

Monterrey Travel Journal from Debbie Gattoni

My husband Bill and I, together with our two teenage sons, left home at 5:30 am on Friday, July 31. A 3 hour layover in Houston placed our arrival in Monterrey, Mexico at 11AM, CST. Situated in the Sierra Madre Mountains, Monterrey is the third largest city in Mexico, a mere 3 hour drive southeast of Laredo, TX. Although the daily temperature hovered at 105 degrees, humidity makes our home base of New Jersey feel a lot hotter. This heavily industrial city is complimented with numerous art museums and cultural amenities. The only thing lacking as far as we could tell, are adequate road maps. None of our GPS systems worked there and the AAA map and Hertz did not have detailed street maps of the city. So, after stopping for a quick lunch, it took us almost 3 hours to find our hotel, which is only 17 miles from the airport. We did ask directions; some people didn't speak English; others were unfamiliar with the financial district where the Quinta Real Hotel was located. By the time we arrived there, Bill had become an expert at 'Retorno'. Needless to say, we had quite a few laughs, some so hard we were crying. Our destination, arranged for us by Tec de Monterrey and ALS WORLDWIDE, proved to be an old world, beautiful and comfortable hotel, well worth the lengthy drive to find it. You will be happy to know that by the time we left ten days later, it only took us 25 minutes to get back to the airport from our hotel. Almost natives!

I have to preface this story by saying Bill took 2 years of Spanish in high school, William 5 years of Latin, Michael 3 years of Italian and 1 of Latin, and myself 5 years of French, 1 year of Latin and 1 of German (and I can't talk period!). Get the picture? On the plus side, you will be happy to know that Bill has become proficient in saying "buenas dias" and "gracias" all over, right down to the US Customs agents in Houston and our Russian limo driver from Newark.

Our plan was to sightsee Saturday and Sunday because check in to the hospital was scheduled for 8am Monday. On Saturday morning, we headed east, which is Ote on street signs, towards Horsetail Falls, a national landmark. (West is Pte, south Sur and north Nte. It only took us two days to figure that out.) The Falls had to be reached on foot via a steep cobblestone path. After the boys pulled/carried the wheelchair a brief distance, we noticed horse-drawn buggies carrying people up. So for 20 pesos each (\$1.75), we took a buggy. We all felt sorry for the horse, as his hooves kept slipping on the cobblestone – kind of frightening too. Our two sons went exploring after dinner Sat night. They found a place called The Kold Bar. They paid \$15 admission each, were given a parka to put on, and entered the club. All the furniture was made of ice. Drinks were served in blocks of ice with a hole drilled out to hold the liquid. It really sounded pretty neat. On Sunday we visited the brewery where they make Carta Blanca, Tecate and I think Dos Equis.

We were very impressed with Hospital San Jose and Tec de Monterrey Medical School and Research Center, both of whom are affiliated with Baylor and Hopkins. Spotless, modern, organized, competent with spacious hospital rooms complete with bath and shower. The plan was to check into the hospital on Monday morning for the first

Neupogen shot, the respiratory test, EKG and MRI, and remain there until the day after surgery, with additional Neupogen shots given on Tuesday and Wednesday morning and the catheter insertion on Wednesday at 5 pm. Thursday morning, the stem cells were to be purified and harvested through the catheter, with implantation at 4 that afternoon followed by hospital release Friday at noon. This had been the schedule for the 5 Americans that preceded me.

We met the whole team Monday morning, from the head researcher to the neurosurgeon to the person who would propagate the cells once they were harvested. Of course, Bill was busy taking pictures of everyone right down to the nurses' aides. The doctor said we could leave the hospital during the day after receiving the first Neupogen shot. Well, we interpreted that to mean we could come each morning to receive the shot and leave. We were all thrilled that I didn't have to stay overnight. Tuesday morning we returned to my room only to find the door locked. Busted!! The doctors came and explained that they meant I could leave during the day but was supposed to sleep at the hospital. However, since we were enjoying our stay and sightseeing, they decided to change the protocol for everyone. New patients would receive the tests and their first shot of Neupogen on Monday and return the following two mornings for additional injections. We didn't have to be admitted until 4pm on Wednesday. So I relaxed by the pool, read, shopped, and just had fun with the guys. We went up to Chipinque, a national park up in the mountains. The "homes" (mansions) we passed on the way up were all gated and lovely, with awesome views.

I checked into the hospital at 4pm on Wednesday. Like clockwork, I went to have the chest catheter inserted. The guys left at 11pm and I went to sleep. Thursday morning, they were back at 8 am in time to see me hooked up to the machine that extracts the cells. By 10:30, that part of the procedure ended. After that, Dr. Martinez and Dr. Gutierrez did a spinal tap; they use the fluid to suspend the cells which are then implanted in the brain by Dr. Caro, the neurosurgeon. At 5 PM, I went down to the OR. They use a 3D screen to pinpoint where the cells are to be implanted. They shaved 2 patches on my head about 2 in by 2 in and then made burr holes. That's all I remember seeing or feeling. I never had any pain or discomfort. Meanwhile, the guys monitored the progress of my surgery through a bar graph screen in the waiting room. By 8 that night, I was back in my room. The boys were all relieved that it was over.

On Fri, I was back at the Quinta Real Hotel by noon. We went shopping downtown as the boys wanted soccer jerseys. We had a fun dinner with Barb and Steve. I was happy to be in my own bed. Except for two small sets of stitches on my head, which I covered with a couple of great looking hats, I felt fine.

Sat morning, Bill and I had breakfast in the hotel. When we sat down, the pianist (told you it was classy) was playing "My Way". Bill said my dad was watching. We went for a ride. The plan was the guys would go to the soccer game at 7 and I would stay with Barb and Steve at the hotel. That changed when the right side of my face began to swell. We thought it was an allergic reaction to something I ate. Bill was nervous so we

sent the boys off to the game alone. They had a great time except for all the cigarette smoke.

Sun morning, at brunch, Barb came over to say hi. They were having breakfast with the head of the medical school who is also a member of the research team. She was so upset when she saw my eye (not only was it puffy but now it was red and black) she called the doctor over. He immediately arranged for us to meet the neurosurgeon, neurologist, and an ophthalmologist in the ER in an hour. They said it was fine, to stay out of the sun, it was a minor bleed, rare but totally normal as the blood seeks the soft optical tissue, and it would be gone in 3 weeks. And it is!! Bill asked the neurologist to swear that he didn't punch me for my mom. We spent the rest of the day relaxing. We also met the next patient from San Diego. He is on a bipap, speaks very well, has no use of his arms, and limited leg use. He is my age and has 4 kids 10 and under. We now keep in touch.

On our last night, we went up to Chipinque to look down at the city. It was breathtaking.

All in all, no matter what, it was a great experience and opportunity. I have no expectations other than hopefully stopping progression. Anything else is a plus. They said we might see some changes in 3 months. We go back Feb 5 for an MRI and a follow up. Next summer, I get a "booster" with the frozen cells.

Thank you for all your prayers and good wishes.

Much love,

Debbie