

# Guatemala Log (X)

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## Travel Log

By Cristiana Grigore  
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*Back to the US:* I didn't get much sleep last night. I was up late talking to Alison. Neither of us could fall asleep because of the dampness and the sound of the neighbors' shower, not to mention that all night long we could hear our colleagues pacing around. Guatemala is great, but I miss home (the States, I mean). I pack my bags anxiously. I put on whatever I find that is clean and comfortable, seeing as it's going to be a long day spent in airports.



*Internet Café:* I have just enough time to go around Antigua once more, to buy some knickknacks and stop by an Internet Café. Next to me is a kid engrossed in a video game. There's also a teenage girl who's trying to print out some sheets. I wonder if they're for school. I remember high-school in

Slatina, and how I used to spend the little pocket money that I had in a similar Internet Café. That's how I made friends all over the country, friends that I started writing to and whom I even got to meet years later. I can't forget the way the white letters looked in the darkness of the hallway, when I'd come back from school in the evening; and how excited I was to discover how differently people lived. It was so useful for me to discover there was "a whole world" outside my town! There are situations when an Internet Café is the only way to travel and meet other people. Maybe some of these people are here just to idly surf the internet. That's almost always the case. Maybe some kids even forget to eat or do their homework, their eyes glued to the computer screen. Wouldn't that be sad? Maybe for some of the girls this is a way of finding a husband, in hopes of escaping poverty. Congrats to them if they succeed! Yet, for other people it may represent "the certain something" that would serve as an eye-opener and would motivate them, "the certain something" that would help them realize (and later on find out for themselves) that the world is much larger and more diverse than their small community. And isn't that a wonderful thing?



*Not enough, but that's ok:* On the way to the airport, we talk about how wonderful the trip to Guatemala has been. We look at the photos, we remember the adventures atop the active volcano, we marvel at the tans we got and our bags, bracelets and colorful scarves. Some people would have liked to stay longer, but that's not possible because school starts tomorrow. I tell them that's exactly how I felt when I went back to Romania for winter break. Two weeks were not enough. I tell them this, but also that sometimes it's ok not to have enough. They have a strange and bewildered look on their faces. Their smile has turned American...then more and more faded. What?! What did I say? Is my theory of "not enough, but that's ok" that convoluted? Am

I acting weird? Is it maybe because I'm "in education" and they're "in business"? Or am I just a misunderstood foreign student? Can I get an answer or is it ok to have a ton of questions that nobody is going to answer☺?

*Israel:* The first few days, I thought that Israel and I were the only two foreign students in the group. I find out that, although he was born in Mexico, he has American citizenship. Out of two little Indians, there was only one little Indian left. Blink-blink, that sounds interesting! And it really is! I find out that his parents are separated. He had initially stayed with his mother in Mexico, while his father moved to the States. Then, his mother sent him to the US, to have a better life, but it was hard for her without the kid, so she was happy when she was able to move to the US too, years later. Israel spent his childhood split between school in the States with his father and holidays in Mexico with his mother. I ask him which language he's more comfortable speaking at home. He tells me it's Spanish; it's his mother tongue, the one in which he likes to express himself. To him, English is "the language of opportunity". He seems sad, or maybe he's just tired. He accepts things as they are, even though given the chance, he'd have made different choices. I start thinking about what the process of assimilation into a new culture implies. There is a point when words begin to get mixed up and some traditions clash. And you don't know any more if you're Mexican or American, Romanian or Gypsy; the "absolute" reference points vanish and are replaced by "relative" ones; things aren't in black or white any more, but in shades of gray.



*Similar cultures:* I'm still thinking about what Israel said and I agree there's a difference between the mother tongue and an acquired language. Not to say that Spanish is better than English or Romanian a cut above any other language; it just depends on what you grew up with, what you felt attached to

and what “rings” familiar to you. The Spanish language and the people of Guatemala make me feel closer to Romania than when I’m in the States. The people act in a similar way, the parents seem to be as caring towards their children; and whenever they say “senioriiita” or “casita” instead of “casa” and “ahorita” instead of “ahora”, it goes straight to my heart.



*Foodstuff:* I wasn’t familiar with the type of food they have here. In the States I have access to all kinds of food, but I usually stick to Indian, Chinese and sushi. The food in Guatemala is mostly Mexican. Considering that I’m crazy about avocado, I ate some almost every day. Now I can’t even stand to see it, at least for a few days. The food was good, but too heavy for my taste. Because of the problems they have with the water, we were instructed not to drink tap water and to eat only boiled food. I miss fresh vegetables and I can’t wait to get back to my daily salad. ☺

*Fragments:* The trips, especially the international ones, the time spent in airports are moments “of a different kind” for me. The weariness, alternating between time zones, quickly going from being “airborne” to being “earthbound”, put me into a kind of “zombie mood”. The brain works differently, switching off from the everyday thoughts and plans. I’m reminded instead of various fragments: moments in Guatemala, Romania, the States or other countries. They flash before my eyes like a movie and I wonder what other “fragments” are there to come...

*Coming in flocks:* The school trip turns out to be part of a real “movement”, consisting of other similar trips. Whether it’s another school, church or organization, thousands of Americans (students, but not only) spend their holidays in Guatemala and the neighboring countries, helping to build houses, working with children or getting involved in other works of charity. At the airport, I strike up a conversation with another *Habitat for Humanity* volunteer. He has his own car rental company, but he aspires to more than making money and investing it again. The Miami Airport is overcrowded.

We sit on the floor, trying to get some sleep anyway we can while waiting for planes to take us to different corners of the US. It's funny how similar this is to the situation in Romania: on Sunday, trains coming from all over the country are full of students returning to school. They go to help their parents or grandparents (or just to relax) and come back with their bags full of jars of cabbage rolls and stuffed peppers, cheese and homemade cake. I'm sitting on the floor in an airport and a few years ago I used to sit on top of the luggage (no, not on the jars) on the train, waiting to get back to my dorm in Bucharest. Maybe Americans also feel the need to go to the countryside, maybe for them Guatemala represents, on a bigger scale, the need to "have a countryside", to see something less "technological and city-like" ... so they find such a place in the neighboring countries that need help. "The kids are coming from Bucharest" can be viewed, to some extent, as "the volunteers are coming from America". The next time I go to the countryside, I'll see how I can present this theory to my folks; since they've seen me so willing to volunteer among foreigners, I'm scared they'll get ideas about helping them on the corn field and vineyard.



*Mission accomplished:* I find out that there is a state that exceeds that of "zombie". It's called "blank"... when I don't think about anything any more, I lack the will to even watch TV (either the one at the airport, or the one running in my head). All I want is to get on the plane and get some sleep. It's late in the evening by the time we leave Miami. I make myself as comfortable as I can, get under a blanket and try to fall asleep. I don't hear the usual instructions, nor do I see the flight attendant, whom I usually ask for some tomato juice. I'm not even in the mood to chat to my fellow passengers. I wake up as the plane is landing. It's already midnight. I slept through the whole flight, like I've never done before. The people around me have already started fidgeting, and I'm barely coming awake. I look out the window. It's been raining. The doors open and I get chills; I realize I still have my

sandals on. Looking into the small, dark window dappled with rain drops, I can see that I'm a bit disheveled and sleepy. I sit like that for a few more minutes until it dawns on me that I'm in the musical city of the US and that I've just gotten back from a 10-day trip. I stretch, look out the window and smile....

**Mission Guatemala, of spring 2010, is accomplished! ;)**

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