

Memories of El Salvador

By Wayne Ng

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I live to travel. To me there is no greater learning, no deeper experience, no richer memory. I say this without having truly travelled in anyway but as an independent backpacker off the beaten path. Yet for all the places I'd visited, I knew I could only taste a morsel of what life was for people who'd opened their homes to me. I knew I was missing something.

As a social worker with what I thought was a reasonable sense of the world, with some understanding of development issues, I'd rarely been able to combine and nurture my sense of social justice and love of adventure.

As a traveler, my research on El Salvador showed there really isn't much out there for traditional tourist travel. The Mayan ruins are more impressive; the beaches softer; and the rainforest denser just about everywhere else. And it's safer just about anywhere else. But we were not just tourists. We were visiting as part of a development and peace mission and stayed primarily in rural, out of the way destinations. When I say we, I mean a group of teachers from my school board, and a prof from a local community college. Travelling with people is in itself a challenge for me. This hombre doesn't ride shotgun nor gear down for anybody but my partner. If you met her, you'd understand.

Anyway, we hooked up with our Salvaide guide and driver who took us to a village called La Pita, in San Vicente. The muddy, lowland coastal plain isn't particularly eye-catching. But if you peel away the dusty layers, you will find hard working, honest people, far more resilient and genuine than we ever will be. Yes, abject poverty is unmistakable, but any economic deficits are easily made up in spirit.

The same can be said about the village of San Jose Los Flores in the province of Chalatenango, up in the northern hills bordering Honduras. Like San Vicente, this is a politically left wing area devoid of any apparent government presence or investment. The rampant garbage, the cratered roads, and the lack of any disaster relief all suggest indifference on the part of then ruling ARENA party to those who think differently.

Very often we hear people speak of community, of solidarity, of working together. These are nice buzzwords meant to stir the soul and rally the masses. But in Chalatenango, this has saved their lives. Much of the community was emptied and massacred during the war, including many children. Nevertheless, people returned, re-built and can say with a straight face, they are happy. The schools are poorly equipped and staff under-trained by western standards. But the kids smile the same way.

The current challenge in the community is a Canadian gold mining company that has been granted rights to dig out much of the surrounding area. In return they've been promised the North American dream of money and happiness to follow—as if. This area may someday have more tourist potential. The hills are beautiful, bumming around would be dirt cheap, and locals are as friendly as they come. But there isn't even so much as a cabana anywhere and eating isn't exciting.

By contrast, there are the western highlands, specifically the provinces of Sonsonate and Santa Ana and the town of Juayua in the Ruta de las Flores. You can assume these are government friendly neighbourhoods, not just because of the political slogans supporting ARENA, but because there is garbage collection, fewer mangy dogs, tree-lined streets, newly-painted buildings, and some semblance of order. Such developments allow for tourist infrastructure. But there are also drunks sleeping on the street.

Everyone talks about the dangers of the capital city San Salvador – “murder capital of the world”. Personally, I never felt threatened, but I did not travel in dodgy areas or far away from our hotel at night. I enjoyed the lack of typical tourist amenities, like a Starbucks or behemoth tour buses. Instead, the local buses are a cheap treat, especially when traveling salespeople and musicians ply their trade onboard.

Outside of San Salvador at San Andres are modest Mayan ruins that represent a whole different side of El Salvador. The ruins are quiet and peaceful and the grounds are immaculately kept. This is in total contrast to the controlled chaos of the polluted jungle of the capital and the dishevel of the other rural communities.

Juayua is in coffee growing plantation country, surrounded by lush greenery, waterfalls, hot springs and decent eateries. It's probably as close to a backpacker destination outside of the surfing as there is. Indeed the only few gringos in all of El Salvador were there.

A real bonus was meeting Carlos, who runs a successful restaurant in the area, and his mom. This was a chance to share some time with different faces of El Salvador. Yes a middle class exists. Yes one can be successful and have ambitions fulfilled there. And no, making money is not obscene nor an anti-left statement. Carlos offered to take us to a local beach and to a private hot springs, such was his hospitality, but sadly we had other plans.

The beach at La Libertad is rustic, coarse with rocks, but real. No manicured white sand, no village of hammocks and cabanas. Instead surfer dudes, local fisherman with hand sewn nets in knee deep water, women balancing firewood on their heads, young local couples sneaking out for a bit of nooky, and, of course, guards with single barrel shotguns.

This juxtaposition is intriguing. How far will one travel for a genuine, authentic Latin American experience? How much is grinding poverty and a limited future but a real community worth holding onto, versus the glitz and plasticity of the worse of western values and lifestyle?

To answer this as a traveler, exploring a rare world bereft of the behemoth tour buses and fast food chains is like breathing mountain air after years in a coal mine. But as a local living with limited opportunities, I know what my answer would be. However, it took me months to figure it out. And as simple as it may seem, it is that it's not for me to speak for them. We western do-gooders, driven by a charity, save the world point of view have managed to delude ourselves into believing we have the heart, therefore we have the answers.

I've learned this arrogance has done more harm than good, that the best we can do is be part of sustainable, equitable development, that we can share the taxi but not be the driver and operate the dispatch. El Salvador and this type of development and peace experience helped me understand that the most worthwhile and meaningful I can do, is to unravel such egocentrism.

Despite having already backpacked through dozens of countries, this trip was a poignant and life altering experience. The country and its people were instrumental in my re-evaluation of international development, social and economic justice, and the role we play in it.

In practical terms, as an employee of a school board I see opportunities to assist in the development of educational infrastructure. Not just to send money and materials, while that is needed, it isn't sustainable or driven and directed by locals. My dream is to share my Board's resources, skills and abilities in special education and specialized student services with our compadres in San Jose Los Flores. They clearly have identified the need, we have the resources. To be able to participate in this type of sustainable initiative is capacity building and empowering. Furthermore, it sets aside the treadmill of charity that while may make us feel good, serves us and not them, and ultimately perpetuates the inequality we so would never tolerate in our own families and communities.

So set aside the tourist brochures, leave your hair dryer behind, and feel community. Get involved with hope. And do it in a group, it's way more fun.