



An Eye-Opening Experience

International Course Takes Students to Belize

With a focus on industry and international development, eight students and two chaperones spent one week in December on a study trip to Belize, Central America, where they learned about agriculture, horticulture and international development.



Preparing to Leave for One Week in Belize – Front Row: L-R: Lorraine Kroes, Margaret Vincent, Katie Savage (Trip Co-ordinator), Les Frayne (Trip Tour Guide) Back Row: L-R: Brandi McCabe, Bailey Trap, Samantha Klaver, Kayla Bishop, Ben Cullen, Leanne Bourque

This is the first time a group of Ridgetown Campus students has had the opportunity to study abroad and earn an academic course credit. The trip exposed the students to Belize culture, industry, government, and development. "It was a great chance for students to broaden their understanding of the world. Many students are looking for this kind of learning experience when considering their post-secondary institution," notes Liz Meidlinger, Manager, Communications and Advancement.

The Ridgetown students were guided by Les Frayne, a semi-retired farmer who has previously taken University of Guelph students to Belize on study tours. Les is also a committed, long-time volunteer with the SHARE (**S**ending **H**elp and **R**esources **E**verywhere) Agriculture Foundation which has projects in Belize. SHARE provides funding, guidance and expertise to community-based agricultural projects in developing countries around the world but with a particular focus on Central and South America.

Ridgetown students saw SHARE development projects as well as citrus, banana, dairy, beef and other agricultural production while travelling the small country. Students also had the opportunity to explore Belizean culture and learn about a variety of different uses for plants through botanical tours. Katie Savage, Ridgetown's Recruitment Co-ordinator, previously made the trip during her undergraduate studies at Guelph, and later as a SHARE volunteer. She co-ordinated the academic course with Les.

Belize is an attractive destination for study as English is the official language, travel throughout the country is very safe, and students can see many different types of landscapes and agriculture in a short amount of time.

Each student was responsible for a posting to the *Belize Blog* so that staff, family and friends could follow their travels along the way. Here is an excerpt of Ben Cullen's blog – Ben is a first year student in the Agriculture Diploma program. >





Learning New Production Practices through Agricultural and Horticultural Tour Stops

- d) Kayla Bishop and Samantha Klaver – learning about banana production at a plantation in southern Belize.
- e) Leanne Bourque, learning about various uses for Belizean plants; this variety of palm leaf is used to build thatched rooftops, like the one the group slept under in the Mayan village.
- f) A sample of citrus pulp, which is fed to the dairy cattle at a Mennonite dairy farm in Spanish Lookout . The dairy operation has four wooden stalls in its milking parlour and milks 35 cows.



Learning About a New Culture

- a) The guesthouse in San Miguel Mayan village that the group called home for two days. Each of the students ate their meals in the homes of different people in the community and were immersed in the Mayan way of life.
- b) Students visited the Mayan ruins of Xunantunich and learned about the history and culture of the ancient Mayans.
- c) Lots of smiles from the Belizean school children at Los Tombos Public School when our group of 10 arrived with school supplies.

International Development – The Opportunity to Help Others

- g) Les Frayne, the tour guide on the trip, donated a sewing machine to a women's group in Los Flores. These women will now be able to sew articles of clothing and items to sell to make extra income to help support their families.
- h) Five refugee farmers from El Salvador, whose farmland we toured in Armenia. These farmers have been hand clearing their 15-acre plots of land in the rainforest with machetes so they can plant pasture fields to raise cattle donated to them by SHARE.



“ Belize has taught me not to think of the potential to make Caye Caulker like Miami, or to make a Milpa farm resemble the large-scale and mechanized style of agriculture we practice at home. Perhaps I have learned that a country run without personal lines of credit or regular bank lending learns to build what the rest of us couldn't do even if we had all the money in the world, they learn to build for what their needs really are. We don't need six swimming pools and a water ski to have a good time, a brand new pickup truck to bring the feed home for the cows or a sweet new pair of shoes to put on our feet when rubber boots will probably get us there in the same time, at the same level of comfort.

Contemplating this, I reflected on what Eloy [a SHARE contact in Belize] told us earlier in the week: that people come to Belize to have their big dreams shrunk down to size. While it sounded cynical at the time, everything from the fall of the once great Mayan empire to the contentedness of a well fed farmer living in a hut started coming together. Belize is a small country that houses great contrast, but if you have the chance to visit prepare yourself not to be amazed. If you can set conventional expectations aside you might find yourself better astonished than if you were to visit the biggest, greatest and most 'advanced' country of all time.”

To read more Belize student blogs, visit: www.ridgetowncampus.blogspot.com ■