

Villa Pacifica

By Kapka Kassabova

Ute was not just well travelled, she was professionally well travelled. So she of all people shouldn't have been surprised that sometimes the road to hell begins with an ordinary bus ride, in an ordinary South American country, at the end of the ordinary year 2009. And on that bus, we sit next to the one we ordinarily love.

Ute and the one she loved had taken the last bus of the day from what the guide book, penned by Ute herself five years ago, called "the regional centre". That was guide-speak for hideous industrial dump with a car yard at one end and a bus station at the other. Having the transport to get away is its only saving grace, Jerry pronounced. The station was full of squat hustlers with dirty nails who waved bus tickets and yelled in high-pitched voices, "Guaa Guaa Guaaaaaa!" and "Jipi jipi jipiiii!"

"What's this hippie place they're selling?" Jerry enquired.

"It's called Jipilini. It's a small transport hub a few hours down the main road. Been there once, and that was plenty."

"Guaa Guaa Guaaaaaa!" the taloned hustlers kept squealing, but nobody paid any attention.

"They're paid commission by the passenger, aren't they?" Jerry snorted.

"Well spotted," Ute said.

"I'm an old South American hand, me. Any questions about South America, I'm your man." Jerry was good at self-parody. This was only his second time on the continent.

They had just spent two dust-choked days in the "regional centre", long enough for Ute to trawl around hotels and eateries and update the practical section of the guide, while Jerry stayed behind in cafés, nursing fruit juices and a jetlag headache. They didn't sleep much at night. The noise was diabolical, and it seemed to ooze from every pore of the city: traffic, car alarms, motorbikes, music, people shouting, dogs barking, and car alarms again. Every night, Ute cursed herself for leaving behind in an Andean village three thousand metres above sea level her box of silicon earplugs, the only type that really seals out noise.

There was a new, "revolutionary" government with great plans, which had just been re-elected that year. Along the road, giant billboards announced in excited letters

“THE CITIZENS’ REVOLUTION IS FORGING AHEAD!” and “THE FATHERLAND NOW BELONGS TO ALL CITIZENS!”

In the rickety bus, the citizens were asleep as usual, mouths agape, while the loudspeakers above them blared out Cumbia and advertisements at eardrum-shattering decibels.

“Are they deaf or brain-dead?” Jerry looked around at the inert passengers.

“All of the above,” Ute said. “Round here you either go brain-dead from lack of sleep or from the music.”

“You mean the same fate awaits us if we hang out here long enough?” he snorted. “Which we won’t, thank God.”

Jerry took things personally. He thought the world was out of joint if it didn’t coincide with him. He was already not enjoying himself. He was normally great company, but outside his comfort zone he became ratty – another reason why they didn’t travel together much, except for pleasantly uneventful holidays to France, Italy and Greece. Four hours on a potholed road, in a stinky clap-trap bus with seats that spilled stuffing was definitely outside his comfort zone.

Ute was worn down after seven weeks on the go and what felt like seven hundred days of broken sleep, but it was a habitual fatigue. Sore buttocks and broken sleep were part of the job description.

Jerry had joined her for this leg of the journey along the coast, to soak up some sunshine in the middle of December. It was his winter holidays.

They rarely travelled together, because his academic holidays never complied with her schedule. Besides, she always travelled alone for work.

She had covered the Andes, which ran along the centre of the country like a spine, and the better part of the coast. They were now headed for the last stretch of it, in the south. It was the least visited.

Puerto Seco wasn’t in the guidebook. But it was on a newly printed local map she’d picked up somewhere further up the coast. It seemed to be the closest point to a local attraction – a recently established national park which consisted of dry tropical forest and cloud forest, an unusual combination. Ute was curious. Every travel-guide writer, even when updating their own guide, wants to discover something new. Who knows, she thought, maybe Puerto Seco was worth a look. Jerry agreed to stop overnight, or maybe for a couple of nights. He just wanted a nice beach, somewhere to warm his bones for the second half of the English winter. Ute had a feeling they

weren't going to find his dream beach along here, simply because all the good beaches were further up north. But they were already on their way, no point in bringing the mood down.

An hour into their bus journey, when it was still daylight, a salesman got on. The bus slowed down, and on he hopped with his suitcase. He was a young man, well groomed, with slicked-back hair and a buttoned-up pink shirt under his jacket. His baked-earth face glowed with sweat. He addressed the lethargic crowd.

“*Señoras y señores,*” he shouted over the music, holding in one hand a tiny bottle and gripping a seat with the other as the bus dived in and out of potholes as big as moon craters. “Can any of you here honestly say that you are completely healthy? That you have never experienced aches and pains, mental and physical? No, of course not. Can any of you tell me how many green vegetables you eat every day, how much broccoli, tomato, carrots?... Ah, you'll say, but we eat banana and plantain. *Señoras y señores,* do you know the nutritional value of a plantain?”

He went on like this for a while. People's heads bobbed up and down, and he staggered about the front of the bus like a man on the deck of a ship in a sea storm.

“That's one hell of a long sales pitch,” Jerry said. He didn't understand Spanish, but it was obvious that the man was blabbering. The salesman didn't make eye contact with any one person; his glazed eyes hovered over their heads. He finally came to the point.

“Have you heard the magic word ‘ginseng’?” He held up the tiny bottle for everyone to see. “Ginseng means health and long life. The Koreans and the Chinese take this regularly, and do you know that China's oldest man, who is a hundred and twenty years old, has a lover of twenty-five? *Sí, señores,* you too could enjoy that if you started taking ginseng regularly.”

Someone chuckled.

“What I have here is pure extract of ginseng,” the vendor went on. “You can buy it or not buy it, it's your choice. You can buy health and a long life for three *dolaritos* apiece, five *dolaritos* for the pair, or you can continue to suffer fatigue, anxiety, arthritis, indigestion, uterine cramps, cancer, erectile dysfunction and early death.”

He cheerfully distributed tiny bottles to the audience. Jerry took one too. A couple of women were already reaching for their bags.

“Thank you,” Ute said to him when he passed to collect the unwanted bottles, “we already have some.” Lying is a form of politeness. Ute had learnt this long ago.

“Thank you, *Señora*,” he lied back, for he knew this too, “you’re very kind.”

His business completed, he sat in a free seat across from them, to wait for the next stop. They were enveloped in a damp cloud of cheap *eau de cologne*. After a while, he leant towards them and spoke to Ute, discreetly glancing at her inflamed face.

“*Señora*, ginseng is also excellent for skin ailments.”

Ute grimaced a smile. “*Bueno*,” she said. “I’ll remember that.”

The faces of women were open to judgement everywhere in the world. Something about a woman’s face made it a free-for-all. Anybody with half a brain had the right to comment on female beauty or the lack of it. Not that Ute was ugly. It was just hard to see her face properly when the evil flower of eczema blossomed over her cheeks, nose and eyelids.

“What’s your destination?” the man shouted over the music – which, unbelievably, had just got louder.

“Puerto Seco,” Ute shouted back. The salesman fixed her with his cherry-black eyes.

“Are you visiting someone there?”

“No, just stopping for a day or two. Do you know it?”

“Yes, I’m from a village further down the road. Not for tourists. Puerto Seco is not for tourists either. But the national park is nice.”

“Is there anywhere to stay in Puerto Seco?” Ute asked.

He shook his head. “I don’t know, there used to be...”

A fresh explosion of Cumbia from the loudspeaker above their heads wiped out some of his words. “I don’t know... still... animals... Pacifica...”

“What?” Ute shouted.

“Villa Pacifica,” he shouted back. Then he got up, waved goodbye and moved to the front of the bus. The bus slowed down without stopping, and he jumped off nimbly. Ute and Jerry looked out the grubby window. He was already walking along the road with his case. He didn’t look up at the bus as it passed him.

“What was that about?” Jerry asked. “Were you asking him about Puerto Seco?”

“Yeah, places to stay. Apparently there’s none. It’s not a touristy place.”

“There’s a surprise,” Jerry snorted.

“But there’s one place called Villa Pacifica, or something like that. I’m not sure if it’s for people or animals though. He wasn’t actually sure if it’s still there. I didn’t hear everything he said.”

“First he’s keen to talk to you, then suddenly he’s keen as hell to get moving.”

“It was his stop. Anyway,” Ute said brightly, always bright when faced with Jerry’s fussiness, “it’s good to have at least one recommendation about a place to stay. It could be interesting – this Dry Port.”

“Good name anyway. And we might get a couple of nights’ decent sleep out there. This noise and dust are driving me nuts. Have you got any water left?”

They took a last sip each from the warm plastic bottle, and he put a sweaty hand on her thigh. They had another bottle of water in her pack, somewhere in the viscera of the bus. She leant into him and sniffed his familiar sweaty, chicken-soup smell.

And she thought, quite out of the blue, that she would leave the last sip of water for him if they were both dying of thirst. But would he, she wondered hazily, would he do it for her? Then she berated herself for thinking such neurotic thoughts.

It was suddenly pitch-black. Unlike everywhere else in the world, here on the equator things didn't cast shadows in the falling dusk. Darkness didn't creep over you crab-like, from the side. No, it hit the land vertically, at a right angle, and without warning it was suddenly night.

The bus driver hadn't heard of a place called Villa Pacifica, and he dumped them in the middle of an empty road. They had passed no signs for the last half-hour. The driver just slammed the brakes and grumbled "Puerto Seco".

They were the only passengers to get off. Not surprising, since most people had already got off a while before. Only a few men remained scattered inside the dark, smelly bus, fast asleep and snoring. Ute knew there was a special kind of poverty in some parts of the world where sleep is the only commodity left to people. And even their sleep is somehow threadbare.

The driver barely waited for them to extract their packs from the trunk on the flank of the bus, and started moving before they'd even shut the trunk door.

"Wait, wait," Jerry shouted and, running after the bus, slammed the door, which nearly dislocated his arm. "Dickhead," he spat out. The bus left them in a cloud of grit and dust.

They took out the large water bottle and drank for a long time. It was dead-dark and dead-quiet, except for the distant barking of a dog. On the other side of the road was the outline of what looked like a forest.

"Well," Jerry said, "I feel like we've crossed the whole continent, but on the map it's nothing. Now what?"

"It's the roads," Ute said. She too felt a bit disheartened by the lack of any discernible village. "They make it longer than it needs to be."

"They're a shocker. Never seen anything like it. This puerto better be good," Jerry said, and helped her put on her pack. "Now what? Where the hell are we?"

"Well, we didn't pass anything resembling Puerto Seco or any other puerto, so let's walk this way." They started walking in the direction the bus had gone.

"Have you got your torch handy?" Jerry said.

"I think it's at the bottom of my pack."

"Hmm. Might have to stop and dig it out. That dickhead of a driver was a maniac. Do you think he just dumped us in the middle of nowhere to spite us?"

“No. Drivers here can be a bit rude, but they wouldn’t do that. Let’s not panic yet.”

“True, true.” Jerry went quiet. “I’m starving,” he added after a few minutes of silent walking.

And just then they saw the lights of a village to the right, and the dog was barking somewhere close ahead. Ute realized why Puerto Seco wasn’t in the guidebook. Because unless you knew it was here, you wouldn’t find it. And last time she hadn’t found it. A dirt road branched off the main road, and they took it.

“This Puerto Seco is really just a bend in the road,” Ute said. “That’s why the driver dropped us there.”

Jerry was peering ahead into the darkness. They walked for another fifteen minutes before the first houses started to form out of the darkness. They were all built on stilts. Apart from the invisible barking dog and some salsa music blaring out from an invisible house, there was no sign of life. They walked along the dirt road until they suddenly came to what looked and sounded like a beach. It took Ute by surprise because, normally, she could smell the sea from a mile.

There were dim lights along the waterfront, and it felt good to be able to see, at last. They were standing on something resembling a waterside promenade, what the locals called a *malecón*.

“I’m confused,” Jerry said. “Isn’t the ocean that way?” He pointed to their right.

“It should be,” Ute said. “It must be a very curvy coast around here...”

“This place stinks,” Jerry said. “And we’re stuck here.”

He was anxiously looking around. There wasn’t much to see apart from the shuttered front of a seaside café and a couple of shops. The façades were different colours and heights. There was a gaping hole where a house had been before, like a missing tooth in a smile. Just then, a motorbike tricycle revved along the dusty road.

“Life!” Jerry exclaimed. “There is life in this dump!”

“*Hola,*” Ute waved to the chunky driver. He stopped and looked at them in dismay.

“We’re looking for somewhere to stay,” Ute shouted over the noise of his engine. “Is there anywhere in the town?”

He shook his head. He was lost for words.

“No hotel, nothing?”

Again, he shook his head. He looked a bit wary.

“What about Villa Pacifica? Is it somewhere nearby?”

“Villa Pacifica,” he said and spat thickly. “Yes, I can take you there.” He spoke with that lazy, hard-to-understand coastal drawl that sounded more like Portuguese than Spanish.

“That’s okay,” Ute said, “we can walk. Which way is it?”

“It’s too far to walk,” he said, and turned off the engine. “It’s beyond the end of the *malecón*, that way.” He waved behind him. “But there’s no lights. You’ll get lost in the forest.”

“I don’t like the look of this guy,” Jerry said. “He wants our money, doesn’t he?”

“Do you want to walk then? It’s either walk or take a ride with him. I’d rather get a lift. And he’s a taxi driver. Doesn’t get much safer than this.”

“Okay,” he gave up. “He’s smaller than me if it comes to that.”

Ute scoffed. The idea of bespectacled, uncoordinated Jerry getting into a fistfight with this phlegm-spitting, thick-limbed ruffian was comical. She dumped her heavy pack on the tricycle’s seat.

The man started the engine again. They rode along the *malecón*. The sea was to their right, when it seemed as if it should have been behind them. But soon she didn’t even know whether there was any water at all, because there were suddenly no street lights. They rode along a bumpy dirt road plunged in complete darkness, then seemed to get back onto the main road on which they’d come.

They soon swerved off the road again and into a forest. Jerry squeezed Ute’s hand. She glanced at him in the dark. She too hated disorientation. Lose your north and south, and who knows what you might lose next.

Suddenly, a bright spot appeared in the shrubs ahead. A massive wood-pannelled gate stood before them in a clearing.

“VILLA PACIFICA”, said the large wood-carved letters over the gate.

Some people were standing outside. Two men, locals. They were watching the approaching taxi intently, perhaps even grinning. Ute paid the driver, who rode off without a thanks or goodbye.

“*Buenas*,” the men greeted them, and let them into the heavy wooden gate. After the rudeness of the bus and tricycle-taxi drivers, this was five-star politeness.

Inside the gates, Ute and Jerry stopped in their tracks, stunned. They were inside a live tropical garden, heaving with exotic plants twice their height.

“Oh, hello!” Jerry said. “I think we’ve come to the right place.”

“This way,” one of the men said. He must have seen his share of new arrivals with mouths agape like this. “The Villa is this way, follow me.”

He led them along a white, pebbled path, and they crunched along behind, gazing about them like in some enchanted dream. The warm, moist air was filled with the sweet, intimate smell of rotting vegetation, reminding Ute of the smell of the Brazilian Amazon. Tiny water jets purred among the plants. Insects screeched and fluttered around them.

Unlit, small pebble paths were leading off in various directions. There were carved signs painted with wild animals. One sign had a tortoise, others had pictures of a lion, birds, monkeys and an armadillo. She glimpsed an empty hammock at the end of a path.

They eventually came to a large terraced bungalow. It stood on stilts, the way most coastal houses here did, to protect them against floods. They went up the wooden stairs onto the terrace. The man who’d shown them the way had vanished. There was nobody around. In the darkness Ute stepped on the tail of a large collie-like dog lying across the veranda like a pile carpet. The dog growled, shook its heavy fur and padded softly away. The inside of the house was dark, and through the enormous glassless windows Ute could glimpse the outlines of a bar, and some wicker chairs and tables. It looked like a communal lounge.

“*Bien venidos!*” a voice startled them. They turned the corner of the veranda, and saw a middle-aged couple peering at them through a cloud of smoke. The woman was elongated and spindly. Her face of a wilted sun-worshipping beauty was framed with frizzy reddish hair threaded with silver strands. A pile of ledger books and a large seashell full of cigarette butts lay on the table before her.

“English? Deutsch? Français? Italiano? Español?” The man sprung to his feet and grinned with nicotine-stained teeth.

“English and French,” Jerry said, visibly relaxing, and then pointed at Ute, “Español and Finnish.”

“Okay, okay,” the man said. “*Sehr gut*. My English is not so good. My girlfriend speaks English and Spanish. And you speak Spanish?”

“I pretend to,” Ute said modestly. Her Spanish was fluent.

The man laughed and shed cigarette ash as he waved his hands about. Two tufts of grey hair frizzed up on each side of his bald patch. He had a grizzled stubble, and

grey hair curled out from the opening of his floral-printed shirt. He flip-flopped inside the house.

“How many nights do you want to stay?” he asked in Spanish.

Ute translated for Jerry. “Ten, twenty?” Jerry chanced. He smiled at Ute. Their host waved his cigarette impatiently.

“Come in, come in, I’ll give you a key and take your passports. You can decide later. Stay as long as you like.” He switched the lights on inside the lounge.

As Ute passed her, the woman gazed up at her dreamily. There was kindness in her eyes, and also something else, something like a shadow of... wariness? A distant memory? Pity for the flame-faced arrival?

“Well done for finding this place,” Jerry said as their host copied details from their passports into a ledger.

“It was the driver, not me,” she said.

“You came through the back gate, didn’t you?” their host asked.

“I don’t know, it was a large gate.” Ute said.

“Did you come in a tricycle taxi?”

“That’s right.”

“From Puerto Seco.”

“Yes.”

“Those goddamn drivers, they know we don’t like people coming through the back gate, especially in the middle of the night like this. They do it to get more money off you, you know. But what can you do?”

“We had no idea. Is there another entrance?”

“Oh yes, just out here, that’s the main gate.”

“Is it closer to the town?”

“Oh, much closer. It’s a kilometre and a half along the beach. Maximum two.”

“So which way is the ocean?” Ute asked.

Small ticks worried the man’s face and hands.

“Ah, you’ll see tomorrow morning,” he winked at her. “*Mañana*,” he said to Jerry.”

“How much is a double?” Ute enquired.

“Depends how long you stay. If you stay two nights, five nights, ten nights, it’s thirty dollars a night. If you stay ten days or more, it’s twenty dollars a night. If you stay...”

“Ten days!” Ute chuckled incredulously. “We don’t have that much time.”

“Of course, you can stay as long as you like. Some people stay longer.”

“How many guests do you have at the moment?”

“Not many. We’re not busy at the moment, it’s the off-season. We’re going into summer. Normally, it rains quite a lot. We sure hope it’ll rain.”

“Why?” Ute said. “Because of the garden?”

“You got it. This garden needs lots of water, it’s a tropical garden. For you of course it’s no good, you’re here for the beaches and to get away from the rain. Ah, I remember the misery of autumn rains in Spain... But we pray for rain every day here. This region has suffered from increasing droughts. Every year, it gets worse. Climate change. Last year, we had *el Niño*. It devastated the garden, flooded the front cabins. People lost their houses in the villages, the *malecón* was wrecked, the beach in Puerto Seco was littered with uprooted trees, dead animals, house roofs, all manner of rubbish. Who paid for it to be cleaned up? The local council, you think? No, of course not. It was the rich gringos at Villa Pacifica, as usual.”

Tiny bits of spittle sprayed them. His dopey grin had vanished. A frown split his big, curved forehead. “Yep, we shelled out yet again. Trouble is, it looks like our prayers will be answered only too well this year, and we’re about to have another spell...”

“Mikel, *amor*, come,” the woman called out softly from the veranda. He seemed to reset himself with an invisible button, and the yellow-toothed smile was back.

“I’ll put you in The Tortoise. You’ll like it. Breakfast is from eight till eleven. We also have a restaurant, so you can have lunch and dinner here. It’s the best restaurant in a radius of 500 kilometres, each way. We have Italian, Spanish, local, and only the freshest produce and ingredients.”

“Is the kitchen open now?” Ute asked.

“No, the kitchen is closed now,” their host replied, shaking his head sorrowfully. Everything about him was exaggerated. Then his body jerked joyfully. “But we have lemon cake, if you want.” He waved at an enticing half-cake along the bar counter. They bought two pieces. Just then, a man materialized in the far, darker end of the lounge and beckoned them over.

“*Buenas noches*, good night,” their host said cheerfully, and returned to the table outside.

Ute and Jerry hurried down a dark path behind their guide, stuffing the moist, fragrant cake into their dusty faces. *La tortuga* was a small wooden cabin on stilts with an overhanging thatched roof. It was partially swallowed by huge plants reaching out on every side to the indigo sky. There was a well-used printed-cotton hammock outside. The windows were simply square holes with mosquito nets stretched across. The single light inside was dim. There were a few pieces of wicker furniture, including a small table, and a simple but attractive bathroom with lots of shells and a huge natural sea sponge large enough to towel yourself with. The centrepiece was the large bed, enveloped in a cascading mosquito net suspended from a hook in the ceiling.

They could hear the crickets screeching on their tiny violins outside. A heavy, gritty fragrance, like incense, filled the cabin. There was no luxury here, but such tasteful simplicity that no five-star hotel could have pleased Jerry more. He was partial to creature comforts, though he wouldn't always admit it, because Ute was just so tough by comparison.

"I don't believe this place," Jerry said. "From hell to paradise in twenty minutes."

"Isn't it just?" Ute dumped the dead weight of her pack on the floor. She heard her torch crunch at the bottom, but who cared – they didn't need the torch any more.

"You know," Ute said, "I thought *el Niño* hit the Pacific coast in 2006 or 2007, I can't remember exactly. Did the guy say 'last year'?"

"Oh, who cares," Jerry said. "What does your guidebook say anyway?" He laughed and she shook her head with a grin.

Without unpacking or even showering she undressed, washed her hands, swallowed her malaria pill, applied some medicated cream on her raw face and crawled inside the net. Jerry was splashing about in the bathroom. She was asleep the second her head hit the pillow.