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Too Tall for Guatemala

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TOO TALL FOR GUATEMALA

Evan Lapinsky, MD

I was clearly out of place. I came to the highlands of Guatemala during my fourth year of medical school to study Spanish, work in a rural clinic, and experience a different way of life. For a month, I lived with a Guatemalan family, ate plantains with every meal, and generally tried to immerse myself in the rich Mayan culture surrounding me. Almost a year later, my Spanish is fading fast. The handful of days I spent in volunteer clinic is a distant memory at this point. Why did I go there again?

I was the epitome of an outsider. I came down with Montezuma's revenge, just like all of my American classmates who traveled there with me. Despite its location in tropical Central America, Guatemala is an exceptionally mountainous country and despite all the warnings from the program's director about the cool climate, I severely under packed. That left me living, eating, and sleeping in my one Patagonia fleece. As a tall American, I towered over the local people and fit very poorly in nearly all things Guatemalan. I rode buses with my knees under my chin and my head on the ceiling.

The coup de grace occurred while I was walking down a street near my Guatemalan family's home. One of the storefronts was doing construction that involved scaffolding above the sidewalk, which I had safely avoided, until now. This time, I walked smack into a wooden beam at full clip. I was jolted backwards and fell flat on my back. I had taken the impact right over the bridge of my nose, where luckily I had been wearing a pair of sturdy sunglasses. I'm convinced that were I not wearing them, I would have broken my nose or knocked out some teeth. In any case, this beam of wood—at over six feet above the ground—was

much too high to bother the locals as they all passed under it with ease. Again, I was out of place—and fortunate to escape with only some minor cuts and a bad headache.

I realized then that it was this feeling of foreignness, of not belonging, that came to define my experience there. Living in a foreign place freed me to approach my time in Guatemala as something altogether different. I didn't want to and really couldn't compare it to my American life because that would be like comparing apples and oranges. The value was in recognizing this disparity and taking Guatemala for what it was. It took me several weeks, but I turned the corner while I still had the chance to enjoy my time there. Accepting the discomfort is what allows us to grow.

Mayan culture fascinated me, and I rekindled my love of learning languages that had fallen by the wayside for a decade. I took pleasure in exploring a new diet and helped my host family's children with their English homework. Interactions with Guatemalan medicine showed me new approaches to familiar problems, and the crippling limitations of third world countries.

I don't know if I will ever have another opportunity to immerse myself in a different culture, but the future holds many more challenges to my comfort zone. When I flew out of Guatemala, I knew in my heart that I would never return—or that if I did, it wouldn't be the same. Still, that didn't change what I learned and how I felt while I was there. I was too tall, yes, but that's precisely what allowed me to make the most of it.

"White Woods"
photograph by Soham Vakil