

Spanish Language School
Quetzaltenango ('Xela'), Guatemala

I travelled to Xela for the month of February 1997 and spent four weeks studying Spanish at the Instituto CentroAmericano (ICA). I chose this school because another alum of CWRU recommended it to me. There are probably a dozen or so schools in Xela, and something like 70 schools in Antigua, the old capital of Guatemala at which you could study.

ICA cost \$120 a week. That includes room and board with a local family, and five hours of language instruction per day M-F. The easiest way to get there is to fly to Guatemala City, and take a bus to Xela. Even if you arrive on a weekend, the proprietors of the school set you up with your family and off you go. Everything is within walking distance, but if you need to cross town, you can take a taxi. Pleasantly, the dollar goes very far in Guatemala, for food, travel, and desirable purchases. Living with a family is a huge plus for several reasons: You are forced to speak Spanish, you learn more about the culture, and you feel immersed in what you came there for. The drawbacks are that sometimes you don't like what the family serves or you wish you had more privacy. This can be better controlled by specifying up front to the school if you have dietary preferences or don't want to live with children. I did live with kids, and found that they were often my best teachers.

The school consists of an open-air courtyard, with tiny rooms with naked bulbs, two chairs, and a table. You sit across from your instructor and just start conversing. Only a few of the instructors speak good English, so you are forced from the start to really try to converse in Spanish. Immersion. It works.

Xela is situated at greater than 5000 feet above sea level, so this makes the mornings and evenings pretty chilly sometimes. As there is no heating in the homes or the schools, this can make your mornings quite cold. What makes ICA nice is that they have a rooftop "terrace" on which you can sit with your instructor, allowing you to warm up as the sun inevitably burns off the morning clouds. The school's policy is to change teachers every week, so that you are exposed to a variety of accents, points of view, and teaching styles. The education is very self-directed;

you do what you want. The school has put together its own nine-week text, if you are so inclined. My teacher and I mostly stayed away from the programmed texts, but looked at them from time to time when the conversation stalled.

What I really liked about ICA is that the immersion went beyond mere language school. You also are given the chance to become culturally and politically educated by going on school-sponsored activities on your free time. Visit a reforestation project, a women's prison, repositories of Mayan art and literature. I visited a coffee plantation and learned about land expropriation and the plight of the campesinos. In case you've read this far and haven't figured it out, ICA (and I think many of the schools) have a bias against the government and the oligarchy that controls much of the country's wealth. In spite of the bias, you are free to make your own judgements.

Travelling in Guatemala is easy and wonderful. There are many places to see as a tourist, both for their natural beauty or archaeological significance. Happily, most of these are accessible on weekend excursions if you choose to spend your weeks in class. You pay only one week at a time, and declare at the end of that week if you plan to stay for the next. You can easily switch schools, or take a week off to travel and then come back. I knew next to no Spanish, and in four weeks my comprehension was excellent and my conversation was passable. I think it's an extremely worthwhile opportunity for a medical student.

- John Schumann
Class of 1997