

Sat. March 21, 2009

Seattle St. Miguel de Allende, Mexico
Ian (age 19) & Karen

Leave house 9:15. Walk to bus.
Transfer. Arrive airport 11:09.
Flight to Huston leaves 11:30.
Arrive 7:30 (5:30 PT). Grab quick
dinner. Walk & train a long ways
to connecting flight at 9 pm.
Regional jet arrived Léon 10 pm
(9 Seattle time). Mostly empty
flight, very fast thru customs.
Driver had our name on sign.
Super nice man in nice SUV.
1.5 hours to St. Miguel through
desert at night. \$3 toll
hiway, then narrow 2-lane road.
All roads in excellent condition
& well marked for safety.

Arrive at house at midnight.



Total flight time ~16 hours.



Total travel time ~13 hours.



Big old house with 9 rooms & central courtyard with plants, table, couch. Each of us has a room with our own bathroom.



Slept till 8:15, breakfast at 9. Papaya, cantaloupe, fresh squeezed orange juice, a somewhat stale coconut muffin, scrambled eggs, fresh tortillas. She bought them from a vendor who came by while we ate.



A carpenter who is helping with something on the family

ranch came over & talked with us. Then Alejandro came home. He is a wonderful man. A real campesino, with a cowboy hat, weathered skin, warm smile. His Spanish is easy to understand & he gave us corrections & explanations. He & Maria worked in the orchards in Stockton CA in 1979 for 4 months when their oldest was 1. Now he works on their ranch. We sat talking for 2 hours - great Spanish practice, though tiring!

At 11 we suited up & headed out into the heat. Walked to the library, thinking we'd go on the House & Garden Tour. But

the place was swarming with tourists & the tour group looked to be huge & in English. We decided not to go! Instead we began to wander.

San Miguel is small. The streets are narrow & the sidewalks aren't wide enough for 2. Many cars & buses make it difficult to walk. It's noisy, fumey, & crowded. It was hard to hear each other talking.

We stopped a while in the Jardin Público, where many locals were spending the day with their families. Then we began walking



up a street. As we climbed higher the houses got fancier & there were fewer traffic. We could see the desert surrounding the town. But up here, no one is on street. It feels dead, just like ~~suburbia~~ suburbia in the U.S. We went back to el centro, where a noisy band was playing in the jardín. We walked some more, but the streets all look about the same. Lots of boutiques & restaurants, many quite pricey. I was getting hot & tired so we headed back to the house for 2:00 lunch. The family was gone but had left us macaroni with a wonderful chicken & tomato ragu, and a salad with wonderful

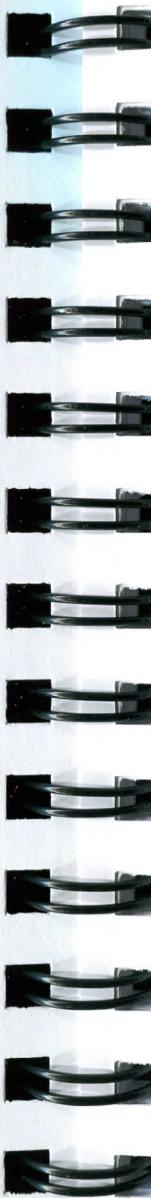
avocados but no dressing except oil & salt & pepper.

I took a short nap & now we are off to the internet cafe & the market.

Internet cafe & many things closed due to Sunday siesta. It's cooled off a bit. Walk back to centro. Group of young people practicing dancing in elaborate Aztec costumes with huge feather headdresses & a loud, monotonous drumbeat.

Many expensive, large cars here, owned by Mexicans & whites.

Prices seem ^{as} high as U.S. for everything, including houses. We saw several for \$1.5 million that were smaller & not as nice as



comparable houses in Kirkland.

The town is pretty clean. Many workers are paid to sweep & empty garbage cans.

Many ex-pats are older. This does not seem an easy place to get around for an older person.

In our breakfast talk this morning, the young man we met ~~said that~~ talked about how in the U.S. (where he lived for 3 years)

life is lonely - there is no one on the streets. Here, people are out interacting all the time. Of course the weather makes that easier.

It's kind of dark & lonely back at the house. No music or signs of the family. Dinner is supposed to be at 8.

We had delicious ice cream in town today - very sweet.

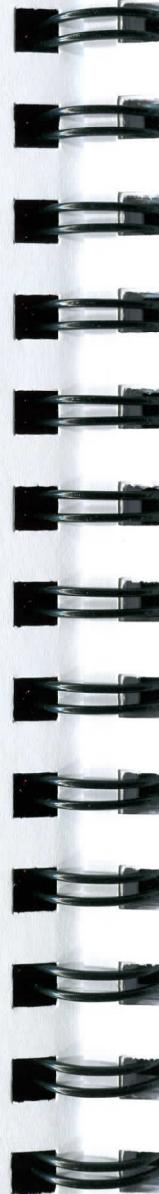
I'm a little bored & tired, but Ian seems to be enjoying himself. This is all very new & different for him. He loves the architecture.

No sign of Maria & Alejandro at 8 - we were very confused.

We were just getting ready to leave a note & go find a restaurant when they arrived.

Dinner was fresh tomatoes from a local convent & salad.

Dinners are small. We were pretty tired so didn't go out after dinner - read & slept.



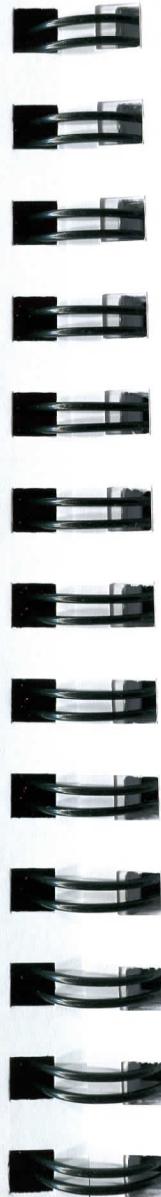
Monday March 23

Today is the first day of school. Breakfast is juice, cereal, milk, & fruit. The mangos are incredible. We met Aurelia, a young woman who comes to help Maria 3 times a week. She is 20, and expecting her first child. She has to stop working because she & her husband ride in front outside of town on a motorcycle, and her doctor says it's too bumpy.

There were 5 students in our class - they placed Ian & me together. ~~For~~ 9-11 was a classroom with w/ Enriquill, a young teacher who was

demanding but nice. Then a short break (they provided tea, coffee, & crackers). Then an hour ^{one of} with a very funny woman named ^{radio} Socorro who did conversation practice. A woman from Holland joined us. Then another hour on the patio with Enrique, working on idiomatic expressions. Dan was a bit ~~was~~ overwhelmed. He was also by far the youngest person there.

At 1 we were done and went back to the house for lunch. Again M&A weren't here, but Aurelia joined us for lunch & it was nice talking to her about this & that.



At 3 we left and walked through the artists market. Lots of local pottery, weavings, pewter, etc. I bought a wrestling mask for Colin & a pick bowl for Grant. I love the pottery but it would be hard to get home.

At 4 we returned to the school for what was supposed to be a short excursion to somewhere. However, it was so hot that no one wanted to go. So we watched a short video about customs & festivals in St. Miguel. There was a long and upsetting part about the running of the bulls. It was stopped for a year because so many people were getting hurt, but it

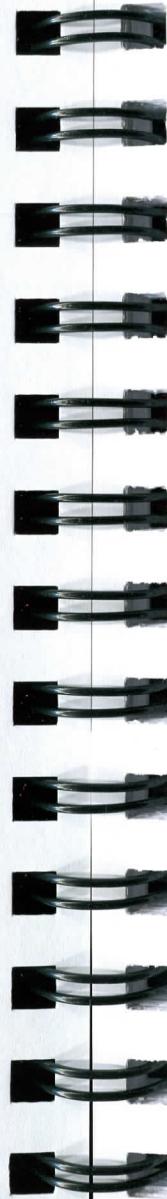
2 meals/day
mosquitoes

Disneyland

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will probably start again because the hotels & restaurants make so much money. Of course, everyone who is there chooses to be there and knows the danger, but still...

So school ended early today, at 5. So we walked some more, south along some new roads. We thought we'd seen everything interesting here, but we discovered some really wonderful new nooks, crannies, & vistas. Like A tortilla factory w/ machines. This is a hill town, and we climbed up to ~~to~~ El Mirador, a wonderful viewpoint. You can see out over the city & the countryside all around. The city



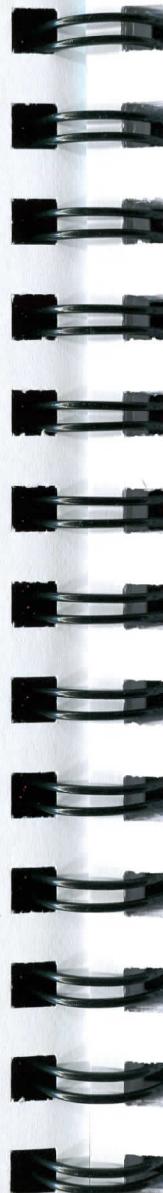
is dotted with purple jacaranda trees. In the distance is a large man-made lake. Then we walked down a steep walkway (no cars - yay!) to El Chorro Park. We plan to go back because it was getting dark & we didn't have time to explore it, but it looked nice. The Parroquia church was beautiful all ~~the~~ lit up - you get lovely glimpses of it from all over town.

Dinner was quesadillas, pineapple, mashed potatoes, & leftover sauteed zucchini, all delicious. Their son-in-law, ^{an amateur laborer on the ranchos} stopped by for a few minutes. We watched the state presidential election a bit & talked about lots of things. We understand most of what they say but sometimes we

get confused. Note: they never serve dessert. Alejandro says that he only eats 2 meals a day - breakfast & dinner - despite working hard all day doing manual labor on the ranchos.

After dinner we walked for an hour or so (my feet are very tired!). The temperature is lovely and the streets are a bit quieter. Except for the main square, where obnoxiously loud mariachi bands entertain the tourists.

One of the students today referred to SMA as a Mexican Disneyland. The town is thronged with Americans staying in fancy hotels, eating in expensive restaurants, & shopping in high end boutiques. I guess it



helps the Mexican economy. There are very few mosquitoes here, although it's the dry season. The hottest month is May, and then the rain begins, which cools things down.

Tuesday, March 24

Breakfast: yogurt, fruit, cereal, quesadillas, orange juice.

Day 2 of school went much better, especially for Ian. We learned a lot, and got to know the teachers & students better. Enrique turns out to be very funny. He told a hilarious story about travelling alone in Morocco. He hadn't heard or spoken Spanish for 3 weeks, and really missed his language. One day he was in the shower & heard people speaking Spanish. He ran out

practically naked & starting speaking Spanish a mile a minute. They were from Guanajuato!

After lunch (cold breaded fish & rice - not so great...) we walked the "La Aurora", an old textile mill converted to art studios & galleries. It was extremely gringo & pricey, however, we did get to talk with two artists, in Spanish & English, about their work. One of them, Edgardo Kerlegard, we liked very much (him & his work). He's coming to Seattle in May to teach & show his work. He told us some fascinating things about his techniques - for example he uses a mixture of ink & coffee to stain his canvases.

Then we headed south to the



Templo de la Concepción Church, which has a beautiful gold gilt altar & tall cupola (gorgeous on the outside). We were the only ones there. Then to the ~~Instituto~~ Instituto Allende (aka El Nigromante) Centro Cultural Ignacio Ramírez y Bellos Artes.

It's a working arts center, with classes in music, dance, & art. The courtyard in the middle is green & peaceful. It used to be the cloister of a monastery. Ian is sketching. I can hear a piano playing for a singing class.

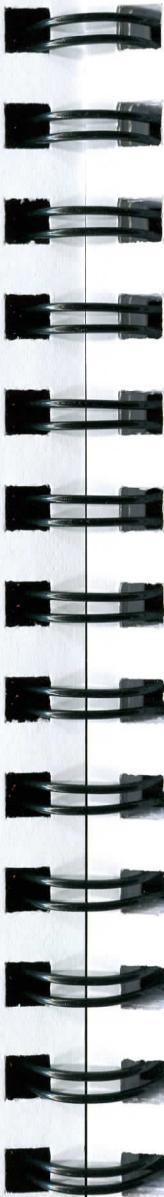
Then we went looking for ice cream, stopping to see more churches on the way. We gave up and bought some so-so soft ice cream, only to discover a real ice cream store on the next block!

There appears to be no recycling here.

The sunsets are gorgeous.

Wednesday March 25

I awoke to the insistent sound of chirping birds. Now I hear roosters, and a loud whooshing noise. It seems familiar... Sure enough, it's a hot air balloon! I wonder what the locals think of a balloon peering down on their private courtyards. I'm kind of surprised the government allows it. Yesterday we talked in class about corruption...



We're falling into a routine. I get up about 7 and shower. There is lots of hot water & good pressure. I wake Ian around 8. Before that I read, write in my journal, & study. After school we stop at the internet cafe & come home for lunch. In the afternoons is school (M,W,F) & sightseeing. We go home around 7 to relax a bit, and Ian showers. Dinner is at 8. Last night M& A were exhausted. They had spent the day in Dolores Hidalgo in a hot office waiting & waiting for some paperwork for their well on one of the ranches. So we ate quickly to leave them in peace. After dinner we stroll for an hour or so. The streets are pretty alive and the traffic is a bit less,

2 TV channels

tattoos
class marks

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although there are many young people
cruising on motorcycles & ATVs.

There's a lot of street food stalls.

We come home around 9:30 or 10,
sit on the old couch in the courtyard
& read for a bit (no bugs!) and
go to sleep a short while later.

We've decided not to try to take
any side trips - there just isn't time,
and there is still quite a bit to
see here in SMA. Guanajuato sounds
really worth seeing, but that will have
to be for another trip. [In the end we
did have time for some side trips.]

I'm eating like a horse and
my reflux isn't bothering me much.
I feel healthy.



SMA is at 6400 feet &
the air is quite dry. My nose
hurts! We are in a desert here.
It is very reminiscent of Arizona.

~~This~~ Mexico is such a religious
country - there are more churches in
San M. than Starbucks in Seattle.
(Sadly there is one of those here too -
with wireless internet.) The churches
feature many doll-like statues,
almost like mannequins, dressed
in real robes. There are also many
gory, bloody Jesus's, in various
tortured poses. I find it quite
off-putting.

There are 2 TV stations here,
both with poor reception. One
is produced here in SMA and

features local news & a lot of religious broadcasting. The other shows soap operas (very popular here) and dubbed American TV shows. The family likes to watch the former during dinner.

There are only 8 or 10 students at the school right now - summer is the busy time. There are several twenty-somethings, but most are older women. In the summer there are more college students. One of the students is an absolutely gorgeous Mexican American girl from LA, early 20's. Sadly, she has hideous tattoos on the insides of both wrists (big ones), on her feet, and who knows where else. What a

waste of beauty!

Today I bought a tiled tin mirror in the market, & Ian bought a woven bag for Marta. I think we're done shopping now. Except I want to buy a book.

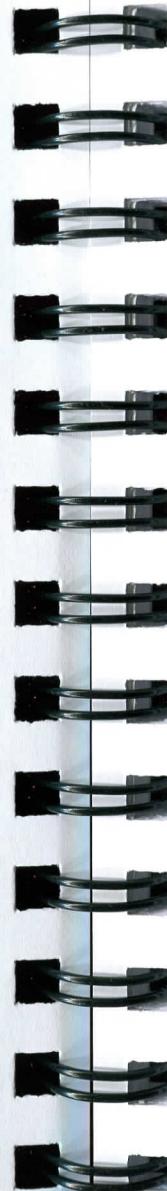
Our afternoon class was on Mexican songs. There were only 3 of us because the other students had "been there, done that". Enrique gave us an overview of popular Mexican music styles & it was very interesting.

After class we bought ice

cream at the place across the street. Then we walked to Juarez Park. It's very clean, with a big playground, sports courts, fountains, & plants. Then we walked to the Instituto Allende, passing huge new developments on the way - condos & a shopping mall - horrid! Felt like we were no longer in Mexico.

The Instituto was closed so we walked back to town, looking for bookstores - no luck finding one open, with the book I wanted.

It's been hot during the day but cool at night,



although interestingly, the days have been getting cooler & the nights warmer. The first night my room was very chilly & I shivered under several blankets. Last night I was too warm under one. Yesterday was a bit cloudy & windy, with tiny spatters of raindrops - a welcome change from the heat of Tuesday.
~~The climate here feels a~~

Thursday March 26

After class today we ate in a restaurant, so Ian could experience that. We had the menu of the day (Comida Corrida) for 45 pesos: tamarind juice,

chicken or vegetable soup, & enchiladas or pork cutlet. Everything was good. It was a restaurant where locals eat.

Then we took the bus to Totonilco, a famous church built in 1750. It's gorgeous inside, but it's being restored so there was a lot of scaffolding inside. The ceiling is covered in colorful, detailed murals. The town itself is small and dusty but quaint. We were the only gringos - yay! The countryside en route is desert - cactus & mesquite - with golf courses & villas springing up - ugh. I suppose it provides jobs... It was a great trip,



and on the bus I had that an ~~would~~ exhilarating sense of adventure, reminding me of why I love to travel.

~~We returned around 4:30~~

+

In Totonilco the bus drivers washed the bus! The inside was also clean & tidy. The driver played loud music & I really liked it - Vicente Fernandez.

We returned to SMA around 4:30 & ~~walked to our~~ bought cookies in our neighborhood bakery - yum! Then we walked to Instituto Allende, which was open. The courtyard is gorgeous

In Totonilco

* with one of the workers who was also a cross country runner.

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and the view from the patio is spectacular. Workers were preparing for a big wedding, Ian was wearing a cross country shirt & we had a nice chat*

Then back to the tourist office to ask about tickets to Guanajuato tomorrow. We then happened upon a short show in front of the Parroquia - a preview for a Flamenco Aztecan show that will be in the local theater. Beautiful women in long dresses & men in Aztec regalia. An interesting combination of ~~infiti~~ dances!

For dinner tonight we had tortas de papas: fried mashed potato cakes - yum! With a stew of nopal cactus (from the ranch) and tomatoes. My first taste of



cactus - yummy! Maria serves fruit with every meal, and often fruit juice too. This morning she served us pancakes - although from a mix they were soft & fluffy. We drizzled sweetened, condensed milk over them ~~was~~ - delicious!

Friday, March 27

During our morning school break I walked to buy bus tickets to Guanajuato. I went to the tour office because that's what the tourist information person said to do. Turns out I could have just bought them at the bus station

and saved myself a lot of trouble. Instead I waited 20 minutes in line, and the woman who helped me was new & didn't know how to use the computer system, so it took another 20 minutes to buy the tickets. The first thing I asked her was whether the bus left from that exact location and she said yes. Then at the end she said I had to go to the bus station, way across town! If I'd known that, I would have taken the second class bus. Oh well, that's the way it goes when you travel - it takes a while to learn how things work.

We left school early & said good bye to the few students left on the last day. Then we took a



taxi across town to the bus station & boarded a "Primera Rus" bus. They give you soda or juice & a "granola" bar as you board. The seats are comfortable & the bus is clean. It cost 90 pesos each way, per person (about \$6). However, there was an obnoxious "speed alarm" signal going off continually, & they showed a horrible movie about a mother who slantly goes crazy because her baby cries continually. Even earplugs couldn't blot out the wailing of the baby & the "tacographia". I also got very nauseous, & the last part of the trip was very uncomfortable.

The scenery was interesting. Arid desert, cactus & mesquite, punctuated by occasional small pueblos, ranchos,

4 reservoirs, as well as some areas of cultivation (green fields & black soil where it has been tilled but not yet planted).

The Guanajuato bus station is on the outskirts of the city. We hopped on bus to the city center. We got off when he said "el centro" but it turned out to be the market. This worked out well because we could find lunch here quickly & cheaply. The bus let us out in a tunnel, one of subterranean streets the town is famous for. The town is built in a valley, things like roads & houses stacked upon each other.

In the market we joined a throng at one of the food stalls



and ordered "milanesa al pollo" - chicken fried steak - with rice, beans, nopales, & spaghetti. Oh, and tortillas of course (corn). The menu said 35 but he only charged us 30 and I'm not sure why. He was really nice. I've heard stories of gringos being charged less sometimes, as surprising as that sounds.

From the market we walked a short distance to the main part of town and were instantly captivated. It's a university town, with young people everywhere, listening to ipods, laughing with friends, blaring rap from passing cars decked out with subwoofers, drinking coffee from paper cups.

The basilica was built in the mid-1600's. The wooden doors on all the churches are amazing.

It feels very European. We both liked it in many ways better than St. Miguel ("St. Mike's", as our teacher said the influx of gringos has made it.)

We wandered the curvy streets for 4 hours, marveling at every turn at the beautiful buildings, the young men dressed like "Cervantes", with guitars, the riotously colorful houses stacked on the steep hillsides, the plazas & fountains & flowers tucked in everywhere.

We toured Diego Riveras childhood home with its many original sketches & paintings. The woman at the door gave Ian a student discount even though



he didn't have his ID. We ate ice cream from a street stall and wandered some more, snapping photos like a typical tourist, wanting to take it all in somehow & savor it later, because it was more than we could appreciate so quickly.

At 6:30 we asked where the bus stop was (everyone is really nice when you ask for directions).

When we got there we were told that the bus only comes every half hour.

At 6:50 I was getting a wee bit worried that we'd miss our bus, but just then the local bus arrived. Traffic was barely moving through ~~the~~^{to SMA} ancient streets that we never designed to carry so much

traffic. But we made it to the bus station right on time. Only to discover that the bus was late due to an accident on the road.

We sat in the waiting room and watched Discovery Channel in Spanish.

We left 45 minutes late and arrived back at the family's house at almost 10. Alejandro was sleeping, so we didn't have a chance to say goodbye to him, but Maria was still up and fed us cereal, fruit, & pastries. We said our sad goodbyes, packed our suitcases, & got to bed at 11. Ian set his phone alarm for 3:40, but I was worried that it wouldn't wake him, so I kept waking up and checking my watch all night.

At about 3:50 the phone upstairs started ringing & ringing. I rushed up to answer, as I didn't want to ~~wake~~ ^{wake} M&A. It was the car driver calling to say he'd pick us up at the street end in 8 minutes. Luckily we were almost ready, but as we rushed out the door he came backing down the dead end street. There were 4 other passengers, but for some reason I got the front seat. This allowed my tired brain one last chance to try to speak Spanish. I would have loved to sleep! It turns out that the driver had come knocking for us at 3:30, not knowing that our pickup time was between 4 and 4:20.

The stars were incredibly on the drive - clouds of them. We arrived at the airport in Léon just before 6 am and waited in the line for boarding passes. Then we ate greasy muffins on queasy stomachs... Oh, and meanwhile we were told that our flight was delayed - 2½ hours! This meant that we would miss our flight in Seattle. Luckily the benches in the airport had no armrests & we were able to take turns sleeping with our pillow. It's a small airport, so pretty tranquil. The shop played nice Mexican music. The airport is clean. Like most everywhere we've been here, there is no heat - it's so rarely needed. So the airport



was chilly at first. It's about a 1.5 hour flight to Huston. We were told "there will be someone at the gate to help you catch your flight, and you won't need to go through customs until Seattle."

We arrived in ~~Seattle~~ Huston and there was no one at the gate.

Signs gave us no choice but to go through immigration. We had to declare the ham sandwiches we'd bought at the airport in Mexico (thinking we'd have no time to grab lunch in Houston).

Therefore they shunted us off to the x-ray dept, where I told the guy we weren't even going to eat them & he could throw them away (at that point we knew

we'd missed our flight). We continued on to security (4th time today our bags had been checked), and then to baggage claim (although we had only carryons). Finally a Continental rep stepped forward and gave us our new boarding passes - we were to leave Houston at 4pm, go through Las Vegas, and arrive in Seattle about 10pm! We tried to go ~~standby~~ walked & walked and walked to the gate she told us to go to. ~~Then~~ we grabbed a burger, then walked & walked & walked to the gate she'd directed us to. Once there we asked if there was any way to get on an



earlier flight - we should have asked sooner - by then we were 7th on the standby list, she put us on the list and we walked to the gate, thinking we had an hour before the flight actually left. But I had forgotten to set my watch to Houston time, and we got there just as they were calling out the names of the 6 people ahead of us in line - no room for us, but we weren't surprised. Then we walked back to our original gate, only to find that it had been changed back to the gate we'd landed at. Twenty minutes later we were back where we started and boarded our 4pm flight to Las Vegas.

That flight lasted 3 hours.

Meanwhile Ian's phone had died & he didn't have his charger, ~~so we~~ so we hooked up to a \$3 rapid charger. (The airline couldn't provide a courtesy phone.) We grabbed chicken sandwiches (too much pepper) and I realized that I had a bit of diarrhea-touristas, or the combination of no sleep and greasy food? We had ~~just over~~ an hour and a half in Vegas and are now on an ~~fl~~ Alaska flight to Seattle that's supposed to last just over 2 hours. I can't wait to get home & sleep!! It will be about a 20 hour day, door to door.