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Maya Baskets of Chilasco

Field Report

CAMILA MORALES

Maya Baskets of Chilasco

By Camila Morales

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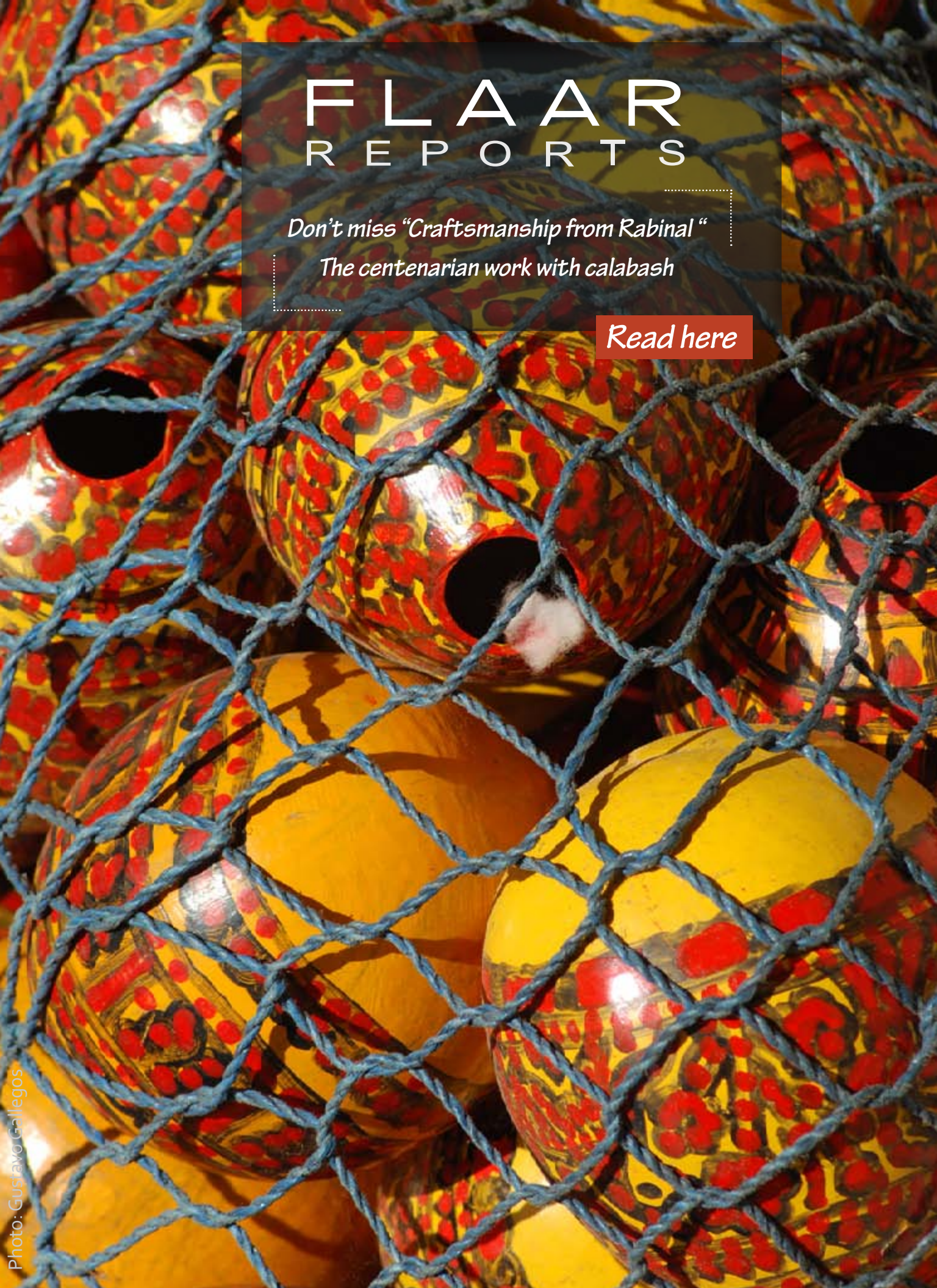
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The centenarian work with calabash

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Photo: Gustavo Gallegos



Photo: Gustavo Gallegos



As part of our research on Native American plants and animals, and their cultural links with the ancient Maya, we planed a route from Guatemala City towards the Atlantic Ocean to the north of Guatemala, the Peten.

Our first destination was San Rafael de Chilasco, where we found the antique tradition of basket making using Bayal and Vara de Sauz. The two plants are commonly



found in the Sierra de Las Minas in Baja Verapaz territory, and their use has been documented since precolonial times.



Maya Baskets of Chilascó

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San Rafael Chilasco is a small and remote town in the Verapaz territory in Guatemala. Its economy is moved by the significant agricultural production, broccoly and maize fields highlight in the landscape. The only language currently spoken in the town is Spanish, but the precolonial imprint is very evident in every corner.

Photos: Gustavo Gallegos

The basket making is a very extended labor throughout Mesoamerica. Diverse traditional practices can be found in several towns around Guatemala.

According to the INE –National Institute of Statistics of Guatemala- almost 30 percent of the National population is Maya, despite de fact that most cultural knowledge is transmitted orally from generation to generation, after centuries, many traditions remain implicit in the society.





San Rafael Chilascó

San Rafael Chilasco
Photos by Gustavo Gallegos



The turn off to San Rafael Chilasco is a few meters passing the Km. 144. The 10 kilometers of ascent path that divide the town with the main highway gives a nice view of the Sierra de Las Minas landscape.

Gustavo was recording with his camera a cloudy forest from the ridge, overlooking valleys of milpas and broccoli fields.

Nomadic groups all over the world have used woven objects, but since most utilitarian items were made with perishable materials, it is not easy to find them in excavations. One of the earliest forms of weaving in Mesoamerica was mat making or petate in Spanish, which comes from the Nahuatl petatl in reference to one of the plants once used. They are an almost indispensable household furnishing, from the time an Indian is born on a mat till the time he dies and it becomes his shroud (Osborne & Osborne; 1965: 182).



Top photo: Gustavo Gallegos
 Bottom photos: Camila Morales
 Next page
 Bottom Left: Camila Morales
 Bottom Right: Gustavo Gallegos

At the very entry of the village there is a tourist information center where we met Don Genaro Rojas, our guide, he gave us a very warm welcome, and took us to visit a traditional basket maker: Doña Calletana Perez Herrera.



Maya Community

Mats played an important role on ceremonial occasions and in everyday activities. Several royal Maya tombs have had remains of petates, such as Burial 116 under temple I in Tikal. The Maya word for mat is *Pop*, and the word for council is *Popol*. According to Friar

Francisco Viana's Poqom Maya dictionary, *pop* is a prefix used for dignity and royalty, and as *popol* implies community, the symbol represents the interaction between royalty and community, as in the case of a public assembly or a sacred congregation.

Photos: Camila Morales

Maya Baskets of Chilascó



Above is our guide in Chilasco, Don Genaro Rojas, he is very knowledgeable of his town, and was always very polite and disposed to help us with our project.

Doña Calletana wasn't expecting our arrival, but she was very well prepared for it, she had a complete set of materials used for basket making -photo on the top left-. Three different plants are interwoven in each basket.

The wooden house was surrounded by the milpa, as is usual in rural places like Chilascó. People grow maize and plantains, and breed poultry or pigs. On the left a kid holds a chicken at Calletana's.





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Weaving Maya Baskets

The first part she does is the stake, she waves a spoke with 13 flat and flexible sticks called varas -probably Vara de Sauz- with that she makes up the skeleton's baskets.

For waving she uses Venas which are tubular long sticks; she twills two of them over and under the stakes until the base is completed;

The varas that left from the base become the beams of structure walls. The rim gives durability and strength to the basket, and is made with Orillas, very similar material to venas but thicker and more rustic. The orillas are sanded before weaving them with the rest of the structure.

Photos: Camila Morales

Photos: Camila Morales



Baskets are different anywhere you go, which depends on the materials and the patterns followed; the process used by Doña Calletana is a “continuous wave”, a constant spiral that goes from the center of the stake to the rim or border.

Baskets have another very interesting connotation: trade. While weaving, Calletana remembered that being a girl once traveled with her father to a market across the mountains for selling their baskets, it was a tough long way, mostly with no shoes and carrying a heavy load on the back.

In the same way Calletana’s ancestors traveled to other villages for economical purposes, the antique Maya developed several extended routes of commerce, which connected the lowlands with the highlands from central Mexico to north Honduras.

The Dance of Baskets is a typical Guatemalan performance, it represents the contemporary view of a traditional market day.

Next page photo: Camila Morales







Photos: Camila Morales



On top is Gustavo Gallegos recording the process, while Doña Calletana finishes the base of the basket using a knife. In pre-colonial times obsidian and sharp rocks were used for this type of purpose.

Photo: Gustavo Gallegos



Photos: Gustavo Gallegos







Photos: Gustavo Gallegos

It looks like San Rafael Chilasco is a village under transformation: a better road is being built, and more people and commerce are moving around the town.

Doña Calletana never traveled again by foot. When the first road was opened, cars could transport people, making the commerce easier than before. The mayor places for exchange still are the traditional

markets, where many of the raw materials are also available.

In the other hand, commerce brought cheaper and more durable products, most of them are made of plastic, which is more attractive for the consumers, now they are the competition of the artisans.



Below, a girl carries water in a plastic container, pitchers like this are very common all around Guatemala. This photo was taken in Raxruhá, a Q'eqchi' speaker community near the border of the Alta and the Baja Verapaz.

Photos: Camila Morales

Staying in Chilascó

There are many reasons to stay at Chilascó; first, it owns one of the highest waterfalls of all Central America.

Second, different traditional processes as the basketry can be found in local artisans. Some of them make their own products, and are very open to show their process to the public.

Any backyard can contain an interesting native species, that have a daily-life use in the people. On the right Dr. Hellmuth photographs a maize female flower at Calletana's milpa.

After our visit to Chilascó we went to Salamá, the capital of the department of Baja Verapaz, which is less than an hour away from the intersection of the main highway with the road to Chilascó.

Don Genaro recommended us a Hotel in the town, the Aldea San Rafael Chilasco Hotel.



The fares are around Q50 per person, the hotel has Wi-Fi service and a restaurant that serves breakfast, lunch and dinners.

For more information about The Aldea San Rafael Chilasco Hotel see the acknowledgments.



The time spent in a single basket depends on the size and shape desired. The whole process can take approximately tree hours. Doña Calletana is part of a group of artisans women. All of them have learned their artistries from their ancestors, and have also transmitted their knowledge to their sons and daughters. However, they are aware of the disadvantages of the traditional crafts in today's market. Together they try to keep strength helping each other instead of competing.

The artisans ask the local authorities for capacitations to remain competitive, integrating other styles of working, and learning strategies for taking their products into new markets.



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Acknowledgments

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