

How to Renew Your Spirit, Lose a Little Weight, and do a Lot of Good in Ten Short
Days
Bob Price

I love my life's work. I am an attorney and much of my work is involved with trying to help people to get through some difficult times in their lives when they become involved with the legal system in one way or another. In my family law practice, I see families that tear themselves apart, often because one or both of the parties have made bad decisions. Folks who come to me with criminal cases very often put themselves in a bad position. In Probate Court, often family members stop being family members and become litigants against each other either because of money or because of old grudges against other family members. A lawyer's job is to try to analyze the other side's position as well as your own clients so that you are in a better posture to assist your client. The other party also has a lawyer who is doing the exact same thing on the other side. By presenting a fair analysis and realistic assessment to your client, often you can assist them to resolve the issue without the necessity of having a judge make the decision for them. This is a rewarding thing to do and I do enjoy working with people and helping them, but boy, do some folks just create their own problems by making bad decisions.

That is why I jumped at the opportunity to travel with my wife and a great group of people to the Rio Dulce region of Guatemala. I had been there twice before and knew that I was signing up for long days of hard work and conditions that were sometimes crummy. I also knew that I would wake up every morning to spectacular beauty and spend my day helping little children who were not in a bad place because of their wrong decisions, but just were not fortunate enough to be born as American kids.

To put things in perspective, Guatemala is the country that is just south of Mexico. It is a land of mountains and rivers and awesome beauty. It has its own unique history. When our group of fifteen volunteers arrived in the country, we spent our first night in the capital of Guatemala City and slept in a building that had been the residence of the President of Guatemala during the 1940s. The rooms were like something out of a movie, think Casablanca. We had breakfast in a large courtyard and enjoyed our eggs with fresh squeezed orange juice and fried plantains. After breakfast, we all boarded the

bus for our six hour ride through the mountains to the river in the northeastern part of the country. It was wonderful to see so much green during the first week of January.

We arrived at the Rio Dulce late in the afternoon of January 2, and boarded a boat that would take us to the hotel where we would stay when we were not working. The Hotel Catamaran is situated on an island in the middle of the river. It is a fascinating study in contrast. In a country with so much poverty, the river was lined with marinas full of expensive boats. The Rio Dulce empties directly into the Caribbean, and many wealthy Americans dock their boats there. It is so strange to see and you must wonder if the Guatemalan people think that we all live like that.

Our rooms were little cabins built on concrete pilings that extended out into the river. Our days generally began early when the howler monkeys would start a row roaring sound in the trees just before dawn. They were like a snooze alarm for me, because I knew that I could go back to sleep for a while.

Breakfast began at 7:00 and the hotel set us up with a complete buffet including omelets and fresh papaya juice. You could eat as much or as little as you wanted. As the week went on, I found that smaller meals were more satisfying. By 8:00 we were on the boat that would take us up river to the orphanage where we would begin work. I won't kid you, that part was not fun, but it is part of the deal. The work was tough and it was continuous. And that was the reason that we came. Our goal was to tear down an old green house and to erect a new one with minimal help from power tools. We had to contend with swarming ants and a Central American sun. Often members of our group would have to take a day off to recover from miseries that were a result of too much sun, not enough liquid, and just the change in living conditions. We worked side by side with Guatemalan men and children. Yes, children, who worked as hard as the men. These people have enormous pride, and frankly, it was tough to keep up with them, but we did.

The work was long, hard and tough. And now it is done. When we left Casa Guatemala, they had a new greenhouse that they plan to use to cultivate orange trees. They want to start an orange grove, to use as a teaching tool for the children, to provide food, and to provide some needed income.

At the end of the day, we would return, pretty worn out, to our hotel. Happy hour awaited and I looked forward to one or two boat drinks. Dinner was a seven, twelve hours

since breakfast, and again, I found that I really was not interested in large meals. We all sat at the same table and forged our friendships. Bedtime was welcome, and usually early, because tomorrow was another full day.

The day before we all flew home, we travelled to the ancient city of Antiqua, in the eastern part of the country. This was the original capital of Guatemala when the Spanish king's regent was the ruler and the Mayans were used by the Europeans to exploit the country's wealth for his most royal majesty. We visited magnificent buildings that were erected by people who lived in huts. Dinner was in the hacienda where the king's representative lived, in 1608, over four hundred years ago. Again, I felt like I was in a movie, this time, think Zorro.

Was the trip worth the time and expense? Oh yeah. Did I help somebody who never knew that I existed? I hope so. Did I return home exhausted and exhilarated? Yup. Would I do it again? Sign me up.

Right now Kathy is in the preliminary stages of planning a return to the orphanage in January 2010. Want to see a wonderful part of the world, help some kids, make some friends that will last a lifetime, refresh your soul and maybe lose a little weight? Come on along, we can sure use you.