

# Foodorama

## Letter # 19: 4th country, Guatemala

By Foodorama, March 21, 2019



Hi everyone, 2 days before crossing the Guatemalan border, Kalima returns sick (yes, it becomes a habit), but this time and more seriously... We still have 62 miles before leaving Mexico and we have to ride by bike (no bus in this place - luckily more downhill than up). After a forced stop at "Lagos de Colon" to rest – a sublime place with natural pools and waterfalls, and also an archaeological site - we arrive on March 10 at the border.



But Kalima is too sick to cycle uphill and once again we have to take a bus to Xela (Quetzaltenango) so she can quickly see a doctor. After a few days of antibiotics and rest, she's better but now it's Sylvain's turn to be sick (yes, yes it's true...).

In short we are really looking forward to see these episodes of health problems stopping. Result of those in 3 weeks we cycled... 4 days...



As soon as we arrive in Guatemala, we must go to the French Alliance to give a lecture (in Spanish!). We are so very happy to speak 1 hour in this language, we had learned only 4 months ago. Even if we had to make an incalculable number of errors, nothing better to progress than to explain a project which awaited us before an audience!



We leave the beautiful city of Xela on March 16 (just one day after Kalima's birthday : 29 years) to arrive, after 53 miles on bike, in Panajachel, at the edge of Lake Atitlan! We are hosted by Americans we met in Mexico, in the state of Oaxaca. We are fortunate and settled comfortably for Sylvain to rest but especially to be able to shoot our episode on the management of food plastic !!



Do you remember, in Mexico, we visited a company that makes biodegradable plastic based on avocado cores? Do you remember its name? Well, we continue here, around Lake Atitlan, our investigation to see how to manage plastics, which are not yet biodegradable (and there are tons!!).



For this lake, as beautiful as it is with the 3 volcanoes which surround it, has a huge problem: it becomes more and more polluted, so much so that the fish die, that one cannot bathe in it anymore, and that the water becomes troubled. Two of the main reasons for this contamination are as follows: - Most plastic waste ends up in the lake, for there is still no garbage collection from municipalities - 76% of wastewater from houses, hotels and other buildings end up in the lake without prior treatment ... With the population that never stop increasing, and the tourists who arrive overwhelmingly every year in this little corner of paradise, do you imagine the damage?



Fortunately, many projects have been planned to protect this lake and its biodiversity. We are going to visit 3 different institutions, which work on the management of the plastic, to see how the local population is managing the problem of pollution:

- **AMSCLAE**: it is a governmental organization which has for mission to protect the Lake Atitlan environment. Its director received us and we learn that there are now 3 villages of Atitlan who banned plastic bags in the shops. Other villages are on this path but it is still necessary to convince the population and find alternatives (paper towels, banana leaves...). For the first ban in the village of San Pedro, AMSCLAE distributed 30,000 paper bags to businesses to ease the transition. AMSCLAE is studying in other villages to understand the reluctance of the population and the businesses. There are 3 main points to ban the plastic bags in these villages:

- Very slightly higher cost of the paper bag so they need to encourage merchants to choose this option and to value them with their customers.
- Need to pass a decree to legally oblige traders to no longer distribute plastic bags otherwise traders who freely choose not to distribute them can see their customers turn to those who continue to propose them.
- Educate the public to bring their own containers for their food (towels, cloth bags, reusable plastic bags, etc.)



- **Amigos del Lago de Atitlan**: this NGO created the RECICLA ATITLAN program, a unique recycling project in the 12 villages around the lake, led by indigenous women's groups. These women regularly go to shops, schools and houses in their villages to collect plastic bottles, soda cans or even cardboard boxes. They also do a great job of raising awareness among the population by explaining that, unlike organic waste (such as banana peel, food scraps or egg shells), plastic will remain in nature without biodegrading. Once collected, the waste is resold to companies that will transform the raw material to make other products (clothing, tarpaulins for building, construction products, etc.). The recovery of plastic becomes a source of income for these Guatemalan women.







The association also organizes "cleaning steps". On the occasion of the water day, on March 22, 6 walks are organized in 6 different villages: on the program, people from all backgrounds of life come together to gather the waste that hangs in the city, a good way to sensitize the people of these villages. We will be attending, with Jean-Pascal, our friend from Quebec, at Santa Catarina's march and we cannot wait to tell you how it went!

- **The Mayor of San Pedro de la Laguna:** the mayor of this small village west of the lake has simply banned, in 2016, the plastic for single use (plastic bag, straw, polystyrene packaging, plastic cutlery) of its municipality. Here people do their shopping with baskets, wrap tortillas in cloth cloths, or meat in banana leaves. A great battle for the Mayor Mauricio Méndez who had to convince the inhabitants of the village before implementing his decree. From now on 2 other villages have followed the example and can be more in the future!



In France, even if the waste is better managed, we have plastic overconsumption problems as well. So, you want to make a move for the planet on your side too? Do your shopping with reusable cloth bags, no longer use plastic straw or sort at home with your parents!! This problem concerns us all, whether we are a Guatemalan family, children in France or even cyclists ;)

See you soon for new adventures! Sylvain and Kalima