

Habitat For Humanity -- Five Very Interesting Summer Trips

I am sure you wonder why there is so many Americans overseas telling other people how to live. What are we doing here in Ukraine? What are we doing in South America?

It is something very characteristic about America. We have always had a kind of a peculiar pride that we know what we are doing and we will share our wisdom with you.

Different people want to share different kinds of wisdom. America has always sent a number of missionaries overseas to make converts to Christianity. You notice that the Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and many other American-based religious groups are active here in Ukraine.

We share more than just religion, however. We share advice. American thinkers had quite a bit to do with the way governments in Eastern Europe sold state-owned factories to private groups. We thought that privatization was a good idea. We did not know the communist system well enough to predict how it would work out. You know how it worked out here: Kuchma's relatives and friends, Ahmentov and Pinshuk, did fairly well.

Americans lead almost every movement to make the world a better place. The United Nations, the civil rights movement, the environmental movement, the global warming movement, the woman's rights movement, and just about every significant reform movement of the last century started in the United States. If you look at any of these movements, they are a lot like religion. People make a lot of logical sounding arguments, but ultimately you have to take some of what they are saying on faith.

I share this very typical American attitude, and I take some things on faith. I made quite a bit of money in business and wanted to contribute something back to the world. The Habitat for Humanity organization believes that people become better citizens when they own their own houses. They are more inclined to save for the future, to get married and to stay married, to educate their children, and do all sorts of other good things. I think they are generally right. For five summers, from 1998 until 2002, I helped people in Nicaragua, Portugal, and Brazil build their own houses. I would like to tell you about this from two perspectives. How was set up for the homeowners, and what I personally got out of it.

It is hard for people in some countries to own their own house. You can start with the question of who owns the land. It is hard for a poor person to buy land because in the first place they do not know if the seller actually owns what they are pretending to sell. Perhaps the seller does not know either. Land ownership records are not very good in a place like Nicaragua. I understand that Ukraine has the same problem; there is quite a bit of argument about who owns the land sitting underneath some big houses down in Ockorski.

If a poor person actually owns some land, the next thing they have to do is to build a house. Most of them know much more about building a house than you or I do. It helps that houses in Nicaragua are very simple. The house has four small rooms, each with a window, the front door, a back door, and a roof. They are usually made out of brick or

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concrete block. Wind blows through them pretty easily. They do not have to be warm, because the climate is warm.

Still, building a house is not easy for a poor person to do all alone. They need to buy the bricks, cement, the wood and the corrugated plastic for the roof. Some things are very hard to arrange. You want the house to have running water, sewage, and electricity. You cannot do this on your own, and if the city does not help you, it might not get done.

This is the advantage of Habitat for Humanity. They organize groups of people who want to own houses. Everybody who joins the group has to have enough money to buy land. Habitat For Humanity is able to hire lawyers to make sure that everybody owns the land. Habitat also arranges to buy the bricks, sand, gravel, lumber and everything else that all the owners will need. By buying it together they get a good price, and it is much easier to deliver for everybody than for each individual house.

All of the bureaucrats in the city and state government know about Habitat For Humanity. It is much easier for them to arrange to have electricity and water brought to a neighborhood. Habitat uses more or less the same plan for all the houses in the country. In Nicaragua it was about 40 m². The houses had a water tank under the roof, so they would always have drinking water. They had of course electricity and water service. Habitat make sure that every house has a septic tank, so when you flush the toilet, it goes someplace safe.

One of the most important things that Habitat does in Nicaragua is to make sure that the houses are strong enough that they will not fall down in an earthquake. They use a lot of steel in building the walls. The houses may be simple, but they are safe.

Habitat organizes the construction of the houses. They have a rule: nobody moves into any house until all the houses in a project are completed. The people who will live in the houses all work together. That makes it quite a bit more efficient. And this was where we came in. As volunteers, we worked alongside the future homeowners. Habitat was able to hire workmen who know how to build houses and could show us. We did the simple stuff, the things that don't require much skill, such as digging foundations, carrying bags of concrete, and mixing concrete. Sometimes they would let us lay bricks, but usually the homeowners and the supervisors did the skilled work.

The last thing that habitat does, something that is very essential, is to provide financing. Habitat establishes a mortgage fund in every country. People borrow the money that they need to build the house and pay it back, without interest, over 10 years. So the homeowners have to pay money for the land, and have to contribute their work to getting the houses built. After that their monthly payments are very low.

After they are built, the houses are usually worth about twice as much as they cost. Habitat has strong rules that prevent a homeowner from turning around and selling the house immediately. It is the other homeowners who generally enforced the rules. It is very effective; in a small village, you don't want to make enemies of the people in your

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neighborhood. That is the same rule for paying the mortgages. It is your neighbors who make sure that you make your monthly payment.

Habitat For Humanity is a Christian organization but it doesn't belong to any particular denomination and it doesn't really preach religion. Their idea of Christianity is, as the Bible says, "by their works shall ye know them." In other words, people should be able to identify Christians by the way they act.

There were lots of reasons I wanted to work with Habitat for Humanity. The first summer I went with my 16-year-old son. He did not know how to work with his hands. I wanted him to have some exposure to hammering, sawing, and digging holes. I also wanted him to have some experience in a foreign country, to appreciate the value of learning a language.

Our team was led by two women in their 60s or 70s. The first night we were there we went to a country dance a little bit less than a kilometer away from our hotel. My son Jack got bored and walked back to the hotel. The two ladies were absolutely scared to death that he would get lost or get into trouble. I was not concerned, but to make them happy the three of us looked all over the city for my son. Finally, as we were standing in the hotel wondering what to do next, he wandered in very casually. I did not understand what they were worried about. Jack had no money, and he was probably about twice as big as most of the people there. Nobody would make trouble with him.

Jack learned some Spanish in his two weeks there. After a couple of days I was able to send him to the market on his own to buy bananas and for other fruit for breakfast. He never did get very excited about digging holes, but he became pretty good at wiring together reinforcing steel.

The first year we stayed in a hotel. The second year I went things were even more primitive. We stayed in two unfinished houses, the men in one and the women in the other. The women and the families whom we were helping cooked for us. It was almost always the same thing. Rice and beans. Sometimes they had fish, and sometimes they had chicken. They did not use any spices to make the flavor interesting. One of my initiatives in the second week was to make fried chicken. The idea that there might be another way to cook it was revolutionary. In some matters the old ways worked best: we drank coffee in the morning, and it was delicious..

Some of the hardest work was to dig out the roots of coffee plants as we were digging foundations. Coffee is a bush that grows about 2 m high. The trunk of a coffee bush may get to be four or 5 cm across. They're pretty tough. We used a pick ax to chop the roots and a long steel bar with a blade on the end to make sure that the walls of the trench were vertical. I love that work, working with my muscles. One time I came across a very stubborn coffee root. Rather than laboriously chop it out, which would have been the more conservative approach, I wedged the long steel bar under it and started prying. The bar was big: 6 feet long, probably an inch and a quarter in diameter, and 20 to 30 pounds. When prying did not do the trick I jumped on it -- and bent it. Even though straightening

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it out meant work for the Nicaraguans, they did not mind because it gave them a great story. None of them are heavy enough to have bent it themselves

After work we would generally just sit around the hotel. There was a dirt floor bar or the local people went to drink rum and Coca-Cola. I went and drank and talked with them. I enjoyed the conversation, but I observed that alcohol is a big problem there. There are more alcoholics than there are in Ukraine, and their lives are worse. Ukrainian people have been drinking for thousands of years. Their bodies can take it. American Indians did not know about alcohol until the Spanish came 500 years ago. When they drink, they often drink quietly and just pass out. Just as often they go home and beat up their wives when the wives complain that they have spent all the family money. The second year I went to Nicaragua with Tom Harman, a man who worked in my company and belonged to alcoholics anonymous. A guy named Mauricio, whom I remembered from the year before, had dried out in the meantime. He took Tom and me to a meeting, where we listened to people tell the stories of their lives with alcohol. The stories were long and sad.

Everywhere we went in Nicaragua we saw old trucks and military equipment made by Russia and Ukraine. Nicaragua elected a communist government in the 1970s and the Soviet Union did everything they could to make sure that communism would succeed. The United States did not like the idea and we supported rebels who fought against the communists. A lot of people died, and as communism itself died in Russia, the war dragged to an end.

During the war the rebels and the landowners fought together against the communists. After the war, however, the rebels and the communists got together to oppose the landowners. For instance, the rich landowners would not let a poor farmer walk across their land in order to get to his own land further up the mountain. They wanted to force them to sell. The poor people did what they could to get political power and make things fair, but fairness is not part of the history of Central America.

Let me share another amusing anecdote about American intervention. Nicaragua is a very poor country. There are advisors everywhere trying to tell them what to do. American feminists are well represented. The two ladies leading our group made sure that we went to hear one of the American feminists speak. She was addressing a very serious topic. A lot of Nicaraguan men do drink too much, they beat their wives and they spend all of the family money. However, a lot of Nicaraguan men, just like men everywhere, are honest and do their best to support the family. This woman would've had you believe that we were all devils. I cannot help but add, she was an extremely unattractive woman, and probably had not had very good experience with men in her life. I thought it was odd that an American woman who certainly had no experience in marriage was lecturing a whole crowd of Nicaraguan women who certainly did.

While we were in Nicaragua we made some small tours of the country. It was the first time I had looked down into a volcano. It was pretty impressive. There is a kind of parrot that lives inside the volcano. It is safe because the smell of sulfur is so intense that no

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other birds can go in there. There are a few lizards living around the volcanoes that are also able to live with a higher level of sulfur in the air.

I love parrots because they always come in pairs. They mate for life, so you never see one without the other. I wonder if it is a coincidence that they live longer than any other kind of bird?

After two years in Nicaragua, I decided to try someplace else. I went to Portugal in 2000. It is a very different situation in Portugal. The country is richer than Ukraine. You have to have an excuse in Portugal to be poor enough to qualify for a Habitat for Humanity home. The homeowners were mostly going to be single women, or women who were still married somewhat to their alcoholic husbands. They were uneducated. On the whole, they were much less interesting to talk to than the Nicaraguans.

The Nicaraguan homeowners were middle-class people. They were teachers, foresters, and government employees. They took the opportunity that habitat offered to improve their lives. They knew what was going on around them. It was interesting to talk about Nicaraguan politics and society. I had a sense that they were going to be successful.

The Portuguese people whom we helped were at the lower levels of their society. They were uneducated and uninterested by and large in what went on around them. The best conversation you could get was with their husbands, after they had had a certain amount to drink. And even at that, they talked mostly about making homemade wine. I don't remember getting any great insights about Portuguese society.

The houses that we made in Portugal were of much better quality. They cost about 30,000 American dollars to build and were worth about 60,000 when they were completed. These people were extraordinarily lucky to get something like this.

Habitat made a much greater contribution to Portugal than simply helping these people. They brought a large number of American construction techniques. In particular, instead of having solid walls inside the house, they used the American construction style of dry walls. Hollow walls are a real advantage. It is much easier to take care of the electrical connections, the water pipes, the heat, and everything else that has to be hidden within the house. It is also cheaper to make. Using hollow wall construction required significant changes to Portuguese building codes. Habitat had the power to see that these changes were made. I am sure that the Portuguese contractors who worked on this project learned a great deal from the American architects and will apply the techniques and other buildings.

Part of the pleasure being in Portugal was to enjoy the countryside. Every day we had lunch at a little restaurant set way out in the country. The tables were set under a grape arbor. There were long tables, at which they set out local food. Usually included chicken and potatoes. It was very flavorful. They also always had large pitchers of their local wine. The wine is called *Vino Verde*, or green wine. It is the Portuguese specialty. The wine is called green because it is fresh; the current year's vintage. It is slightly

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carbonated, light in alcoholic content, a little bit sweet and very easy to drink. It is also the reason for the alcohol problem of so many of the men. We ignored that and simply enjoyed it. It was a wonderful break in the middle of the day, and an opportunity to talk with our hosts.

We were in the city of Braga, Portugal it is a city of more than 100,000 people. It is significant as the cathedral city of the northern part of the country. Three centuries ago, as gold was flowing from Brazil and Portugal, much of the ended up in Braga. The city is full of absolutely gorgeous churches. People today are not terribly religious, and the churches are not very well attended, but they are beautiful to look at.

The interesting part of the city, the part that is very alive, is the pedestrian zone in the center. People stay out late at night. You see mothers, fathers, and little children out at all hours visiting the cafes there, a wonderful place to see your friends as you sit and sip on a coffee or a glass of port wine. They also have wonderful pastries, just like here in Ukraine. When an American thinks of what is good about Europe, one of the first things that comes to her mind is the ability to sit in the cafe with something good to eat, something nice to drink, and good friends to talk to.

While we were in Portugal we drove out to the beach in Ukraine we are all long way from the ocean Portugal is right on the Atlantic Ocean, and the beaches are really attractive. Sometimes they're a little bit cold, but the ocean is always beautiful to look at cold or not, I love the ocean and I went swimming.

One of the great pleasures of my trip to Portugal was that two of my friends from Washington DC went with me Linda was the school nurse or my children went to school. She and I sat on the top of a open topped bus one afternoon and sang every old song we could remember from the days of the Beatles. The singing made me feel so good that I decided I would take singing lessons when I got back to the United States and I did. For the next six years I sang in the church choir, until I came over here to Ukraine. I'm looking for a place to sing here.

The last trip I made with Habitat for Humanity was to Brazil in 2002. Brazil is a huge country. The North is tropical, the south temperate. Most of the agriculture and industries in the South. It is fairly rich, on a level with Europe. The North is a different story. In the Northwest is the Amazon, very wet, without very many people. Read my story about my anthropology trip with the kayapo Indians two years later, in 2004.. The Northeast is dry and poor. There is some industry along the coasts, but the inland is mostly agricultural. In some places they can grow crops; in others it is primarily cattle.

We were in the city of Juazeiro do Norte, in the interior, a place where the biggest businesses raising cattle. We went to a rodeo and country dance while we were there. We saw some very good horsemen and some good dancing. To be honest, it is a lot like Texas.

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The real pleasure in Brazil was working alongside the excellent craftsman. The people have had hired as professional builders were really good. The homeowners themselves were more like those in Portugal. They were poor for a reason. They seemed not to manage their own lives very well. In any case, it was interesting to observe the building process in yet another country.

Our last weekend in Brazil we went to the beach at Fortaleza, on the coast. It was summer in the United States, but winter in the south of Brazil. All the rich people were up in Fortaleza enjoying the sun and the beach. The beach was nice, and the nightclubbing was absolutely excellent.

That sums up my experience with Habitat for Humanity. In 2002 I worked full time as a teacher, and my big trip was to Honduras with high school students. After that I was a graduate student at the University of Maryland and my adventures were anthropology courses in Brazil and Argentina. But those are stories for another time.