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Flowers, Fauna and Firearms

Submitted by Josephine (Jo) Mele

I've heard travel broadens the mind and that there's always something to be learned. Several years ago we went to Bolivia to visit friends. What did I learn on that trip? My husband can sleep through anything; and getting home alive can be the best part of any vacation.

After staying two relaxing weeks visiting our friends in Cochabamba, Bolivia, my husband and I caught an international flight to Miami, which required a connection in Santa Cruz. Our friends stressed that there was only one Miami flight daily and that we shouldn't stay in Santa Cruz any longer than necessary as it was the cocaine and crime capital of Bolivia.

From the air, Santa Cruz looked normal enough. We collected our luggage, and headed for customs. We were the only ones there: no other passengers, no customs agent, just the two of us. I went to the airline counter and asked where the customs agent was. The woman shrugged her shoulders. "When will he return?" I asked hopefully. I got a big smile: "Manana."

Even my husband knew that much Spanish. No customs agent meant no Miami flight for us today. We watched the plane being loaded and the doors closing. We called our friends who helped make reservations for us at a small hotel hidden behind a high whitewashed wall covered with purple Bougainvillea. It looked safe enough. We spent the day reading and napping, and after dinner fell asleep to the scent of flowers coming through the louvered window.

I woke to the sounds of heavy footsteps stomping down the concrete stairs outside our room; the clock glowed 2 a.m. I could see through the slightly opened window and noticed several pair of boots stopped on the lit stairwell. It seemed their owners were listening to something.

They began to whisper. Trying to translate when you're half-asleep and hyperventilating is very difficult, but I managed to hear a deep voice say, "Quickly, follow me and for God's sake be quiet!" Then more running, then quiet. My heart was beating so loudly I was sure everyone in the hotel could hear it, except my husband.

I got out of bed, waited for more sounds and peered through the peep hole in the door. I saw nothing! I knew I would have an indentation around my eye I was pressing so hard. When my feet felt like ice on the tile floor I went back to bed and to my still-snoring husband.

I ran through the possibilities: college kids having a good time, drunks trying to find their room, a police raid on known drug lords, robbers looking for the stranded American tourists. I vowed to stay alert until sunrise.

I was jolted awake by what sounded like, Pop, pop, pop! I shook my snoring husband and whispered that I thought I heard gunshots. He sat up, looked around, and said, "I don't hear anything." Then he rolled over and told me to go back to sleep because we had an early flight. Yeah, right! How could I sleep? How could anyone sleep?

I thought about calling the desk and asking if anyone had heard shots or been killed lately but didn't know the Spanish word for gunshots. I decided to take a shower, get dressed, repack my suitcase, and wait for daylight. A shower seemed the most sensible thing to do at least if they shot me I would be clean and dressed.

A few hours later, I was surprised to find no blood, no chalk outline, and no dead body in the hallway. Believe me I looked everywhere. I decided not to ask anyone at the desk if there had been a problem and carefully eyed everyone's footwear. The clerk asked if we had a good rest; I almost wept. I wanted to leave immediately. My husband opted for breakfast since we had the time and the hotel food was great. Men really are from Mars!

When we finally deplaned in Miami and passed through U.S. Customs, I was happy to see those serious-looking, uniformed agents. "How was your trip?" one agent asked.

"I'm happy to be home," I said with a smile - and my brain silently added - alive. No wonder the Pope kisses the ground on his return to Rome. Wonder if he's ever been to Bolivia?

Jo Mele is a Moraga resident. The opinions expressed are those of the writer and not necessarily those of the Lamorinda Weekly.

Vacation Stories Good and Bad

Lamorinda Weekly wants to hear about your memorable vacations - exhilarating or exhausting. Send your unique stories (500 words or less) and trip pics to cathy.d@lamorindaweekly.com by August 9 and prepare yourself for a different type of vacation experience - one you can read about!

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The Watch

By Derek Zemrak



Jonah Hill, Ben Stiller, Richard Ayoade and Vince Vaughn star in *The Watch*.

Photos: Melinda Sue Gordon - TM & © 2012 Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

Does a great cast guarantee a funny movie?

Everyone could use a strong comedy and enjoy a few laughs at the movie theatre after the tragic shooting on July 20 in Aurora, Colorado. Our hearts go out to the victims, their families and the community.

From the outside, *The Watch* has all the elements to become this century's *Ghostbusters* with funny guys Ben Stiller (*Meet the Fockers*), Vince Vaughn (*Dodgeball*) and Jonah Hill (*Superbad*) forming a neighborhood watch team after a bizarre killing at their local Costco. Yes, they do end up battling a gooey alien.

The *Watch* is the perfect example, how-

ever, of excess not being the guarantee of a funny movie.

Yes, you might laugh at the Costco jokes but what could have been a humorous PG13 comedy like *Ghostbusters*, *The Watch* pushed the envelope with sexual and potty-oriented jokes to earn an R rating. What else can be expected from co-writer Seth Rogen (*Superbad*, *Pineapple Express*)?

Does adding more sugar to the cake make it taste better? Unfortunately, *The Watch* had potential but falls short.

Derek Zemrak is a Film Critic, Film Producer and Founder of the California Independent Film Festival. You can follow Derek on Twitter @zemrak for the latest Hollywood news.



A neighborhood skater kid (Johnny Pemberton, center) easily gets the better of his hapless interrogators, Evan (Ben Stiller) and Franklin (Jonah Hill).

TEEN SCENE

Consider This: Prestige and Education

By Steven Zhou

What do these institutions of higher learning have in common?

Prestige.

Admittance at many four-year campuses ordains an unexplainable, automatic aura of respect and power. When asked what school one is attending next year, "the chosen" are proud to pronounce their prestigious university, while basking in the laudatory responses and imminent comments of "Wow! You must be super smart!"

On the opposite end of the spectrum are those who are not applauded upon proclaiming admission to a two-year community college such as local Diablo Valley College. A friend who will be attending DVC endured "oh, I see" to "good job...I guess" to "at least you are staying in school."

Judging intelligence by the college attended is so deeply ingrained in our culture that, verbalized or not, it affects our perception of accomplishment.

"Community college is looked down upon because stereotypically, the students have lower GPAs or are considered to have been too lazy to apply to any 'real colleges,'" said Miramonte senior Desiree C. "However, community college is actually a more logical choice for several reasons."

Such benefits include the lower price tag. "The general education is cheaper at only \$48 per unit," continues Desiree, "plus the flexibility to work part time while attending classes is a huge plus." Other DVC-bound seniors point to other selling points as motives for choosing a community college: the lower levels of stress-inducing pressure, the proximity to home, and the ease of transferring to a four-year university when ready.

Yet a general comment heard from numerous Lamorinda interviewees was that stuck between the choice of going to a four-year college, that doesn't fit their goals or to a community college, they would accept anything

to avoid the stigma that comes with being a "community college student."

"Looking down on community colleges is just plain dumb," said a Lafayette resident. Senior Kristin C. believes "teens should not go to their safety school. If they really want to study at a specific school, they should work to get in by attending a community college first. Being offered admission by only one university or wanting to move out of the house are not reasons to choose a safety school."

Jonathan D. also defends the community college system. "On a job application, community college attendance is not as impressive as a four-year university degree, even though community colleges do a great job of teaching. People need to be evaluated on their talents and capabilities, not the school they attended." Although prestigious universities claim many exceptional and famous alumni, four-year institutions are not prerequisites to guaranteed achievement.

Seventy-six percent of Lamorinda seniors will attend four-year universities. As we congratulate all our graduates, let's remember that it's not the college that determines success; it's our determination to be successful.

Is the pedigreed diploma the definition of accomplishment?

Consider this: Steve Jobs!

The administrator and host for Express Yourself! Teen Radio, Steven Zhou graduated in June from Miramonte and will be attending Pepperdine University on a scholarship this fall.

Teen Scene is YOUR voice. If you have something to say or have writing skills and want to be part of our Teen Scene team, email our Teen Coach, Cynthia Brian, Cynthia@CynthiaBrian.com.

The opinions expressed in Teen Scene are those of the writer and not necessarily those of the Lamorinda Weekly.