

Guatemala... A Journey of Discovery...A Taste of Humanity

By Juan Carlos Rivas

I take pictures of every place I visit.

I love how photography can capture moments that reveal something about people. It also allows me to share with others not only my experience but also my feelings.



Captivated by color and texture, I snapped images of the ancient gorgeous handmade dresses worn by women in the marketplace and the magnificent architecture of La Antigua.

stereotypes is not only that they are often untrue but also that they are incomplete pictures of people, places and cultures.

Ultimately, I realized on this journey that my challenge went beyond snapping a good photo. The real challenge for me was to let go of my



preconceived ideas and to let myself be embraced by a culture that didn't care if my pictures were good or not but cared rather for truly sharing with me the feeling of being connected and part of a community. It was a taste of humanity much deeper and larger than I had imagined before.



I went to Guatemala for a week with a student group from the University of California. We served as volunteers in a community near by the rural town of San Martin Jilotepeque. We worked together with the community

However, as the week went on I realized how difficult it actually was to convey the incredible experience I had, immersed in a culture so rich and complex. I was left with questions. How do I take a photo that conveys the humble pride of Don Gabriel showing us his home and his water spring or introducing us to the 11 children he is raising? How do I capture the emotional experience of hearing Juan Osorio recount the ordeal of his 23-day journey with a migrant smuggler to the United States? How do I photograph the struggles, the bonds, and the determination of the community that hosted us?

Juan Carlos Rivas was born in Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico, and has coordinated international travel and education programs with youth for more than 11 years. His passion for life and learning is contagious, and we are excited he has joined Via International as the new Outreach and Education Director.

We also visited La Antigua and enjoyed various presentations and discussions with community members on regional topics including migration, sustainability, development, and history.

Sure, I took a picture of us carrying water up the hill for what seemed like forever. I did not, however, photograph 8-year-old Victor Manuel teaching me about personal responsibility by making many more trips up the hill every day to bring water to his family. Of course, I took a picture of the 20 community men who volunteered to build the playground with us, but what the picture doesn't say is that they gave up a day and a half of pay and sacrificed the ability to buy food for their families simply because

To view more photos of our Guatemala Voluntours, visit our photo galleries online at www.facebook.com/ViaInternational

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So, there I was in Guatemala, a place I knew very little about. Yet, as I was taking my first photo, I was curious and imagining a sense of similarity with the culture where I grew up in Southern Mexico. Yet, I had no idea what was in store for me.



their sense of community comes first.

With every photograph I took, though, I found myself more and more fascinated. Lush forests, canyons, and waterfalls, as well as Mayan villages, ruins, and volcanos greeted me. Not only did the beauty of Guatemala's rich and diverse environment enchant me, but I was also inspired by the beauty, warmth and openness of the people.

If a stereotype is a "mental picture or image that generalizes a group of people," I found myself breaking my stereotype of Guatemala with every picture I took. The problem with

I soon realized, as any visitor quickly discovers, Guatemala is a photographer's dream!



Photos by JC Rivas, Via International

- 1) Victor Manuel and Juan Carlos Rivas during Guatemala Voluntour
- 2) Camera Shy? Local volunteers from Mayan village of La Cuchilla
- 3) Weaving cloth in La Antigua
- 4) Carrying water in the Guatemalan highlands
- 5) Local volunteers and University of California San Diego students mix cement for community work project

