

Dispatch #10B – June 17, 2010

Quixaya Part 2 –

Juan Pablo, El Conductor (Or Guatemalan Rules of the Road)

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Saturday June 12, 2010

I write just after leaving Quixaya, one week after my arrival. It was hard to leave - both the most gracious hospitality of my new friends and family, and the continued and dedicated efforts they are making are beyond impressive. However, my Spanish school and masters research calls and I'm back on the road.

I write because I must tell you about the rest of my week. By Wednesday, I had become a card-carrying member of the CCDA, and better yet, one of their drivers! It seems that it is difficult and expensive here to get your drivers license. As a result, my driving skills became helpful and I was enlisted to help deliver water/food/clothes in the final days of my week in Quixaya. Some days we couldn't make it - ongoing rains continue to wreak havoc in areas where the road had been completely swept away by the torrent of water and boulders. It is also these areas where villages and emergency shelters continue to suffer without drinking water. However, we did our best to keep supplying water every day - luckily Quixaya has a natural spring which provided us with the supply of water we were delivering to the emergency shelters.

The state of the shelters did not change through the week. I was continually shocked to learn that yes, they were now depending on us to deliver the water. Or if they weren't depending on us, they certainly did not have a steady supply of anything. The CCDA was able to secure a large shipment of food, clothes and water from CARITAS (I think the Solola Catholic diocese), which went a long way. But like I said before...a drop in the bucket.

Now I will refrain from loading your conscience more. Instead, I have some Guatemalan driving tips to share in case you ever find yourself in my situation. I'm happy to say that these were gathered without incident and that my plan to drive back to B.C. looks better than ever.

#1. The lines on the road mean nothing; and the space you need to pass is relative to only the size of whatever vehicle is oncoming.

#2. Related to #1, the right-of-way here is entirely dictated by the size of vehicle. Therefore, get out of the way of chicken buses (which are the exception...they may not be the biggest, but they have the craziest drivers and are therefore the most feared). Transport trucks come a close second.

#3. The horn is not malicious. If you're polite, you use it to thank people, remind drunks they're stumbling in the middle of the road, and scare away the thousands of street dogs and family chickens.

#4. Passing is a given at all moments and on all sides. On blind mountain corners be afraid! Chicken buses are not only the exception to every rule, but they are guaranteed to break them in a blanket fog at night. And after a day of driving, you start doing it yourself (passing that is...I am not a chicken bus driver).

#5. Gas stations here have way more class in Guatemala (except for the bathrooms...in this regard maybe they're equal with Canada, maybe a bit worse). Not only do they have enough staff, but they won't even let you fill your tires yourself.

#6. If you're a gringo driving in Guatemala, you will be stared at. I'm not sure what's going through people's minds, perhaps that I'm a finquero owner or maybe that I'm simply crazy?

JP

For a day by day photo essay of the field school, see:

<http://www.facebook.com/album.php?aid=427370&id=532435594&l=c37feae6fd>

and

<http://www.facebook.com/album.php?aid=437732&id=532435594&l=4bcd6199e0>