

Heifer Study Tours

Guatemala

Diary of the Study Tour: Discovering the Cuchumatanes

November 11-November 20, 2008



Study Tour participants, Heifer Guatemala staff and community members of CADIQ

“A Life Changing Experience”,

Bill Bernier, Heifer Study Tourist, Guatemala 2008

Day 1, November 11, Tuesday

Journal Entry:

How strange and wonderful traveling is- one day you're in the thrust of your familiar busy life surrounded by familiar people and places...and poof!...on a plane to a place for you yet to discover in a corner of the world far from your home.



and perspective

Jennifer Edson, Heifer employee

...And here we are together in Guatemala oozing with excitement about what will unfold for us in the next 9 days. Complete strangers in most cases (except of course for the sisters who are lucky enough to experience this together) we have travelled to be on this special trip from all over the United States and even from Canada-- Massachusetts, Little Rock, Arkansas, Chicago, Iowa, Maryland, Kansas City, the state of Washington, Arizona, Connecticut, New Your City, Virginia, and Albany, NY.

I am touched by the purpose of this trip. For me, since I work for Heifer and think about the organization 24 hours a day, I finally get to see some of the beneficiaries of Heifer's great work. I cannot wait to visit projects, to observe what it means to lend a helping hand and build for sustainable futures and to look in the eyes of Heifer recipients. I know I will be changed humbled by this trip but don't know yet how. I welcome this shift in and hearing from the group what changes they are experiencing as a result of visiting Heifer projects. Together, as a small community of North Americans, we've come to this place to experience something deep,

poignant, and memorable. I know I will cherish this and being with each one of you... then in 9 days we can go back to our busy lives and familiar surroundings- yet changed in a significant way and maybe we'll look at our world's differently and become individual forces of change for making this world a better place...

Just because...

*Just because we saw through Heifer's work that it can be done! **Jennifer Edson***

Day 2, November 12, Wednesday

Journal Entry:

*Development is a challenge. We haven't even seen a project yet, but we have discussed the many ways that projects can fail. I am looking forward to seeing efforts that are working to overcome these challenges! **Dawn Bowen***

Journal Entry:

*We were fortunate to have an unexpected treat on today's travel- a visit to the ruins of Iximché to observe a portion of a ceremony there. What fun that we could sing Happy Birthday to Rob's daughter, Ruth. Tonight we met Guillermo, the Heifer technician for this area who will be our guide tomorrow. **Judy Capen***



Iximché, the precolonial capital of Kaqchikel territory, Tecpan, Chimaltenango.

Day 3, November 13, Thursday

1st project visit

Journal entry:

Could this be Thursday already? A day to and up in the mountains, roadsides littered with flowers. Dahlias, Rob, our guide, says, are not only a gift to our eyes but food for women (the leaves contain iron), even the flower itself is edible. I hope I'm correct about this! The project's wonderful welcoming men and women who explained to us (the men did) and those from another community about silage, composting with manure and red worms which also make manure. We saw an amazing contraption that shredded oats and watched the sheep eat some while the rest was bailed up in black plastic with all the air pressed out so it would not ferment and spoil. Then we walked through oat fields and over hill and dale to the pine tree farm which prompted questions about mono-culture. What a blessed day, and I realized that there is so much more to learn about this country, its people and Heifer's work.



Men in Capellania shred oats by machine

Project name: Integrated Family Farm Committee Project

Project number: 23-0608-02

The Integrated Family Farm Committee consists of 16 families from three communities—Casco Chancol, Capellania, and Climentoro. These communities began working together in 1986 as part of the larger “Los Cuchumatanes Committee for Livestock Development.” This original organization included over twenty communities that were interspersed throughout the Cuchumatanes highlands of Western Guatemala. In the winter of 1997, with Heifer’s support, the Cuchumatanes Committee completed a livestock project that improved the nutrition of 320 participating families. These families received goats, wool sheep, hogs, or fish. During the last several years of the project, some communities adopted soil conservation and water retention practices while organizing their own tree nurseries, with special attention given to planting nitrogen-fixing trees for forage.

After the Cuchumatanes project ended in 1997, these three communities requested to continue working with Heifer Guatemala. After several meetings, a decision was made by this group of 16 families to conduct an in-depth socioeconomic study of their farms. During the study, the families visited each others’ farms to familiarize themselves firsthand with what each was doing to increase crop and forage yields, decrease soil erosion and water runoff, and improve their sheep raising methods.

Day 4, November 14, Friday

2nd project visit

Journal entry:

Today we travelled to an area the bus couldn't navigate so our group was divided into a minibus and a pickup, some actually standing in the back as we journeyed along on a rutted, bumpy, dusty road amidst indescribable mountain scenery.

We arrived at the Ojo del Agua Community Project. We are greeted by women and their daughters dressed in traditional attire. Their blouses are embroidered in brilliant colors, dominantly red. Many of them have heavy lace that is as white as white can be. These are separate from the dark woven skirts. Some have a woven rolled head piece intertwined with their jet black hair. These are Maya women, and speak two languages, Spanish and Acateco. In 1999, this group of women began to organize with the help of a Peace Corp volunteer. In 2002, contact was made to Heifer for financing to help improve their sheep. Women from Habitat Cooperative of Aguacatan were here to observe the “passing on the



Travelling in style...in the back of the pickup



The proud women of Ojo de Agua

the rope to lead Pandarita. This participating experience was emotionally moving. What joy there is in knowing Maria's family will prosper with the addition of this animal. We all moved to the veranda expressing our gratitude for the opportunity to be here today. Back at the cross, tamales and mutton soup are blessed. We commune over lunch. The women's president said, "We want to share the fruits of our labor." Following lunch, we walked a short distance to see one of the women's sheep and goats. It was time to leave this special place. My heart will always be with the women of Ojo de Agua. Terri Whitehurst

Project Name: Raising Goats and Rabbits in Ojo de Agua Community Project
Project number: 23-0607-02 and 23-0101-02

This project will support 20 families located in the village of Suj, Ojo de Agua, municipality of Aguacatan, Department of Huehuetenango. The animals will support the consumption of animal protein as well as organic material that will be used in the crops. The families will receive training in agricultural and livestock techniques in order to promote a sustainable integral farm.

This group of women formed around the method of communal banks, which was managed by the Habitat Cooperative of Aguacatan. This cooperative strengthened grassroots work using Peace Corps volunteers. In November 2003, the group was taken to visit the project "Development of Integral Farms executed by "Agro Aldea Paraiso" in Nebaj Quiche. After this visit, the group was motivated to start working in their own community, and the first trainings in rabbit healthcare were quickly implemented. After this, arrangements were established with the Mayan Women Alliance from Ixtahuacuan who "passed-on" 10 female rabbits to the group.

Because the Ojo de Agua group was so successful, they were chosen to receive a pass-on of sheep from the Tunayac project. Ojo de Agua has already started to pass-on sheep to others within their community.

Day 5, November 15, Saturday

Journal entry:

This day was mainly devoted to travel. Wow!! Have we traveled? In four days we have gone a modest 350 miles on the ground, but we have ascended Mount Everest in the vertical dimension, having climbed 31,000 feet (about 6 miles) – up to 10,000 foot to our first site, to 8,000 feet at our second site, and back to 5,000 feet at Lake Atitlan today- essentially the same elevation we started at in Guatemala City.



Lake Atitlan, the most beautiful lake in the world!



The view west from on top of the Cuchumatanes

Today we saw magnificent landscapes as we went from Huehuetenango to San Cristobal for a rest stop, and then to Panajachel for a spectacular view of Lake Atitlan (described by Aldous Huxley as “the most beautiful lake in the world, or so says Frommer’s *Guatemala*), over 10 miles wide and edged with magnificent volcanic cones. **Keith Harries**



Shared worship and giving

Day 6, November 16, Sunday

Journal entry:

On the first day, Alice asked why I had come to Guatemala. I said I didn’t know—Guatemala had just called out to me and I came to find out why. So, here I am, a pilgrim open to whatever Guatemala wanted to offer to me on this, my first spiritual journey on “foreign” soil.

We are half-way through this trip and I already have enough to reflect upon to guide me for a very, very long time.

It’s Sunday. My worship this morning is sitting at the edge of Lake Atitlan with Imeldia, Melisa, Maria, Jesus, and Brenda sitting quietly (really!) by my side watching me write. I’m thinking about Rob’s story of how and why the mountains were created, and I reflected upon all the sounds, the view, the children around me, the wind, the communities we have visited—things I don’t have words to describe but are resting in my heart. I feel connected to something I don’t understand and I’m reminded that we, and all of creation, are a word spoken by god.

Sunday evening, Rob’s story about the history of Guatemala nearly sent me over the edge, but he left us with a reminder that “You can cut the flowers but can’t keep the spring from coming.”

May we all continue on our life journeys seeing with the eyes of our heart and believing in the hope of our eternal spring. **Deb Cooper**



Empowered with knowledge, women take control of their destiny

Day 7, November 17, Monday

3rd project visit

Journal entry:

A very heartfelt thanks to each and every one of you on this trip. I have gleaned a gem of inspiration from each and every one of you... and for that I am so grateful **gracias**. But of course, it is also about the people of Guatemala. About their individual stories, their pain, suffering, tenacity, stoic faces, and undying hope for a better tomorrow. This is what I will remember. I think I have been most awe struck by the power of the women. Individually, and as a community, coming together to support one another (be it as a result of their husbands being killed in the war), and the concept that two is better than one. We are such a “me” society in North America and I think this power of people coming together for a common cause is something

we have lost. It is something I miss in Canada.

Having just been introduced to Heifer International, I am very impressed. Their cornerstones are in alignment with my own principles. As a participant on this trip representing Elanco, I am so privileged. There is so much opportunity to work together as individual citizens, and in an NGO/Corporate relationship.

Keep up the great work Heifer. A very very special thanks to Oliver, Rob, Dale, Guillermo, Maria and of course... Rigoberto. I have never met such a bus driver so patient and calm.

Thank you all for the great memories. **Marta Haley**

Project name: Sololá Cattle and Honeybee Project

Project number: 23-1300-01

This project, through the Association of Organic Coffee Producers of the department of Sololá (APOCS), will support 143 families of small coffee producers from seven communities in the Lake Atitlan watershed. The project will improve the economic and nutritional situation of families through the diversification of agricultural production and the production of organic fertilizer for use on their land, with the goal of improving organic coffee production. The project will support their implementation of a sustainable coffee system that will also improve family income levels. Project activities will begin with the distribution of one bull for 31 families and two beehives for another 25 families through revolving funds administered by APOCS. Additional families will benefit through the passing on the gift.

The project is funded by Heifer's corporate partner, Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, a specialty coffee company that supports fair trade and organically produced coffee, purchased conventional coffee from APOCS members in 2003, and plans to increase its purchases of conventional and organic coffee production in the future.

Day 8, November 18, Tuesday

4th Project visit

Journal entry:

Throughout the study tour, we saw projects at various stages of Heifer support. I've noted, however, that all of Heifer's Cornerstones are obvious in every single project.

Guatemala quote: "A flower that is blooming is like a candle that is lit."

Project Name: Cattle and Agroforestation Project for Hillside Farming in Quiche,

Project Number: 23-1313-02

This two-year project is a partnership between Heifer International and CADIQ (Coordinator of Integral Development Associations of Quiche) to increase food security for 370 indigenous and mestizo farmer families in the townships of Sacapulas, Uspantan, San Andres Sajcabaja and Santa Cruz del Quiche. Families in this region are currently facing food insecurity, low incomes, degraded lands and poor environmental conditions. Under the project, 155 original families will receive 60 dairy cows, 190 meat sheep, eight rams, 1,540 fruit saplings and materials for cattle handling. An additional 215 families will benefit from "passing on the gift." The project will enable families to strengthen their knowledge and skills regarding organic agricultural production and environmental conservation; 16 agriculture and livestock promoters (2 from each association) will be trained to replicate the model.



Morning tea in the community



Heifer cornerstones provide and compliment knowledge and motivation

Day 9, November 19, Wednesday

5th project visit

Journal entry:

*...peoples honesty, transparency, excitement and work ethic, intelligence, self esteem and pride in their community—was absolutely the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. They were the very definition of "internal beauty" shining through and seeing this internal beauty was the most exciting part of this tour for me. I didn't understand the words of their language without an interpreter, but I could see the Hope, Faith, and Love in their beautiful faces. **Deb Cooper***

Project Name: Improvement of Food Security in 12 Kaqchikel's Communities

Project number: 23-1308-02

This project will improve food security for 510 families (300 originals and 210 through passing on the gift) in 12 rural communities through production of medicinal plants, environmental conservation and the use of appropriate technology. It will provide hens, 50 water filters, 165 improved stoves and technical assistance. It will also establish 300 vegetable and medicinal plant nurseries and a revolving fund.

Journal entry:

*So typical of Heifer Study tours—A Life Changing Experience
But, there was something more with this one, things were brought into context with Rob Cahill's and Oliver Rogers' being able to relate the communities of Guatemala of today with the tragic past of 36 years of violence.*

*It was a unique experience in many ways. **Bill Bernier, Worcester, MA***

Journal entry:

I was here some 44 years ago. The most exciting change I observed are the Mayan women who participate in Heifer projects. No more flat affects or scurrying off to the shadows. These women have found strength in spite of the terror of war they lived. I saw smiles, hope, and eagerness to learn and share. A "we can do attitude". These women stood with dignity, self respect and pride in their community.

The women exhibited pride in being Mayan by wearing traditional textiles, whereas the men shed their Mayan clothing during the violent years in a life saving effort to hide. Only in one tourist store did I spot the traditional Mayan men's jacket. The trauma of war lasts a life time for many. There is still much work to be done to encourage women and men to share ideas and training equally.

*We were privileged to be included at the passing of the gift as well as observe a variety of Heifer Projects to develop sustainable solutions to hunger, poverty and a peaceful future for Guatemala.
This was a memorable trip which I will continue to reflect on. **Jane H. Peters***



Guatemalan women, proud of their past, take control of the future through the practice of integrated organic farming techniques

Journal entry:

Along with overwhelming beauty, I also experienced a deep sadness. In preparation for this trip, I read about Guatemala's history, violence, poverty and mistreatment of the Mayan people. At the Ojo de Agua community, I looked at the women in the cooperative and their children and thought that they are just like us. They must have the same desires and hopes that we have to be able to live in peace and to be able to feed their children and to be able to buy medicine when their children are sick. It brought tears to my eyes to imagine how unjustly they have been treated. They deserve the dignity of being able to take care of their families. I imagined people in this community or other communities in neighboring mountains that have children who go hungry when the corn runs out and may die for the lack of a \$10 or \$20 medicine to treat an illness that would be easily treatable in the US.



The next generation, Guatemala's hope and future

Even now, three weeks later, these thoughts still bring a tear to my eyes.

Since coming back to Kansas City, I have talked about Guatemala, subsistence farming, hunger, violence, and the work of Heifer to several groups and to about anyone who seemed to be interested. As we were educated on the trip, I feel that I am able to do something positive by passing on what we learned. Our group's donation to a four year project in Guatemala also gives me something to look forward to. We cannot solve the world's problems, but we can do something that will help someone to be able to take care of themselves. My wife asked why I said that this trip was very emotional for me. Hopefully, putting my thoughts down in writing will help explain it. But, you had to be there to really understand. Thank

you for "listening" and sharing a very important trip. Hal Havens



The next generation, Guatemala's hope and future

**Story and photos by Oliver Rogers
Communications Official,
Heifer Guatemala
February, 2009**

Original story compiled by Dale Perkins, 2008 Guatemalan Study Tour leader, from actual journal entries of study tour participants.