

Dantanatanas

The free shuttle from our Costa Rican resort was a rusty minivan with duct-taped blue vinyl seats, piloted by a driver who spoke very little English. My wife, Lanie, and I knew a few useful Spanish phrases like “hello” and “quickly, where is the bathroom”, but not much else. We brought a pocket-sized English/Spanish translation guide with us and decided to try it out during our three-hour ride through the Central American mountains.

Our driver was a good sport. As we drove through the jungle, Lanie would look up individual words until she pieced together something she wanted to ask, such as “were you born under Albania” or “what color is the brown hair you are wearing.” The man waited patiently as she flipped back and forth in the little guide to create questions, or to figure out his answers.

Since we wanted to practice our translation abilities, I asked the driver to stick with his native tongue. Lanie would ask something, and then the driver would answer in Spanish. After flipping around the little book, one of us would eventually come up with a reasonable translation. It became a game and we all cheered each time someone correctly deciphered the other’s reply.

Eventually, we ran out of things to ask and all rode quietly until we approached the center of a large town. A convenience store and gas station signified the reappearance of modern civilization, and suddenly, our driver spoke up.

He glanced at us in the rear-view mirror and said, “Dantanatanas.”

One of the few Spanish phrases I knew was “please speak more slowly.” With no idea what our driver had just blurted out, I replied, “habla más despacio, por favor.”

The driver gave me a puzzled look in the mirror, but said more slowly, “Dantanatanas.”

With a blank look on my face, I silently stared back. “Dantanatanas” he repeated. “DANTANATANAS.”

Lanie, wide-eyed, glanced at me and then hunched forward to quickly thumb back and forth through the translation guide. There were hundreds of words and sayings in the little book, but she seemed to think that she was certain to find the driver’s mysterious phrase if she flipped the pages at the speed of light.

I sat quietly, trying to make sense of the sounds coming from the now frustrated man. When we stopped at a traffic light, he turned around to face us.

“Dantanatanas.” he said again. Then again. “DANTANATANAS”, he exclaimed, hands out and palms up in the universal sign for “what the heck is wrong with you people.”

Lanie slid closer to me so we could both stare at the pages of the suddenly useless little book. With no answer to be found, we sat in the back seat making “what do we do now” faces in uncomfortable silence.

I stared intently through the window at exotic sights, like bananas. And t-shirts. My wife had stopped looking at the book and slid back over to her own window. It became important to avoid eye contact with the driver, or each other. All communication was now off limits since the basics had broken down.

The light changed, the driver turned back around and shrugged, and we moved forward through the town in silence. I carefully inspected the window trim while Lanie experimented with different methods of tying her shoe. We did anything we could to look distracted and busy.

Then we turned a corner and came face to face with a large sign. It said, in big, English letters -

Atenas Grocery.

I slapped my forehead like a cartoon character and said, "Atenas aqui!!!"

The driver, looking like I had just solved world hunger, raised his fists in the symbol of victory.

"Si, Senor!" he exclaimed. "Atenas AQUI!"

Atenas is here. We were in downtown Atenas, or "dan tan atanas." Lanie and I were both so certain he was still speaking to us in Spanish that we never made the mental jump back to our own language. Instead, we searched through the little guide for anything close to sound he was making.

International crisis averted, we resumed our flip-and-quip method of communication until we arrived at the absolutely stunning La Paz Waterfall and Gardens resort. After sharing a good laugh with our driver, he went on his way.

We spent four days in the mountains of Costa Rica, where clouds passed below our balcony and we fed hummingbirds from hand-held feeders shaped like flowers. We went zip-lining through the jungle and watched sloths and toucans move through the trees.

On our way to the airport in San Jose, we wound our way down steep mountain roads and every time we passed through any town, big or small, one of us would grin and comment, "dantanatanas."

Our driver didn't seem to understand.