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LIVING'S

Incomes Abroad

FUND YOUR LIFE OVERSEAS

Reinvent Yourself for a New Life Overseas

By Barbara Winter

I first met Tom Linzmeier when we were teaching self-employment seminars in Washington, D.C. Tom had a career as a stockbroker before becoming a full-time investor. Then he reinvented himself again as a teacher.

For several years, we continued to bump into each other at adult education centers around the country but after a while we lost touch.

Then I discovered that Tom had reinvented himself yet again and opened a gallery selling the work of Vietnamese artists. I was more than curious. After all, stockbroker to investor was a logical move. Art gallery owner/importer seemed a dramatic new direction.

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Turn Your Travel Bug Into a Profitable Tour

By the Staff of *Incomes Abroad*

“I love the stimulation. Every time I take someone on a tour I learn something new about places I’ve seen hundreds of times before.”

So says Helene Kahn who has loved Mexico since she was 10 years old. Now she lives in the artistic hub of San Miguel de Allende and gets paid for something she loves doing: showing people around her adopted country.

A love of a place is often all you really need to begin guiding. “We started with nothing but a passion for travel,” says Benita Gluck who lives in Pereira, Colombia.

Tour guiding can be profitable, too. “I make between \$1,000 and \$3,000 on every tour,” says Cynthia Morris, who leads groups from the U.S. in France. “I can’t think of anything else I’d rather be doing. Or of an easier way to fund what are really fun travel experiences.”

“Anyone can guide,” says Ginger Aaron who runs tours in Ireland specializing in gardens and genealogy. “I quickly picked up the tour business and took to guiding.” If you can plan an itinerary, book hotels and restaurants, and market your tours you are good to go.

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Cynthia Morris loves French culture and immerses herself in it through tour guiding

BRICKS-AND-MORTAR BUSINESS

Building a Construction Business from Nicaragua's Raw Materials

By Gordon MacKay

With an investment of just under \$50,000, Michelle and Austin Drill are now on their way to making a living...selling bagged dirt in Nicaragua.

The former New Yorkers found a place where they could breathe, the easy-going beach town of San Juan del Sur on Nicaragua's Pacific coast, and a business opportunity whose time had come. Today, after five years, they have a good income that supports a great lifestyle.

“We live very happily and very fully here,” says Michelle. “We have an incredible group of friends that keep our social calendar full and provide endless beach, pool, and play dates. This tight-knit group also doubles as a reliable support system that rivals most families.”

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Austin and Michelle Drill, with baby Bodhin, have discovered a great family lifestyle, with a business in San Juan del Sur

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Building a Construction Business from Nicaragua's Raw Materials

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Their original plan was to buy a piece of land and build a house that would serve primarily as an investment and vacation rental property. Who knows...maybe even a place to retire to someday.

But plans have a habit of changing direction.

In the time it took to build their house they realized two things. One was that they were really enjoying living in San Juan del Sur. The other was that they had hit on a method of sustainable construction—using earthbags—that had the potential to become a viable business.

They decided to stay.

Like many Nicaraguan expats, Michelle and Austin's story starts in the U.S. In 2005, they were feeling the confines of the city. They wanted to live in a place where they could appreciate the outdoors while enjoying a more temperate climate. Initially, they moved west to Santa Monica, California.

Austin worked in real estate finance and development; Michelle was working as a freelance producer on television commercials, music videos, and magazine photo shoots.

They dreamed of finding a house with expansive outdoor living, but nothing in California met their vision. Austin suggested they broaden their search. Michelle was thinking another state, but Austin had his sights set on Central America and made a trip down there.

On his arrival in San Juan del Sur he was immediately taken by the vibrancy and

authenticity of the town. He called Michelle to tell her he had found "the place."

Two weeks after receiving the phone call from her excited husband, she was en-route to Nicaragua to meet him. Austin had a few pieces of land scoped out and was ready to make a deal.

Starting to Build

They purchased the land and then collaborated with their friend and architecture professor, Ezra Ardolino, in designing a house that incorporated solar panels, water catchment, and gray water systems. The plan was to use local wood, palm fronds, and clay tiles. They also wanted to maximize the use of indoor/outdoor space and airflow.

"As construction began we realized that we could have pushed the envelope even further in terms of sustainability...so we started to do some research," says Michelle.

After much exploration and study of traditional earthen applications for construction, Michelle and Austin wanted to put what they'd learned into practice. They decided to build a second, smaller, house on their land. They set a three-month goal to build a small guest house using earthbags.

"Earthbag construction typically utilizes bags constructed of polypropylene (the same used for rice) that are easily found in Nicaragua," explains Austin, who notes this is an ancient construction technique.

"These polypropylene bags act as forms, and are filled with moistened earth that is often excavated during site preparation, thereby lowering the energy and cost associated with the manufacturing and transportation of building materials. The bags are laid, tamped into place, and as the earth dries in its bagged forms, these building blocks become strong and incredibly solid."

Michelle and Austin had intended to continue on with their careers in the U.S., but a few things occurred during this project that gave pause to their plan.

"While we were building, many neighbors and passers-by stopped to inquire about our 'bunker'. And once we approached completion, many more asked how much it cost...how long it took to build...and eventually, if we would be interested in building one for them as well," explains Michelle.

With construction of the home they initially designed complete and the building of their guesthouse well underway, it was time for Michelle and Austin to make a decision. List the house as a vacation rental...or move in?

With the economic market in the States collapsing—and their work there significantly slowing down—Michelle and Austin wondered if they might actually be able to earn a living in Nicaragua in natural building.

"It was a leap of faith, but we both felt the pull of Nicaragua so strongly, we took on a 'now or never' mentality. In early 2010 we packed up our lives in California and officially relocated to San Juan del Sur," says Michelle.

Setting Up Business

Not long after settling in, Michelle and Austin teamed up with local non-profit organizations, such as Comunidad Connect and the Newton/San Juan del Sur Sister City Project, to construct community projects throughout Nicaragua.

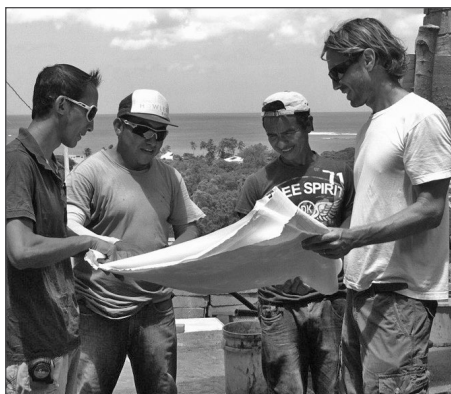
"With some alliances formed and a couple of new projects underway, our local bilingual paper ran a story on a school we were building—garnering further interest from the expat community—which led to our very first private client hiring us to build a *casita* on her land," explains Michelle.

Austin oversaw all fieldwork. He toiled alongside the crew onsite each day and worked at negotiating rates for material purchases. He also spent time conferring with engineers and electricians. Michelle took care of accounting and payroll.

"We began to grow and realized we needed to legitimize our company. A local lawyer assisted us in applying for our Nicaraguan residences, and nearly six months after acquiring the proper paperwork from our own country and submitting it to the government, we received our residence cards," tells Michelle.

With residence, Michelle and Austin were able to register their company with the town's mayor's office. They hired a licensed accountant who was familiar with the intricacies of Nicaraguan labor and tax laws, enrolled all of their employees into Nicaragua's social security plan, and promoted their trusted crew leader to assist in daily operations.

With an investment of \$28,000 for construction of a *casita*—and an additional \$20,000 for a vehicle, tools, web



Austin Drill works onsite with builders in the Casa de Tierra construction company he set up with his wife, Michelle



This earthbag building was the beginning of the Casa de Tierra company, which now employs a crew of local builders

development, and office supplies—*Casa de Tierra* was officially born.

And now, just a few years later they are starting to see a return on their investment.

Living in a developing country, Michelle and Austin saw firsthand the lack of effective and affordable housing, and believed that natural building had the potential to play a major role in addressing this need. Their goal at this point is to reintroduce environmentally-sound, economically-efficient, and structurally-effective building techniques.

Casa de Tierra uses a wide range of materials and methodologies that emphasize ideas of sustainability, while preserving traditional design concerns of aesthetics, utility, durability, and comfort. The concepts appeal to a variety of clients.

The company works with non-profit organizations on projects to create schools, composting toilets, and health centers in underprivileged areas. It also works with people who are interested in incorporating sustainable techniques into their otherwise conventional homes, as well as landowners who simply seek to build homes at modest prices.

“In recent years, there’s been a big shift in thinking regarding the environment and our social responsibility for it, and that awareness has been a boom to our business,” explains Michelle.

Lower Costs

Operating a business in Nicaragua is far less expensive than in North America, but it certainly doesn’t come without challenges. Skilled labor is hard to come by, especially when you are in a business that is new to

Nicaragua. On the job training is really the only option.

With the minimum salary for the average construction worker at \$244 per month, wages are considerably lower in Nicaragua. Michelle and Austin pay their crew on a sliding scale, rewarding their more experienced and skilled employees for their loyalty.

It is however, important to know that in addition to providing a minimum salary, employers

are legally responsible to pay an additional two months’ salary per year per employee. One for vacation pay and one in December as a Christmas bonus. They are also required to pay into a social security fund. Additional employee taxes, fees, etc. equate to approximately 44% increase in the initial base salary.

For Michelle and Austin, life in Nicaragua hasn’t been all business. In 2012 they welcomed a baby boy to their family. Bodhin Drill was born at the Metropolitano Vivian Pellas hospital in Managua where both Michelle and Austin were thoroughly impressed by the quality of health care provided.

Michelle originally had a hard time imagining raising a child in a foreign

country without family nearby. But soon after becoming pregnant, she started to connect with a community of expats who were also creating families in San Juan del Sur.

“Our new friends provided us with insight into preferred obstetricians, pediatricians, hospitals, childcare, daycare, and schooling. They also shared their personal experiences on parenting away from ‘home’,” says Michelle.

With Bodhin’s second birthday approaching, he will soon start classes at San Juan del Sur Day School, a private international school located just five minutes from the Drill’s home. The school employs teachers from the U.S., Canada, Ireland, Holland, and New Zealand, and they cater to the dozens of families living in San Juan del Sur.

Currently *Casa de Tierra* allows Michelle and Austin to earn a modest income, but in Nicaragua “modest” funds a very comfortable lifestyle.

What began as an investment property has turned out to be a whole new way of life. In their initial weeks and months in Nicaragua Michelle and Austin assured each other that if they couldn’t make it work in one year, they’d return to the United States.

“We’re now on year five and have been steadily building our business and rooting our lives here,” says Michelle.

Michelle and Austin have learned starting with a plan is important, but being able to adapt and take full advantage of the opportunities available makes life in Nicaragua that much more exciting and fulfilling.

Sustainable Construction Around the World

Earthbag is one of a number of sustainable construction methods in use around the world. Here are some others.

Rammed Earth

This is another way of using earth in construction but offers greater design flexibility than earthbags. Like earthbag construction, it is labor intensive and therefore not commonly used in the U.S. But it is widely used in developing nations in Africa and other places where the cost of labor is low and the material itself is cheap or free. In fact, a quarter of the world’s population lives in an earth home.

Hemp

Hemp has long been popular in France where it works well with stone construction. Mixed with lime it forms a plaster for insulation. This mix is also available as a hempcrete block. Now it is being recognized for its value in earthquake zones, because of its resistance to cracks, and areas prone to wildfire due to its fire-resistant properties.

Straw Bale

Straw bale construction is effective where other building materials are in short supply. It is subject to strict regulation codes in the U.S. but less so in other parts of the world. It is becoming popular in China where housing needs are great but so is the need to reduce pollution. As a building material, it is readily available, creating no production emissions. Ultimately the houses are easier to heat, requiring less fuel.