

HAITIAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION
Willingness, Know-How, Resources

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"FROM THE MOUNTAINS TO THE SEA"
From Charity to Development



In the land of volcanoes, a Haitian in Guatemala

In 2024, the Haitian Medical Association Abroad (AMHE) convened its annual fifty second scientific meeting in Guatemala. Upon landing at La Aurora International Airport in Guatemala City, we boarded a bus and journeyed to the picturesque village of Conacaste in Puerto de Iztapa, where we stayed at the all-inclusive Oceana Resort, offering stunning views of the Pacific Ocean.

Driving along the 120 kilometers highway for approximately 2 to 3 hours, from 1500 meters to sea level, two sights particularly caught my attention. All the green and densely wooded mountains of the Nahuatl Cuauhtēmallān (place full of trees) displayed, and according to our guide, about 200 distinct microclimates, easily recognizable to the naked eye. I also saw several significant volcanoes from the road, two of them active. A bit of suspense to liven up the journey!

Looking back in the rearview mirror of time, during my years as a student at the Faculty of Medicine of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, I relived my 1968 trip from the highlands of 2240 meters in Mexico City to the shores of Acapulco, in the state of Guerrero. To my left, dominating the Valley of Mexico, were two volcanoes, according to Nahuatl legend, the princess Iztaccíhuatl, "the sleeping woman," and the warrior Popocatepetl, "the smoking mountain," seemingly eternally trapped in a loving embrace. Xóchilt, a Guatemalan university mate, woke me from my nostalgic dreams to remind me that Guatemala, a Central American country sharing borders with Mexico, Belize, El Salvador, and Honduras, was the true country of volcanoes. Since then, Guatemalan volcanic eruptions have been boiling in my mind, and not just because of the heat!

We set out early one morning from the Oceana Resort to embark on an adventure towards Lake Atitlán. Upon arrival, we were greeted by an impressive spectacle: the majestic volcanoes Atitlán, Tolimán, and San Pedro, forming the landscape known as "The Three Giants." These imposing peaks are just three of the approximately 300 volcanoes that adorn Guatemala's volcanic chain. The Atitlán Volcano stands out, especially for its height of 3,535 meters and its history of volcanic activity, as if it is always ready to steal the spotlight. This volcanic system is part of the Central American Volcanic Arc, which is part of the famous Pacific Ring of Fire, known for being the dance floor of some of the world's most active volcanoes. Definitely, a view that leaves you breathless, and not just because of the altitude!



The intense volcanic activity of the Volcán de Fuego is primarily due to the interaction of the lithospheric plates in the region. This area, characterized by the constant movement of tectonic plates, is prone to generating earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions.

taken by Manuel Salvador Galdámez Aguirre, General Guide of Tourists of Guatemala No. 798 on, December 28, 2021

Volcán de Fuego
3,830 meters
above sea level

Lake Atitlán, formed approximately 84,000 years ago after a massive volcanic eruption, is 1,500 meters above sea level. With a length of 18 kilometers and a depth of around 341 meters, it is the deepest lake in Central America, covering an area of 130 square kilometers. It has earned the title "The Most Beautiful Lake in the World" for its deep blue and green waters.

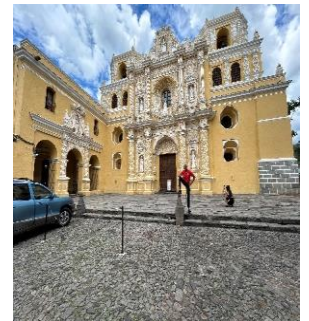


Around its shores, there are twelve Mayan villages inhabited by the Cakchiqueles and the Tzutujiles. For mystical reasons and perhaps a bit of tourist marketing, these twelve villages are sometimes erroneously presented in tourist guides as if they bare the names of the 12 apostles of Jesus Christ.

Additionally, the lake hosts a romantic legend: the story of "Xocomil," a local version of Romeo and Juliet. According to the legend, two young lovers from rival villages meet in the center of the lake, defying the differences between their families and communities to make their love immortal. There's nothing like a touch of drama and romance to add more charm to this beautiful place!



The following morning, we headed to La Antigua, Central America's first capital and a key center for education, economy, politics, and religion. La Antigua is a historical gem, founded on March 10, 1543, and declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979. Walking through its streets, I felt as though I had traveled five hundred years back in time, immersing myself in its rich history. During this experience, I admired ancient temples and monasteries, 16th-century buildings, cobblestone streets, the Plaza Mayor, the Jade Museum, the old Cathedral of Guatemala, and the stunning view of the Fuego and Acatenango volcanoes. And, of course, I couldn't resist taking a selfie with Saint Peter in a monastery, just in case! You never know, having proof of friendships in high celestial places might come in handy someday.



I was shocked by the bustling economic activity in Guatemala, the largest economy in Central America, the tenth in Latin America, and the sixty-fifth worldwide, with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of \$92.7 billion in 2022. Despite this dynamism, reflected in an economic growth rate of 4.1% in 2022 and 3.5% in 2023, with an upward trend expected for 2024, it was estimated that in 2023, 55.1% of the population lived in poverty, including extreme poverty. Furthermore, the informal economy accounted for 49% of the GDP, and 71.1% of the employed population worked in the informal sector.



With my height of 1.81 meters, I stood out among the indigenous population of the Conacaste region. The petite women shone with radiant smiles, many with their incisors adorned in gold. During informal gatherings, they informed me that in 2014, Guatemala was ranked as the fourth most unequal country in Latin America and the ninth worldwide, with a Gini coefficient of 48.3. A value of 0 represents absolute equality, while 100 indicates the highest possible degree of inequality. Amazingly, they pointed out that Haiti, despite having one of the lowest human development indices in Latin America, has a Gini coefficient of 41.1, making it one of the most equal countries in the region.

There was definitely a positive connection between us, the Haitians, and the inhabitants of the village of Conacaste. Was it our courteous attitude or perhaps our similar historical background? I mentioned to them that



in 1789, Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, in his book "Description topographique, physique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'île de Saint-Domingue," classified the black-white racial mixing into twenty-eight possible combinations within nine categories: sacatra, griffe, marabou, mulatto, quadroon, mestizo, mameluke, among others. For example, "whites with black women: mulattoes; the mulatto woman with the white: quadroon; the black woman with the mulatto: capre; and the white with the quadroon: misti," etc., based on the proportion of "black" blood. The objective of Moreau de Saint-Méry was to create an "epidermis aristocracy," placing white slave-owning colonists at the top of the social pyramid and generating segregation between blacks and mulattoes to benefit the numerically inferior white colonists. Moreover, in the slave market, the lighter an enslaved person's skin, the higher their sale price.

They told me that in Guatemala, since the Spanish rule, a similar caste system emerged among the three groups: whites, Indians, and blacks. From the mixture of these groups, a list of 16 basic combinations and numerous variations arose, with distinctive names such as calpamulato, coyote, cuarterón, genízaro, jarocho, tresalbo, zambo, etc. For example, a Spaniard with an Indian: mestizo; a mestizo with a Spaniard: castizo; a

Spaniard with a Moor: mulatto.

Haiti, like Guatemala, has not escaped the hegemonic whims regarding blood purity, where a person's value seems to depend more on the amount of melanin than on their character. As in Haiti, black slaves were brought to Guatemala to replace the local indigenous people in forced labor. On Wednesday, January 3, 1543, "a number of 150 slaves" arrived from Santo Domingo. On November 27, 1602, "it was prohibited for Indians to work in the mines, having to be replaced by blacks." According to the 2018 census, 0.3% of Guatemala's population was of African descent, including Creoles and Garifunas.

Before traveling to Guatemala, I wanted to learn as much as possible about my new destination. In addition to my readings, I asked my friend Harold in Weston, Florida, where I reside, if he could introduce me to some Guatemalans. I was greatly surprised to discover so many Guatemalans in Weston. Today, about 3.5 million Guatemalans reside in the United States. Like the Haitian diaspora, the Guatemalan diaspora and their remittances play a crucial role in Guatemala's economic development, direct investment, and business creation. In 2023, family remittances sent to Guatemala from the United States amounted to \$18.039 billion, compared to \$3.28 billion sent to Haiti, where these remittances are mainly used for consumption, education, housing, and health.

Certain customs, such as corruption, are challenging to eradicate. In 2023, Transparency International ranked Guatemala 154 out of 180 countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index, with a score of 23 out of 100, where 0 represents a very high level of corruption and 100 a very low level of corruption.

During my stay in Guatemala, I felt very safe despite knowing about gang activity in some areas. The main gangs, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18, represent 95% of the gang members in the country. In Guatemala City, around 53 additional gangs operate. These gangs thrive in impoverished urban neighborhoods where state services, especially social services, are often absent. The violence from these gangs has forced many families to flee their homes in search of safety in other countries.

In the mid-2000s, homicide rates in Guatemala, due to urban gangs and organized crime infiltrating state institutions, had reached 44 per 100,000 inhabitants, a figure comparable to that of Haiti today. Haiti could draw inspiration from the Guatemalan model and adopt similar measures to address gang violence and institutional corruption. This model aims to restore peace and justice by combining international expertise with local resources, respecting national sovereignty, and strengthening institutional legitimacy. Adopting such measures would allow justice to be served to Haitian victims of violence and corruption effectively and respectfully, considering the country's particularities.

Back in Weston, Florida, Harold, originally from Cali, Colombia, and a member of my Rotary Club of Weston, invited me to have coffee with a member of the Rotary Club of Vista Hermosa in Guatemala. However, this time, the time machine projected us into the future, showing us a panorama full of possibilities and collaboration. Inspired by my trip and the lessons learned in the land of volcanoes, I am convinced that we can build bridges of understanding and progress between our communities through international cooperation and cultural exchange. Perhaps we could create a "Rotary Volcano Route" that includes visits to the impressive Guatemalan landscapes and our new friends in Conacaste. At the end of the meeting, I realized that although time travel is not yet a reality, friendship, and cooperation are the true machines that take us toward a better future. So, get ready, volcanoes, because the Rotarians are on their way!

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