

¡Hola! ¡Hola! Caring Clowns Cruise to Adventure in Mexico

Greta King and Lynda Del Grande, Caring Clowns from Toronto, Canada, were co-tour leaders on a Caring Clowns Ambassador Cruise that traveled from Ft. Lauderdale to San Diego via the Panama Canal and Mexico. Joining them were Bruce King, Greta's husband and good-humored keyboard accompanist, Linda Sweig and Rosette Strubel, Hospital Clowns from Chicago. This is Lynda's account of an extraordinary voyage and numerous learning experiences.



Getting off the ship in Puerto Chiapas. From the left Greta King, Lynda Del Grande, Anna Taylor, Bruce King, Rosette Strubel and Linda Sweig

From Lynda Del Grande, Toronto, Canada

¡Hola! This Mexican greeting of “Hello,” combined with feelings of joy and love, became our password into the play, laughter and wide-eyed curiosity of the children. As Caring Clown Ambassadors in Mexico, we came to bring a little fun to children in need. It didn't matter that we only spoke a few words of Spanish. Love is a universal language.

Cruising on Holland America's MS Volendam, we had already played tourist in Cartagena, Colombia and Puntarenas, Costa Rica, and delighted in the transit through the Panama Canal. Tropical rainfall for most of the day didn't dampen our spirits. Now it was time to bring out our clowns. First stop, Puerto Chiapas, Mexico. As a new port of call on the cruise circuit, the townspeople eagerly awaited their visitors. We trundled down the gangplank to a festive welcome by a Mariachi Band, Spanish dancers and beaming local tour guides. The excitement at seeing a group of clowns descend was electric.

We were on our way to visit the three homes of the children's shelter, 'Albergue Ninos del Futuro El Beun Samaritano'. As we arrived at the first home, it was evident that the children had been anticipating our arrival. Greeted at the door by two rows of bright smiling faces, we were roundly applauded as we made our

entrance. Imagine, a standing ovation before we even got through the door! It was the same at the other two homes. There because their parents were imprisoned, the children were now living among a community of care and love. It showed. Polite and attentive, they giggled over the smallest gesture – a happy face sticker, a funny handshake, and a waft of bubbles descending above their heads. Later, we were taken to the women's prison, where many of the children's mothers were housed. After leaving our possessions behind and undergoing a thorough body search, we entered a courtyard where the women were waiting. Screams of delight turned our visit into a raucous celebration. We sang children's songs to them in English. When You're Happy and You Know It Clap Your Hands! They clapped and cheered. And sang back to us in Spanish. What a remarkable sense of community it was. ¡Hola!

The next day it was on to Santa Cruz Huatulco and a visit to Pina Palmera, a community rehabilitation center for children and adolescents. Riding both inside and in back of our host's pick up truck, we traveled for more than an hour in excruciating heat over an uphill, winding road to reach our destination. It was Children's Day and along with the Pina residents, about a hundred other children and their parents were there to welcome us. Once again, joy and love were the order of the day. Under the welcome shade of a stately palm tree grove, we sang our sweaty hearts out. Head and Shoulders, Knees and Toes! After being outfitted with a pair of oversized glasses and red nose, our host also joined us in the fun. We danced the Mexican Hat Dance and invited the children to dance with us. We handed out dozens of red clown noses to the kids and their parents. Once again, we found ourselves surrounded by a community of love.

Our third official visit was to Zihuatanejo and the NETZA Bilingual Primary School for Indigenous Children. In spite of what local guides tell tourists, public education in Mexico is not accessible to all children.

Children who cannot speak Spanish and whose parents cannot afford money for school uniforms or textbooks are denied access. This was the case for these kids. We performed for over 400 children aged 3 to 12 who gathered in a cement covered play area high atop a hill overlooking the bay. At the sight of the stickers we were handing out, orderly lines of children transformed into near chaos as we covered their uniforms and faces with an array of smiles, clown faces and Canadian flags. This time we were accompanied by a group of first time clowns. Among them were Ashley and Ruth, a couple in their 80s who were storytellers from Georgia. We'd met them aboard ship and they immediately expressed a desire to come with us to the school. For them, it was the experience of a lifetime as they learned to communicate across the two cultures, not with words but with love and laughter.

In addition to our organized clown visits, we clowned on board ship. Linda Sweig kissed hundreds of passengers and crew with her ruby red lip stickers and handed out millions of dollars worth of funny money. Rosette Strubel was delightfully sweet as Nosey Rosey. Greta, as Flutterbee, flittered about while meticulously dusting off everyone she met. I had great fun as a wacky French maid while walking my poorly behaved but invisible French Poodle, Mimi.

On the days at sea, we taught an Introductory Clown workshop for our group and hosted a LaughterYoga class for anyone who dared to come and laugh along with us. Many accolades from the other passengers and crew encouraged us to keep clowning.



Above Rosemary Preskett with Children from the NETZA School in Zihuatanejo, Mexico

After more than a year of planning, this leg of our journey was complete. We returned home tired, but exhilarated, knowing that we left behind a little of ourselves everywhere we went. More importantly, we returned home with some of the spirit of Mexico and memories of the incredible warmth and love of the children, our hosts and everyone who cheered us on. Fortunately, endings give way to new beginnings and as Caring Clowns we look forward to the next time and place where we might share a little joy and love among those in need. We have miles to go and much yet to learn. *¡Hola!*