



FFI GUATEMALA DISCOVERY TRIP EASTER 2008



Daily Journals

Good Friday, 21 March: Welca Farr & Joanne Ancira.

Friday began with meeting our local hostess Clelia Zamora and her son Chema for a bus tour of Guatemala city - a very modern metropolitan area, but with many older buildings from the Spanish era. It is clean and well maintained, but was strangely quiet because this week is a Holiday before Easter. After lunch at a lovely café we parked our bus in the gated compound where our hostess lives. This compound differed from the ones we saw earlier, where the Embassies and the super wealthy have their multi million dollar estates. Our hostess lives in an upper middle class area in circumstances we would find familiar.

Then we walked many blocks thru the neighborhood seeing the preparation of the “carpets” of flowers, etc, for the Processions of the religious ‘floats’ carried by the ‘penitents’ in preparation for Easter. We saw the blessing of the ‘floats’ in the church, and then watched the processions as they were carried thru the streets. This is not a commercial activity, and I saw no TV crews. It was a personal act of devotion carried on by locals for their own “Hermandad”.



Returning to our hostess’ home for a home cooked meal, we had time after dinner for a meeting with local friends and their family, to make a presentation of information about the Friendship Force by our Spanish speaking members (Ramon & Sandy Villareal, Rosana Crouch, Mike Summers, Amparo Moya & Dave Bentzin.)



Back to the Marriott Hotel by 9.30 pm, exhausted from not only the walking, but from all the excitement we experienced.

This city and its people, though largely unfamiliar to most people in the US, is a modern, functioning community – there is wealth and sophistication here – a commercially viable economy, tourism, and is doing very well, thank you, even tho it is not ‘on the screen’ of general American consciousness. A lesson we should learn and appreciate.

Welca Farr.

Our group was most satisfied with the wonderful American breakfast provided by the Marriott Hotel. A few of us decided we could indeed “rough it” if these type of accommodation were the norm.

The weather was bright and beautiful for the Good Friday tour. Most all of the stores were closed so there was very little traffic. Holy Week is a big holiday season. Our guide/contact person for Friendship Force, Clelia, joined us on the bus and we were off. – Clelia is a lawyer who handles adoption. She explained how dangerous it is for people in her profession because of the terrorists (mafia).

We drove along a beautiful parkway, the Avenida de las Américas with bright flowers everywhere, jacaranda & chaperone trees in full bloom. This is where the people of the city promenade on Sunday from 10 o’clock until one o’clock in the afternoon.

Driving into a gated community we encounter homes of the very wealthy and many embassies of various countries. These homes are three million dollars and up. Bougainvillea in brilliant orange, purple and pink cascade over high walls topped with barbed wire. A little further along we stop briefly to look into a valley where the poor live; no running water, electricity or schools and a haven for criminals. The contrast is stark!!

Clelia invited us to her home to see how she and her family live and to have a cold drink. Then her son Chema took us to look at the “rugs” – Ginny Philippy and I assume we are going shopping for woven carpets (alfombras). After walking many blocks, more than four, we came to streets covered with sand paintings like carpets made of sawdust and flowers. It was then it dawned on me that these were the carpets!

We reached the plaza in front of San Sebastian church where we refreshed ourselves with cold water and a much needed rest. The procession of ‘pasos’ began and we watched the faithful carry these huge coffin-like boxes with statues of saints on top. One was so huge that it took over a hundred men to carry it.

Returning to Clelia’s home we enjoyed a wonderful dinner that she and her friends had prepared. After dinner a group of about ten arrived to listen to Ramon, Sandy, Rosana, Mike and Amparo explain about Friendship Force. We are hoping that these people will want to start a new Friendship Force club in Guatemala City.

Joanne Ancira.

Saturday 22 March: Rosalie Bentzin & Ginny Philippy

We enjoyed breakfast on the terrace of the elegant Marriott Hotel. Good food, good service, and beautiful weather.

This morning, from the balcony of our room we were able to see smoke coming from one of the area volcanoes. Guatemalans take the many volcanoes in the country for granted, but I see them as amazing.

At around 10 AM we boarded the bus for a tour of the Relief Map of Guatemala at Minerva Park. It is an informative three-dimensional map, showing a few flat areas, and a huge number of volcanoes spreading across the lower half of the country.

Viewing the map explains the difficulty driving across the country.

We stopped at a local grocery store for a restroom break, and took the opportunity to shop and buy some excellent local coffee.

Our group is getting to know each other now, and conversation noises fill the bus. The driver, Cosmos, is friendly and helpful.

For lunch, we were taken to a beautiful restaurant called El Portal de Angels, with a great view overlooking the city. The restaurant is large and rustic, and specializes in local barbecue dishes. After lunch, we were taken to the Mercado Artesanías, with a good display of native crafts. Our shoppers were happy buying dolls, jewellery, and fabrics for the next hour or so.

We returned to the hotel around 6 pm, and took the opportunity to give gifts to Clelia and Chema. We thanked them for all their work for our group. We will leave for Tikal tomorrow after church, and won't see them until our return a week or so later.

Several of us went to sit around the hotel pool for drinks, and to listen to a great Cuban 7-piece band playing poolside. The pool is a very popular area, full of families, with meals served outdoors.

For a late dinner, 15 of us met at the Champions Sports Restaurant in the hotel to watch KU beat UNLV in the NCAA playoffs. KU now will go on to the Final Four to play against former coach, Roy Williams.

Tomorrow is Easter, and after lunch, we will fly to the city of Flores in the Peten to see the Mayan ruins of Tikal, where people lived from 200 BC to around 900 AD.

Rosalie Summers Bentzin

Holy Saturday.

After our 4 block walk of yesterday, everyone happily boarded the bus to take a tour of the City center. We passed the church of Our Lady of Guadalupe on route to the Relief Map of Guatemala.

This Great Relief Map covers 4 hectares and is a graphic illustration of how mountainous the southern portion of the country is. The Sierra Madres of North America end in Guatemala with many high volcanoes, some visible from Guatemala City.

“Mapa en Relieve”

19 Abril 1903

29 Oct. 1905

Francisco Villa, Surveyor and Engineer.

Also in the park was a large specimen of the National tree – La Ceiba, Árbol Nacional

Upon leaving the Park we stopped for an intended “potty” and water stop at a local supermarket. The bus ride continued past an abandoned Synagogue in what was once the Jewish neighborhood.

We passed the National and Presidential Palaces and the church of San Sebastian, seen yesterday, and even a quick glance at the Cathedral. Parade preparations notices still under way.

Lunch at El Portal del Angel overlooking the city. An hour at the Artesians. Market and back to the hotel for rest & relaxation.

Fifteen of us ended up in Champions, the bar in the hotel, eating, drinking swapping lies and laughing. A wonderful day once again.

Ginny Philipppy.

Sunday 23 March: Ramon Villareal & Betty Jean Liles

Although it was Easter Sunday, the day started out, perhaps, differently than in the US. Here there is a lot of attention paid to “Sunrise services” whereas in Guatemala there is more emphasis on Holy Week processions. These are put on by Cofradías, brotherhoods of the faithful, mostly men but also a few that consist of females. Following the processions there appeared to be somewhat of a lull in activities related to churches. The predominant religion is still Roman Catholic with evangelicals and others making inroads but not yet prevailing.

According to some, the sunrise was very nice although I did not personally witness it. That is what others said about it. There were some in our group of ambassadors who arose early with the intention of attending services at a church of their choice within the traditional four blocks of our hotel. According to, at least two of the ambassadors, they asked for and received directions to the church they had selected and arrived at the wrong church although in a timely manner.

Another group received instruction that they followed religiously (no pun intended) but did not arrive at their intended destination. With a police escort consisting of two young officers, they did arrive at the right church in time for worship. All the ambassadors had relied on a sheet that they obtained at the hotel which listed many area churches of several denominations with the time of services.

Following a brief lunch, the group met and reclaimed their luggage in preparation for an afternoon flight to Flores where we would spend the night before touring Tikal. A short delay occurred when the airplane failed to arrive on time at the assigned gate. The delay extended in fifteen minute increments for the first two hours and finally the lady at the gate admitted that the plane would be “late” but was now in the air from Miami. Three hours late we finally boarded and left for Flores. The flight lasted around 30 minutes.

We were scheduled to arrive in Flores around 7 p.m. but landed around 10. Our first night in the jungle started late. The 6 a.m. wake up call was changed at the front desk to 7 a.m. so following my inquiry at 6:15 we did receive an anonymous call at 6:20 thus giving the front desk an out so that they could say that they had called us although no one was on the line when the call came.

Ramón F. Villarreal

Good morning and a Happy Easter from BJ

What a wonderful beginning on such a beautiful day. Here I am looking out on a view of Guatemala City from my room in the Marriott Hotel. There is such an amazing view of a ring of mountains (volcanoes) of which one in the distance is active; also, the remains of an ancient aqueduct, and the serene quietness of a city with over a million people. The serenity is the result of the people celebrating Semana Santa (Holy Week). Virtually everything comes to a complete halt during this week of celebration. It is the Holiest time of the Guatemalan year. I was most inspired with the dedication of the people to their churches and faith. On Friday we had the opportunity to mingle with the crowds and watch one of their Holy Processionals.

Some of the ambassadors attend church services. One group even had a police escort. This was not related to any reason other than the two policemen were doing their “good deed” for the day!!!

Some of the group just walked around near the hotel, bought coffee, lunch and were just sightseeing. Others were resting or better said, catching up on a leisurely morning.

Following a delightful breakfast fit for a king, we packed our luggage in order to go to the airport for an afternoon flight to Flores where we were to spend the night before going to Tikal the next morning. Well, to say the least, we were in for a big surprise as intentions don't always go as planned. We had a short (three hour) delay. After much information on the reason for this delay (HA HA HA), we were able to take off on TACA Airlines. Much to some of our surprise, TACA Airlines was a very nice comfortable plane with plenty of legroom and in fact, our plane was a 142 passenger Airbus 319. TACA Airlines is a joint venture of five different Central American countries.

BUT, out of the long wait in the non-air-conditioned airport, good things happened. We all were able to become better acquainted with our fellow ambassadors, since we came from various FFI clubs throughout the world.

Finally we arrive in Flores and make our way to the Hotel Camino Real Tikal. So ended our Easter Sunday.

Betty Jean Liles

Monday 24 March: Bill Anderson & Lottie Miller

Our accommodation for two nights was the elegant Camino Real Tikal Hotel located on the shore of Lake Petén Itza. The large deep lake located in a spectacular setting is unique in that no surface rivers continuously flow into it. All continuously flowing rivers feeding this lake are underground.

After a tasty buffet breakfast we bussed to Tikal National Park. At the entrance our group had the option of riding or walking to Tikal's Grand Plaza. Most chose the 1 kilometer jungle walk on the well-used trail under the jungle canopy. The walk there and back was led by Eddy, an excellent guide who made it enjoyable and educational. My highlights were the Sapodilla tree (chewing gum tree) whose sap was initially used to make chicle chewing gum, and the Howler and Spider monkeys.

The Mayan City of Tikal, which was the center of Mayan civilization in Guatemala, was inhabited from 600 BC till 869 AD. The temples in the Grand Plaza were probably built and repaired between 690 and 850 AD. I was amazed that the Maya could build this complex with such large temples. A highlight was climbing Temples II and IV where we could view Tikal and the surrounding jungle.

Bill Anderson.



We were up and “at ‘em” at 6:00 a.m. Breakfast was enjoyed by all between 6:30 and 8:00 on the lovely veranda overlooking the lake that rested on the shores of the lovely Hotel Camino Real Tikal.

We left at 8:30 for Tikal. We made a stop at a souvenir place and got water for everyone around 9:00. We got to Tikal and walked...and walked...and walked! We saw Howler Monkeys on the way to the ruins and heard them HOWLING! And relieving themselves all around us!!!

After seeing and climbing the first temple, our guide, Eddy, took us to another which was under “rehabilitation.” He explained the Mayan calendar with chalk on the sidewalk. After climbing the 100 steps of this temple, we all trekked to an open air area for lunch of beef, chicken, or veggies. When we had finished our enjoyable meal and company, we walked much more back to the main building and caught the bus back to the hotel.

Several members of the group enjoyed a “pool party” upon returning back to the hotel. A raucous game of water volleyball was played by several members of the party.

Dinner was on our own for the evening. With a 5:00 a.m. wake up, many of our group just went to bed early!

Lottie Miller

Tuesday 25 March: Sigrid Higdon & Ethel Kutac

Flores to Atitlán

We arose at dawn to leave the beautiful Hotel Camino Real Tikal and travel to Lake Atitlán. After a brief TACA flight to Guatemala City we were met by Victor Ruiz who would guide us for the remainder of the trip. During the bus trip from Guatemala City to Lake Atitlán, Victor offered many bits of information to help us appreciate the country and culture we would be visiting in the next week.

Our first experience as we left the airport was a dramatic auto crash with a young driver. We learned that alcohol abuse is a serious problem among the young male population. Victor called the youth “New Generation Pepsi” to differentiate the changing values and culture of the young folks. We also learned that with much ongoing construction, stops by officials (looking for drugs?) and uneven road surfaces, travel that on a map might appear to be short, could take lots of time. Along the way, Victor introduced us to the brightly painted “Chicken Buses” that aggressively pursue local passengers and keep the luggage handler riding on top of the bus with the luggage to shorten the time at stops.



The NW highland area of Guatemala is populated primarily by Ladinos (non-Amerindians) (40 %) and 23 indigenous Mayan groups (60 %) each of whom have their own language and colorful textile patterns. About 50% of the people in this area do not have jobs and survive with some kind of small business that is outside the economic mainstream. For the Mayan population, large families, illiteracy, a diet of primarily beans and maize and very limited access to health care have meant that many are trapped into a life of poverty.

After checking into the exquisite Hotel Atitlán, we visited the Friendship Bridge project. We were greeted by Connie Newton and Jorge Salem. This Colorado organization offers micro loans to rural Mayan women who are at the bottom of the economic ladder. As part of the program women are organized into groups where they support each other, approve each others credit and learn the skills needed to successfully run their own small businesses. They also are offered information on health care, money management and topics designed to increase self esteem and help participants see how family living conditions can be improved. The program also works to keep children in school since 40% of Mayan children do not complete first grade often because the child enters school speaking only a Mayan language and with no knowledge of Spanish. (In photo Connie & Jorge with FFI members having dinner prepared by Mayan ladies.)



Although this very long full day left all of us ready to enjoy our lovely hotel, many of us summoned our energy reserves to go on a buying spree at Friendship Bridge where we were able to buy the authentic handmade products of program participants.

Sigrid Higdon

Early morning wakeup – but breakfast was served. Plane trip from Flores to Guatemala City. Victor, Tour bus guide, met us. Traveled 3½ hours to Lake Atitlán / Panajachel.

Observations on the way:

- First time in all my travels my 2 bags were the first out of the shoot.
- Bus too tall to get out – needed to back up to get out.
- Took the Pan American highway.
- Lots of constructions on the road –only one heavy piece of equipment was seen. No workers as they were “out to lunch” or “taking a siesta”.
- Most of the cars are small. Lots of “chicken buses”.
- Beautiful trees and foliage. Crops seen were squash, cabbage, cauliflower, unions – terraced on the side of the hills.
- Lots of trash on the side of the road – recycle anyone?
- Stands in small villages had produces etc., but no customers.

** Reflections on Easter Sunday in G.C.

After church we had 3 hours so we went to the pool area. Lots of folks there. It soon became obvious there were American couples with little Guatemalan girls. I saw at least 6 couples. Visited with one young lady from Va. She said the Marriott Hotel accommodated them by helping with the adoptions. They provided a baby play room and equipment – (strollers, etc.) for their use. Sometimes it took weeks to finalize the adoption.

Arrival at Atitlán Hotel at 3:30PM – beautiful Colonial furnishings and delightful grounds with lots of birds.

Ethel Kutac.

Wednesday 26 March: Aileen Carter & Mike Summers



Our day was spent on Lake Atitlán and in two villages across the lake. We traveled by boat. The lake is very beautiful and surrounded by three volcanoes in the background. Volcan Fuego, near Guatemala City, was releasing steam. It is in the third mountain range. Compared to our lakes, there were few boats on the lake and certainly no cigar boats or jet skies. We did see some men fishing in cayucos for crabs. They were using traps and chicken necks for bait. Cayucas are boats made from hollowed out tree logs with rough planks for side boards.

We noted some beautiful homes along the lake on large tracts of land. We were told the land was bought by wealthy people and military personnel during the civil war at a very cheap price. The land is worth millions of dollars now.

As we approached Santiago de Atitlán, I noticed villagers washing clothes and taking care of hygienic needs in the lake. Others were bailing water from the lake to water their garden.

As we came ashore we passed some older women whose faces depicted a lot of character, probably due to the harshness of their existence. They demonstrated how their head dress is wrapped on their head and allowed us to take photos for a small fee.

There were interesting statutes in the Santiago Church representing a brotherhood or fraternity, dressed in the Mayan tradition. We were told they believe in a deity.

I took my first ride in a *tuc-tuc*. It was rough going over the cobble stones but an ideal type of transportation considering the narrow streets.

In the next village of San Antonio Palopó we saw a mat weaver making mats by hand and his daughter had a foot loom on which she made scarves and various clothing items. Their little shop was in a very old dilapidated adobe building and they had a good supply of cats around.

It seemed like there was trash everywhere and I noticed small, narrow channels cut across the roads carrying waste water directed toward the lake.

We had a wonderful lunch at the Atlantis Cafe and Bar in Panajachel. The beer was especially cold and refreshing. We returned home to our wonderful Hotel Atitlán and I felt so pampered after seeing so much poverty in the villages.

Aileen Carter

First of all, I could not believe that it is already my day to write a journal entry. Secondly, I've waited until Thursday 27 March, 2008 to record... On the bumpy bus ride up the hill from Pana (Panajachel) to Chichicastenango.

But, I digress and go back in time 24 hours. I woke up before 6 am Wednesday shivering to the cool lake air, blowing off lago (Lake) Atitlán, and made my way to the restaurant for a Chapin (Guatemalan) breakfast of black beans, scrambled eggs, sausage and plantains –except today the plantains weren't fried as in prior hotels that we've stayed in during this trip. They were boiled with cinnamon. They reminded me of a candied boiled carrot.

After brekkie, I walked around and took more photos of the botanical gardens located on the grounds of the hotel. A good attraction for Europeans and American travelers. In time to meet Victor and the tour bus, we navigated the narrow streets of Pana in our giant bus to the “marina” where we boarded a boat to Santiago de Atitlán. Across the lake and between the volcanoes (Toliman, San Pedro, y Santiago), we stopped to see a group of Mayan women bathing and washing their clothes. From there we landed at Santiago to a rush of Mayan women and children selling vibrantly colored wares (necklaces, bracelets, blouses) and local men trying to get us to ride their *tuc-tuc* mini taxis.

Two older Indian women unwound and rewound their “tape” hats for us, before we crowded 3 people each into the *tuc-tuc* for rides up the hill to the local church.

Arriving in the town's plaza, there were more vendors and there was even a girls basketball tournament going on at the school across the street from the plaza. Just up from the plaza was the church. It is of note because American -born priest (from Oklahoma) was killed in 1980 during the years of violence during Guatemala's civil war period.

Father Rother was killed for educating the local Indians – part of the Roman Catholic Church Liberation Theology – essentially the idea to elevate, or become socially mobile, through education. It is ironic that the church thought this because, in theory, not only was Liberation Theology dangerous to the land-owning oligarchy (wealthy) and the power of the military, but the fomenting of a social revolution might have ultimately reduced the influence of the Church itself.

After some time for shopping, we re-boarded the boat to San Antonio Popoló. After a 20 – 30 minute ride, we saw an older family -Mayans- that showed us how some of their goods were woven... both fabric and baskets. The highlight for me was the hut containing the kitchen. There were 3 stones in the fire and there was also a (grain) milling stone with 3 legs. Both of great significance to the Indians, – meaning life. To the indigenous, “3” is to life as the feminine image is to life. The number “3” equals; the breast and the womb. Not quite the feminine mystique, but you get the idea.

We were to also to have gone to Santa Catalina, but returned, instead to Pana. Most of the group went to the Restaurante Atlantis to lunch, however, several of us returned to the hotel to lunch and rest... Since I'd gotten too much sun while sitting on the bow of the boat, I chose the latter.

After a brief respite, the skies clouded over and I left the hotel grounds and walked to the Atitlán Nature Reserve, taking photos along the way. I had a brief visit to the hot tub looking out on the lake and the volcanoes before meeting our rambunctious group in the hotel bar for lots of laughs, lead by Dorothy, Lottie, Rosana and Shirley – the gang of 4 ... a refreshing end to an adventurous day.

Mike Summers.

Thursday 27 March: Bruce Liles & Rosana Crouch

Our Friendship Force International ambassadors began my assigned journal day, with our usual exceptional Guatemalan breakfast at the Hotel Atitlán located on the beautiful Lake by that name. After breakfast we boarded our tour bus and headed for Chichicastenango accompanied by our very capable guide, Victor Ruiz, driver Enrique, and navigator Vinicio, as I dubbed his position. Thank goodness we had Enrique and Vinicio as the Guatemalan roads are tortuously curvy and the village streets are very narrow by our standards. Vinicio's sole role was to watch for oncoming traffic in curves and to stop traffic in villages so our rather large "Mercedes bus" could backup in order for Enrique to negotiate the sharp corners. Having at one time in my career taught drivers education, I found this cooperative venture in driving just short of miraculous at times. Of course, our guide Victor, in his usual good humor, claimed to have taught Enrique everything he knew about driving.

Our trip required roughly an hour and thirty minutes time. When travelling in Guatemala one soon learns to measure distance in time rather than miles or kilometres where the shortest distance is rarely a straight highway between two points. The trip to Chichi, the Guatemalans abbreviate many words, took us through a plain consisting of very fertile volcanic soil. For the first time on our trip we saw small plots of farmland growing a variety of fruits and vegetables. The farming practices of the indigenous Mayan people are labor intense, tilling the soil in most cases by hand with wide bladed hoes. We did on one occasion see yoked oxen plowing a small field. The area must have been of significant agricultural importance as we had to pass through a district produce checkpoint set up to prevent the introduction of harmful plant materials and insects.

Chichicastenango is located in the El Quiche department of Guatemala and is known for its Maya Indian culture. Its name means City of Nettles. Our guide Victor explained that during the time of the Spanish conquistadors the nettles were used to define property boundaries. The village consists of many stucco buildings and is located at an elevation of over 6000 feet. Our bus could not pass through the narrow streets of Chichi so we abandoned the comforts it provided and continued our adventure on foot. After a few blocks, I became quite aware that the ambassadors from the high altitudes of Colorado had a distinct advantage over this lowlander even if we were going down hill. The narrow streets become even smaller on Thursdays and Sundays as many vendors set up colorful booths selling traditional handmade articles. Each merchant is more than ready to lower prices and "haggling" seems to be at the heart of the trade. With our visit being on Thursday, more than one of our group left the area with treasures perceived to be bargains and I'm sure that it is pure conjecture as to who got the best deal, buyer or seller.



After an ample lunch at the Mayan Inn we backtracked up the main street to again board our bus. On our return, the 400 year old church of Santo Tomas sits unavoidably at the top of the hill overlooking the village. There are 18 steep steps leading to the main sanctuary. These steps are the remains of a Pre-Columbian ruin upon which the Spanish built this church, as was their custom. It has been speculated that each of the steps represents a month in the Maya calendar year. I have since read that this church is still used for Mayan rituals and in certain instances burnt offerings are made for the gods. On our trip back to Lake Atitlán, our group reflects on another wonderful adventure in Guatemala.

Marcus Bruce Liles, Jr.

Victor and friends took us on a long morning bus ride to Chichicastenango. We drove along winding mountain roads in our big, comfy, lime green bus.

In Chichicastenango, we visited the Church of St. Thomas. The stone front steps of the church were crowded with vendors selling candles, flowers, incense and other items to be left as offerings on the church's altars.

We entered the church through the side door. Entry through the front door is reserved for Officials, and for major celebrations. There are 14 Brotherhoods or "cofradías". Each one is in charge of a specific celebration. St. Thomas is celebrated from December 21 through the end of the year.

Inside the church there are several altars set up through the center aisle of the church. Each altar provides the opportunity to pray for specific things. Offerings of rum, flowers, and lit candles are left on each altar. People pray out loud, and it is not uncommon for them to make their way down the center aisle on their knees.

The local cemetery is very interesting. It is very colorful, and most of the burials are marked with above-ground crypts. There are monuments shaped like pyramids, some like cradles. Others are very simple. Death is celebrated, and the dead are honored and visited. Family members come to the cemetery to conduct rituals and pray. Rituals include fire circles, incense, chanting, and offerings. Families come to tend the graves, and even the poorest monuments have built-in places to put flowers and candles.



We had a lovely typical lunch at the Maya Inn. The Maya Inn was opened by Clark Tours, and it helped develop tourism in this part of Guatemala. Lunch was served by waiters in typical Maya costume, and accompanied by marimba music played in the garden.

Chichicastenango has a museum with many beautiful artifacts in stone and jade. It has many beautiful weaving samples, and some photos comparing Chichicastenango in 1940, and present day. There is a portrait of the Popol Vuh creation story, as well as a depiction of the Popol Vuh and its translation.

The market at Chichi is very dense, and crowded with vendors and tourists. Traditional tourist goods are sold in abundance. Another part of the market is reserved for fruits, vegetables, household items and clothing.

Everything is used and re-used. One vendor had every size and shape of plastic jug –all of them previously used. Another vendor was selling a big jumble of McDonald's and other fast-food restaurant toys. I need to look into being a regular supplier for this guy.

People in the market had a good English sales vocabulary, and persistent sales skills. Everyone that could walk could sell. Babies that couldn't walk sat in the booth. Persistent, diligent, hyper-aware shoppers might find an armadillo or the greatest treasure of all – a saint's hand.

Rosana Crouch.

Friday 28 March: Sandy Villareal & Dorothy Bentzin

We sadly bade farewell to beautiful Hotel Atitlán and boarded our bus for our next adventure. Because it was market day in Sololá, we were unable to take the direct route to the Pan American Highway. Instead we drove through beautiful mountain countryside, passing many coffee and onion plantations, to reach the Pan American Highway. Victor, our guide from Clark Tours, told us that coffee was brought to Guatemala by the Jesuits. The coffee business is not doing well at the present time and macadamia nuts are being grown as an alternative to coffee. On our trip we passed a new housing development, Cantares del Agua. The signs for the development advertised potable water and electricity. In another small town we passed, I saw a sign that read, “This Christmas, don’t cut our trees.”

We stopped to visit the Mayan site of Iximché. In Tikal the last recorded date was 869 A.D. Iximché, in contrast, was a late Mayan site. It was founded in approximately 1470 A.D. by the Kaqchikels. We visited the small museum located on the site to see the scale model of Iximché. Afterwards we enjoyed an hour of climbing around the pyramids, ball courts, etc. I was particularly interested in a small area at the far end of the site where present day Maya conduct ceremonies. Candles were still burning in some of the niches in the rock. The Spaniards arrived in 1524 and enlisted the aid of the Kaqchikels in conquering other highland Mayan groups.

I think we all enjoyed the school children who had come to visit the site on a fieldtrip. I hope their broken down bus was repaired and they were able to get back home!

After lunch at the Restaurante Kapok, we drove on to Antigua where we checked into Hotel Soleil.

At 7:00 we went to the town plaza to the library where we were given a presentation by Jack Leeth on the court system in Antigua and by Kathie Amble, who talked about WINGS, an NGO that works to improve reproductive health for Guatemalan families.

Jack gave a depressing overview of the Guatemalan court system but felt that there were small signs of hope for the future. Kathie gave a brief overview of the history of WINGS and the programs that they help fund.

After the presentation in the library, some people stayed in the plaza area to have dinner, while others returned to the hotel.

All in all, it was a very interesting day. And, of course, I must mention the highlight of the day, which was Dave Bentzin presenting me with an armadillo!

Sandy Villareal.

It is with a certain amount of sadness that we depart the Hotel Atitlán – the lush gardens glowing from the rain in the night. - As we left Panajachel, our guide Victor pointed out devastation from the hurricane Stan in 2005. We wondered if rebuilding would ever occur – all the land is for sale along the San Francisco River.

On our way toward Antigua we observed the rural life of the indigenous Mayans: onion pickers, cattle, sheep & horses grazing by the road; men preparing fields for planting; women watering gardens with buckets and hoses. Our guide stopped the bus to pick red beans (Palo y Pita) from the chalaka tree – or fortune teller tree. The Shamans mix these red beans with the black beans in order to tell truths to the people. The Shamans are good for the people. They never charge for services and truly help. Unlike witchdoctors who “play” with the minds of the people and charge for their “services.”

We stopped at Iximché. This is a national park and important to the Mayan people. Here is a largely unexcavated ancient city. It was the first place the Spaniards came to. Some 2,000

people were living here and initially defeated the Spaniards who went their way. The small museum there was very interesting. More interesting to some of us were the school children on a field trip there.

Arriving at the “Antigua” Hotel in Antigua we found it was now called “Soleil Antigua”. Our rooms were comfortable. In the evening we traveled by bus to the Central Plaza. At 7 pm we were greeted in the Biblioteca by ex-pat Jack Leeth and Kathy Amble from WINGS. Jack spoke to us on life in Antigua and the political climate. We then heard about the work of WINGS – a family planning and reproductive health organization. We ended our busy day at the hotel to rest before a new adventure the next day.

Dorothy Bentzin.

Saturday 29 March: Amparo Moya & Jim Stone

My day to write. Perfect day for walking in charming **Antigua Guatemala**; a bit overcast in the early morning. I am surprised that we are taking by bus to start our city walk. The walk begins at church of Santo Domingo (founded by Dominican monks in 1542). The town seems to be full of churches, nearly one on each corner if you ask me.

After church we go to a jade factory... next to churches... I will put jade factories/shops as 2nd in line. At about lunchtime some of us have had enough and we disperse. After a quick bite of food in Café Condesa I take a walk about town at my pace. What a gorgeous town this is, its people also very friendly and helpful.

I see a building with one more jade shop as frontage; “la Casa del Jade”. I am ever so glad I went in to have a peek: it has the most relaxing and inviting courtyard I have seen so far; the usual fountain in the middle, this one is modern and pretty. Nice, expensive looking boutique shops around its courtyard. Under the archways and above in the balconies, locals & tourist are sitting at little tables sipping drinks, eating, chatting. Several plaques around the courtyard tell me I am in the 3rd house built in Antigua. Once a University it is now a National Monument and amongst its exclusive boutiques it houses two museums: the ‘Museo de Arte Colonial y Cultura’ on the second floor and the “Museo e Historia del Jade” on the first floor. This building is now called “Casa Antigua El Jaulón”. It still has a fresco painting on the left wall by the entrance to the courtyard pertaining to its original owner: don Pedro de Alvarado (1524). Here he is for all to see. Actually, this painting looks familiar, have I seen it in some art book...??



After a chat with the curator of the jade museum, I am off again. I want to browse in the markets – artesanías and nick-knacks. I feel I am back in Spain or Italy’s markets. I haggle and get few things to take back home with me. I could spend hours in these markets, but I must get back to the hotel –a short distance away.

A little rest and we are off to meet with Jack Leeth. He takes us for a short walk near the hotel to meet some of his neighbours and friends, all Americans, for us to see how they live in La Antigua Guatemala. The first home we see belongs to Mary-Lu. She is an archaeologist and hence her home is chock-a-block with old bits and pieces. One in particular catches my eye: it is an old medieval armour helmet with its rusty mesh and all! Here, have a look, did anyone else see it? Our second home to see was Nathan’s. He is an artist/designer of lead-glass works; needless to say it, he has some beautiful windows and pictures: all being his creations.

The third home belonged to MaryAnn Anderson. Delightful gardens and upstairs terrace with picture views of the volcanoes.

And so on to Jack's own home. We met his very friendly wife. Their home is more a gallery of paintings and works of art: stunning! We all had cheeses and wines aplenty. Gentleman Jack accompanied some of us ladies to, almost, the door of our hotel and a well-deserved rest from a very full and enjoyable day.

Amparo Moya.



We visited some churches. We also visited a jade shop where they told us how jade was made, the different colors and shapes. Also, how they find it in among the other rocks.

Jade is the second hardest stone in the world, diamonds are the hardest.

In late afternoon we went on a Home Tour. We visited 4 spectacular homes, followed by a wine and cheese tasting. After that we had supper at different locations.

Jim Stone.

Sunday 30 March: Mary Anderson & Shirley Schultz

Today was a free day for everyone to do as they pleased. Eight of us opted to hike up the Pacaya volcano. At this time Pacaya is the only active volcano near Antigua. Bleary eyed but ready for adventure we boarded the van at 6 am. The early hour was necessary because it was 1½ hour ride to the trailhead at San Francisco de Sales.

So off we drove through the cobblestones of Antigua, modern superhighway (with even a roundabout) and finally a rough dirt road. Being an early Sunday morning, we passed farmers working the fields, a small church overflowing with worshippers, joggers, bikers with the latest equipment, and bikers on their old transport bikes.

Arriving at the trailhead we were greeted by enterprising youngsters selling walking sticks. With great foresight, not knowing what was ahead most of us purchased them. There is nothing like getting out of the van and starting straight up the hill, no warm-up here!!

No one knew what to expect of the trail but it turned out to be 2½ kilometers up, up, up with an elevation gain of 1312 feet. The trail was wide and in the forest all the way. Exclamations heard were grueling, strenuous, tiring, exhilarating steep, but when we arrived at the point where we could see the fire and lava flow, it was nothing but stupendous. I cannot describe how exciting it was to see the fire and hear the lava and rocks crashdown. Two members hiked to where the actual fire was coming out of the earth.

The heat on the soles of our shoes and in our faces was something to behold. All I could think was that this must be what purgatory is like. What a morning! A wonderful memory with Friendship Force friends.

Mary Anderson.

Today is our free day and everyone seems to be doing their own thing such as: trip to the volcano Pacaya, sleeping in, walking downtown to shop, or to doing absolutely nothing.

Dorothy and I are going to walk to the market. Since she has been to Antigua before, I know this will be an adventure for me.

Just returned from the Artisan Market here in Antigua and it was an absolute blast. Trying out my Spanish, bargaining with the vendors, and enjoying the whole atmosphere.

The Mayan Market across the street was in another category. The mingling of aromas (meat, fruit, vegetables) and sounds (Marimba CD's, automobile horns, motorcycles) were in a class all by themselves. All in all a perfect day.

Shirley Schultz

Monday 31 March: Vicky Mateev & Dave Bentzin

Monday, May 31, 08 is our last day in Guatemala and a wonderful trip is coming to an end. We are in Antigua, the old colonial capital city of Guatemala before it moved to a new "safer" location, and we are leaving by bus around noon to go back for another night in the comfortable Marriott Hotel. Since this morning is still part of a free day many are going to town for last minute shopping – there is always room for a little more in the suitcase and bargaining can be fun. Others are walking to town for a few more perfect shots of this picturesque city.

The bus trip back is rather uneventful but the smell of fresh coffee beans, which we purchased in Antigua, permeates the bus. We are arriving in Guatemala City in the early afternoon and several members of the group decide to visit two known museums in the city, which were closed earlier on our trip. A short taxi ride to the University Francisco Marroquin, which houses the museums, is an adventure. Like all metropolitan cities Guatemala has its share of bumper to bumper traffic, one-way streets and many stop signs rather than traffic lights which make skills and guts a must for any taxi driver. A little prayer for a safe journey may also help.

The "Museo Ixchel Del Traje Indigena" has a collection of very colorful textiles of over a hundred indigenous communities and watercolor paintings of Mayan people in their traditional dresses some of which we have seen when traveling the Highlands. Ixchel was the Maya goddess of fertility and weaving and she must have inspired her people to create these beautiful pieces. For the museum almost no written record exists of Mayan dresses prior to the conquest. The other museum "Museo Popol Vuh" was named for the most famous Maya holy text and it presents extensive pre-Columbian art in chronological order. Very impressive was a sizable collection of funeral urns where human bodies were put in fetal position to fit in. Other items include pre-Columbian stone sculptures and pottery as well as a few religious items from the earlier colonial time. Both museums are very interesting and of course our 2 hour window before closing and the taxis arrival for the return trip is too short to give either museum its due.

A few of us rounding out our day with a delicious dinner and beer at an outdoor local restaurant along Avenida Reforma and enjoying the night scene along the boulevard before turning in for our early morning departure.

Vicky Mateev.

Our last full day in Guatemala is filled with activities in a seemingly desperate bid to pack more memories into our overloaded brain. And yet, the day is metaphor for this Friendship Force trip, and for Guatemala itself.

Rosalie and I awaken in a nice hotel in Antigua serving tourists of many languages: French, German, English. And I saw a Spanish-speaking group leave early this morning. Yes, we have also seen Japanese tourists during our travels. Tourism is the #2 industry in the country and is an increasingly important part of the future of Guatemala. Many of the guides and drivers come from poor agricultural backgrounds. They have moved up to a better life for themselves and their families through education. And, their educated children will be important in the future of the country.

This morning we enjoy another breakfast with fresh fruit before we walk to the market to buy more of the fabulous Guatemalan coffee. Agriculture is the #1 industry in the country. Coffee and sugar are the main exports, but we have seen fields of vegetables, orchards of fruit and nut trees, and greenhouses with flowers and ornamental plants. Several of us go back to Casa Santo Domingo for one fine lunch. This hotel and museum complex in the ruins of a 16th Century convent is a marvelous example of the rebirth of Guatemala. Importantly, this hotel complex was created with Guatemalan money and expertise.



Here we are, Rosalie and me, by the lovely fountain and ruins of one of the gardens of Casa Santo Domingo.

Our early afternoon transfer to Guatemala City goes smoothly thanks to Bill Anderson, our Travel Manager. Guatemala City is the bustling commercial and political heart of the country. The many billboards brightly announcing their products indicate business ties with many countries and cultures, including other Latin countries.

After a quick check-in at the Guatemala City Marriott Hotel, half of our group crowds into taxis for the short ride to the University Francisco Marroquin, the home of two marvelous museums. The Museo Popol Vuh has a fine collection of pre-Columbian artifacts. The displays are “state-of-the-art” with bilingual signs, charts and maps – completely new since I visited three years ago. The Museo Ixchel is a fine study of the history of the textiles and clothing of Guatemala. These displays have also been redone in the past three years.

This evening we join Ramón and Sandy Villareal, our Co-Exchange Directors, in meeting with new Guatemalan friends: Sra. Clelia Zamora, our hostess, and her friends Jaime and Sonia Roche. (Clelia’s son Chema, could not join us because he was in class studying for his MBA!) Bringing Friendship Force to Guatemala has been a wonderful learning experience for all of us.

Dave Bentzin.

And here we are. Picture of the group on our last day together. This is not “adios.”
This I hope is: “HASTA LA VISTA AMIGOS!!!”



EPILOGUE I

We have since learnt that Friendship Bridge called. One of their Highland "Borrowers" is coming to Denver. They are introducing her, and their program to people in the area. Maria is a weaver, and is also one of their Loan Officers helping other ladies in her community. We have arranged for members of the Exchange, and of the club, to meet her on April 19.
(Pic of Friendship Bridge volunteers)

EPILOGUE II

Some of you lucky ones would have arrived at your homes sometime on the 1st of April. Have pity on me. After arriving at my LAX Hotel the staff at Reception gave me a blank stare, only then did it dawn on me; I was using Spanish lingo still... it happens!

I had a good night' sleep and after a light breakfast I was taken to LAX terminal for my flight to Hong-Kong... all 16 hours of it non stop!! On arrival at HK, I had another 4 hours wait for the last leg HK – Adelaide. This was a shorter trip of 9 hours.

I finally arrived in Adelaide, exhausted, late morning on Friday the 4th. The weather was cooler than when I left 2½ weeks earlier, and it had rained!!! What a lovely, beautiful sight rain is when there has been none for months.

And within 24 hours after arrival, Qantas, although I had not used them this trip, had fixed and repaired my suitcase, (broken during Adelaide – Los Angeles travel.) Ah, Qantas!

My summary of this FFI Guatemala Discovery Trip is one of unforgettable camaraderie and fun. Of seeing beautiful scenery, flora and fauna. Also of profound realization of how fortunate we, who live in “wealthy” countries are. Some of the poverty seen has been staggering and overwhelming. One lesson learnt is that these people, the less fortunate ones, seem quite happy with what they have.

I know some of our group is/are coming to Australia for FFI International Conference. I am looking forward to seeing you then. To those unable to make it this year, I hope and wish that you will put Adelaide as your next FF exchange. We in Adelaide Club would LOVE to have you as Incoming Ambassadors. Please do come!!!

Your humble and untrained copyeditor,

Amparo 
