
Quality Of Life is Priority Number One at U.S. Military Group Honduras

By

CDR John T. Nawrocki, USN

Despite the generally low level of economic development in Honduras, the quality of life at the MILGP is excellent. The country of Honduras offers many attractions to the average American, ranging from the Mayan ruins at Copan, and the beauty of the Bay Islands, to the mahogany furniture which can be purchased at very affordable prices. To the personnel stationed at the U.S. Mission in Honduras, and particularly for the members of the USMILGP, life is even better.

First of all, housing is very affordable and it is of very high quality. MILGP members obtain private leases, rather than pooled Embassy housing. The U.S. Embassy's Interagency Housing Board considers all housing requests and ensures that the housing market remains competitive. Seldom does a member's rent exceed his overseas housing allowance (OHA). The average family of four qualifies for 2057 sq. ft. of living area (not including hallways and storage space), meaning that quarters are usually very spacious. There is a down side to the housing picture in Honduras in that MILGP families are in direct competition with the rest of the embassy community. This means that the General Services Officer (GSO) at the embassy is trying to acquire leases on the same property that MILGP families are trying to rent. Since other U.S. Mission agencies are provided their quarters by the GSO, MILGP families have to search all the harder to obtain adequate residences. Once quarters are found they must satisfy stringent security requirements, and often the correction of discrepancies takes time. This means that a stay in a hotel or Bed & Breakfast is often necessary. While waiting, however, temporary lodging allowance (TLA) covers the cost of temporary quarters.

Utilities are fairly reasonable in Honduras. Only electricity approaches U.S. rates, and water and local telephone service is very reasonable. On the other hand, long distance, overseas phone service is expensive. Electrical service can be erratic, as occasional disruptions to power are common (nearly all electricity in Honduras is provided by hydroelectric power and is dependent upon rains). During the drought of 1994, rationing of electricity up to 14 hours a day was the norm. This necessitated the acquisition of 13 kilowatt generators for all residences. The MILGP now has in its inventory a generator for each of its ten military and GS employees. Tap water in Honduras is not potable, thus all families must bear the expense of bottled water. Utilities allowances, nonetheless, are generally adequate to cover costs, and surveys are conducted periodically to ensure that the allowances are raised to keep up with inflation.

Another benefit to MILGP Honduras is that all major household appliances are provided by the government. This prevents damages in shipment when personnel own their own appliances, and prevents others from having to make major investments just because they are ordered overseas. The upright freezer, provided to each household, is an essential element in every home because of the monthly commissary order (which is received in bulk quantity). The military commissary support that military personnel stationed in Honduras enjoy is highly envied by their State Department counterparts. The U.S. Embassy operates a modest commissary store in Tegucigalpa for the convenience of the diplomatic community, but its prices for most items are relatively high. Conversely, all military commissary orders must be

made in case lot quantities, making a freezer an imperative for the storage of perishables which would otherwise not be purchased.

Funded dependent education is another aspect of life at MILGP Honduras that contributes to a high quality of life. All MILGP dependent children attend Tegucigalpa's prestigious American School, one of the best, if not the best, private school in the country. Security Assistance funds pay for enrollment fees, tuition, and transportation costs.

One other significant, and particularly noteworthy benefit of being stationed in Honduras is the presence of U.S. Forces at the Honduran Jose Enrique Soto Cano Air Base, located about 50 miles north of the capital. Available at the base exchange are a good selection of food, summer clothing, and other convenience items, including Class VI, which can be purchased in reasonable quantities for the personal use of service members and their families. Other significant benefits available at Soto Cano AB are access to quality American medical care and the availability of frequent Air Mobility Command (formerly MAC) flights to the U.S. and Panama. Unfunded Environmental Morale leave (UEML) flights may be taken twice annually, and "hops" on a space available basis may be obtained almost daily from Soto Cano. Funded Environmental Morale Leave (FEML) trips are available direct from Tegucigalpa to the nearest CONUS port of entry once per two-year tour for MILGP members and their families. A second FEML trip may be available if a tour is extended to three years.

A myriad of cultural, recreational, and tourist attractions are available in Honduras. Among the most interesting are the Mayan ruins at Copan. Nestled in a snug valley near the Guatemalan border is the cultural center of the ancient Mayan world. A new museum has recently opened, tours of the ruins conducted by English-speaking guides are very reasonably priced, and modern hotels with all the amenities are available through the Morale, Welfare and Recreation office at Soto Cano AFB. In the waters surrounding the Bay Islands are some of the best coral reefs in the western hemisphere and therefore, some of the best snorkeling and scuba diving. On the largest island, Roatan, are many excellent hotels, which cater to all tastes. From the Fantasy Island Beach Resort at one end of the scale to any of a number of beach bungalows at the opposite end of the scale, there is something for everyone in the Bay Islands. Honduras' north coast prides itself on some the most beautiful, pristine, white sand beaches in Central America. During Semana Santa (Holy Week), Hondurans come in droves to the north coast centers of Tela, La Ceiba, and Trujillo to get away from the big cities and enjoy their mid-summer vacations. Honduras has its share of wild rivers waiting to be tamed by white water rafters. In the remote departments (political divisions) of Olancho and Gracias a Dios are the rivers Patuca, Platano, and Kruta, all of which are accessible only by air and rafting trips. For the daring types, this can be the experience of a lifetime.

As far as security is concerned, the terrorist threat in Honduras is virtually nonexistent. That is not to say that there is no threat. Crime is rampant due to the poverty in the country. This necessitates that individual precautions be taken by all members of the U.S. Mission. A high security profile is the best deterrent to becoming the victim of a robbery or an assault. Therefore, the Embassy's Diplomatic Security Officer contracts for roving security patrols throughout the American community, and alarm systems have been installed in all residences. Portable radios are carried by all MILGP members and their families; this means that a response from the roving security patrol is only, on the average, four minutes away. Additionally, a limited domicile-to-duty vehicle policy is in effect which permits the use of government vehicles by MILGP personnel to commute to and from work under certain circumstances.

That brings us to driving. Driving in Honduras is, in itself, an experience. The police are not budgeted adequately to patrol the highways and streets. Accordingly, enforcement of

traffic laws is scarce. It is not uncommon for a driver to approach a line of cars waiting at a stop light, pass all the cars leaving them to his right, and run the red light when an opening in the crossing traffic presents itself. Similarly, never is anyone stopped for speeding on the few high-speed "carreteras." Beware though, the use of excessive speed is mitigated against by the cattle, ice cream salesmen, and slow buses which monopolize the main arteries. Roads, apart from the main highways, are usually unpaved and unmarked. In numerous spots, half the roadway is washed away due to poor drainage and sporadic maintenance. It behooves the traveler to know his route and not to deviate from it when taking a long trip.

Intangible advantages of living in Honduras include the recent decline of the Lempira (Honduras' unit of currency) versus the U.S. Dollar. Over the past two years the Lempira has dropped from 7.4 to 11.1 to the dollar. This has spawned significant inflation, but it has also increased the purchasing power of Americans who are paid in dollars. Accordingly, very good bargains can be had in everything from wicker furniture to scuba diving trips to the Bay Islands. Some of the other good deals to take advantage of in Honduras include: hand-rolled premium cigars, pottery of all sorts, wood products (particularly mahogany), marble, pewter, and, possibly the favorite of many spouses, affordable household help (i.e., gardeners and maids).

Life in Latin America is different from the United States in many ways; the culture, the language, certainly the pace of life, in general, is less hectic. It affords one the opportunity to experience something new and different. Honduras, though poor economically, is very rich in so many other ways. Its people are happy, friendly and very hospitable to Americans. Our Honduran neighbors make us feel welcome and wanted always. They actually seem to emulate us in their dress, their style, and their expressions. More than any other aspect of Honduras, perhaps it is the people, who make the quality of life so rich and rewarding.