

Simone's Story

My name is Simone and I am from Austria. Like many open-minded Europeans, I was already aware at a young age that the wealth of Europe is due in part to the exploitation of developing countries. As a visual artist I have always found it interesting to analyze social structures and value systems as well as to question and consider alternative ways of living, as I find accepting an unequal world illogical. The global social differences are, however, accepted by most people as long as they are on the rich side of the equation at home.

As I found it somewhat difficult to deal with the European world of constant consumption, since 2005 I have been living in an indigenous village in Guatemala, partly because I wanted to get to know the other side of the coin. The most interesting thing about the indigenous people of Guatemala is their empathy. You judge a man by his heart and not his bank account. Our new god "capitalism" gets on my nerves incredibly, even if I am well aware that you cannot truly escape that world anywhere, it is at least something less revered in the Guatemalan province and other values are upheld.

To live as a white, western woman in Guatemala, of course, also has plenty of drawbacks. Although I have been very involved in the village community, am friends with many locals organize workshops for schools (often unpaid), collaborate on the local cultural festival and for years intensively study the various Mayan calendars, I will always remain a "gringa", a foreigner, an outsider.



In addition, the facts that I am an unmarried, childless, independent woman who also belongs to no church are not as easy to accept for many people here.

The local men are quite incapable of living alone, because no one can cook or do laundry, not to mention clean. Nevertheless, they manage to convince their wives of the opposite and to convince them that a woman is lost without a husband and a lot of women believe that too - not only in Guatemala.

As my friend, a German who deals in coffee from Guatemala here in the village and enjoys a high reputation, has helped people a lot in times of civil war, I have my legitimate status in the village, as a woman at the side of a respected man.

However, I kept the fact that I ended this relationship several months ago a secret, because I want to avoid that my being single gets around the village. The fact that my (ex) boyfriend is currently staying in Germany gives me the opportunity to keep up appearances.

A further complication is my illegal status in Guatemala. Should someone check my passport, I have a tourist visa for 3 months, but I've lived here for years, pursuing my own business and even paying taxes. The fact that I am here without residence and work permits, had not better come to light. Then deportation would be quite likely. So I renew my visa every three months and am still officially a tourist.

A residence permit can be organized with a bit of time and a reasonable sum of money, and is therefore much easier to get than in most countries in the world.

Why do I still have no residence permit after all these years?

For the sake of my mother. Were I to report myself as "living abroad " in Austria, I would have no social insurance and could no longer take advantage of the Austrian healthcare system. So I was registered by my mother as a domestic helper and I pay my monthly social security, a sum that could do much good here.

I can always hear my mother's voice repeating: "But at the same time you pay into your pension. " As if I believed in a pension ...

But since I love my mother very much, and cause her unnecessary worry, I am still playing the game after all these years. The fact that I live in Guatemala, a country in which the detection rate of murders is less than 3 % and where, because of the many murders of women, people speak of "femicide" , my mother is relatively worried. She also visits me often enough to know that the murder statistics refer mostly to Guatemala City and one can lead a reasonably peaceful life in the countryside here. However, she thinks that if something happens, at least I have the right to treatment in an Austrian hospital. I myself believe more in the healing power of the local shamans, in natural medicine and self -healing, if I did need an operating room, I know exactly where I need to go in this country.

The difficulties being here brings with it are still easier to handle for me than living in Europe. I like the degree of social intelligence here in Guatemala, respectful and helpful behavior in the community and the standards by which people are evaluated. Social cohesion is very important, because with the help of family members and friends, hard times can be reasonably well overcome. However, it is only possible for a helpful person to receive help. A common form of greeting in the Mayan language is: "I am another you." This highlights the thought that everything is one, therefore, egoism is an illogical concept. This way of life suits me more and I feel more comfortable in this environment than in the European one, where unfortunately it is very common to put the heart aside, and only to train the mind.

Perhaps more Europeans traveling abroad should question the European value system.