

Artful Living in the Present - Intensive Retreat in Guatemala 2006

For the past two years we have been spending the end of our NYC summer on retreat at lake Atitlan in Guatemala, which Aldo Huxley termed the most beautiful lake in the world.

In June of 2004, we were looking for an exotic, not too popular and remote place overseas for a summer meditation / yoga retreat and vacation. My partner Stan who teaches a form of yoga and qi-gong which he developed called qi-yoga and myself, a teacher of Living in the Present / dynamic mindfulness meditation, found Villa Sumaya (heaven on earth in Arabic) - a retreat center at lake Atitlan - which turned to be the ideal place for ourselves and the three busy New Yorkers (in desperate need for an end summer get away) who joined us.

From the moment we arrived to Guatemala and started our journey to lake Atitlan, we kept falling in love with the beauty, colorfulness, simplicity and diversity of this country. The weather in August is perfect for those who don't like it too hot, too humid and who don't mind a little afternoon shower.

Villa Sumaya is a combination of simplicity, elegance, exoticness and impeccability. While respecting the Mayan cultural motifs of "Her Majesty the lake", (as they refer to it there), Wendy Stauffer's personal accent and taste is felt throughout the premises. (Wendy, the owner and founder of the retreat center is a talented American ex-patriot artist and shaman herself)

There are seven simple and comfortable double occupancy and single rooms, including a delux suite, which are all named after the animal totems they represent. All the rooms face the lake through an incredible garden and each room has it's own hammock. The first light of dawn and the setting of the sun in the evening, are particularly breath taking. I fell in love with the lake instantly, and found myself mesmerized watching the stoic seaweed gatherers on the lake in boats that look like they were built 2000 years ago.

The only way to travel around the lakes is by public (or private) boats, which because of the size of the local people tend to be very low, and for a tall westerner can be an adventure, as they dock at the small towns around the lake, and people travel in them with their live stock, children and incredible local garments - which differ from town to town, as do their indigenous languages. We learned very soon that the lake dictated our activities and it was no wonder why was it so revered and respected by the locals. One evening, we got all decked up to go to Panahchell, (the closest town" - for a performance, the lake which is usually calm and pristine, got very turbulent, and as we looked out and saw our boat being tossed up and down, we took a look at each other saying "you've got to be kidding me..." and decided to skip the trip and give each other massages at the meditation hall - as we were watching mother nature displaying a dramatic storm. (we later learned was the aftermath of Hurricane Ivan..)

The people are modest and friendly to Westerners. As in any developing country, it is apparent how poor they are in comparison to us, and yet, there is a mutual exchange that can be worked out based on mutual respect - which is an art by itself. Keeping a determined, yet honoring smile and saying 'hola' is crucial. It's not unlikely to arrive to one of the towns surrounding the lake and be flocked by local people who are trying to sell their goods and offer their services. It is however easy to communicate interest or disinterest without too much of a hassle. These trips to the towns around the lake, which we offer are centered around visiting the indigenous cultures and experiencing them first hand: the churches, the people, the food, the art and some shopping. Our favorite towns are San Marcos and Santiago. Traveling in Guatemala as in many other developing countries can be a challenge and a great lesson to the 'control freak' in us. Last year, after the group left, Stan and I stayed on for a couple of days, and took a trip to Xella, a town with hot Springs, which we wanted to experience. We rented a van for the day, and as we were making our way through the incredible mountains, we noticed that the traffic was stopped for kilometers ahead of us. When we left the van to inquire what happened, we found out that the local villagers blocked the road with rocks and trees in protest to the privatization of their water - by the government. Three hours later... we found ourselves flowing with the unexpected change. We engaged in conversation with the people, who were too eager to tell us their story, and when the road opened up finally, it was too late to go to our original destination, and yet, it was one of our most memorable experiences of our last year's trip to Guatemala. We transcended being consuming tourists to having made a connection with the people.

Our retreat last year had 11 participants who started their mornings with qi-yoga, conscious breathing and mindfulness meditation. A delicious breakfast was followed by a lecture and a hike around the lake. After lunch there was free time to catch up on rest, reading, a healing session or a boat tour. Our evenings started with another qi-yoga and meditation practice followed by a candle light dinner; sharing time in conversation, videos, jacuzzi and sauna or just quiet time listening to the crickets.

The retreat started with a blessing ceremony of a local shaman. One of the eight days was a day of silence, which started right after breakfast and ended at dinner. During that day we had plenty of free time to roam around the property, swim in the lake, journal and just lounge in the garden, and just be... Yes, being present - that lost essential art of being - which in our busy 'doing' lives in the 21st century is probably the most calming, enriching yet challenging benefits available in the retreat. Spending quality time with yourself, reflecting on your life - far enough from it, yet closer to it than ever before, because of the surroundings and the incredible beauty of nature, the guidance and demonstration of the teachers, and support of the other retreatians, can be an investment of a life time; a discovery of the Self - we are always looking for, yet often too busy to find.

It was amazing and humbling to see the participants upon arrival, and witness their transformation and flowering over eight days. Our last night of dance and celebration was particularly joyful. We were happy to share our presence and felt close and accepting of each other. And while we felt sad to leave, we were ready to take the experience with us and integrate it into our daily lives.

As we are preparing for our [2006 retreat](#), we realize how much the trip impacted our lives, and how long the effects of it stayed with us since we have been there last. We are thrilled to go back to Lake Atitlan and share its splendor and innocence with the next group.

Samuel has spent 20 years as a body/mind therapist and a meditation teacher, speaker and author. In the 1980s, he facilitated The New York Healing Circle, which helped thousands of people with HIV live with a sense of peace and self-acceptance. Trained in body-centered psychotherapy, and in the Zen tradition and the Vipassana style of meditation, as well as in MBSR (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction - by Jon Kabat Zinn), Samuel is in private practice in Manhattan. He has been teaching Living in the Present / Dynamic Mindfulness Meditation through individual & couple sessions, classes, workshops, organizational wellness training and retreats.

He currently teaches Mindfulness Meditation, Stress and Pain Management to cancer patients at Gilda's Club and people with HIV at Friends In Deed, at a major bank in NYC, The 92nd St.-Y, and the NY Open Center. He co-facilitates workshops, and retreats with his partner Stan Grier - worldwide.
<http://www.livinginthepresent.com>