

Not Your Usual Fieldtrip: Touring with Fr. Tim

Dear Mission Friends:

Today's youth are inhabitants of a digital global village, having grown up with and being highly skilled at using the internet and social media as well as all the related must-have devices. And it is no coincidence that they are increasingly self-centered, lonely, or unconcerned about building a meaningful future. They are passive consumers who are used to being entertained, in isolation, for much of every day. Use of their imagination or creativity, critical thinking or genuine communication is stifled and even discouraged. Awakening and nurturing these skills—indeed, simply capturing and then of course keeping young people's attention—pose a huge challenge to parents and educators. If there is any hope of beating off the media monsters, it lies in living and teaching by example, in encouraging and celebrating individual differences, and in exposing them to the beauty of the real world.

Fr. Timothy Conlan, our missionary in Rabinal, Guatemala, whose primary focus is youth and their education, knows he must keep them busy and interested so as not to lose them to social media. Following is his account of this summer's excursions with which he rewards deserving members of his group of scholarship students, *Jovenes Arriba* (Upward Youth)—often at much peril and always fraught with the unexpected. Fasten your seatbelt!

~Lesley Warnshuis

Dear Friends of the Mission in Rabinal:



Where to go?

There are not too many places we can explore without spending a lot of money. Hotels can get a bit expensive for us and my car is just not up to long drives, plus time is short—the students only have a week vacation—so we try to find places less explored but interesting. But we can always count on a few surprises. Our first trip the week of June 24 started out in a panic—I insist that the youths be responsible and prompt, but one of them had to call me at 6:20 because I had overslept!



*Center, helping with the bee project at the Emiliani Institute.
Right, encountering the sneaky Fer de Lang, the most poisonous snake in America. Can you find him?*

Thankfully, the old buggy, as my father would say, a four-wheel drive 2003 Mitsubishi Montero Sport, with a jerry-rigged third seat, was in the best condition it has been for many years. It does have over 200,000 miles on it and a big problem of overheating, but I had cleaned up the interior and had just put in a second thermostat, new engine oil, and four new brake pads. So I was relatively confident...

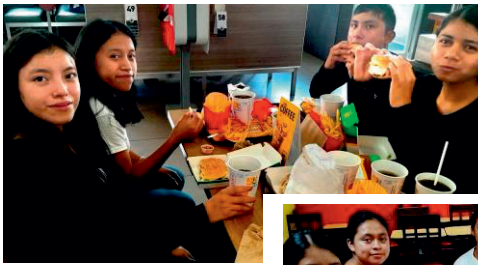
The planned first stop was a Mayan fort and ceremonial center called Mixco Viejo, about five hours away over a dirt road. But it had rained for a week and we learned from one of my scholarship students, now a transit policeman, that a mudslide the night before had closed the road to Mixco Viejo, and we had to change our plans. So I moved the visit to the grand Aurora Zoo in Guatemala City from Wednesday to that first day. The cop had reported that the paved road to the next town was cleared, but we were met with one-lane roads and fallen trees, barely allowing the car to pass. After climbing out of two deep valleys and passing through thick forest, we finally arrived in the desert area of El Rancho about 9:30. We ate breakfast and got to the capital about 11:30, heading straight for the zoo. But something was strange—there were no cars in the parking lot, and sure enough, the zoo is closed on Monday.

So I got the inspiration to head back to the city center, one of my favorite sites. We went first to St. Dominic's Church where we met the pastor, Fr. Jorge Pitalis, a Dominican whom I had known for years. He was kind enough to invite us into his office in the 250-year-old convent and got his sacristan to show us the secret way to climb up for a closeup view of the elaborately decorated and luminous statue of the Virgin of the Holy Rosary, Patroness of the country. While we waited a bit for the sacristan to finish lunch, we went for a hot drink in a restaurant across the street, which should be in the record book for the smallest bathroom, but we all enjoyed our hot chocolate while watching the rain.

St. Dominic's has a rich history. The first convent built in the new capitol after the 1773 destruction of the old one of Antigua, it was built to resist earthquakes with columns over three feet square and two grand lateral naves on either side of the main nave.



Virgin of the Holy Rosary, Guatemala City.



Eating out, from McDonald's (first time ever!) to the fancy bamboo hotel, was probably the highlight of their trip, never having eaten so well.



As all the churches in Guatemala, it is filled with statues of the saints set in elaborately-carved wooden niches, lots of religious paintings, and a high altar.

Around 4 PM we took a ride through the colonial heart of the city with the cathedral, the President's palace, and the great fountain, all cradled in the two-block wide plaza lined with ancient columned corridors. We parked and entered the enormous three-storied underground market. I wanted the group to see the incredible assortment of folk art of the many areas of the country, all assembled in one place, and indeed they were entranced by the plethora of unique items. I gave them \$6.00 each to get a memento of some sort, warning them to stay in line-of-sight view of each other. Sure enough, two wandered off and I had to search a bit. We could have stayed for hours but we were headed to the Emiliani Institute, a technical school run by the Somascan fathers and brothers, for dinner and our first night's sleep. It was normally a half hour drive from the plaza, but at 5 PM on a work day, we spent the next two and a half hours just inching along. Although we arrived an hour late for dinner, we were blessed to get a cold meal and to have a bed to sleep in after the long day.

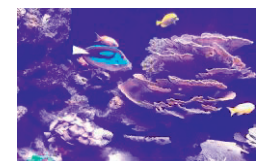
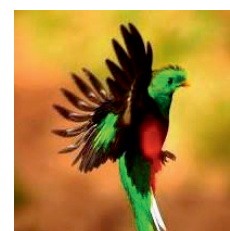
Besides being a technical school for 1500 junior college students encompassing several campuses, the Emiliani Institute offers scholarships to poor youths, whose first year is dedicated to service. So this would be a day of service projects for my group too, helping Br. Victor, the tireless administrator of the physical plant of the school and convent.

Three of my group who had come once before for training in the bee project would help with that, learning how to change bee hives, even capturing a loose bee swarm to start a new hive. The other ones helped in the kitchen, baking a few hundred cupcakes which Br. Victor will use for some of the many groups he constantly hosts at the school. Other skills the students at the institute learn and help with include welding, electrical repair, carpentry, and the care of domestic animals. They also grow some of their own food such as fruit, vegetables, and coffee.

We ate lunch with the live-in students who cannot have cell phones and meals are always together, with time to sit and talk over table. Then I planned to go to the bee-goods store to buy some tools I needed for our own bee project. I am notorious for getting lost, however, and so, thank the Lord, Br. Victor had one of his workers drive me, as even a bee could not have found his way there if it were his hive.

Our goal was to get to the zoo early in order to be able to see it all while still getting back to Rabinal, a four hour drive at best, before dark. The zoo is very large—we had walked about 15 blocks all around the zoo amid thousands of people and still hadn't seen everything, but it started to rain at noon and so we scurried out to the car. Of course it was the busy lunch hour but we finally got outside the city and stopped for lunch at McDonalds, which no one had ever been to! I paid, of course, but a meal for six there costs the equivalent of what a good job pays in two days, and that was with coupons I had.

We left Mc Donalds at 2 PM but the "four hour" trip took ten. Our car overheated in 15 minutes, but after getting off the highway we were incredibly lucky to find a gas station where we cooled the radiator. The traffic continued for most of the trip back, however, over the mountains and through the desert, where we changed the water. Then there were more mountains to ascend, with fog so thick I could hardly see two feet in front of the car, and my brights just made it worse. Additionally, I do not see too well driving at night and there are no painted road lines. And it was still raining. But once we started descending from the mountain top, we breathed a sigh of relief and finally and gratefully arrived in Rabinal at 12:30 AM. We always say prayers as we start out and a prayer when we arrive, and certainly the Lord was guiding us every turn of the trip.



Above, visiting the Aurora Zoo; left, the protected national bird, the Quetzal.

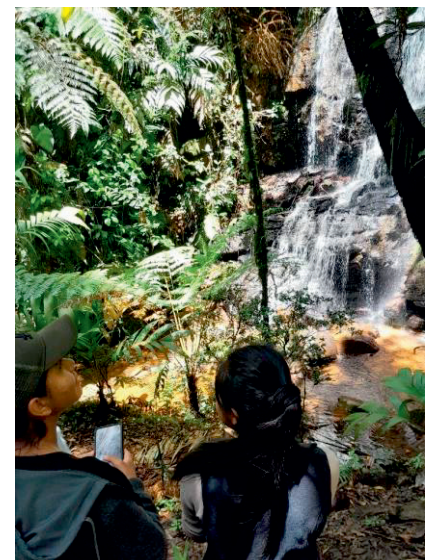
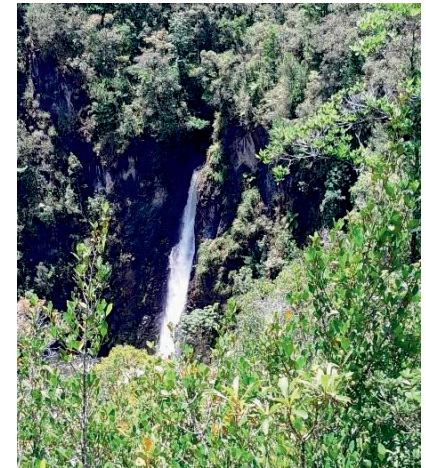
Rather than riding my bike after midnight from the office to the rectory where I live, I found an old foam mattress in the storeroom and got three and a half hours of sleep since we were going to leave again at 6 AM for Coban. I made myself a strong cup of coffee and the five girls and I actually got off at 6:30 AM. Our first stop was at the Hotel Ram Tzul on one of the nature reserves in a cloud forest in Baja Verapaz. The hotel is constructed entirely of bamboo poles which are 50 feet tall by eight inches diameter. The entrance to the restaurant has a lovely fountain and steps down to the spacious hotel sitting area. All the furniture, window frames, and lamp shades are cleverly made of bamboo. There are fire places and sitting nooks and grand cushioned chairs. Everyone was hungry after the two-and-a-half hour drive. I ordered the simple breakfast for all of us in order to save time and money, but even at \$5.00 each, it was well-prepared with carafes of hot coffee and tea left on the table and the usual fare of beans, scrambled eggs, cheese, sauteed plantains, and tortillas. While we were waiting, I made sure the girls tried out sitting in all the chairs and sofas and took note of the marvelous creativity of the artisan craft work. And meanwhile I asked the attendant to play some symphonic music since that is one of the hotel's notable features. It is definitely a high-class tourist place with bungalows (an impossible \$100/night for two—we asked!) for the guests, only one of whom was eating that early, sitting in regal splendor and enjoying his breakfast in total tranquility, other than my giggling girls.

At 9 AM we were ready for our self-guided walking tour, which cost more per person than the breakfast, but the nice attendant gave us a discount. The hotel is on a reserve for the preservation of the Quetzal, the national bird. It contains three impressive waterfalls, a high platform for observing the whole forest, and some deep pools for swimming. As a cloud forest, every tree or plant is dripping water and the ground is saturated with wet leaves. The sunlight breaks through in thin slanting bursts and the quiet is deafening.

Small delicate flowers abound. Birds glide by occasionally. **It is magical, but the trail is over five miles up and down very steep hills crossed by countless slippery roots.** At the point when we arrived at the platform that looks out over the steep, two thousand feet gorges of the main fall, a couple of the girls screamed, aghast at the cavernous space below. It was a place to rest a bit and take pictures. I challenged the group to continue on, though at the last steep slippery decline to the swimming hole, I stayed behind. They came back exhausted but victorious.

We hiked quite a distance back up to the hotel and headed for a 3:00 PM appointment with the Monastery of the Discalced Carmelite Nuns in Coban. It is very isolated but I had been there once before and found the entrance; it was, however, blocked for street repair and we ended up walking another mile up a mountain side to the other entrance. We were an hour late and all very tired but still enthused. The 12 or so nuns were more than gracious, congregated in a room behind a latticed grate. I had gone over with the girls about the history of the Carmelites and their vocation as well as the ordinary routines of their life, but the girls were at first tongue-tied. One finally asked what they do all day and a sister explained the various hours of prayer according to the Divine Office. They say the longer morning prayer of Matins in the evening as if it were the first prayer of the new day, followed by the final prayer of the day, Compline. The sisters offered us a piece of cake and a homemade fruit drink, and little by little the nuns asked a few questions and the girls answered and reciprocated. I tried to facilitate with questions about whether they celebrate fiestas, have television or internet, play ping pong, etc. They do in fact have a common television and computer with internet. Their recreation is mostly needle work, but they do have a small basketball court and a garden area. Their main work is making communion hosts and they offered the girls the leftover cuts of dough which they add to their soup. They explained the various stages of becoming a nun and each sister spoke

to her own process. To my surprise there were four or five young sisters in their twenties. Three of them beautifully sang a lovely hymn for us and the girls were impressed. The superior told me they were very happy to have had a visit from these young girls, as this was only their second group of visitors this year. Of course, she hopes more girls will join their joyful community.



We hiked a more picturesque route back to the car and drove to a restaurant for a simple and healthy dinner. Then we went to the shopping mall so the girls could see the women's shoes that are produced by *Calzado Coban* (Boots of Coban), the company that we would be visiting the next day. At 7:30 PM we drove to the Dominican fathers' retreat house to stay the night. However, even after many years of visiting, I could not find the entrance in the dark and once you pass it, there is no turning around for awhile. When we finally found it and rang the bell several times getting no response, I called my secretary who looked up the priest's phone number. It turns out he is hard of hearing and I was ringing the bell at the wrong door. **But happiness is a warm bed or any bed after a very long day.**

Early the next morning we headed to San Cristobal Verapaz, about an hour away, where the boot company has their manufacturing plant. We got there early and had breakfast at a restaurant near the central plaza which I was familiar with. They serve beef liver and do me the favor of adding some sauteed onions and giving me a bottle of catsup as a concession for being a *gringo*. The plant has been producing boots for over 100 years, currently employing 500 people, about half of them women, in a highly industrialized system, something people in our area could not imagine. They make boots for many well-known brands which are exported chiefly to the USA and Europe. The older plant with its wooden floors and timbers for beams was still in full operation, but we also got to see the huge new plant just across the street. Its strict rules forbid tennis shoes which, of course, one of our girls was wearing, but a kind staff member went home and brought back another pair of shoes for her. A couple of guides explained the manufacturing process as we walked around amid the whirl of hundreds of machines, each type adding some small detail to the finished product. It is overwhelming to see how complicated a pair of boots can be. The third plant in the capitol was now making the women's boots so they had moved my favorite machine there too—a huge round monolith, 10 feet tall and 25 feet in diameter, by which the boot entered soleless but after a lot of huffing and puffing, with steam spouting out of numerous openings, it belched out a new shoe completely soleful.



*The museum director
(in purple)
with my five fellow travelers:
1 in medical school,
3 college seniors,
1 college freshman.*

At noon we drove down the hill to the Museum Tinamit, a cultural center which promotes primarily the history and culture of the Pocom people. Its director, a lovely lady who struggles to keep the place open, was awaiting us. She gave a slide presentation of the projects of the museum. She is also quite involved in her community, where over 50% of children under five years of age are malnourished. After hurricanes and flooding, my students and I have aided her in feeding surrounding villagers, collecting and delivering several boxes of food basics. So before this trip I had proposed to my five girls, who all agreed, that we would donate food for 25 families as part of our reciprocation with the museum. **Of course, we have the same problems in our own remote villages, but learning to give is always a good thing.** Then I gave the girls a couple of dollars each to buy a little purse or some memento from the gift shop. We headed home after that with no delays other than the 46 speed bumps on that road—we had counted them on our way there—which can be dangerous if the driver is not concentrating, so I now carry construction helmets and require anyone in the back seat to wear one.

I know this is a long description with lots of details, but if I were to describe our trip in general terms, you might assume we were driving on regulated highways and safe mountain roads. As you have gathered, any venture in a car here has serious risks. Or you might not understand why I describe every meal, or take poor youths who have never even eaten at a McDonald's to eat at an all-bamboo hotel which they would not think of visiting otherwise. It is precisely so they realize that these things are accessible to them if they rise just a little bit in the world. That hotel and all the other excursion stops are also to incentivize the youths to be aware of interesting and beautiful places outside their too small world of Rabinal, places which are inexpensive (only \$6.00 for the zoo) or free (some of the world's most fabulous waterfalls).

Indeed, much of the world's beauty is free. But the youth of Rabinal, like everywhere, have reduced their sights to the false world of the internet in their phone while the great wealth of nature, art, and culture in their midst is ignored.

Thank you for accompanying us on our latest excursion. I hope to have gotten to the bottom of my old buggy's overheating problem by the next time I write. For now, I ask always for your prayers. ~Fr. Tim

If you take away the yoke from your midst,
the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,
if you pour yourself out for the hungry
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness
and your gloom be as the noonday.
And the LORD will guide you continually
and satisfy your desire in scorched places
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.
And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations
of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
and make your bones strong;
the restorer of streets to dwell in
(Isiah 58: 9-12).

Mission Appeals

Our director, Fr. Jordan Bradshaw, O.P., will be preaching at the weekend Masses of the following parishes. Come hear him if you're in the area.

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| St. Jude Thaddeus, Earlimart | July 20-21 |
| St. Vincent de Paul, Petaluma | July 27-28 |
| St. Aloysius, Tulare | Aug. 3-4 |
| St. Rita, Tulare | Aug. 10-11 |
| St. Dominic, Benicia | Aug. 17-18 |
| St. Therese, Isleton | Aug. 24-25 |
| Christ the King, Salinas | Oct. 5-6 |
| TBA, San Francisco | Oct. 19-20 |
| St. Sebastian, Sebastopol | Nov. 16-17 |