Embracing Adventure
(Personal Essay by Katacha Díaz)

Year-around, I love to walk and nature is right outside my front door. It’s such a joy to put one foot in front of another and walk down the hill to the Riverwalk. The waterfront is the crown jewel of Astoria, the quaint little town at the mouth of the Columbia River, a few miles from the Pacific Ocean, and the oldest settlement west of the Rockies at the end of the Lewis and Clark Trail. Whether I am experiencing the beauty of dramatic sunset clouds underneath the Astoria-Megler Bridge or gulls surfing with the wind or barking sea lions frolicking upriver or cormorants atop pilings or a stunning double rainbow after scattered showers, I look forward to an intimate rendezvous with nature along the scenic river trail. The Astoria Riverwalk is where I go to reflect and feed my soul, and to soak in the ever-changing river scene with ships registered around the world passing under the bridge.

I celebrated the Big-69 with gusto at Fort George Brewery + Public House, affectionately known as The Fort. The microbrew pub is a favorite community-gathering place, reminiscent of The Bull & Finch Pub in Boston, the inspiration for the hit TV shows Cheers. While friends enthusiastically shared tantalizing tidbits about the upcoming Great Columbia Crossing 10K Run and Walk, I sipped Vortex IPA (India Pale Ale) beer and tuned into the conversation with unbridled curiosity. Autumn is a time of dazzling color and piercing blue skies, but it often brings blustery wind and heavy rain to the Pacific Northwest. Steve recalled a wild, wet and windy trek into a fog bank across the
Astoria-Megler Bridge. He laughingly said that it was a white-knuckle and soaked-to-the-bone bridge crossing.

“David is walking,” said Pam, sipping Cavatica Stout. “I’m staying behind to serve guests breakfast. Why don’t you sign-up and walk with David.”

Without hesitating, I agreed.

Then I turned to Steve and asked, “Have you signed up?”

“You’re kidding, right?” he said.

I shook my head.

“Nope,” he said, sipping Cavatica Stout. “Been there, done that!”

And then there was silence.

“Nah, don’t want Steve to join us anyway,” said David.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Stormy weather and bad karma,” he said, smiling, and then ordered another pint of “every beer drinker’s fantasy” – The Fort’s popular seasonal 3-Way IPA.

I laughingly said in a low voice, “What a relief, then to know it’ll be a weather-perfect “bridge to nowhere” crossing.

Interestingly, back in 1966 when the Astoria-Megler Bridge was built, critics called it the “Bridge to Nowhere.” The 4.1 mile long bridge across the Columbia River was the final link in the Canada-to-Mexico highway system, and the longest continuous three-span through-truss bridge in the world. The bridge connects Oregon and Washington. In addition to saving motorists time, the bright green iconic
bridge offers amazing views of the picturesque historic town of Astoria perched above the mouth of the Columbia River, and framed by the Cascade Mountains, and the ship traffic navigating the river and passing underneath the bridge. With more than 7,000 vehicles traveling in both directions daily, and well over a million crossings a year, the postcard-pretty “bridge to nowhere” showed its critics that it is the bridge to somewhere.

I love a good challenge. It thrilled me to know that the upcoming Great Columbia Crossing event offered professional and amateur runners and walkers of all ages the opportunity to once a year cross on foot the Pacific Northwest’s mightiest river – the Columbia. The 6.2-mile course is mostly flat with one steep and challenging 200 feet incline above the ship’s channel to the peak of the Astoria-Megler Bridge. I have a spectacular view of the bridge from my river view apartment; I peered through my binoculars at the bright green bridge and visualized walking across the finish line under the 2-hour allotted time.

In the words of Antoine de Saint-Exupery, “A goal without a plan is just a wish.” I couldn’t wait to get out on Astoria’s streets first thing in the morning to not only walk along the river trail, but also add a few steep hills dotted with colorful Victorian houses to my walking régime.

But there was something I needed to do before adding a few steep streets to my daily walks: I needed to buy a new pair of sturdy walking shoes.

In the next few weeks, the steep streets got easier and tiny adventures awaited; I was carefree and relaxed, the days passed by quickly. While contemplating Sunday’s walking adventure, I stood in line Friday morning to pick up packet at the Astoria Warrenton Chamber of Commerce office. Meanwhile, Pam had arranged transportation for David and
me to the Port of Astoria with guests who return yearly to compete and stay at their bed and breakfast. Saturday I kept abreast of changing weather conditions throughout the day, loaded up on pasta for dinner, and turned in early.

At 5 A.M., buzzing alarm clock awakened me Sunday. It was overcast, moonless and pitch-black. Flashlight in hand, I walked down dimly lit deserted streets to meet David, Jim and Jolene at the Rose River Inn Bed and Breakfast. It was still dark and raining hard when we arrived at the Port of Astoria, the designated meeting area for participants. We rode the shuttle bus across the river to the start location in Dismal Nitch, Washington, where the lively tunes of Acústica World Music sunrise concert lingered in the air, and the mood was festive with participants singing along and dancing in the rain. When the music stopped, it was race time! The runners set-off first and the walkers followed 15-minutes later.

Okay, I thought. No time like the present to get out there and live another bridge-walking adventure. The light drizzle stopped. It was overcast, with a light breeze – great weather for strolling across the long bridge with its narrow lanes and the mighty Columbia River waters rushing below.

During weather-perfect epic crossing, David and I laughed and chatted away, and took in the awe-inspiring vistas along the way. The steep trek to the peak of the bridge did not disappoint; it was challenging but the views were spectacular. I laughingly told David I wished for longer legs to keep up with him. When we crossed the finish line at the Port of Astoria, I looked up at the race clock, it read under 2-hours! Jim and Jolene waited at the finish line to drive us back up the hill to the Rose River Inn Bed and Breakfast.

“How was it?” Pam asked.

“Epic!” I said. “But I’m dead tired.”
Walking back to my river view apartment, I thought about the secret ingredient that makes my life's journey so rich; it's about choices and embracing life's adventures with *joie de vivre*!