

2023

Slow Tourism: A Possible Solution to Indigenous Communities' Invisibility in San Cristobal de las Casas

Edurne M. L. Sosa El Fakih
Florida International University, edurnesos@hotmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/undergraduate-journal>



Part of the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sosa El Fakih, Edurne M. L. (2023) "Slow Tourism: A Possible Solution to Indigenous Communities' Invisibility in San Cristobal de las Casas," *FIU Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 2.
DOI: 10.25148/URJ.010321
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/undergraduate-journal/vol1/iss1/2>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in FIU Undergraduate Research Journal by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.

Slow Tourism: A Possible Solution to Indigenous Communities' Invisibility in San Cristobal de las Casas

Cover Page Footnote

Special acknowledgment to Dr. Cruz Rueda of Universidad Autonoma de Chiapas (UNACH), for hosting the author and providing further guidance throughout her research internship.

Slow Tourism: A Possible Solution to Indigenous Communities' Invisibility in San Cristóbal de las Casas

Edurne Sosa El Fakih, Florida International University, US, esosael@fiu.edu

Faculty Advisor A. Douglas Kincaid, Florida International University, US, ad.kincaid@fiu.edu

Tourism is Mexico's second largest service industry and makes up a significant amount of the country's revenue. Scholars have considered and described the impact of Indigenous exploitation on the tourism industry; however, researchers have generally limited their investigation to the social conflict between Indigenous communities, *mestizos*, and tourists, instead of providing sustainable solutions to an issue that has worsened with time. Parallely, even though recent studies have suggested Slow Tourism as a development tool to the economy, their proposal does not consider Indigenous communities as active agents. We report the results of descriptive research design, considered from a transactionalist framework, from which we draw potential steps towards a sustainable and fair industry; this methodology allows accurate description of the Fast Tourism phenomenon. Through field work in non-participant observation and field notes gathered in the span of four weeks, the observation process develops in a three-stage funnel system, manifested in the appendix. This study aims to shift the current international and capitalist touristic models to fit Indigenous communities' necessities and values through the implementation of Slow Tourism practices.

Keywords: *cultural consumerism, indigenous people, conflict resolution, hybrid cultures, Chiapas*

The tourism conditions in Chiapas, especially in San Cristóbal de las Casas (SCLC), are unique. The city's tourism has had a history of ethnic conflicts unparalleled in other parts of the globe due to the context linked to the Mayan Indigenous communities that are bounded to the area and the insurrection of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), also referred to as the Zapatista movement (Garza Tovar & Crispín, 2015). What is more, the EZLN has revealed the exact inequalities that motivated the Indigenous insurgence, upon which the current touristic economic system is built: a history of oppression and vehement resistance to colonial rule, a rebellion that mixed Marxist influences with Protestant and Catholic liberation theology and has recently been supplemented by queer rights and feminist movements (Berg, 2008). The need for fair and sustainable tourism is dire for the Indigenous communities in SCLC.

The aim of this research paper is to act in response to the social and ethnic conflicts in SCLC that have been aggravated by the tourism industry's exponential growth in the last decades. The purpose of leisure travel is to get out of regular routines, yet tourism is at war with itself because it is, fundamentally, an activity subject to market-organized infrastructures of transport and hospitality that frequently exploit cultural minorities, subjugating them to said external and ill-fitted systems (Stasch, 2017). This is why it is necessary to shift the touristic visibility of Indigenous people from overexploitation and extractivist practices that appropriate their heritage – tangible and intangible – to a holistic anthropological standpoint. This overexploitation of image is a direct consequence of Indigenous people's inequalities in tourism access and determination.

Though the literature on the subject overlooks a possible solution, the issues described by relevant authors in 1994 are still consistent today and, if anything, exacerbated. In today's touristic climate affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the search for meaningful connections and respect for the host country and culture, it is necessary to reevaluate the future of the industry in this city. Slow tourism can be a possible solution to ameliorate the living and working conditions of Indigenous people in the area, connecting them back to their cultural roots and providing the business levels in which SCLC thrives. The methodology of the research is qualitative, with multiple sources of data, combining extensive literature research on the subject and field notes, with thick non-participant observation, as well as voice recordings of interviews with displaced people, all of which were taken in the span of four consecutive weeks in the city. This paper is structured as follows: Part I consists of a brief introduction to the subject, Part II provides the conceptualization and context by reviewing relevant literature, Part III describes the specific objectives and defines the methodology of the research, Part IV presents the theoretical discussion and preliminary interpretation, and Part V provides the conclusions of the research.

Literature Review

Defining Tourism

The Perfect Freedom' is how the U.S. Travel Administrations describes tourism, and as discussed by Peter Burns in *An Introduction to Tourism and Anthropology* (1999), a definition of tourism and its meaning is an unresolved issue that varies according to the lens through which it is observed. Travel demand, tourism

intermediaries, destination influences, and the derivative range of impacts are the four commonly agreed upon elements of tourism; however, these factors place emphasis on business and marketing, leaving out the vital component of human interaction. The modern anthropological thinking around tourism today is that tourists' motivations are far too vast and complex to be accurately categorized (Burns, 1999). However, as noted by Stasch (2017) one way of finding commonality between diverse anthropological works on tourism is by examining the pattern that, while tourists intend to experience something outside their daily reality, tourism unfolds as the imposition of tourists' systems into the places (and people) they engage with.

For the anthropological study of tourism, it is necessary to understand it as a system built on two subsystems: generating regions and receiving areas. The connection between both areas creates what Jafari refers to as "zones of mutual interdependence" (Burns, 1999). It is here where anthropology should answer the need for involvement beyond direct financial outflow by tourists or companies' investments. For the purpose of this paper, the definition that best reflects SCLS's industry is Nash's 1981 concept, derived from the theories of work and leisure.

While reading through Carlo Petrini's *Slow Food Nation: Why Our Food Should Be Good, Clean, and Fair*, the concept of "slowness" bled through different societal spheres beyond food, such as Cittaslow (Slow City) and Slow tourism, which impelled the research to consider the movement as a possible answer to the rampant consumerism apparent in the city. With the rapid proliferation of the Slow Food movement since its foundation in 1989, Petrini's concept of slowness as a direct response against frantic capitalism has been translated to cities, money, media, parenting, fashion, and tourism. As with the case of tourism, the concept of "slow" is not defined nor agreed upon, rather, it is divided into a number of typologies that vary in relation to cultures, practices, mobilities, and contexts.¹ Generally, slow tourism could be interpreted in relation to the importance of time, region, activities in the area, and environment consciousness (Fullagar et al., 2012). Dickinson and Lumsdon's (2010) translation of J. Frykman's *Cittáslow* describes what he termed slow tourism as being:

An indicator of a wider process – a reaction in that time and space is compressed in the fast society. The hunting of seconds tends to wipe out the peculiarities of place and persons... Therefore, places in contemporary Europe have put their continuity and history to the front. Slowness has become one of the many ways to express such peculiarity (Frykman, 2000, p. 37).

The authors argue that slowness represents only partly the antithesis of fast, because it also implies sustainability from an interest in strands of green travel, slow consumption through quality time and physically slowing down to enjoy the quality of experience, and meaningful engagement in tune with

¹ Some examples include: rural, eco, green, agricultural, individual, smaller scale tourism, which are often perceived in relation to "Soft Tourism," as alternative ways of tourism that come across as more sustainable and socially aware (Lowry & Lee 2016).

ecology and diversity (Dickinson & Lumsdon, 2010). Slow tourism is the act of traveling for leisure with a critical understanding of the journey and destination (culture, people, gastronomy, sites, etc.), valuing the impacts of travel and focusing on quality time by *physically* slowing down to enjoy. Slow tourism's necessity is reflected in a study of the history of SCLC and tourism's trajectory in the city. To frame theoretically the findings in SCLC, the research is supported through the anthropological transactionalist paradigm that postulates individuals' choices, often within 'economic' terms reflecting an interested rationality (Sneath, 2018).

Geographical and Historical Context

SCLC is marketed as Mexico's most magical town out of all 132 *Pueblos Mágicos* in the country ("Gobierno del Estado de Chiapas," n.d.), which are defined as places with fantastic symbolism and folklore; the antique value of the towns has been crucial for the country's development of its history and identity. Contrary to Mexico's major attraction of sun, sand, and sex tourism that makes most of the tourism revenue in the country, SCLC stands out as being a cultural hub of Spanish and Mayan traditions, where the "colonial stucco walls and Spanish tile roofs contrast with the surrounding villages, which remain home to an array of Mayan-descendant Indians" ("TripAdvisor," n.d.).

The nearby Indigenous villages such as Zinacatan and San Juan Chamula are tourist destinations, alongside Mayan ruins such as Palenque and Bonampak. The Chiapas Highlands are the greatest area inhabited by monolingual Indigenous people in Mexico, comprising one-tenth of the 12 million or so Mexicans grouped as "Indigenous" because they are still speakers of a native language. The 12 million Indigenous people in Mexico make up for about 14 percent of the population, with over 50 recognized ethnicities or micronations living in the crevices of Spanish-speaking Mexico and the mestizos who make the "national" culture (Van den Berge, 1994). The newly acquired interest in all things Mayan by tourists and outsiders promoted the town to be more Indigenous-oriented than ever before. *Ladinos* and *mestizos*, originally from SCLC – known as *coletos*, who had a history of Spanish pride which implied a latent disdain for all things Indigenous, hold the economic and governmental power to develop new ventures. *Ladinos* have not only the language abilities, but the purchasing power and know-how systems.

Van den Berge (1994) argues that even though the situation is not ideal for tourists, the exponential growth of tourism in SCLC has driven some money to "trickle down" to the Fourth World peoples, or what Aguirre Beltran called "regions of refuge." Yet, Cañas Cuevas' 2016 "Pueblo Trágico" study of the city's neoliberal multiculturalism and urban governmentality found that the 2001 Programa Pueblos Mágicos (PPM) of which SCLC is an outstanding member, recognizes local Indigenous people "inasmuch as they can be turned into docile subjects" (Cañas Cuevas, 2016). The study concludes that the PPM's projects are focused on bettering the urban image of the town. The touristic ventures and advances that the government has put forward do not answer the needs of the majority in SCLC. What is more, the program aims at

creating “docile subjects” as objects of exhibition for the tourists, cheap labor for the tourist establishments, and/or denying their presence in the urban landscapes. With this said, the 1994 optimistic views on positive economic impacts and development on Indigenous communities are not only outdated, but in need of revision.

Objectives and Methodology

The general objective of this study is to react to the above-mentioned social conflicts in SCLC aggravated through tourism by (1) demonstrating the flaws on the existing bibliography on ethnic tourism in SCLC, (2) opening the dialogue for possible new touristic strategies within a transactionalist framework that considers Indigenous people and recognizes them as an active agent and subject, and (3) studying slow tourism as a possible solution.

Throughout this study, a qualitative methodology was used, combining extensive literature research and descriptive field notes taken during the span of four consecutive weeks in the city. The complete field notes are presented in the appendix, along with images that further illustrate the observations and annotations of the author. The qualitative nature of the research impelled non-participant observation; due to the language barrier with Indigenous communities, the author remained an observer of Indigenous people’s activities and interactions with tourists. Further interviews, notes, and properly translated conversations are needed to accurately convey the Indigenous people’s thoughts and feelings toward tourism in general, and slow tourism specifically.

As an apprentice researcher in anthropology, my own lack of experience in the field enthused me towards certain perspectives about the community that presented subjectivity in my research. Acknowledging my positionality as a non-indigenous Hispanic woman, who had never interacted with indigenous communities and came from a certain privileged academic status, allowed me to recognize potential biases. During the research period, my views and positions were constantly challenged and exacerbated by my inexperience with the surroundings, and moments of fear, unease, and doubt, both academically and personally. The ethical concern for a researcher in the field is to acknowledge the power imbalance between the participants and the researcher, and to establish appropriate relations during the study that follow meticulous risk assessment both from the researcher’s home institution (Florida International University), and the receiving institution (Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas). In the instances in which I followed Dr. Cruz Rueda in her research and interacted with indigenous communities, Dr. Cruz Rueda asked for permission from the participants, and they gave verbal informed consent to have me shadow her research. Furthermore, all the people I encountered throughout my research have been made anonymous.

Findings and Discussion

Racialized Invisibility

Based on the observations carried during the month of August of 2021, the Indigenous people referred to in this article belong mostly to two main adjacent communities near SCLC, San Juan Chamula and Zinacantán, where the native language is Tzotzil. The street vendors on the main square and boulevards of SCLC are mostly women, from both Chamula and Zinacantán communities, accompanied by their children and other women.

Right next to it is the Plaza 31 de Mayo, where there were many ambulant food stands and shoe shiners. The informal economy of this town is quite high, and I notice most of them are indigenous people speaking in their own language. Two kids approached me to persuade me to buy a bracelet from them, I said “no, thank you” and they asked me to give them “diez pesitos, nomás” with a thick Spanish accent. After mentioning I had no cash, they moved on to sell their commodity to somebody else. Author’s journal notes.

As described in the fieldnotes, the situation of Indigenous people in the touristic market of SCLC is contained to the informal economy: street vendors of hand-made products, food stands, and beggars are recognizable by their garment and accents when speaking Spanish.

I noticed a great deal of visitors, both foreign and national tourists, reject and decline the street vendor’s insistence, as well as beggars. They just go on about their walk, drinks, and conversation. Author’s journal notes.

The social problem attached to their situation is the invisibility that they are subject to, where tourists don’t see them anymore – or pretend not to see them – because of the sheer number of people on the streets. This is particularly prominent with begging children, going from table to table at most restaurants and trying to sell their crafted products. From my observations, only two out of ten tables give money to the children, without even wanting the product they are selling, simply doing it for charity.

John (30-year-old Englishman): “I was thinking, all these people selling things on the street, they should market their products better because they are all selling the same thing and they can’t possibly be making money off it.” Author’s journal notes.

The reason for Indigenous invisibility and desensitization from the tourists comes from the overwhelming number of street vendors and beggars, who see themselves forced to go to the main city square and boulevards to make a profit. The tourism is the pull factor that motivates them to migrate from their communities to the city, and the push factors that encourage them to leave their communities are vast and diverse, such as religious discrimination, physically demanding labor on the fields as opposed to the city, or women’s need for an independent, steady income for their family. It seems apparent that Chamulas and Zinacantecos lack opportunities in their own communities, forcing them to look for resources in SCLC.

Commodification and Spectatorship

While tangible heritage is commodified through the many “Mayan” products sold on the streets and across the state, Indigenous intangible heritage is exemplified in the monetization of San Juan Chamula’s church visit and the guided tour through the temple. Indigenous people’s practices are watched by tourists while a tour guide explains and translates the rituals, the same way art is exposed and translated in a museum or, a poignant comparison, animals at a zoo.

The tour guides all gave a speech in the same tone, without missing a beat, and with perfect accents in Spanish, some even in English. Author’s journal notes.

Reviews in TripAdvisor describe the tour-guided visit to the church as “simply repeated by heart a little story he had repeated I don’t know how many times (which lasted not even 5 minutes), answered my questions without not even too much interest (when I really had a genuine interest in knowing the habits there), and couldn’t wait to go out once again to attract other [customers]” (“TripAdvisor,” n.d.). This review supports the author’s cognition about tour guides’ commodification of heritage, exemplifying the ways in which tourists feel served a ready-made story, mass-produced experience, void of genuine interest and/or cultural integrity.

Transactionalist Discussion

Transactional theory, also referred as “methodological individualism,” is concerned with the decision-making and economic maximizing strategies of individuals that inhabit specific political “arenas” (Erickson & Murphy, 2021). This anthropological theory answers the key dilemma of structural-functionalist statements that individuals are imprisoned in, and defined by, social and cultural structures. Dissimilar to structural functionalism, transactionalism considers individual agency and choices, within a larger social, political, and economic structure. This theory works well for understanding Indigenous people’s motivation to engage in the commodification of their heritage through tourism. It can be applied to the fieldwork by analyzing the specific transactions and interactions between tourists, visited peoples, mestizos, and the ethnic divisions in SCLC.

As the tourism industry in SCLC increases, so does the marginalization of Indigenous people from “regions of refuge,” who see themselves forced to take part in a capitalist system that benefits from the Mayan heritage of the communities, but leaves them as docile or inanimate, invisible objects. Slow tourism practices come up as a solution to ameliorate their living conditions and access to resources, but only if understood from within their own framework and applied within their own parameters. Tourist practices handled by mestizos and expatriates are abundant in the city, but there are no tours or activities made by Indigenous people themselves.

Based on previous studies about the industry in the Chiapas Highlands, the researcher infers that a few steps towards slow tourism can be implemented gradually. Firstly, by promoting slow touristic alternatives

that incentivize longer stays and motivate tourists to engage in a slow consumption of experiences, these practices can be done from both the public and private sector. Secondly, by stimulating Indigenous participation in the public sector, they can represent their community fairly and make their voices heard to the mestizo majority. And thirdly, by providing the tools and resources for the development of slow tourism, Indigenous people can be recognized as active subjects in the tourism industry.

Conclusion

It is evident that the tourism industry in SCLC has shifted: from its early stages in the later years of the 20th Century, when backpackers, academics and researchers explored the Lacandon Jungle, to the Zapatismo promoted by political movements like the EZLN, and later fluctuating to a tourism that traded Mayan heritage to attract visitors. Today, however, the city center is kept alive by numerous restaurants, cafes, and hostels, visited by tourists who spend short periods of time in the city, as they “town hop” across Mexico. These visitors struggle with both interest in the Indigenous culture of the Chiapas area, and rejection towards Indigenous street vendors and beggars, creating the issue of invisibility.

Through the literature review, the academic weakness that studies Indigenous tourism from a conflict theory is established, concerned with exploitation and social struggle. At the same time, the study that introduces slow tourism as a developmental tool for the economy of the Chiapas Highlands are presented in the research. The results reported through extensive ethnographic description demonstrate the marginalization of Indigenous communities adjacent to SCLC who partake in the tourism industry of the city as docile subjects. Through a transactional analysis, it is concluded that slow tourism is a viable answer to provide Indigenous people from Zinacantan and San Juan Chamula access to touristic resources, inasmuch as tourism is implemented within their own framework and applied within their own parameters.

It should be noted that it is imperative to carry out deeper research on the characteristics of the tourist profile in SCLC, as the allotted time and resources did not provide enough data to be able to draw conclusive information. The research topic presents itself as floriferous and befitting for further research, extended fieldwork, and deeper analysis via postgraduate research in the future.

A main keynote from the research is the importance and focus of slow tourism, a rising movement of socially and environmentally conscious tourism practice, in direct relation with indigenous communities fighting against consumerism, extractivism, and invisibility in SCLC. Instead of doing away with tourism altogether in the city, slow tourism provides a new framework from which to shift the current unsustainable situation to more positive outcomes, taking advantage of the already thriving industry in the area. The alternative of slow tourism is not only applicable in SCLC but transposed to other communities in Mexico facing similar unmaintainable consumerist practices. Slow tourism tours, visits, and activities can be implemented through grass roots and local groups at a small scale, in order to slowly introduce this touristic alternative and examine its feasibility for indigenous communities.

Special acknowledgment to Dr. Cruz Rueda of Universidad Autonoma de Chiapas (UNACH), for hosting the author and providing further guidance throughout her research internship.

Please visit <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/undergraduate-journal/> for full appendix materials.

References

- Berg, G. (2008). *Zapaturismo in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Mexico: Marketplace capitalism meets revolutionary tourism*. University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba.
- Burns, P. (1999). *An Introduction to Tourism and Anthropology*. Routledge Press.
- Cañas Cuevas, S. (2016). "Tragic Town: Neoliberal and multicultural governmentality in Southern Mexico." *Revista Pueblos y Fronteras Digital*. <https://doi.org/10.22201/cimsur.18704115e.2016.21.6>
- Dickinson, J. & Lumsdon, L. (2010). *Slow Travel and Tourism*. Routledge Press. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781849776493>
- Erickson, P. and Murphy, D. (2021). *A History of Anthropological Theory*. University of Toronto Press.
- Fullagar, S., Wilson, E. & Markwell, K. (2012). *Slow Tourism: Experiences and Mobilities*. Channel View Publications.
- Garza Tovar, J. R., Sánchez Crispín, Á. (2015). "Estructura territorial del turismo en San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, México." *Cuadernos de Turismo*, (35), 185–209. <https://doi.org/10.6018/turismo.35.221571>
- Gobierno del Estado de Chiapas. (n.d.) www.chiapas.gob.mx. <https://www.chiapas.gob.mx/pueblos-magicos/san-Cristóbal/>
- Lowry, L. & Lee M. (2016). "CittaSlow, Slow Cities, Slow Food: Searching for a Model for the Development of Slow Tourism." *Travel and Tourism Research Association: Advancing Tourism Research Globally*. 40. <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/ttra/2011/Visual/40/>
- Nash, D. (1981). "Tourism as an Anthropological Subject." *Current Anthropology*, 22(5), 461–481. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2742284>
- "San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Mexico 2022: Best Places to Visit." (n.d.) TripAdvisor. https://www.tripadvisor.com/Tourism-g150802-San_Cristóbal_de_las_Casas_Southern_Mexico-Vacations.html
- Sneath, D. (2018) From transactionalism to practice theory. In Candea, M. (Ed.) *Schools and Styles of Anthropological Theory* (pp. 91- 107). Routledge.
- Stasch, R. (2017). Tourism. In F. Stein (Ed.), *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. Cambridge. <http://doi.org/10.29164/17tourism>
- Van Den Berghe, P. (1994). *The Quest for the Other. Ethnic tourism in San Cristóbal, Mexico*. University of Washington Press.

Appendix

Journal Entry: August 2nd

After successfully switching to the “connecting flights” area, I looked for my gate to sit down patiently and wait. However, there was only one big tv where all flights were being displayed at a pace I found annoyingly long. Right where the massive tv is, there is a checkpoint where policemen revise the fruit containers that workers bring into the restaurants on the inner side. Most of the workers are young males (20-30 y/o), and they have the tomatoes and potatoes on long green crates, covering the top with translucent plastic, and being transported on tumbrils. The crates go through the x-ray baggage scanner, while the employee undergoes a similar process as the rest of the travelers. This makes me wonder about MIA International. From where do the businesses and employees bring in all the items? I am sure there is an employee check point, but I have never looked for it nor paid attention. I vividly remember the employee check point at Maiquetia Airport in Caracas, with the people saying hi to each other and sharing coffee or juice. But I never saw anybody bringing crates full of vegetables. I noticed a few other details that I hope to get more insights on: as I waited in line, I was the only person with the boarding pass on the smartphone. Everybody else had the email printed. I don't believe is a matter of not having connectivity nor data on their phones, as everyone was using them for their personal matters (calls, Instagram browsing, games, etc.). Could it be that they don't fully trust the virtual process to leave such important matters in the hand of a device? I can relate to that, as I screenshot all important information and QR codes “just in case.” But printing single use paper breaks my heart. Another interesting detail I observed was the family behind me, who had the phenotype I would associate with Mexican people. Racially, the family of five could be described as “Hispanic,” but they were speaking perfect American English, both the parents and their three kids. Two immediate options cross my mind: they are Mexicans who have been living in the states for a very long time, coming home to visit family and places; or they are in fact American and are going to Tuxtla Gutierrez for tourism. If they are foreigners arriving for tourism, why Tuxtla? Why not Tulum or Playa Mujeres or Cancun? What places are they going to visit during their trip? I cannot assume they will come to San Cristóbal de las Casas, but it seems likely (SCLC is one of Mexico's best Pueblos Mágicos, “magic villages”).

It's 9pm and I am at last in San Cristóbal de las Casas, at the rooftop terrace of my Airbnb. The drive from Tuxtla Airport to SCLC was beautiful. I took the bus alongside a family and two couples (all Mexican, this I know for certain because they told the driver); it was a small minivan like the ones hotels use at airports. The driver was too far from me to ask him anything, and the vehicle was too loud to hear his conversation with the copilot. I only grasped the few sentences he directed to the group in general. For example, that the road is undergoing some amplification construction, that we passed through one of the biggest bridges in Mexico above the Usumacinta River, where smaller rivers across the country and Guatemala converge, making it a vast waterway. This river has five dams in which five plants generate over 70% of all the hydraulic energy. I have yet to confirm his claims. Unfortunately, I fell asleep for most of the drive, and could not

see any other dams, bridges, or flowing rivers. The little bit of the landscape that I observed, made me feel awfully homesick. The nature is very similar to my hometown. How odd, how all of Latin America can be so familiar, and yet so strikingly different. Maybe that is the reason why Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Juan Rulfo can write such specific stories about their villages, and we all relate and understand them as if they were our own. My first impression of the town was the comforting feeling of familiarity, to an extent, I feel as if I had been here already. The cobblestone streets, the way-too-narrow sidewalk that barely fits a grown man, the random and arbitrary stop signs, and the sound of the motorcycles rushing up and down. If it wasn't because the people are physically different to people in my hometown – and the skirts, fruits and taco stands that spread all around – I could imagine this little town being in Venezuela or Colombia or Ecuador. Carlos Fuentes explained the cultural and architectural traits we have inherited from Spain, and how our future should be having that inheritance in mind, instead of copying US and British economic and political models. We are so alike, and yet so different. The room I am renting is inside a big colonial-style house, with terracotta floors and yellowish walls, full of plants.



Inside the Airbnb

The streets with polished stone

Estefania, the sister of my Airbnb host, sells coffee, cakes, and pizza from a window. She was the one who welcomed me and answered all my questions regarding the safety of the town, the times of sunrise and sunset, and recommending a vegan place. When I was a Front Desk Agent at a hotel in Miami Beach, there was nothing that bothered me the most than googleable questions. As I am writing this, I realize I could have simply googled all of that, but I needed the reassurance of a human, local and female, letting me know what she thought the best and safest places were. The room is modest, but it has its own private bathroom, which I am extremely grateful for. Just in front of the toilet, there is a little window overlooking the street that I have

to be very mindful of, as any passerby could see inside easily.

After a shower, I went to the vegan restaurant Estefania recommended. I slipped a few times on the sidewalks because they are made of polished stones, and my shoes slide if I am not careful. Te Quiero Verde was attended by women only, one of them was visibly the owner or manager because her little boy was playing with their dog. I sat next to an Argentinian couple. The other two tables were occupied, one by a single white man around thirty years old, and the other one had a group of Mexican young men. I wonder if they are here on tourism, but they did not look like it. They looked local. Do local young men eat at cute vegan places like this? After walking the town, I arrived to Zócalo, where the cathedral stands overlooking the indigenous ladies who lay down their art: floral rugs, skirts, hats, leather bags, hats, handmade jewelry, etc. The sun was starting to come down on the opposite side of the cathedral, so it showered the plaza with golden light. Right next to it is the Plaza 31 de Mayo, where there were many ambulant food stands and shoe shiners. The informal economy of this town is quite high, and I notice most of them are indigenous people speaking in their own language. Two kids approached me to persuade me to buy a bracelet from them, I said “no, thank you” and they asked me to give them “diez pesitos, nomás” with a thick Spanish accent. After mentioning I had no cash, they moved on to sell their commodity to somebody else. I noticed a great deal of visitors, both foreign and national tourists, reject and decline the street vendor’s insistence, as well as beggars. They just go on about their walk, drinks, and conversation. On my way to the Airbnb, I passed through a very popular street, full of bars and at least three Argentinian restaurants. There were many foreigners sitting on the tables and looking at the different street performers. I want to know what brings them to this town in specific.

Journal Entry: August 4th

Impressions of the Cerrito San Cristóbal: only locals, very safe, people genuinely enjoy running or exercising and walking their dogs. On my way back home, I saw again a group of people waiting in line at the doctors, and I noticed that almost all of them were indigenous. The women were wearing the black sheep’s skin skirt typical from San Juan Chamula and speaking in their native language. This made me think back to what Elisa was describing to me yesterday: the distrust from indigenous communities to the government and the health care system. Their experiences are tainted by the language barrier and topped off with structural and symbolic violence and racism.



Steps up to the church in Cerrito San Cristóbal



Views from El Cerrito

10pm – Reviewing the images of the Zócalo and thinking back to my experience, I noticed very few tourists engaged in purchasing, only a few walked around the sellers and looked at their products.



Women selling at Zócalo, in front of the cathedral



Journal Entry: August 5th

Today my experience trying to observe the women at the Zócalo turned sour when someone threw their chewing gum in my hair. It shouldn't upset me, but it really does. I am not sure if it was on purpose or not, and as I was realizing how afraid I was of talking to the ladies, someone spat their gum on the back of my head. I cried at home.

After spending the morning researching relevant bibliography for my research and reading Elisa's supporting documents, I decided I had to simply walk the town and see where the indigenous women worked; their habits, their dynamic and relationships among each other. My original theory was that transportation and mobility were lacking in their communities, which pushed them to use informal methods of transportation. I imagined that the lacking public transportation was due to racial discrimination on the government's part, but after walking and asking a few ladies about public buses to San Juan Chamulas (a nearby indigenous village), they assured me there were "colectivos" that did the route. I walked to the place where the colectivos collect passengers, but it was after 6.30pm and the buses stop at that time. Instead, I walked back to the main plaza and sat to observe the ladies. The remaining merchants at the Zócalo intrigued me, if they were still at the plaza is because they did not need to catch the bus; then, either they don't go back to their communities and sleep in SCLC, or they have personal methods of transportation.



Colectivo stop — the buses with a green stripe dire inside SCLC. San Juan Chamula's have a blue stripe instead

I wanted to ask them these questions and find out what motivated them to come here to sell artesanias, but I was paralyzed with fear. As I saw them interacting with each other and their kids eager trying to sell me something, I notice they don't speak Spanish, and I am not sure how to approach a person that I can't even communicate with. I have studied the need for protecting subjects and the importance of asking the right questions, but actually doing it feels extremely daunting. What if they don't want to talk to me? What if I am wasting their time by distracting them from potential customers? How tainted would their answers be if I start conversation by purchasing one of their products I have absolutely no interest on buying?

Journal Entry: August 7th

As I was reading Berghe's ethnic division of labor, I found how truly accurate it is. Antonio the host of my Airbnb (27-year-old, male, Mexican), perfectly fits the description that the author makes of the mestizos, who monopolized on the indigenous culture, but had the means of production to set up hotels and restaurants. Not only that, but they are also the middleman between foreigners and Indigenous people. Moreover, Antonio mentions how his grandparents wouldn't have put the Maya textiles he has on the house as decoration, as they made a clear distinction between the people "from here" and "them" (a form of othering). Truthfully, my experience from two days ago at the market supports his views on the poverty and "dirtiness." I will add a few images below of the plaza in front of the church that slowly became the Mercado de Santo Domingo. Antonio explains he does not recall the time without the market being set-up, but he does remember when the sellers were mobile, instead of settled in small squats. Nonetheless, the market was indeed dirty; the cobblestone floor had brown puddles and the amount of trash was unmeasurable. Maybe I just don't like markets?



Entrance to Mercado Santo Domingo & Street at Mercado San Miguel

I also witnessed a wedding celebration parade in the middle of an andadero, but what called my attention weren't the dancing performers or the giant Parachico, but the guests. Almost the majority of the guests were white people. As I saw the giant masked performer and heard the drums, I followed it only to find a long tail of men dressed in tuxedos and women with night dressed and heels. It was afterwards that I saw the couple kissing in the middle of the rumble of dancers and guests and colors. He was not white, but the bride was. I am not sure if people from here marry this way, and if not, how do they? How will Antonio celebrate his wedding, for instance?



The Couple

Guests and Parachico

Performer serving guests

Journal Entry: August 8th

On my way to the bus station where the combis go to San Juan Chamula, I wanted to stop at the Mercado Municipal Jose Castillo Tielemans, as my Airbnb host mentioned it would be an interesting place to visit. The market appeared to me a few blocks away, I arrived to it from the side, and all I could see where small stands with vendors on the sidewalk, with plastic rugs on the floor exposing their products. Only a few of them had made-up roofs for the stands, with umbrellas and/or cloth. I walked in between some of the vendors and saw that the majority sold vegetables such as cabbage, strawberries, tomatoes and potatoes. After crossing the sidewalk, they were occupying, I entered the actual market building. My very first impression was nice, the two first stands were pastries, that smelled good, and the store had some yellow light making the ambience cozy and attractive.



However, passing the pastry stands, there was a butcher shop and fish shop. I normally try to put away my personal distaste for these shops, and understand them within their own context; nonetheless, the smell was so strong it was impossible for me to be there at ease. Most of the counters and shops were empty, perhaps because it was only 9am, and the overall smell of the building was very unpleasant. A few blocks further, a dog was ripping apart the trash, and nobody seemed to mind. As a matter of fact, an indigenous woman was sitting on the floor right next to the dog, exposing her vegetables. I wondered the reasons that push her to come all the way to this market to sit down next to the trash to try to sell some produce.

When I felt I had arrived to the street where the bus station was supposed to be at, I asked for more directions, and a gentleman answered “siga la chamulita, ella pa’a alla,” “follow the chamulita, she goes there.” He used the diminutive “ita,” and instead of calling her señora he referred to her as the village she is from. She was wearing the indigenous black skirt. I wonder how such language is embedded in the power relations between coletos (people originally from SCLC) and indigenous people. The bus station was inside a big garage, I would have missed it if I wasn’t following the lady, and as soon as I entered the garage a gentleman approached me and opened the door of his car to offer me a ride. I accepted when I saw a tourist Mexican couple go in as well, and an indigenous family. The ride is \$18, for me and for the lady I followed. I thought people from Chamula should get a discount on the transportation, but they didn’t seem to mind the price and paid every time. After we had taken off, a group of three waved the car to stop and the driver did so, he spoke to the group of indigenous people in their language, and when he opened the door, he told each person where to sit. He directed the younger girl to the back of the bus next to some tourists, he directed the young man to sit next to another single man, and he instructed the older lady to stand in the car. I wanted to give her my seat, but I was afraid I would upset the driver. I made signs for her to sit and she shook her head no.



Lady instructed to stay up in the combi, sitting on the floor

We arrived on the top of a hill, got off the combi and people started paying their rates. I followed the group of tourists down the hill and through the market. It's a steep two-way concrete street where cars don't go through, and people are selling their products on the floor. There are many stores as well on the sides, but the real attractive is the middle full of people with fruits, vegetables, pastries, chickens, pots, sandals, and I even saw two geese. The market takes over the street surrounding the main plaza where the church is, and through my walk down I only saw two tourists: one white couple of ladies and one white single woman.



Street in San Juan Chamula, highlighted both the street market and the church at the end

When I arrived at the plaza, it surprised me how there were no vendors inside, but only tables on the side where families were eating, and men were wearing white clothes made of sheep's skin. Groups of mariachi-like bands were singing to each family in the different tables, and the songs from the different bands were overlapping.



Male white sheep's clothing



Mariachis singing to the family at the table

I walked into the church; but a man stopped me and stated the fee was 25 pesos. I went with him to the side table and paid 26, he gave me a ticket and started attending the next customer. As I noticed he was not going to give me my one peso, I told him "I gave you 26, you owe me one," he responded "oh I don't have change, do you?" I shook my head no and waited, he checked his bag of money and found a peso that he gave to me while talking to someone else. Who keeps the money? Where do my 25 pesos go, if a guided visit costs extra? There are many tour guides dressed in the white Borrego skin outside the church, and it looks messy, filled with people and calling out for new customers.

The church is truly astonishing. A complete feeling of magic impregnates the space, as if truly otherworldly things were to occur at any moment. The smell inside was delicious, smelled like pine, burned candle and incense, and the whole church was lit up by thousands of candles. I wish I could have taken a picture, but the sign outside strictly forbade any type of camera. When I walked, I was in such magical shock, I couldn't keep walking because it was filled with visitors, so I took my phone out and started to write down on my notes the things I found interesting in the church, up until when a tour guide approached me and told me phones were not allowed. I replied, "I am not taking pictures," to which he said "do you see the people from here with phones? No. So you cannot use it." I decided not to question it, after all, I am the visitor. I put my phone away and took my tiny note pad and started writing the last idea that I had in my brain, until

someone else came over and told me notepads were not allowed. At this point I felt as if management simply did not want me to pay close attention, they wanted me to pay, enter, walk the church, and leave. As I walked around the church, I noticed several Indigenous people were using their phones to listen to music, send messages and check social media; they were using their phones *inside* the church. The tour guides all gave a speech in the same tone, without missing a beat, and with perfect accents in Spanish.



San Juan Chamula Church

Sign in front of the church

People come to the church to perform healing rituals: I saw a mother with her two daughters accompanied by a healer that was taking the oldest daughter's pulsations. Sitting on the floor with five rows of lit candles in front of them, the healer chanted praying words to which I only recognized the words "senor." She opened a small bottle that contained a clear liquid that looked like water, washed her hands, and passed her hands through her long black braids. She poured some of the liquid on a shot glass and gave to the ladies to drink. I realized it was alcohol because the youngest girl looked at her mom with wide eyes, as if asking for permission, and made a face afterwards. Besides the transparent alcohol, they had bottles of soda (something like sprite, and Coca-Cola). I heard a chicken as well but was unable to spot it.

I exited the church and sat on the small cross in the middle of the plaza, where a young indigenous girl came with two younger kids asking for money. I apologetically said no and they went off playing around the cross. She looked at a rock and started to count in Spanish, and she told the other girl "It's twelve thirty," the other one replied in their native tongue and the girl counted again in their language and pointed at the slits on the rock. I imagine is some sort of clock, I took a picture below.



Journal Entry: August 9th

Antonio, who has become a friend now, invited me to go have a drink with his friend John from England. We went to a bar full of foreigners, the two tables next to us were British, and the guy behind was speaking French. John was with his younger brother, and they were happy to see Antonio. I felt a bit awkward, because I have never met friends in this context, where my host invites me out; at the beginning they were talking to each other, but soon after we got comfortable in our seats I started adding to the conversation. I had spoken to Antonio about the ritual I witnessed yesterday at San Juan Chamula church, and he had told me the name of the alcohol is Pox. We ordered a shot for each, the boys got double shots and I got a single one. I am SO glad I only had one, because it truly was very hard to drink. I hated it. It had a spicy ting of sweetness at the end that made it unbearable.



Pox, a maize liquor

When John asked me what I am doing in SCLC I said I am doing research in anthropology with the indigenous communities, and I felt very silly to say it out loud. In reality, I am just sitting in coffee shops reading a ton of articles and writing ideas on different word documents. Nonetheless, he was excited to hear that and said “I would want to talk about you! I was thinking, all these people selling things on the street, they should market their products better because they are all selling the same thing and they can’t possibly be making money off it.” I told him I completely agreed, but the root problem is what pushes them to sell things on the street. We got into a discussion about their issues, and he stated “well, they need to know the market. It’s their fault they can’t sell anything. I would be making bracelets with Western icons to make it more appealing.”

Journal Entry: August 10th

The vegan tacos’ restaurant had a wall full of Zapatista art, and a few indigenous ladies are selling Zapatista figurines on the street. Antonio has mentioned a few times how his grandparents’ house in the mountain “el rancho” was taken over by indigenous people. It’s noticeable that this was an unpleasant experience for him.



Vegan tacos' restaurant displaying Zapatista art & restaurant with the name "The Son of Zapata"

Journal Entry: August 12th

I went for dinner with Antonio, after reading and writing all day. He told me he was surprised when he saw a white man doing labor jobs for the first time in Mexico City.

After eating, we went to a local place to have another drink. It was a small street, away from the main streets I have walked on my time here, and for a minute I got scared of following him through places I was lost in. But soon we made a turn and I saw white people coming off a tiny black iron door. How sad that I am less afraid when I see a bunch of white people. We entered and the whole place smelled like marihuana, and everyone was white. It was so shocking to me I started laughing. All the Europeans seem to have decided to leave their countries because they like it better here, but still hang out with each other only, drink beer only, speak their languages only and listen to their electronic music only.

Antonio and Estefania's house has 5 rooms which they rent on Airbnb, and they are always full, and I don't have enough time to get to know anyone before they leave onto the next Pueblo Mágico already.

Journal Entry: August 13th

In the early evening, I went for a cup of hot chocolate at Kinoki. At some point, a couple sat next to me. He was Mexican and she was foreigner, her accent in Spanish was very thick. He mentioned how Europeans sell dresses and bracelets on the street so they could pay off their travels across Latin America and he explained why it deeply bothered them because their countries have better opportunities and here they are taking away from the potential market that indigenous people and lower-income families strive off: tourism.

Journal Entry: August 14th

I went to meet Elisa at her husbands' workshop, where they were meeting some indigenous people, whose land was stolen by the government.

The conversation was between Tzotzil and Spanish, with the maestra translating "Castilla" to their language. Juan Perez Jolote also uses the word Castilla to refer to the Spanish language. The reason why Elisa was working with them is because they were stripped from their land, a total of 59 families and about 300 people were removed from 250 hectares of land by the government.

Elisa was working with them, as she is a lawyer, to demand the land back from the government and to call out the human right violations that the families suffered. Their food, their houses, their way of living was taken away from them simply because the government said so. Then, they are at the phase in which the government has finally recognized the violation of human rights and are "reviewing" the case. The maestra had just received the email confirmation saying that in fact they were *despojados y desplazados*. Elisa was explaining them the legal jargon and plotting the next steps and course of action.

Out of the four authorities and institutions to which they wrote about their human rights violations, only two responded. They are waiting on *Fiscalía del Municipio* and *Ayuntamiento de Nicolas Carranza*. I initially thought that Nicolas Carranza was a gentleman, but it's simply the name of the *Ayuntamiento*. How silly. Below are a few details I observed during the talk:

The maestra uses many Spanish words on her Tzotzil speech: *ahora, pero, entonces, porque, como que* and *orale*. Besides the names of the institutions, which are in Spanish. This makes me think of how not having names for institutions in their languages excludes them from bureaucracy. If in their native language they cannot translate *Fiscalia del Municipio*, I don't think they are respected legally.

Two men made comments in Spanish. He responded to Elisa when she mentioned that she and Javier would work on the project for as long as they (the community) wanted them to work on it, and the gentleman said "no, *seguiremos hasta tenerlo resuelto mejor*" which means "no, we'll work on it until we finish it." He said it with a laugh that intended to make it easier, but his message was clear: you must get us our land back. She said, "yes of course, but if you get tired or don't want to keep fighting, I cannot force you to." The older gentleman who never sat on chair said in limited Spanish "you see me, I am old, I don't speak Castilla and I don't know how to read. All I want is my land so I can eat. You see me, I am old, but I have energy in all my body, my hands my feet my teeth are fighting. You have to help us. I don't get tired."

Journal Entry: August 15th

Elisa, Javier and Iyari picked me up at 6am at the Airbnb. We stopped in Comitán, at a small street stand where a woman was selling *empanadas*, coffee, and "pan" (which is not bread, is something like cake). I had a

coffee and two pieces of cake, and they had atole and empanadas. We arrived to Chicomuselo at 11am, where we were supposed to meet Paquis and Roberto, two people who are working alongside Elisa and Javier on implementing the Human Rights program they are working on rural towns in Chiapas. Paquis wasn't in the building when we arrived, so we went to eat at the church's cafeteria. It was right outside the church, in a patio, two long tables and a tiny kitchen. Paquis arrived while we were eating and was telling us that Comitan was extremely dangerous lately. A group of guys with guns had stopped the priest and stolen the car and his wallet and left him almost naked on the middle of the street. The priest's car was 2021 and very expensive. Paquis says the people sell Mexican stolen cars in Guatemala, and the ones stolen in Guatemala are sold here.



Javier and Iyari and me, eating

After eating, we went to the little school where Elisa & Javier were supposed to meet and waited outside while Roberto talked to the “comi” (short for Comisario) to let them in and gather the junta for the meeting. When the meeting finally started, Elisa began by apologizing for not being there the last time and asked for their confidence and trust that the project would move forward. Afterwards, we went to a different community, about 15 - 20min away and went to an older lady's house, where we're supposed to sleep for the night. The lady's name is Refugio, and her house was very pretty. It started raining when we arrived, but Javier had to change the next day's meeting to an earlier time so we could leave on time, so we went to Juan's house, the comi of that other village, so he could put the announcement on the town speakers. The town had speakers where the street light posts were and things were announced when needed. Elisa stayed at Refugios' house and Javier, Iyari, Refugios and I went to speak to el comi Juan. He said he would change the times of the meeting, but people might not show up because it was raining, and they couldn't hear the speakers with the rain.

Journal Entry: August 16th

I was able to sleep until 7.30am. The meeting was supposed to be at 9am, so I thought we should wake up and help with breakfast. I brushed my teeth, made the bed, untied the nets, and folded the blankets, and washed my face. Refugios insisted I had nothing to do in the kitchen, so I went for a little walk. I came back at 8.15 or so and helped serve the coffee and “bread.” I was afraid we were going to be late to the meeting, but then they told me that the town had a different time zone with an hour behind, to which they kept referring to as “horario de verano” (summer schedule). Refugios said that el comi Juan had breakfast for us, so we headed to his house and had pasta soup for breakfast.

I was able to sleep until 7.30am. The meeting was supposed to be at 9am, so I thought we should wake up and help with breakfast. I brushed my teeth, made the bed, untied the nets, and folded the blankets, and washed my face. Refugios insisted I had nothing to do in the kitchen, so I went for a little walk. I came back at 8.15 or so and helped serve the coffee and “bread.” I was afraid we were going to be late to the meeting, but then they told me that the town had a different time zone with an hour behind, to which they kept referring to as “horario de verano” (summer schedule). Refugios said that el comi Juan had breakfast for us, so we headed to his house and had pasta soup for breakfast.



Journal Entry: August 17th

Today I rented a bike with Antonio, and we drove around many places of SCLC that I had not had the chance to visit. We went to Na Bolom, Frans’Blom and Gertrude DUBY Blom, two archeologists, pioneers of the Chiapas explorations in the early 20th century. The museum is now where their house was, and every room has information and exposed items from the owners. The house even has a chapel with a piano. Their

work was very interesting, they “discovered” countless precolonial artifacts and lived with the Lacandon for months. Frans made the first map of the Moxviquil, which we visited afterwards.

Journal Entry: August 20th

I went to run to a different hill today, but there was still a church a top of the stairs. I wonder why there are two parallel churches in both ends of the city, both a top of hundreds of stairs, looking at each other. Antonio told me all churches facing west, with their backs to the east, because of sunrise and sunset.

Journal Entry: August 21st

The other day I saw how in one restaurant they had the food displayed as if it was a buffet, but servers would come and ask for the order. There were three servers for 7 tables, plus cooks and one cashier. Why do they have cashiers? It's a waste of money! It's a salary you don't need to pay, the servers should do it. Antonio told me is probably because they don't trust the servers with the cash, but they shouldn't “trust” them with it if you had a reliable system that track the transactions (both inventory and payment). One hospitality professor one time told me every penny counts, and it's true!

Journal Entry: August 23rd

When I was working, I heard lots of sirens going off, and claxons beeping and music. Antonio and Estefania went to the window to see what the fuss was about, and I told them “It's probably a burial,” they looked at me confused. How am I going to know more about their own culture than them, the true coletos? But I was right! It was a burial, and they were simply walking the dead person through the city, parading them. It's exactly what we did for my dad's burial back in 2019.

Tomorrow I have to wake up at 4am because we are going to the mountains, to a lake that is the “most beautiful thing you will ever see” according to Antonio and Estefania.

Journal Entry: August 25th

I woke up at 4am, and packed a towel, shorts, and extra socks on my bookbag, and headed to the living room to wait for Antonio. He made coffee for the both of us and we put everything in the back of the truck. Afterwards, we went to pick up Estefania at their parents' house and started our little road trip. I was familiar with the road, because we had done the exact same trip with Elisa and Javier.

We were rushed on our way to San Quintin, because we had to be back by 5pm if we wanted to cross the jungle with daylight, as the road is tricky, and the villages become a bit unsafe after dark (according to Estefania and Antonio). There was a point on the trip, after we got to the “terraceria” (no asphalt, but just dirt road), where we had been driving for over an hour and we arrived at a tiny village asking how long until San Quintin, and the gentleman said we still 2hrs left to go.

On the road, there were multiple Zapatista signs that the communities had made, saying that the government has no say in the village and the only “law” is the Zapatista law.



Finally in San Quintin and without breakfast, we parked at the touristic parking and left the car with the people, bought our tickets and the tour guide told us we might want to rent a horse because the “hike” was very swampy because of the heavy rains of the summer. Antonio and Estefania said we didn’t need one, as they had done the hike before. The tour guide took us through a hanging bridge where the river below was heavy and at full force coming down, after a few minutes, he showed us the sign and told us to follow the similar signs and we would arrive. He again warned us about the mud.

The mud reached my knees and my adidas are completely broken and brown. The “hike” should have taken 1hr, but it took us 3 hours and a half to get to the lake. I was honestly so uncomfortable, scared, hungry and I did not trust Estefania and Antonio to know the direction of the walk; we made so many turns and took so many little off-path roads to avoid the mud that I honestly thought we were going in circles. It was 4pm and we had not reached the lake. I sat down because I was dizzy and Antonio sat with me, apologizing for the experience. Even when I am fuming at them, they are polite and kind and apologize with the right words. After crying a little bit in a puddle of mud, we kept walking. I truly felt the anxiety creeping in. How must it have been to live like that! No phone, no way of knowing where we are, no human on sight, just the mere faith that we will make it at some point. At last, we saw a body of water opening through the jungle and I ran like a madman. Took all the clothes off (I have never smelled like that in my life) and jumped in the water without thinking. I needed to wash off all the horse’s shit on my fingers, toes, hair, everywhere.

Antonio and Estefania don't know how to swim.

The lake was so big it would be impossible to swim it all. I want to come back but get a horse and spend the night at the lake, I heard from the men the experience is lovely. I got tired of swimming and went to talk to the gentlemen who control the lake. They were laying on hammocks and watching a cooking pot boil. They explained that they rent the hammocks and make food for the tourists, that the sunrise on the lake is beautiful. I sat on a hammock along the gentlemen, who made some coffee and gave me a cup. They explained that the little lanchas can go beyond the mountains, and that even they haven't been able to explore the whole lake. They were making fish soup with some freshly caught fish and offered me some, but I kindly turned it down. The men called through radio to ask for 2 horses for us to come back down.

January Entry: August 27th

As I wait on the bus stop for the combi that will take me to the airport, I think back to the feelings I had about this same terminal when I first arrived to SCLC. I was afraid, scared that I would be hurt, mugged, or mistreated. Today I feel completely safe in this tiny terminal, and if anything, sad because it has come to an end. I am sipping my last warm chocolate and stuffed my bookbag with coffee and chocolate from Cacao Nativa (spoiled, I know). Mexico is a love affair, and I can't wait to come back.