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## Living among Guatemalan Mayans is fascinating experience

By irene scharf

The author, who lives in Brookline, is Professor of Law, Dean for Clinical Programs, and Director of the Immigration Law Clinic at the Southern New England School of Law in North Dartmouth.

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I have just lived a dream. Five years ago I learned of a school where students of all ages could study Spanish intensively while living among the Guatemalan Mayans. Peace Accords had been signed in 1996, the government was encouraging tourism, and it was, finally, safe to visit.

Why a dream? Because, 25 years ago, when I traveled through Central and South America, I promised my family I would avoid Guatemala because of the perceived war dangers. During that trip, as I met many Europeans and others who had visited, remained safe, and found it a fascinating country, I vowed to visit someday.

So I waited. Peace came, yet I had two young sons and, even as they matured, were not eager to make the trip with me. Nor was my husband, who doesn't much enjoy roughing it. Then, after 17 years of teaching, came a sabbatical. My sons were grown, and my time had come. It was now or never.

I had another reason to renew my Spanish, and to do it in Guatemala. I direct the Immigration Law Clinic at SNESE. About 3,000 Guatemalans live in our area, many refugees from the war who live and work hard among us. Immigration advocates around the country, including our Congressional delegation, support legislation that would provide long-term relief for our Guatemalan neighbors. If this happens, the Clinic will finally be able to help them normalize their immigration status and their lives.

The school I attended, the Bio-Itzá Eco-Cultural Spanish Language School, is located in the remote northeast Petén region, a short bus ride from the famous Mayan ruins at Tikal, and one minute uphill from Lago Peten-Itza, a large, clean, wonderfully tranquil place with water calmly reminiscent of the reflection of Trinity Church in the Hancock Tower. Bio-Itza was an outgrowth of the non-profit Association for the Conservation of the Itzá Biosphere, formed 15 years ago to help preserve a large regional rainforest. Association members soon realized they needed income to achieve their mission of preserving the region's medicinal plants and generating employment for the local Mayan community.

The forestry work, which employs nine local men, provides leaves, roots, and bark to the women, who use these ingredients to make soaps, shampoos, and lotions sold on location and in nearby shops. In addition to employing the Spanish teachers, the school compensates local families who offer home-stays for its students. Income generated from the project has enabled participating families to improve their homes and send their children to school beyond the government-supported six years.

The school has a capacity of 45. Families accommodate vegetarians and other individual needs. My family, in addition to five children and a niece, included a dog with four new puppies, some chickens, a rooster with 11 chicks, and two pigs.

The well-trained teachers use various techniques to impart the language and make learning fun.

Grammar lessons are, of course, incorporated, as is reading aloud and reading comprehension (as my teacher hopes to become a lawyer, our reading was often about Guatemalan history, old and new). A two-hour break for lunch at our "home" follows classes, after which afternoon activities begin. And, while the rest of the week was interesting, enjoyable, and productive, the variety and quality of our activities was the best surprise. The first afternoon we toured the town, and while tiny (2,000 inhabitants), it has all it needs: mayor, post office, stores, school (all grades), public library (one room), a restaurant, a couple of bars, and construction to improve lake-front facilities. The next day we hiked around the largely-unexcavated Mayan ruins of Motul, located nearby in the forest. Several stelae (tall, engraved stone structures dedicated to deceased community members) remain, in various forms of decay. Surprisingly, though, several engravings remain well-defined. On Wednesday came my favorite activity: a fishing trip on the lake. The group included a motley crew of young — other than me — foreigners from Australia, Italy, and the U.S., and a few of the teachers. We embarked in a small lancha, a narrow covered motor boat. Our driver, an elderly man, accompanied us using his voice and harmonica on songs of his own making. For four hours we fished, swam, chatted, and connected in Spanish and English the way travelers do. While the teachers caught enough fish to enjoy a stew that night, few of the students caught anything, but we didn't care.

The Petén region has two seasons, dry and rainy. The dry season spans January through September-October. Even during those months, though, the air is jungle-like — heavy, and warm. Sponsoring families provide fans and mosquito netting for protection, and cooling off in the lake is just a minute away.

Tuition is \$150/week, and includes 20 hours of individual instruction, activities, 7 nights stay near the School, and 3 meals a day. For a few dollars families will do laundry. Internet is available for a small fee, as is transport to and from the nearby sweet town of Flores (international airport).

To reach the school one can either take a comfortable bus from Guatemala City (8 hours) to Flores, capital of the Peten region, for about \$25 each way, hop on a one-hour flight (\$130 round-trip), or arrive from Belize City by bus (\$19, 4 hours). From there transportation can be arranged to shuttle you to Bio-Itzá.

For more information, contact them by e-mail at [escuelabioitza@hotmail.com](mailto:escuelabioitza@hotmail.com) or [bioitza@yahoo.com](mailto:bioitza@yahoo.com), by visiting [www.ecobioitza.org](http://www.ecobioitza.org) or call (502) 7928-8056 and ask for Administrator Paula Sentucun.

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