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In her piece, "Kite flying on sacred ground," Etie Zilber, head of the American School of Guatemala, describes the fascinating Latin American celebration, The Day of the Dead, as she experienced it in Santiago Sac, Guatemala, on November 1, 2006. On that day families gather in cemeteries to remember their dead relatives. One of the main events is a kite-flying competition where teams build kites and then fly them, some as large as the one in the photo, above the gravesites. Read all about it on page 19.

Kite flying on sacred ground in Guatemala

by *Ettie Zilber*

The Day of the Dead, November 1, is celebrated all over Latin America with a diversity of traditions. However, nothing prepared me for the unique customs of Guatemala, specifically the city of Santiago, Sacapequez. This non-descript town, only 40 km from Guatemala City and 5 km from La Antigua, comes to life on this day as they demonstrate - to the living and to the dead- their kite-making and kite-flying skills.

Entering Santiago Sac (the official short version) at 8 am guaranteed us parking, not only for the mini-bus, but also for our picnic shelter. And where else would you set up a picnic on such a day if not inside the grounds of the town cemetery? To our amazement, this is where all the action is- and *action* is a tempered description.

Each year, Guatemalans bundle up their families, food and flowers and head to their cemeteries to remember their relatives and share the day with them. They arrive early with hoes in hand to scrape away the weeds that have grown over the earthen mounds. Most of the gravesites in the cemetery do not have tombs, stones or any marker but each family

knows exactly where their loved ones are resting. After the cleaning, they lower the hand-woven textile bundles from their heads to unload the enormous quantities of orange marigolds and green leaves that they use to cover the gravesites. The women and their children giggle in glee as they share in the task of decoration and commemoration. Some sit down on the mound or tomb and share the picnic delicacies they have prepared. This is women's work, because the men are busy with another job - kite-building and flying.

The construction and decoration of the kites, which are sized from 1 to 16 meters in diameter is completed on site - i.e., in the cemetery by teams competing for prizes. Enormous bamboo poles are used for some of the largest kites - and the construction is taking place right on top of numerous gravesites. Numerous kites were in the air, as we watched the wishes and messages of the living reach their loved ones in the skies. Kites would come crashing down, sometimes on an unfortunate visitor among the masses in the sardine-packed cemetery. Raising the kites airborne is the ultimate challenge - especially as agility

is required as one prances in and over the gravesites to get lift.

As an intrepid traveler, I seek out unique cultural events to add to my memory of experiences, mentally comparing the festivals, colors and customs I have witnessed over my years of life overseas. Such was the case today. It wasn't the walking and shoving through the packed streets laden with merchants and vendors that piqued my interest; it wasn't the smells of the meats on the make-shift barbecues at the entrance to the cemetery that made me wonder. It wasn't

even the tip-toeing over, around or on top of the earthen graves that caught me by surprise.

What threw the entire experience into surrealistic proportions were the ice cream and pizza vendors hawking their foods to the living, with cries and bells, in and around the graves. Bursting into unexpected laughter, I realized that this carnival atmosphere was a shock to my cultural sensitivity, where death is somber, serious and staid.

To my mind, experiencing cultural diversity is one of the draws

of a lifestyle of international mobility. The world is a fascinating place because of the variety of customs to be encountered. And, when you ponder this diversity, who says that kites, picnics and pizza are not a better way to deal with death than what we have to offer? Let us continue to travel and enjoy the differences among us, and hopefully, the interest and awe of our diversity will draw us closer together.

Ettie Zilber is the director of the American School of Guatemala.