

CLASSROOM WITH CULTURE

Heading back to school in Antigua, Guatemala

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

Going to school doesn't immediately spring to mind when thinking about vacations, but hitting the books turned out to be a highlight of recent travels to Antigua, Guatemala.

We took Spanish language classes at Proyecto Linguistico Francisco Marroquin (PLFM), a non-profit foundation specializing in teaching Spanish and local Mayan languages. It was a return to the same school we attended more than 30 years ago at the beginning of an extended trip through Central and South America.

We thought that it was time for a refresher.

Students can attend half or full days for as many weeks as they like. We opted for the full seven-hour day, which can be quite intensive with one teacher per student. While students spend most of the school day in the classroom, there is a lot of flexibility.

If you feel like getting outside, you and your teacher could walk to a nearby colonial church and discuss its history or architecture or talk about food in the local market.

Our fellow students ranged in age from teens to retirees and came mostly from the United States and Canada, with a surprising number of Europeans and Asians as well.

A few were there for school credit or because they need Spanish in their work, but most were just like us, simply wanting to improve their Spanish for travel. We met a couple from Manitoba who have come here for several winters to take classes for a week or two before travelling.

Class time is only part of the education. Like most students, we opted to stay with a local family where we ate our meals. We were fortunate that our host, Elvira, loved to cook and was fond of showing off Guatemalan dishes.

If host families know any English (most don't), they are not supposed to let on, so mealtime conversations can be as good a work-out as speaking in class.



At the end of the day, we were mentally exhausted and ready for bed but there was usually homework as well.

Antigua has dozens of such schools, making it the top place in the world for one-on-one Spanish lessons.

Part of the reason is the low cost of living in Guatemala. Tuition is US\$200 for a week of full time study, and another \$110 for the home-stay. Some schools cost even less.

A big draw is that Antigua is such a pleasant place. You can also get to most places on foot.

Antigua means old, in this case referring to the old capital city. In the Spanish colonial era, it was the capital of much of Central America.

After a devastating earthquake in 1773, the capital was moved to Guatemala City, leaving Antigua as a time capsule from an earlier age.

Today, the entire town centre is a UNESCO World Heritage site, with cobblestone streets and some of the best preserved colonial architecture in the Americas.

Nestled in a scenic highland valley and surrounded by volcano peaks, Antigua's slogan is "the land of eternal spring," where it never gets too hot or too cold.

Another plus is the fascinating mix of cultures, with a large Mayan

population where women continue to wear colourful traditional outfits as everyday dress.

The nice thing about taking classes for interest rather than credit is that it can be a learning holiday, where you work as hard as you like and enjoy the surroundings as well. Exams are optional, and not finishing your homework brings only a mild scolding.

Arlene and Robin Karpan are well-travelled writers based in Saskatoon. Contact: travel@producer.com.



TOP: Masks, bags and scarves in a rainbow of colours are for sale in the Antigua market.

ABOVE: A Mayan woman weaves on a traditional back-strap loom.

LEFT: La Merced is one of many colonial churches in the city.

| ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN PHOTOS

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