UVA in Guatemala Reflection

It was 5 am my first morning in San Lucas Toliman, Guatemala. I climbed stairs passed the rooms of my sleeping UVA and Guatemalan friends to the top floor of our hostel. And I stood, mesmerized by the gorgeous view of Lake Atitlan. The sight of the early sun climbing the volcano steeps, the mixed sounds of chirping birds and barking dogs, and the cool feeling of the foggy, morning air on my skin was an incredible start to an unforgettable two weeks.

Each day of the UVA in Guatemala program was jam-packed with unparalleled memories and lessons. Our group of 30 students and instructors started each morning by standing in a circle and sharing personal stories and goals. We then walked together towards the banks of the Lake Atitlan for a hot breakfast of beans, tortillas, fresh watermelon juice, and eggs taken from the farm that morning. Some days, Jessica, a leader in the UVA-Guatemala Initiative (UVA GI), taught a lesson on the Guatemalan healthcare system. Other times, we had a guest speaker tell us about the influences of American missions on education in San Lucas Toliman. On my favorite days, we took tours led by San Lucas natives. We visited the beautiful white church built by Father Gregory, the lakeside where people were bathing and washing laundry, and the colorful cemeteries. With each tour and lecture, we learned about the rich and complex history of Guatemala, and the ways in which Guatemalan and US social infrastructures resemble and differ.

The afternoons involved traveling throughout neighboring cities and towns. Walking on foot, we went to the medical center of San Lucas and engaged with the doctor of the town. With a 30-minute boat ride, we crossed the shimmering Lake Atitlan to the tourist town of Panajachel. Here, we walked deep into the town, past the shoreline markets, past clusters of homes, to the local wastewater treatment plant. Engineers walked us through the details of how they took old, abandoned infrastructure and transformed it into a functional plant. Other days, we stood on the back of pick up trucks and cruised along the curving mountainside roads to community developments. Many families graciously opened their homes to us and showed the biosand filters provided by UVA GI for clean drinking water.
Halfway through our time in Guatemala, we moved our base from San Lucas Toliman to Xela, a historic and bustling city in the western highlands. On our way there, we stopped at a camping resort in Huehuetenango. In the day, we scaled Mayan ruins, explored caves, relaxed at a mountaintop cafe (we could see Mexico from up there!) and, for some good fun, played a lot of basketball. In the evenings, the UVA students taught our new Guatemalan friends about s’mores as we sat around a campfire.

Xela showed us a very different and exciting part of Guatemala. Many of the Guatemalan students were very thrilled to teach us about their hometown. During free time, Irene, a student studying nutrition in Xela, showed us the artwork she painted along alleyway walls throughout the city. All of the students went to markets and malls and ate incredible amounts of pastries from the famous bakery, Xela Pan. During our days around Xela, we went to coffee and rubber plantations, hospitals, textile mills, a chocolate house, and more places to continue to understand how the country operates. UVA Professors Kent Wayland and Eric Anderson taught us about the Guatemalan Civil War and led us through reflective discussions on discrimination in the US and Guatemala. After long and eventful days, our cohort sat in a circle back at the hotel and reflected on all we had learned. My Guatemalan roommate, Yossie, and I would stay up for hours after this to laugh and share stories about our lives at home.

The last evening in Guatemala City made for a difficult day because it was so hard to say goodbye to incredible friends made over the past two weeks. After the final hours of games and chatting, my friends and I sat to watch the beautiful sunset against the volcanoes lining the city. All of the students hugged and said our farewells before sleeping to depart early the next morning. I came into this trip with little knowledge or connection to Guatemala, and I left with rich fulfillment and deep love for Guatemala.

~Rawan Osman, SEAS 2022~
Guatemala