

## ***Gorgeous Guatemala***

***September 2016***

My excitement was running in high gear as I prepared myself and my instruments for my first ever trip to Guatemala. I had been to Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and all over México, but only heard and read enticing reports from Guatemala. Thanks to an invitation from friend and colleague, Richard Hagstrom, DDS, I was about to see it with my own eyes!

La República de Guatemala, along with Belize, are the most northern countries of Central



America, and border México to the north and west. The territory of Guatemala once formed the core of the Mayan civilization, which extended across Mesoamerica. Most of the country was conquered by the Spanish in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, becoming part of the vice royalty of New Spain.

Guatemala attained independence in

1821 as part of the Federal Republic of Central America, which dissolved in 1841.

The name, “Guatemala,” comes from the Nahuatl word Cuauhtemallan, or “place of many trees.” It is the most populous state in Central America, with an estimated population around 16 million. It is a heavily forested and mountainous nation, with Pacific coast lowlands in the south that rise to the volcanic Sierra Madre and other highlands, then descending to the forested northern lowlands, including the narrow Caribbean coast. A representative democracy, Guatemala’s capital and largest city is Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción, also known as Ciudad Guatemala, “Guate,” or Guatemala City, boasting over 1 million inhabitants.

From 1960 to 1996 (36 years!)

Guatemala endured a bloody civil war fought between the US-backed government against leftist rebels, including massacres of the Mayan population. Since a UN-negotiated peace accord, Guatemala has seen both economic growth and successful democratic elections, though it continues to struggle with high rates of poverty, crime, drug trade, and instability.



Guatemala’s abundance of biologically significant and unique ecosystems includes a large number of endemic species and contributes to Mesoamerica’s designation as a biodiverse hotspot. This country is also known for its rich and distinct culture, which is characterized by a fusion of Spanish and indigenous influences. There are over 50 living languages listed for Guatemala, of which 23 are recognized as National Languages. Even though Spanish is the official language, there are 23 dialects, many of whom speak no Spanish, making our



work in the highlands of Alta Verapaz challenging, most speaking Q'eqchi'. However, 93% of the population speak Spanish, either as their first or second language. 74.5% of the population 15 and over, are illiterate, the lowest literacy rate in Central America. Riding back to the hotel from the Mercado Central, the taxi driver told me he had completed 3 years of school, before he had to start working to help support the family. He further explained that if he worked a long 10-hour day, he could take home \$10 USD on a good day, something we have difficulty comprehending.

Our mission was to travel to the highlands of Alta

Verapaz, taking about 12 hours in buses our first full day, with many interesting sights along the way. We were based at a training center in the community of Chinaasir in the Chulac area, called Sikaab'e, where those interested local inhabitants can come, stay, and be trained.

We traveled a few minutes each day, over to

the hospital, Nueva Concepción Senahú, where our portable clinic was set up. Rampant

dental disease with destroyed mouths was a common presentation, though some patients only needed a restoration. The heroic dentists of the group were Roy Hammond, DDS, who performed some bridge procedures on the spot, using gold wire and resin to replace missing anteriors; and Richard Hagstrom, DDS, who took care of endodontics, when there was need for a critical tooth.



The most severe case I saw was a 14 year old boy, from whom we removed 12 destroyed and necrotic remnants of teeth. With lack of operatory chairs we take for granted at home, some worked standing up, and our backs paid for it later. For the many patients who spoke no Spanish, we used interpreters to tell us in Spanish what the patient was saying. And as usual with needy groups, the patients were full of gratitude for their almost free service, the hospital charging a mere 25Q (Quetzales, or \$3.50 USD) for each patient irrespective of what they needed. Joining our group of providers were three recent graduates of the Universidad San Carlos dental school, with their impressive skills and tireless effort. Our reward each day returning to our rooms, in addition to the



affectionate gratitude from the patients, was the delicious regional food prepared by incredible local chefs at the center.

After a beautiful recognition/farewell ceremony, including fireworks, we traveled back to civilization for R&R on the Río Dulce, and back to “Guate,” for our return home, with warm hearts and great memories, and a wonderful taste of Guatemala to take back with us.

We all again realized it’s not about the teeth, it is about people’s lives; it was about lives being changed, and in particular, ours certainly were. Another facet when helping internationally, is that one needs a strong serving of flexibility to adjust to unexpected circumstances, in our case a landslide from incessant rain which blocked our travel route, causing a detour with several extra hour’s delay. Often we get stuck in the routine of working to accumulate more things, so a mission in giving to those who really need it will energize one to view the things that are really important in life more than the material, and combat the burnout many experience. We believe our goal was met in giving to these dear people our love and caring, going beyond what is necessary in life to help and feel the inexplicable reward of giving without expecting in return. But as usual, I believe I received more than I could ever give. As I have heard said, “People don’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care.”

Many thanks to our sponsoring non-profit organizations: Crown Council, Choice Humanitarian, Smiles for Hope, Esperanza International, and Smiles for Life.

My sincere thanks to friend and colleague, Dr. Rick Hagstrom, for inviting me and making it possible for me to enjoy my first visit to this unique country. Also to Dr. Roy Hammond and the group of giving people from Utah. Thank you for your hard work and your giving spirit, working with you was a blessing to me.



Ronald E. Fritz, DDS, MPH

A blog about the adventure:  
[www.teresalarsen.blogspot.com](http://www.teresalarsen.blogspot.com)

