

The 8th Aid Via Action Mission Trip commenced with a flight from Dallas/Fort Worth (DFW) to La Aurora International Airport in Guatemala City. Subsequently, we boarded another flight to Mundo Maya International Airport in San Benito on November 15th, 2025. The flights were uneventful, and anticipation for the mission was high. Upon arrival, transportation was promptly arranged, and, in a rather unexpected turn of events, we were greeted by an ambulance, providing a unique and memorable introduction to our destination.



Sunday was dedicated to exploring the island of Flores, where I began the day with a 5K run around the Island. The island was vibrant, characterized by its colorful traditional houses and hotels overlooking the serene lake. We enjoyed a delightful Guatemalan lunch at one of the lakeside restaurants, followed by a press conference and orientation at night. During the press conference, members of the local media were present to discuss the mission of our organization and the profound impact it has had on the local community over the course of the previous eight trips. The orientation session then provided us with further insight into the day-to-day activities and an opportunity to meet other team members.



Later that day, we visited the Regional Hospital of San Benito, the primary public hospital in Petén, to meet with our patients who had been pre-admitted in preparation for surgery the following day. What struck me most during this visit was not the lack of privacy, with patients often placed in close proximity to one another, but rather the overwhelming sense of gratitude from the patients, who were finally able to have their surgical needs addressed. Despite my limited Spanish proficiency, I was able to engage with the patients with the assistance of Dr. Ortiz, the Medical Director of San Benito Regional Hospital.





Monday marked the beginning of our surgical operations. We started the day early with a group breakfast at 5:30 AM before heading to the hospital by 6:30 AM to commence our cases. Three operating rooms were in use, with one dedicated to urology and two for general surgery. I had the privilege of working with Dr. Huerta, the CEO and founder of Aid Via Action organization and the mastermind behind this phenomenal mission trip, on four inguinal hernia repairs and one umbilical hernia repair. The first case involved a small fat-containing inguinal hernia, which proved to be a manageable starting point as it allowed for a smoother transition into the local healthcare environment. With the assistance of a medical student, I was able to complete the operative report and orders in Spanish. All surgical patients were admitted for 24-hour observation post-operatively.

The second case involved a chronically incarcerated, melon-sized inguinal hernia that had been causing the patient significant discomfort for over three years. The lack of surgical instruments posed a challenge, as the set available for this case included only one Addison forceps and one large DeBakey forceps, which required us to adapt and improvise. Despite the extended operative time, we were able to safely identify critical anatomy, repair the defect, and securely place the mesh. I concluded the day with an elective open cholecystectomy, marking the first such procedure I have assisted with in an elective setting during my almost three years of surgical training. Afterward, I joined Dr. Ortiz at his private practice in Petén, where we performed both an open and a laparoscopic cholecystectomy.



The following day, I had the opportunity to work alongside a local surgeon at San Benito, Dr. Ochoa. Together, we successfully completed four elective open cholecystectomies by 2:00 PM. The efficiency of our work was due in no small part to Dr. Ochoa's expertise and the remarkably quick 10-minute turnover time between cases. After rounding on our patients, we took a break to swim across the lake before enjoying dinner at a local restaurant on a nearby island, Raíces Del Lago.



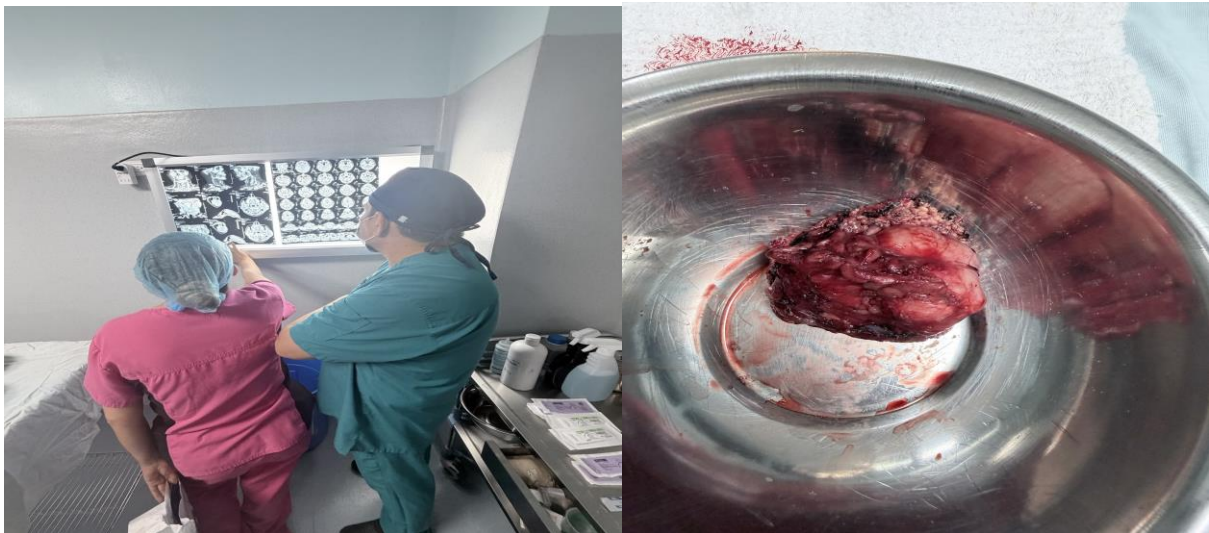
On our third day, we visited the Tikal National Park, which provided a welcome opportunity to explore the region's rich Mayan history and unwind after several intense days of surgery.



Our fourth day was particularly noteworthy, as we welcomed Dr. Sosa, a pediatric surgeon from Guatemala City, who flew in to assist with six pediatric cases. Unfortunately, the Petén region lacks a dedicated pediatric surgeon, meaning that most pediatric surgeries are performed by general surgeons or require referral to Guatemala City, a 10-hour drive away. It was an honor to collaborate with Dr. Sosa on these cases. What stood out to me during this day was the lack of dedicated pediatric instruments. For instance, when closing the external oblique aponeurosis after an inguinal hernia repair, the needle driver I was using was nearly half the size of our pediatric patient. During our orchiopexy, we also experienced a power outage lasting approximately 10 minutes, which made visualization of the surgical field even more difficult. With the aid of one headlamp and two mobile flashlights, we were able to safely continue the procedure until electricity was restored.



Later that day, I assisted Dr. Ortiz at his private hospital with a parotidectomy for a pleomorphic adenoma, which was my first time assisting with such a case, as these are typically handled by ENT surgeons in the United States. We also evaluated a patient for appendicitis, who subsequently underwent a laparoscopic appendectomy. Despite the private hospital's relatively greater resources compared to the public hospital, we still faced challenges due to the high cost of specialized tools. For example, we had to create endo-loops from Vicryl sutures and make an endo-catch bag from a sterile glove. Our day concluded late, at around 11:30 PM, after completing nine cases across both the public and private hospital.



Friday, the last day of the trip, was focused on urological cases. We ended the day with a dinner attended by local surgeons, hospital team members, and AVA volunteers. Team members were presented with certificates of completion, marking the successful conclusion of our eighth AVA mission trip where a total of 50 cases were completed

As a Syrian immigrant, having experienced firsthand the challenges of limited access to healthcare and resources in developing countries, this mission was both personally and professionally fulfilling. It provided me not only the opportunity to share insights from my training in the United States, but also to grow as a surgical resident and learn from both the patients and staff at the Regional Hospital of San Benito. I have come to appreciate the many comforts we often take for granted in the U.S., from uninterrupted electricity to access to specialized surgical care and a wide array of instruments and suture types. I will forever cherish this experience and I am eager to continue my involvement with the AVA organization and to participate in future missions, particularly in the expansion of the pediatric surgery program at the Regional Hospital of San Benito, where we hope to provide much-needed surgical care to an increasing number of children in the coming years.