

Dear Family and Friends,

It's the day after Christmas, and as the week progressed and I realized I wouldn't get this out to you until after Christmas I was feeling pretty awful. But then I experienced my first Guatemalan Christmas and it seems now a whole lot more appropriate to write afterwards.

Here's a picture of Christmas in Guatemala City:

Grocery stores begin filling with larger than average piles of papaya, pineapple, pears, raisins and prunes that will later be chunked and simmered in big pots with cinnamon to make the Guatemalan Christmastime beverage *ponche*. *Ofertas* ("sales") boast "bargain" prices of 40 Quetzales (about \$6) for 2 lb bags of imported Hershey's chocolate chips. Piles of fruitcakes in *estilo ingles* ("British style") find their place next to the typical *pan dulce* ("sweet bread") in the bakery aisle. The economically well-to-do reach for corn *maseca* to make tamales, timely fruits for ponche, along with a sampling of imported oddities, evidence of globalization hitting the grocery cart.

Neighborhood *tiendas* (tiny corner stores), pile stacks of firecrackers along store fronts and sprinkle the sidewalk with pine fir nettles. The *senoras* at the vegetable and tortilla stand do double duty filling orders for homemade *tamales*, employing the help of girls with strong arms and good balance to deliver heavy baskets filled with the banana-leaf wrapped Christmastime specialties – steamed corn flour filled with bits of chicken, tomato sauce, green olives, and prunes.

I watched all of this, feeling pushed out of my resident groove into again the role of spectator, as new sights, smells, sounds, and traditions took over the routine. At the seminary, we celebrated our annual Christmastime *convivio* ("gathering"), a morning of *dinamicos* (group team building games), a devotional, going out to a restaurant for *carne asada* (grilled beef steak and chorizo sausage), exchanging gifts for our *amigos secretos* ("secret friends") and receiving Christmas baskets filled with bags of dried black beans, rice, powdered milk, sugar, coffee, cooking oil, salt, and a bag of *angelitos* ("marshmallows"), and closed down the 15th of December to reopen the 2nd of January. Some businesses close for a full month.

In spite of an overwhelming quantity of work to plan for two University groups and the Spring semester all to take place in January, I took advantage of (fellow MCCer) Beth's family being in the country to visit over Christmas to join them on a couple excursions the week leading up to Christmas– to the ancient Mayan ruins of Tikal in the Peten jungle and to Lake Atitlan, a crater lake formed by a collapsed volcanic cone, surrounded by volcanic peaks.



When I returned back to the city, perhaps out of a drive to reclaim a bit of a Mid-west Christmas, or perhaps because cooking and baking have become my personal outlet and hobby, I embarked upon a cookie making quest and finished two days later with 22 plates of sugar cookies, brownie/cookie bars, and green cornflake – marshmallow wreaths. It was Christmas Eve, and I finished exhausted, delivering the last two plates to my landlady and her visiting family downstairs, who promptly offered me some ponche. 'Sure,' I said, and she retired back to the kitchen, coming back with an entire pitcher for me! So I thanked her with surprise in my voice, made the final accent to my apartment and crawled into bed at 9:08pm, despite the giggling grandkids running up the stairs to the roof and random firecracker testing interspersing my dreams. I woke to a war zone, or so it seemed. I glanced at the clock. 11:55pm. Five minutes until Christmas.

I made it to the living room, plugging my ears as windows rattled and the blasts pounded in my chest. Out my windows, there was a literal panoramic display of fireworks – coming from rooftops all over the city and sending flashes of color to every inch of the sky. In the street, teens, kids, young men were setting off every type of noisemaking, light-producing firecracker known to human kind in the streets (all of which I am sure would be illegal

in Michigan, perhaps in the entire US!). The streets filled with firecracker shrapnel and smoke. By 2:30am the last of the firecrackers of the night had been set off, and I went back to bed, waking an hour later than usual at 7am, to another deafening and unusual sound – complete silence. The sun was bright and high in the sky, but there wasn't a single pedestrian, water truck, bell-tousled ice-cream cart, newspaper seller, barking dog. Normally at this hour, it is a bustling street packed with people, vehicles, and vendors. I went to get ready, and came back to check on the status of the silence at 8am. Still all was at peace. At 9. Again, nothing. I started calling fam, and in the middle of the conversation with my sister, the silence was broken. It was 11:55am Christmas Day and apparently it was time for a firecracker reprise!

In the afternoon, an early Christmas dinner was prepared in my apartment courtesy of Beth and her family – Vietnamese beef soup with rice noodles – Pho. We finished up with a steaming mug of ponche, way too many Christmas treats and a lively game of spoons. And that was my first Christmas in Guatemala.

The last few months 2007...

For updates and pics from the last few months, including Christmas pics, visit to Tikal in the Peten jungle and Lake Atitlan, MCC orientation (in October, 6 months late!), CASAS “gira” tour to Universities in the US and Canada in November, you can visit my blog at: www.sminguatemala.blogspot.com.

Prayer Requests 2008:

Looking into the new year, I have a swirling collection of plans, good intentions, lessons learned, resolutions, etc. that my task in the next couple days will be to sort, prioritize and organize into a coherent yearly plan.

In these first critical months of 2008, please keep the CASAS program, its students, and me personally in your prayers. After having a good 8 months to observe the program in action, I see that this coming year will probably be seeing some changes, and changes are hard. We will need to begin implementing staff evaluations, staff development goals, and looking to finally seek a person to fill the admin support vacancy that we desperately need filled. Not being a natural leader (and being a gringa and being young) multiplies the difficulty of implementing these type of changes, so I ask for your prayers that I will act with humble, graceful, assertiveness when needed and while including and listening to all of CASAS teachers and admin staff as much as possible for ideas to make the CASAS program stronger in the future.



Please also pray for my energy, and centered-ness, as I am teetering on the burnout stage of many sustained months of burning the candle at both ends, with no foreseeable end in sight, which is a discouraging place to be. On the one hand, I feel very at home here and I am learning a lot, but my work load is definitely wearing on my health, and mental and spiritual perspective. But knowing people are praying is tremendously encouraging.

Thanks again to all of you for your prayers, notes, and financial support. You have been a blessing and a sustaining force for me as I have made a new life here in Guatemala. I thank God for you. I hope your Christmas brought you your own batch of unexpected surprises, and quality time with loved ones. Rich blessings to you in the New Year.

With much love,
Shannon

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