed to be eating beef and lamb, and for special occasions horse meat. But even the poorest people had access to the two foods that seemed to be the pride of all places - bread and plov. Plov is a rice dish that is prepared with ram or sheep tail fat, meat (usually beef or lamb but I was able to get some with chicken made especially for me), raisins, garbanzo beans, and red and yellow carrots. The round breads were stamped with special designs belonging to each artisan. They were cooked in round wood-burning ovens, thrown against the inter walls, and then removed with long spatulas.

FRESH PRODUCE



SPICES AND GRAINS



BREAD



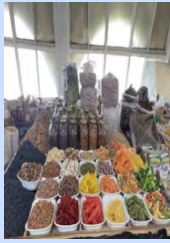


Removing bread from the round clay ovens <https://youtu.be/Wj98-Vy6RII>

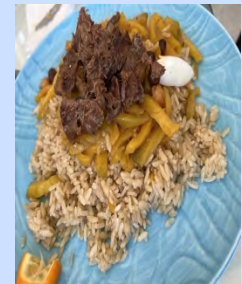
DRIED NUTS AND FRUITS



SWEETS



PLOV



Making plov at the famous Beshqozon Pilov Restaurant in Tashkent

<https://youtu.be/pP9XSZRmbQQ>

HANDICRAFTS



MEATS



The Third Journey of Life: Challenges and Opportunities

Part 2

By Sumedha Mona Khanna



Introduction

On my 65th birthday, I realized that I was now entering what I called the *Third Journey of my Life*. This is an important and unpredictable phase of one's life. To arrive at this age without a major health or personal challenge is a blessing. Most of us who were working full time have retired from our jobs. While initially we feel free from daily commitments and work requirements, after a year or so we feel the need to be engaged in something that gives some meaning and purpose to this phase of our life. From now on, it becomes not just a question of *adding Years to Life- but rather – adding Life to Years*.

How do we remain vital, active, and purposeful till the end of our lives? When I reached this phase, I asked myself - who would show me this path and teach me how to make this journey gracefully? I wanted to live each day fully, feeling free, with no pressure to achieve. I felt the need to explore what remained to be done in my life and what was still unresolved.

There is no blueprint for growing older gracefully and vitally. Too often, the experts, doctors, and commercial ads emphasize the negative - physical and medical challenges of ageing - chronic disease, disability, depression, and declining mental ability. Yet, there are positive role models of women and men who remain vital and vibrant into their later years of life. What could I learn from them? What motivates them? What did I need to explore and discover about myself? How could I prepare myself for the spiritual journey of dying? I felt the need to connect with other women who were making this journey and share our ideas, challenges, experiences, and wisdom.

Judith Duerk's book - *Circle of Stones* - encouraged me in this direction. The following words attracted my attention:

“How might your life be different if there had been a place for you... a place for women, where you were received and affirmed? A place where other women, perhaps even somewhat older, had been reaffirmed before you, each in her time, affirmed as she struggled to become more truly herself?”

“A place where, after the fires were lighted, and the drumming and the silence, there would be a hush of expectancy filling the entire chamber...a knowing that each woman there was leaving old conformity to find herself...a sense that all of womanhood stood on a threshold. And if during the hush, the other women, slightly older, had helped you to trust your own becoming...to trust it and quietly and prayerfully nurture it, how might your life be different?”

I then decided to invite some women in my community in their sixties and beyond to form a Circle. In January 2009, a group of ten women met and decided to create a circle and called it - **SISTERS OF THE THIRD JOURNEY**.

Over the years this Circle has met monthly to share personal stories, challenges, opportunities, and transitions. While during this period some members have left the Circle, new ones joined and continued meeting. Some of us are now in our early eighties and finding new challenges.

This is a summary of our conversations over the years that I feel is relevant to others who are at this phase of their life's journey.

MAJOR CHALLENGES

1. What does The Third Journey mean to us:

This phase of our lives is a mystery. There is no set direction, no blueprint or well-defined path. We face many challenges, some are individual, and many others are common to us all. There often appears to be a conflict between what we have and what we want. We need to define what creates passion at this phase of our lives. Often there seems to be a conflict between ours and our partner's (if we have one) needs. Often the man is content with his life as it is. Women may not be - they may want more from life but are not always sure what that is. With retirement (if one has been in a full-time job), time frees us up and we need to find what might have purpose and give us passion in life. If one has lost her/his partner, one must reexamine how to live alone and find what is important.

While we may have different challenges and issues, the three challenges that appear to be common are:

- Finding a sense of purpose at this phase of our life's journey.
- Finding a sense of place in living through this phase of our lives.
- Resolving relationship issues with partners, children, and grandchildren.

2. Passion or Purpose in Life during the Third Journey

The questions that come up for most of us are:

- How do we find or rediscover passion or purpose?
- How do we act on our passion or purpose?
- How or what would we have to change if we acted on our passion or purpose?

Most of us go through some changes in life when we come to this phase. If we have been working full-time in a job, we generally retire by the age 60-65. We then go through a transition phase, releasing the old way of life, and finding or creating a new identity. If we have had a life-partner, it is possible that the partner either has died or moved away. So, we find ourselves living alone and that often requires major changes, including moving to a different place or with family/children or dealing with possible limitation of resources, among other things. We must change our expectations of ourselves – get rid of old baggage to renew ourselves. We also may have more time to pursue something that gives us joy and passion. Some of us learn some new skills and recreate our passion.

Our passion is related to our sense of place and time. We need to question our assumptions often and change them if necessary. Passion is internal and different for each one of us. An important challenge is to take the necessary time to find something that will truly give us satisfaction.

3. Our Ageing/Changing Bodies - Health Challenges

There is no doubt that as we grow older, our body begins to present more challenges, calling for more attention.

“Your body is not something you are, it is something you have.”

Our whole being is Body/Mind/Spirit. We need to consider each one of these and the changes that are occurring. Some questions that we might individually need to reflect on include:

- What does *Ageing* mean to me?
- Am I comfortable with getting older?
- What is the “image” that I hold of my ageing?
- What are some of the major health challenges that I am experiencing? How am I dealing with them?
- How do I nurture myself?

One thing that is certain is that ageing affects our bodies and we become more aware of the changes that are occurring. Some face more physical challenges and try to adjust and adapt to the changes. Perhaps a problem that we all generally face is related to our mobility. The question we may ask: Is there a way to prevent or at least slow down the decline? An exercise that may help is: *“On a scale of 1-10, what value do we place on our health? Describe the feelings about whatever number we choose.”* Then ask, *“What do we do every day to maintain our health and wellbeing, and how do we nurture ourselves?”*

Women generally do not pay enough attention to nurturing themselves. They tend to get busy with other activities including taking care of their partners, children, and parents, and they easily make more time for others than for themselves. Some of the common concerns expressed are:

- *“I feel guilty about spending time on myself.”*
- *“There is always something else to do.”*
- *“Even if I have time, I find something else to occupy it - I am not sure why that is.”*
- *“I would love to get a massage at least once a month. I am not sure what stops me from doing that.”*
- *“I feel that I am getting older and can't do all that I would like to do. There are too many issues to deal with, especially with mobility challenges.”*
- *“My partner is getting weaker, needing a lot of attention. He is very dependent on me. Sometimes I feel that I should take time off for myself – to nurture myself and recover my energy, yet I feel guilty if I do that.”*

I believe it is important to remind ourselves that - ***“Our health is the most important asset we have, because without good health there is nothing worth having.”***

4. Sense of Place - Where do we want to live?

This challenge often comes up at this phase of life for several reasons. It is also a complex issue and there are no easy or single solutions. One's needs are unique, and circumstances are different. The family size tends to be smaller with children, if any, having moved out and in some cases the partner may have passed on or moved out. The home where we have lived may not be conveniently located to the services that we most need, such as health care; it may not be appropriate due to any physical/mobility issue that we might develop; necessary support services may not be easily available, or it may not be financially possible to keep them.

It is not easy to make a move at this phase of our lives, but sometimes circumstances oblige us to do so. Some of us may not be financially comfortable to make the move, especially if we need caregiving. In-home support services are not always affordable. So much as we would like to stay in our homes and *Age in Place*, this may not be an easy option. It is important to do some research regarding the options and discuss with friends or experts in this field potential places where we can move. We must also be prepared for the change, and plan for it rather than have it forced upon us due to circumstances. It is better if we make this decision ourselves rather than having someone force the decisions on us because of our inability to decide.

There are an increasing number of communities especially designated as *Active Adult Communities* for people age 55+. They are safe and conveniently located, and some of them have what is called "Continuing Care options" – that means one can initially move into an independent home, and as the physical and mental challenges develop, one has the option to move to an Assisted Care and even a Nursing Care facility within the same location. These are not available everywhere, and often they are quite expensive. One needs to do some research or talk with others who have more experience in this regard.

Some important considerations when deciding about moving are: affordability; physical appropriateness; location i.e. close to some family, transportation facility if one can't drive; health care services; and opportunity for social connections.

It is a complex and sober topic and there are no easy answers. Each person has her/his own unique circumstances and needs. There are no simple or standard solutions. That's why it is important to talk to an expert or others who have gone through this experience.





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