

# Guatemala Log (VIII)

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## Travel Log

By Cristiana Grigore

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*Vamos a la playa*: Yesterday we finished all our work; we accomplished what we had set out to do and decided to help the school as well. Tonight we have to get to Antigua, but until then we have a free day. We want to go to the beach, which is about two hours away from Guatemala City. We worry about transportation, but Ted and (Victor) Bart let us use the team minibus. We've done a good job so "us kids" get the car to have some fun. The bathing suits, beach dresses, shorts and suntan lotion are the only things we grab from the luggage stuffed in the trunk.



*White Dress*: I can finally put on my beach dress, the one I bought in February from my favorite store in NYC. It's a simple white dress, made of linen, with discreet Indian stitching. I found it at a mega sale and grabbed it in a hurry while I was running to get to an event! I like it a lot. It's delicate and velvety. I carefully sit in the minibus and pay attention so not to stain it with tea; I don't want anything to happen to it on the first wear.



*Black Sand:* We choose to stay on a private beach; I don't care either way, I'd be ok even with going into the wild. Yet, when I find out about tourists that were attacked and shot (in Guatemala you see people everywhere carrying guns), I change my mind. Steve negotiates the price so that we each have to pay only a few dollars. I change my mind even more when I see how the compound looks: there are flowers, palm trees, pools, umbrellas, wooden bridges that connect the different parts of the small paradise. We grab our towels and head for the ocean...I'm left speechless at the sight of a beach with only black sand; sand the color of coal, waves the color of milk foam. There's a strong breeze and the waves are tall. We run towards the ocean, leaving behind our clothes, towels and luggage. I'm dipping my toes into the Pacific for the first time!



*Gone with the wind:* There's a strong wind blowing. I tie my scarf around my chair so it won't get blown away. I lay down my towel, dry my hair, lie back to enjoy the sun and all of a sudden I'm startled. The dress?!? Where did I leave the dress? I look left and right: nothing. I head for the ocean where I remember having left it before going into the water: nothing. I ask my colleagues who are looking at me puzzled. Is it nowhere to be found? I

go to look for it in the direction in which the wind is blowing. My head is spinning. Why me? Why this dress? It could have been any T-shirt or scarf but not the very dress I had hardly got to wear. I walk around like a robot. I don't know if it's a dream or reality. I keep expecting to see the dress at any moment. How could I have not held it close to me? In front of me the sand stretches endlessly, to my right is the ocean, to the left I leave houses and palm trees behind. I have no logical reason to believe that I could get it back, but I keep hoping it will turn up: somewhere in the sand, stopped by some palm tree. I don't know for how long I've been walking around. I've lost track of time. Could it have been 15-20 minutes? The scenery is increasingly wild, the houses progressively farther apart. About 500m ahead, I can see a group of people and I slow down. On the one hand, I feel like going to them, on the other, something is telling me I'd better turn around. I walk a bit more and then stop, the group is heading towards me. I don't know what to do. I can see a sort of "beach motorcycle" (I always forget what it's called) coming from the opposite end. I wave. It's a kid around 16 or 17 years old. I explain to him the story about the "blanca" dress that had been swept away by the wind. He looks at me puzzled and tells me this is "*una zona peligrosa*", and to walk away. I tell him where my colleagues are, I get on the bike and we head back in a hurry. I can't believe how much I had strayed. I thank him in a subdued voice...I didn't find the dress but I was lucky enough to get back safe and sound.



*Swiiiiimming*: The wind is blowing strongly and the sand is much too rough. I'm sad because of the dress but I can't but get used to the idea that I've lost it...We leave the ocean behind and we settle down where there are chairs, a swimming pool and a small garden. We are surrounded by palm trees and flowers. The Latin music and refreshments perk us up. My colleagues are in the pool, doing somersaults and playing around. Although I've been practicing since autumn, I still can't swim. I carefully walk towards where the water is shallower and there isn't the possibility of drowning. Paul is next to me and he's beckoning me to him. Somehow, while I'm splashing around, I start mimicking the movements I did in the pool in the States, but

without any sort of float to aid me. And surprise, surprise: I'm swimming! Swiiiiimming! I've managed to advance in the water more than a meter. Then I sink to the bottom and take some water in. Paul helps me get back to the surface. Although I swallowed a few gulps of water it wasn't all that bad and I got over this fear as well. Anyway, I'm so happy that it doesn't even matter any more. I'd hug everybody, the water, the sky, the telegraph post and the palm trees. I started screaming with excitement; it's like learning to walk once again, seeing one of the wonders of the world and discovering a great secret of life. It's unbelievable that I can finally synchronize my hands and feet and it's unreal how the water feels when I am swimming. Paul helps me practice some more. After a few successful attempts, I get out of the water tired but triumphant.

*Heaven is a place on Earth:* my brain is "buzzing", my legs are shaking and my ears are ringing. It's like I've been through a storm that lifted everything, spun it around and rearranged it. This is how I feel now, as if a mental frame, a pattern that had been set in stone years before, has been restructured. I don't know if what's happening is real, I can't tell who I am any more, what I am doing and where I am. I just want to sit down, so I stretch out in the sun and sit like that, not moving. I'm aware of my breathing; then the sounds around me; I open my eyes and stretch my arms: blue, green, wind, leaves, water, air. I look up and above me there's an umbrella, not like those we see in Vama Veche, but a real one, a palm tree. I watch the leaves swaying, I look at the coconuts and I slowly open a book... Yes, it might just be true and heaven could be a place on earth.



*Antigua:* In the afternoon we leave for Antigua. I get back to the minibus embarrassed; I quickly look for something to put on, still sighing over my white dress. At the hotel, we stay in the same rooms we had before. After a couple of days staying at a luxury hotel, this room seems even smaller, darker and the dampness even more intense. I look at Alison, she looks at me. Yes, it's time to get back to our homes. The good part is that we'll meet up with our other colleagues. I had gotten used to our small group, but I am slowly readapting.

*Festive meal:* Tonight, we're eating at one of the fanciest restaurants in Antigua. We're invited to sit at a big table, especially set up for us, with a white satin table cloth and rose petals. Ta-dah! We look at each other awkwardly. The waiters are wearing the traditional dress. Each group briefly presents what they've achieved. The teachers say some words in turn. We're all grateful for this experience. I like that we have this sort of closing evening. It is virtually a way to show that an experience has come to an end, but I don't think this is the last stage... There is another one, which is more subtle: that of reflecting on what it is we have learned from this experience and how we can share it with others: through talks, interviews, travel logs. I eat my white fish with grape sauce and go out to explore the place. It's actually a restaurant inside a hotel. I idly walk around, look at the décor and sit in a hammock. I go up an exterior staircase and wonder at how the plants and flowers have climbed so high. I leave the bustle and the noise behind. I end up on a terrace from where I admire the clear, starry sky. I take a deep breath and draw in the smell of the flowers. My thoughts drift away. I'm immersed in the quiet. These festivities and celebratory moments are beautiful, but nothing compares to the ever surprising spectacle of nature.

(To be continued...)

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