



THE ZAPAMICHE ROAD

The Fonseca Gulf Islands in El Salvador are yet to be touched by large-scale commercial tourism compared to some neighbouring Central American countries. So far, only its local residents and a few tourists have been privy to the spectacular sunsets on the Gulf, when the Pacific waters turn the colour of gold. La Ruta del Zapamiche (The Zapamiche Road), a small-scale family-run business, is the only ecotourism operator on the Islands and has recently joined Clean Up the World campaign as its member in El Salvador.

"I always tell my tourists that those of us who practice 'ecotourism' aren't crazy, nor do we stop people from having fun during their trip," says Joaquin Batres, one of the founders of La Ruta del Zapamiche, an ecotourism business operating under the motto "Lend a hand and enjoy yourself!" since 2003.

Batres says he could identify with the story of Clean Up the World's founder Ian Kiernan AO¹ right away. "My first trip to the Fonseca Islands was back in 1991 when you would see turtles and dolphins swimming next to the boat. What you often see now is floating plastic bottles and a lot of pollution," he recalls.



A bird eye's view of the Fonseca Gulf Islands

Batres and eleven other local families involved in the ecotourism venture run their business in a traditional and cordial way: men take care of the boats; young people act as tour guides; while

women cook local specialities and are in charge of accommodation.

"The tourists have the opportunity to share the family customs of cooking and eating together – it is a great experience!" he says.



The Osorios is one of eleven families involved in the ecotourism venture "La Ruta del Zapamiche"

"After the first few tours, we started to realise that the tourists enjoyed the experience much more when the beaches were clean and that they also liked to observe local wildlife, in particular birds and turtles," adds Batres.

Ninety percent of La Ruta del Zapamiche staff members come from the four Gulf Islands, which means that the profits stay with the community.

Batres also points out that ecotourism opens up opportunities for local youth, as the only existing option for them previously was to become fishermen.

Now many are considering pursuing their studies, training as tour guides, or even becoming wildlife photographers.

As part of the Clean Up the World campaign, La Ruta del Zapamiche guides insist that tourists bring back the rubbish accumulated on their trip. The Clean Up the World weekend in September is entirely dedicated to clean up activities on the Islands and the Gulf. This year, community volunteers are also planning to build a nursery for marine turtles.

Several endangered species of turtles are found in the Fonseca Gulf, including the Olive Ridley, hawksbill and green turtles, with the latter also known as the black turtle in the eastern Pacific.

Sadly, 600 Olive Ridley turtles have been found dead earlier this year from various causes, including marine pollution.



One of the victims of pollution in the Fonseca Gulf



The Fonseca Gulf Islands offer a spectacular vantage point for watching the sunsets over the Pacific Ocean



La Ruta del Zapamiche tours include a "Turtle Conservation Day", during which volunteers help in the maintenance of a hatchery for over 200 turtles, under supervision of Vicente Osorio, better known on the Islands as "Don Cuentillo".

"In the evenings, he entertains tourists with his brave and magic stories about the sea and has taught many of them how to cast fishing nets or ride a boat."

Don Cuentillo is a charismatic fisherman, motor mechanic and a father of ten who has been working with La Ruta del Zapamiche since its inception.



A quiet harbour on the Island of Meanguera

"His knowledge of the sea is like that of a fish, and although he has never read a single veterinary book in his life, he is an expert in rescuing injured turtles and determining the cause of their injuries," comments Batres about Don Cuentillo.

Don Cuentillo also tells visitors about the times when the beaches and the waters in the Gulf and beyond were pristine, encouraging them to leave nothing but footprints after visiting the Fonseca Islands.



Don Pijudo living on the Pirigallo Island is another local resident involved in La Ruta del Zapamiche

"We cannot be indifferent to the problems the planet as a whole faces – poverty, species extinction, water pollution, and so on. If we do not teach tourists to act responsibly, we would be contributing to the cause of the problem and not to the solution," explains Batres.

Batres' dream is to make the Fonseca beaches the cleanest in Central America and have them declared as nature parks.

At the moment, protected areas account for two percent of El Salvador's land area, compared to the regional average of eight percent in Central America and the Caribbean.

"Seeing how Ian Kiernan's vision has changed people's attitudes and transcended borders makes me believe that I will be able to see the Fonseca Gulf islands returned to the state they were in all those years ago with their spectacular beaches and jade coloured waters," says Batres.



La Ruta del Zapamiche volunteers

While Batres may have a long road ahead to achieve his goal, the success of his Zapamiche Road will surely speed him on his way.

Story by Xenya Cherny Scanlon. 2006 © Clean Up the World Pty Ltd. Photos are courtesy of La Ruta del Zapamiche. This article is available for reproduction free of charge as long as due acknowledgement is given to Clean Up the World and the author, and the meaning of the article is not changed.