

# Life in San Miguelito

by David Dudenhoefer

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***Hola.* This is my home in San Miguelito. San Miguelito is a small town with about 50 or 60 families. It has a school and a soccer field and a few churches, but it doesn't really have a center, like most towns. The houses are scattered along the one dirt road that leads up here from the coastal highway, and ends just above town, in El Imposible National Park.**

**My house isn't on the main road. It's at the end of a footpath, down the hill from the school. I live with my mom, dad and two older sisters: Elsi and Maritza. Our house is wooden, with a metal roof and a dirt floor. It has two rooms: the kitchen, where we eat and hang out, and the bedroom, where we all sleep. My dad built our house with his brothers before I was born. He also built our beds, the table we eat at and my mom's stove, which is made of wood and clay.**



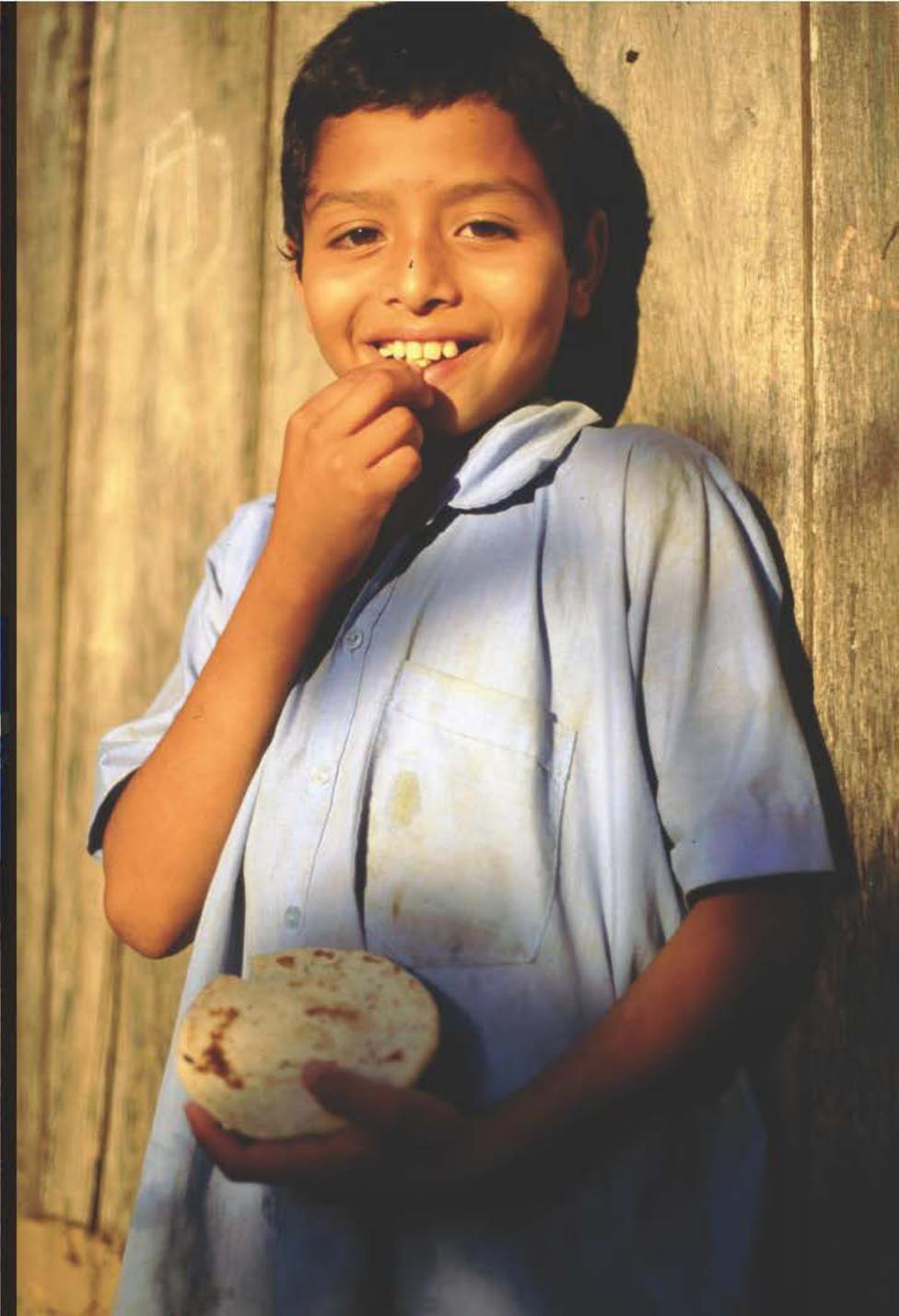
**My dad is a farmer. Since I'm 11 now, I help him after school, on the weekends, and during vacation. Like everyone around here, we grow coffee. We also have some bananas and other fruit trees—lime, papaya, orange, mango and *jocote*—growing together with the coffee bushes. Those trees shade the coffee, which can't take much direct sunlight, and give us fruit to eat and sell. My mother and sisters also have a little garden behind our house where they grow squash, tomatoes, hot peppers and cilantro.**

**Since we don't have much land, my dad rents small plots from other people, paying them with part of his harvest. That's where we grow the corn and beans we eat all year. Coffee bushes can live 20 years, but beans and corn have to be planted every year. We plant at the beginning of the rainy season, in May or June, and harvest in October and November. Planting is hard work, since the fields are real steep, and we have to clean the ground with machetes and hoe the soil. I always get blisters on my hands. Harvesting isn't so bad, especially since it means we get to eat fresh beans and corn on the cob.**



photo © SalvaNATURA

**We dry most of our corn and beans in the sun. We remove the dry corn kernels from the husk and store them in sacks. Every day, my mom boils corn for tortillas and we take turns grinding it. She then pats the corn dough into tortillas and cooks them on a steel plate over the stove fire. There's nothing like fresh tortillas! I eat them for breakfast, lunch and dinner.**



**As soon as we're done harvesting our corn and beans, we start picking coffee. The coffee berries are ready to pick when they turn from green to red. They don't all ripen at once, though, so we have to go back through a couple times. Every berry has two beige coffee beans in it, which we squeeze out and wash in water.**

**After washing the pulp off, we dry them in the sun. We then loosen the screws on the corn grinder and turn the beans through it to knock off a clear husk. Then my mom roasts them in a pan, which turns them dark brown and makes the house smell great. We have a small grinder to turn the coffee beans into powder that we put into a cloth sack and pour boiling water through to make coffee. I like coffee with two big scoops of sugar in it.**



**Since our farm is small, it doesn't take us long to harvest, so we also pick coffee for other people. During November and December, when the rainy season ends, my dad, mom, sisters and I all pick coffee on San Miguelito's big farms. We don't get paid much for each bushel we fill, but if we work every day for a month, we can earn enough money to pay our debts and buy some new clothes.**

**Harvest time is really busy around here. Our school year ends in October, because all of the kids in San Miguelito have to help pick the coffee. By Christmas, the harvest is over, so I have more time for myself. I play soccer and other games with my neighbors, visit my cousins on the other end of town, or go to the park with my sister Maritza. Vacation doesn't last long; school starts again in February.**



**Of course, I always have my chores to do. Every day I have to collect the firewood my mom cooks with. Since the coffee farms that surround our house are full of trees, there's always lots of dead wood on the ground. I also have to get the water we drink and wash with from the communal spring in the valley below our house. I like getting water, because it's cool in the valley, and there are usually birds singing in the branches of the big trees.**

**We have all kinds of birds around here—kiskadees, trogons, kingfishers, laughing falcons. There are usually other kids getting water at the spring, and women or girls washing clothes, so it's a fun place. Some of the families along the road have running water in their homes, but most people in San Miguelito rely on springs.**



**On school days, I usually wake up at six so that I have time to do my chores. While my sisters help my mom make breakfast, I chop wood, or look for ripe oranges. For breakfast, we usually eat refried beans, tortillas, fruit and coffee. We have a couple of ducks, so now and then I get an egg. School is just up the hill, so I'm usually one of the first ones there. All the students have to wear uniforms—navy blue pants and a light blue shirt.**

**Our school is pretty cool: its classrooms have cement floors, glass windows and blackboards, and the bathrooms have running water and toilets you can flush. It doesn't have electricity, but nobody in San Miguelito does, except for a few families that have generators, or solar panels.**



**I'm in 5th grade now. We study the usual subjects—math, history, science and Spanish. My favorite course is science. Sometimes biologists from SalvaNatura visit our school to give us special science classes. They teach us about the plants and animals in El Imposible National Park, or the importance of conserving nature. SalvaNatura is Spanish for "SaveNature."**

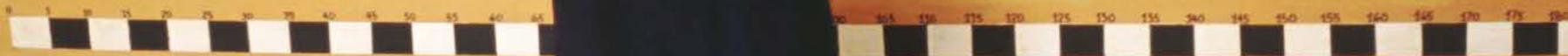
**It's an important organization around here—they run the national park and do things to help the people of San Miguelito. My sister took SalvaNatura courses to become a nature guide, and my aunt took a course that taught her to make souvenirs to sell to tourists. My dad joined a SalvaNatura program to grow coffee in a way that won't harm the environment. For example, we have to be careful not to dump any waste from our farm into the stream down the hill, and we're planting more shade trees so the birds have plenty of food and places to perch.**

Soy el Rey Zope, el Ave más Grande de Este Parque



...y el Ave más grande y fuerte de este Parque, cuando extiende sus alas, alcanzo a medir hasta 193 centímetros.  
...bito en este parque y mi trabajo es el de limpiar la naturaleza que me alimento en carroña que es la carne descompuesta de los animales muertos. Actualmente es muy raro verme en este lugar, porque estoy en peligro de desaparecer.  
...problema, soy muy importante porque sirvo también para que tú no te enfermes.  
...regístrate al guía por qué.

Extienda sus brazos y compare cuánto  
cuanto mide el Rey Zope con los días



Last year, a biologist from SalvaNaturra told my class that more than 100 of the birds around here spend half the year in the United States. I hadn't noticed it before, but in May, I began to see what he meant. The *camaroneros* (yellow-green vireo) that had been hanging around our house disappeared. He explained that birds, like the *chipe negriamarillo* (Townsend's warbler), fly all the way to Canada. Canada looks pretty far on the map. He said the birds spend our rainy season up there because it's warm, and there is plenty for them to eat, but they fly back to El Salvador in September and October to escape the snow. I know that snow is white—I've seen pictures of it—but I don't understand what's so scary about it. Maybe the birds come back to El Salvador because they like it here. I know I do.

