

Guatemala City

Written Wednesday Feb. 19 – 2020 by Rob Bowyer

Yes I am a tourist. I am also on a mission. I have come to Guatemala to help build stoves. There are roughly 20 of us arriving from frigid Ontario over the next few days. Then we will go up into the highlands that surround Guatemala's second biggest city, Quetzaltenango. And once up in the mountains we will meet the Mayan people who have lived there forever, in villages and communities small and large, old and new, and we will get down to work. A few of the organizers are already in Guatemala. They came early to meet the people and collect information on the many stoves that have been built over the past year.

Not counting the organizers, this particular traveling party of 6 are the first to arrive in Guatemala. We had set our travel plans as such so we would have a few days to acclimatize ourselves to the country and the culture. It is a great idea. I love the idea of hanging out before work.

One slight hitch. Only 4 of us arrive at the Guatemalan airport. Two are left behind in Mexico City. They missed their connecting flight. It is a long story full of happenstance and pathos. I'll skip the details and summarize by saying we are not impressed with AeroMexico. Things being what they are, the two of them did eventually arrive, sans luggage. As it is, there ain't no sense in dwelling on things that go amiss. If I were the type to dwell on my screw ups I'd regret most every day of my life. That's also another long story. Best to leave it alone. For now.

At the exit doors of the airport the surviving 4 of us were on the lookout for a dude that should be holding a sign written in English. 'Stove Project'. We found him and after a semi-confusing conversation held in sign language, broken Spanish mixed in with a few French verbs, and much pointing we follow him out the door to a waiting shuttle bus. A shuttle bus is basically a big van with a whole lot of seats. I quickly learn shuttle buses in Guatemala are usually full beyond capacity. They drive along roads with the sliding side door wide open. People hop off and on willy nilly. Luggage, boxes, tools, crates of live chickens are stored and tied haphazardly in place on the roof. This is not the case for the four of us. Today we travel in spacious luxury.

My first breath of warm Guatemalan air has an aroma thick with floral sweetness. Sounds of traffic and the occasional horn mingle with the cheerful chirping of birds. Colour seems to be everywhere. A blue sky. Trees full and green. Red, orange, yellow flowers. I see butterflies. I'd call this paradise if I were not standing in the midst of a large Central American city.

The colourful contrast to the mostly monochrome uniformity of a Canadian winter is almost overwhelming. Over the past few months I have forgotten the pleasures that come with a Canadian summer, and now, how quickly I accept my new surroundings. Winter was yesterday and already a part of my past.

It is hot but not humid. These are highlands after all. And though one could say we are in the tropics I am told the type of climate that makes your clothes stick to your skin is limited to the Pacific coast. Moisture that wafts in off that vast and rolling ocean stalls when the heavy air masses encounter the volcanic mountain range that traverses Guatemala like a bony spine and divides the country in two.

Guatemala City is the capital. Like Ottawa the population is a million strong but it is said if one includes the surrounding areas the number of people living here soars above 3 million.

Our bus swings through the city. The driver has a heavy foot. Traffic is chaotic. There are more motorcycles and scooters than cars. There seems to be no traffic lights and stop signs. Like ants on a congested path trucks, cars, bikes and the smoke belching chicken buses merge and pass and cut one another off. Movement is continuous. Roads are lined with uncountable vendors and pedestrians who appear to be inches away from the voluminous traffic. Rules? There are no rules. No time for shyness. Just go.

I am wide eyed and laughing with the giddy tickle sensation that comes with the excitement and wonder of

something completely foreign yet unmistakably human . Can this be the same planet I currently live on? Mere minutes have passed and already I have become entrenched in a strange new world in which my sense for the exotic is about to explode and my hunger for adventure is ravenous.

Motorcyclists do not wear helmets. There are two, three, four, five people sardined into the seats of a thousand speeding scooters. Entire families weave through traffic, tiny children sandwiched between parents. They speed along center lanes with careless abandon. I gorge on the thrill of it all and I long to be riding in the midst of this chaotic mayhem. Without a doubt I would be injured or deceased within minutes. It seems worth the risk.

Mr. Heavy Foot pushes the van along what I think might be a highway and soon the traffic thins as we reach the edge of the great city. Up into the mountains we climb. The road snakes and turns as we go and we lean and rock with every motion. I should be tired for I have barely slept in the past 30 hours. But between coffee and excitement I am alert. I am doing my best to engage with what goes on before me.

After an hour, or two, for it is hard to tell, we come to another city. The roads we have traveled have been a continuous line of houses and businesses, except where the mountain sides are too steep to build, so I find it difficult to discern changing patterns. But traffic has congested once again. Of that I am sure.

Without warning pavement turns to cobblestone. The tires click and roar and the van bounces to the cobblestone beat. Streets narrow to alleyways more suitable to horse and buggy. The roads jut confusingly in every direction. The buildings we fly past are solid looking and their exteriors are plastered and painted in a mosaic of colour. Once again there are pedestrians and motorcycles everywhere. We pass churches and park squares, coffee shops, hotels and homes. Some buildings lie in ruins. The van seems to be going in circles. Later I figure out the streets are a maze of one way directions. The van jerks to a halt. We have arrived in Antigua unbeknownst to me.