

## Caminando con el Commandante: Experiencing Development and "la mistica" in Guatemala



La Fundación Turcios Lima is a non-governmental organization that does integrated development work with communities affected by the 36-year civil war that ended in 1996. It works on various agricultural projects, as well as community building. My role within the organization was working to educate members of La Fundación about Fair Trade coffee as well as develop connections between La Fundación and various international development organizations.

### Project Goals

- Educate members of La Fundación about the details of assisting coffee farms in entering the Fair Trade market, which guarantees farmers decent prices for their coffee
- Use my connections with Oxfam America to help set up a meeting between Cesar Montes (the president of La Fundación) and the director of Oxfam's Central America regional office, in order to help La Fundación become a partner organization of Oxfam

### Personal Goals

- Improve my Spanish skills by immersing myself in the language
- Become acquainted, first-hand, with the realities of community development in a Global South nation
- Serve as a positive ambassador for the United States in a nation that has been deeply harmed by U.S. foreign policy in the past

### Activities

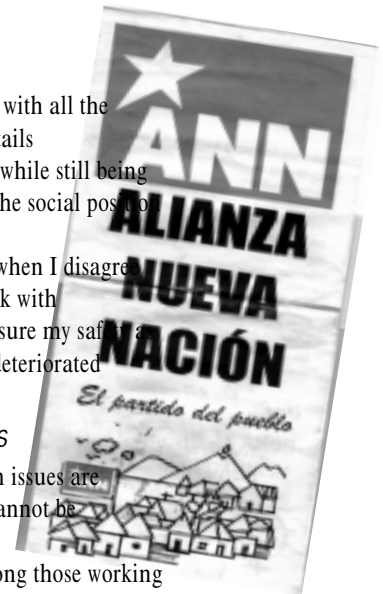
- For the main part of the two-month internship I traveled with Juan Carlos and Pavel, agricultural engineers working for La Fundación in two communities of returned refugees. While there was little formal work to do, I provided an additional perspective on various community dynamics that affected their work.
- Combining Internet research with an actual trip to a Fair Trade coffee farm, I was able to give instructions to various members of La Fundación on the dynamics of organizing a Fair Trade farm.
- Initiated and organized a meeting between the president of La Fundación, Cesar Montes, and the director of Oxfam America's regional office

### Key Dilemmas

- How to adapt to a new culture, with all the many aspects and quirks that entails
- Being respectful of the culture while still being critical of aspects (for example, the social position of women) that bothered me
- How to work with people even when I disagree with or find them difficult to work with
- Taking extra precautions to ensure my safety as the country's political situation deteriorated

### Important Learnings

- Development and globalization issues are amazingly complex issues that cannot be narrowed to simple formulas.
- A philosophy of arrogance among those working to improve the situation of the poor will lead to disaster. The key is to work *with* the people, not *for* them. One must be highly respectful and adaptable to differing situations. At the same time, to romanticize "the people" is a mistake, as they are *people*, for better and for worse.
- Networking, as "dirty" as it may seem sometimes, is crucial to success in social justice work. Knowing the right people can open big doors.



*I had the good fortune of visiting Santa Anita, a coffee community made up of ex-guerrillas that had recently entered the Fair Trade market. I am standing with Lazaro, the head of commercialization for Santa Anita, with whom I had a long conversation about the details of Fair Trade to impart that knowledge to members of La Fundación.*

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*Paul Adler*



*At left is a classic view in Antigua, Guatemala, the old colonial capital where Xiomara and I stayed our first month in Guatemala. In the background is El Volcan de Agua.*



*(Above) One of the first steps the agricultural engineers took in the communities was to run "agricultural diagnostics," community meetings to determine the economic condition of the farm. Here is Pavel conducting one in Nuevo Mexico.*

*(Center left) Nuevo Mexico, one of two communities of returned refugees which I visited once a week for two months with a team from La Fundación. On the far left is Pavel, an agricultural engineer who specializes in commercialization and who I spent a great deal of time with. To his right is Juan Carlos, whose family I lived with for two months and is also an agricultural engineer. On the far right is Guillermo, the community organizer for La Fundación.*



*(Lower left) A protest in Mazatengano (my host city for the majority of my time). The government is currently trying to privatize all health services in the country and this was a demonstration by a coalition of union members and indigenous people against privatization.*

Studying at El Centro Linguistico Maya continues to go quite well and my Spanish is improving. So much knowledge, after years of studying, is bubbling to the surface. I can even use pronouns now! My professor is a riot, full of jokes as well as knowledge about all aspects of Guatemalan culture, history, and politics. Inevitably, I've started to fall in love with Antigua and highly recommend some of us do the expatriate thing down here at some point, as it's perfect.

Last Thursday, Xiomara, Cesar Montes, two other officials from La Fundacion Turcios Lima, and myself went to a farm, a drive several hours to the southwest. We went over some really back country roads, almost killing about eight dogs and a campesino heading to work. With regard to driving, Guatemalan's heartily believe "the best defense is a good offense." The poverty here is heartbreaking and the emotional impact is only lessened because it does not seem much different from what I expected. The country is gorgeous and I've seen a lot of the farming areas.

At one point Cesar calmly noted that we would be driving by the spot where his wife was killed while fighting the army. He also described how all of his brothers were murdered during the conflict. Our drive took us on dirt roads, through a huge farm, and to a group of tents that appeared to be part of a giant fiesta. We thought we were only visiting a farm that works with La Fundación, but it turned out to be much more. Guatemala's peace accords are about the most radical there are in concept. As part of the accords, a government agency called El Fondo de las Tierras is redistributing land to landless peasant families. We had come to a ceremony marking the handing over of land to 358 peasant families who in the history of their families had never owned their own land. We sat under a giant red tent as a group of civil society leaders (unions, NGOs, etc.) made fiery speeches about their right to land and called for greater social justice. The look on the faces of the farmers as they received the certificates to their land was incredible. I'd never seen justice in action so clearly until today.



Pictured above is President of La Fundación Turcios Lima, Cesar Montes, with one of the campesinos of Finca Montecristo who had just received their own land, as part of the redistribution process being implemented on account of the peace accords.