

The Cultural Plunge



**How to Get Off the Tourist Track
and Experience Community Life
in Foreign Countries**

Fidalgo Island Rotary Club
Anacortes, WA, USA
FidalgoRotary.org

Preface

Immersing yourself in a foreign culture, even for a short time, can be a life changing experience. We encourage every Rotarian – and their families – to do this.

This guide describes some tried and true ways to travel to foreign countries and involve yourself in communities away from the familiar tourist tracks.

Each page highlights a non-profit organization offering anything from a quick tour to long-term volunteer positions. Many of these opportunities are suitable for secondary-school students and recent graduates in your family. Several of the organizations are concerned with childhood education and literacy, but others focus on areas such as health care, sanitation, microcredit and language schools.

Every one of these organizations is known to – and recommended by – members of Fidalgo Island Rotary Club (“FIRC”), or has a long and deep relationship with Rotarians elsewhere.

Currently, all of the organizations are in Latin America. Not because of any geographical bias on our part, but because these are the organizations we know best. Latin America is, after all, relatively easy to get to. We hope to add organizations on other continents in the future.

Most of these opportunities do *not* require knowledge of the Spanish language. However, attending a total-immersion language school with home stay is an excellent way to experience another culture.

We trust that this guide will spark your interest in experiencing community life in other countries.

International Committee
Fidalgo Island Rotary Club

P.S. For additional copies of this guide, download it from FidalgoRotary.org.

Cultural Immersion

What is cultural immersion? And how do you know when you have achieved it?

Here's just one approach: Organize your trips to foreign countries to check off as many of these experiences as possible.

- Visited towns and cities that attract few tourists.
- Stayed in a family home, family-run hotel or B&B, instead of a western-style hotel.
- Spent my days surrounded by local people rather than other tourists.
- Visited locals – both young and old – in their homes, schools, orphanages, libraries, hospitals and other institutions.
- Worked on a humanitarian project.
- Volunteered at a school or NGO.
- Visited NGOs to learn about their projects and the needs of the community.
- Attended meetings at Rotary clubs in the area.
- Ate at restaurants favored by locals, and purchased food from markets.
- Initiated meaningful conversations with locals, on a variety of topics.
- Attended cultural events that are not typically for tourists.
- Took part in community groups such as language clubs, sports clubs, book clubs, churches or cooking classes.
- Researched the history and current events of the country to understand its cultural environment.
- Rode on the buses used by locals.
- Learned some of the local language, and used it every day.

Mexico

Libros para Pueblos (LPP)

Location	Oaxaca, Mexico
Mission	LPP has established more than 70 children's libraries in the state of Oaxaca (pronounced "wa-ha-ka"), mostly in indigenous villages. Donated funds supply the books. LPP also has a vision care program that provides glasses and eye operations to Oaxacans of all ages.



Connection	A Rotary global grant with donations from FIRC is providing computers to 10 of LPP's most remote libraries. FIRC also "adopted" one of LPP's libraries to fund its annual infusion of new books. A club member has worked extensively with LPP, and provides annual funding for two libraries.
Opportunities	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Travel with LPP staff on their working trips to villages, to plan or inaugurate new libraries, to deliver books, to present programs for kids, or to train librarians. You will meet librarians, lots of kids, and often the village President and his team. Trips are from half a day to a week in length, and cost is just \$50 (regardless of length).2. A variety of short- to long-term volunteer opportunities are also available.
Language	Spanish not required except for some volunteer positions.
Environment	Oaxaca is a colorful, mid-sized colonial city (pop. 300,000) at 5,000 ft in southern Mexico. It is safe and offers fine museums, hotels, restaurants, markets, language schools and tour opportunities. The historic center of Oaxaca is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.
Travel	Recommend flying Seatac-Houston-Oaxaca. Other routes available. Combine LPP with a visit to Fundación En Vía (next page).
Web Site	LibrosParaPueblos.org
Contact	LibrosParaPueblos@yahoo.com

Fundación En Vía

Location Oaxaca, Mexico

Mission En Vía is a microcredit organization providing interest-free loans to indigenous women artisans and entrepreneurs in villages surrounding the city of Oaxaca (pronounced “wa-ha-ka”). They also provide the women with education in basic marketing, accounting and English. Borrowers are seeking to start or expand their businesses, whether they are weavers, vegetable growers, tortilla makers or small store owners.



Connection In 2013, FIRC provided funding for loans to 10 borrowers in a specific community. En Vía is also supported financially by two FIRC members, one of whom has been on several of the organization’s tours.

- Opportunities**
1. En Vía’s half-day tours visit 5 or 6 women who are about to get loans. You meet the women and their families, usually at their homes; learn about their businesses; discuss business plans; and provide encouragement. The \$50 you pay for the tour funds new loans. On TripAdvisor.com, En Vía’s tours are often rated the #1 thing to do in Oaxaca -- a major accomplishment.
 2. Volunteer opportunities for teaching classes to borrowers, or for help with administration.
 3. Internships are available for students.
 4. Study Spanish at the affiliated ICO language school.

Language Spanish not required except for some volunteer positions.

Environment Oaxaca is a colorful, mid-sized colonial city (pop. 300,000) at 5,000 ft in southern Mexico. It is safe, and offers fine museums, hotels, restaurants, markets, language schools and tour opportunities. The historic center of Oaxaca is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Travel Recommend flying Seatac-Houston-Oaxaca. Other routes available. Combine En Vía with a visit to Libros para Pueblos (previous page).

Web Site EnVia.org

Contact Info@EnVia.org

Central America

Proyecto Bibliotecas Guatemala (PROBIGUA)

Location Antigua, Guatemala

Mission PROBIGUA's Spanish language school provides an intensive, total-immersion experience, through very small classes, organized trips and group activities, and room-and-board with a local family. The school's profits sustain a children's library bus, and libraries in rural villages where there is no access to books.



Connection Several FIRC members have visited PROBIGUA and their library bus. The organization has received club funding in the past, and is being considered for a grant in 2013.

- Opportunities**
1. Volunteer to accompany a library bus as it visits schools in villages around Antigua. You will help working with the children.
 2. Volunteer in PROBIGUA's college in San Pedro Yepocapa, a village located about one and a half hours from Antigua. Many volunteer possibilities, including computer lab, library, English classes, sports and the arts.
 3. Attend PROBIGUA's language school to learn Spanish rapidly through total immersion in the culture.

Language Spanish not required except in some volunteer positions.

Environment Antigua, the former capital of Guatemala, is a small, colorful colonial city and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is a charming place and safe for visitors. It offers a wide range of hotels, restaurants, markets, galleries, language schools and hiking opportunities.

Travel Recommend flying Seatac-Houston-Guatemala City, then tourist van or taxi from the airport to Antigua (1 hr).

Web Site Probigua.org

Contact Info@Probigua.org

Dr. Miller's Medical Missions

Location

San Lucas Tolimán, Guatemala

Mission

This annual podiatric surgery mission corrects club foot and other foot/ankle problems, mostly in children. The mission lasts about 9 days in January or February, and the visiting team size is about 15 people.



Connection

FIRC member Dr. Steve Miller organizes these missions, which have also received grants from our club. Rotarians from both Anacortes clubs have joined the team each year.

Opportunities

The mission offers two opportunities for adults:

1. Join the medical team if you have needed skills in surgery, anesthesia, general practice or nursing.
2. Outside the medical professions, join the team to provide logistical support or to help with related on-site projects.

Language

Spanish not necessary.

Environment

San Lucas Tolimán is a small town on the shores of spectacular Lake Atitlán, about 2.5 hours from Antigua. The town attracts very few tourists, so your cultural immersion is complete.

Travel

Work with the mission's logistics volunteer for travel arrangements. Combine this trip with a visit to PROBIGUA in Antigua (see previous page).

Web Site

N/A

Contact

Dr. Steve Miller at ftdock1@comcast.net

Guatemala Literacy Project (GLP)

Location	Antigua, Guatemala
Mission	GLP provides badly needed textbooks, library materials and computer centers to underprivileged children in over 220 impoverished rural communities. GLP has also founded 54 self-funding computer centers, 25 literacy programs, and 49 school libraries. GLP's goal is to ensure that no child in Guatemala grows up without both traditional and technological literacy.



Connection	GLP is a partnership between more than 400 Rotary clubs and the non-profit organization Cooperative for Education (CoEd).
Opportunities	<p>GLP and CoEd offer two week-long tours, each offered twice per year:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. On CoEd's popular Snapshot Tours, you will see each of CoEd's projects in action, interact with students and provide educational materials to the schools. Experience Guatemala's culture, travel to small Mayan villages and visit the colonial town of Antigua. All hotel and restaurant accommodations are tourist class. Cost per person is \$1,275 (double occupancy) plus airfare.2. Open only to Rotarians and spouses, GLP Tours are volunteer opportunities to enjoy a week of celebrations and interactions with the children and families served by CoEd. Deliver textbooks and inaugurate new computer centers at impoverished schools. Learn about Guatemalan history and culture, as well as the challenges of the developing world. Accommodations are in mid-level hotels. Cost per person is \$1,575 (double occupancy) plus airfare.
Language	Spanish not necessary.
Environment	Antigua, the former capital of Guatemala, is a small, colorful colonial city, and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is a charming place and safe for visitors. It offers a wide range of hotels, restaurants, markets, galleries, language schools and hiking opportunities.
Travel	Work with trip organizer for optimum travel arrangements.
Web Site	GuatemalaLiteracy.com
Contact	Jennifer@CoEduc.org

Mayatan Bilingual School

Location Copán Ruinas, Honduras

Mission Mayatan is a K-12 private bilingual school, staffed jointly by Honduran and American teachers. Most subjects are taught in English. Mayatan high school graduates receive both American and Honduran diplomas. Students come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.



Connection A FIRC member has visited the school and funds scholarships for two secondary students.

- Opportunities**
1. Visit the campus and volunteer for a day or a few days. Present something educational to the students; lead a lesson on a topic you know well; teach a valuable skill; or discuss educational or job options the students might consider.
 2. High school students (ages 14+) and recent graduates can spend a few weeks at Mayatan, volunteering in classrooms, studying Spanish, and learning local culture by living with a host family.
 3. Volunteer for a week, a month, or even longer. Work as a teacher or assistant; help develop the curriculum; help in the library; or design and build construction projects.
 4. Long-term, administrative volunteer positions also available.

Language Spanish not required except in a few volunteer positions.

Environment Copán Ruinas is a small town in the highlands of Honduras, close to the Guatemala border. At the edge of town is the spectacular Mayan archaeological site of Copán, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The town is safe, and has a good choice of hotels and restaurants. Some guided tours and hikes are also available.


Travel Fly into San Pedro Sula (Honduras) or Guatemala City (Guatemala), then first-class Hedman Alas bus to Copán Ruinas (3 to 5 hrs). Visits are easily combined with a trip to Antigua or other destinations in Guatemala.

Web Site MayatanFoundation.org

Contact Development@MayatanFoundation.org

South America

Etta Projects

Location	Montero, Bolivia	
Mission	Etta Projects started in 2003 as a dining hall, providing children a daily meal and offering their mothers income-generation workshops in a neighborhood of Montero. Since 2009 they have been working with rural villages to develop sustainable health, water, nutrition and sanitation projects.	
Connection	Etta Projects was created to honor the life and legacy of Etta Turner, a Rotary International exchange student whose young life ended tragically in 2002. She was the niece of a FIRC member, and Etta Projects has received grants from our club.	
Opportunities	<p>Etta Projects offers an annual volunteer trip to support dental, vision and other projects in rural villages where the organization is active. Trips last about 10 days and total cost runs around \$2,200 (including air fare, accommodations and meals).</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. A dental team has a maximum of three dentists and several assistants. Anyone can be an assistant. Qualified dental hygienists and assistants are also welcome. The team provides examinations, tooth extractions and restorations.2. A vision team needs at least 6 people and will issue several hundred pairs of glasses. Etta Projects will train anyone to do it. An optometrist or ophthalmologist is always a welcome addition to the team.3. Sometimes a team will be organized to work on other village projects. An example would be building eco-latrines, which is hard labor (but no more than what Etta staff and the villagers do).	
Language	Knowledge of basic Spanish helpful but not required. Etta staff assist with translation.	
Environment	These trips are challenging and exhausting, but very rewarding. Not recommended for children except perhaps older teenagers who can tolerate difficult living conditions. Montero is a mid-sized city (pop. 100,000) about 30 miles north of Santa Cruz de la Sierra. Altitude is 1,000 ft and average temperature is 73°F. The projects are in impoverished rural villages outside of Montero.	
Travel	Recommend flying Seatac-Miami-Santa Cruz (Bolivia). Arrange details with trip's travel coordinator.	
Web Site	EttaProjects.org	
Contact	Penny Nixon at Pennyelw@EttaProjects.org or 360.876.7487	

El Centro de la Niña Trabajadora (CENIT)

- Location** Quito, Ecuador
- Mission** CENIT helps working children (mostly girls) and their families overcome grinding poverty and improve their quality of lives through education and job training, nutrition programs, health and social services, psychological help and recreation. CENIT's K-12 school packs two years of education into every year, because many kids have missed some years of schooling.



- Connection** A FIRC member funded a scholarship for a CENIT student.
- Opportunities** CENIT relies heavily on the help of volunteers. There are many opportunities available for adults of all ages, requiring a minimum commitment from 2 to 6 months. Examples include:
1. Street outreach volunteers work with pre-school kids, playing, singing and teaching basic education through activities.
 2. English teachers in CENIT's school work at various levels, with the assistance of an Ecuadorean teacher.
 3. Street Clinic volunteers visit people in various market sectors; measure blood pressure, etc.; and provide information on nutrition, hygiene & family planning.
- Language** Most volunteer positions require basic to advanced Spanish language skills.
- Environment** Quito, the capital of Ecuador, is a large colonial city (pop. 2 million) at 9,000 ft in the Andes mountains. It has all the amenities you'd expect in a large city, including good language schools. Its historic center is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Weather is temperate year-round.
- Travel** Recommend flying Seatac-Atlanta-Quito. Other routes available.
- Web Site** CenitEcuador.org
- Contact** Volunteer-Office@CenitEcuador.org

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