

# La Mosquitia: Land of the Forgotten People

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Honduras is about the shape and size of the state of Kentucky. It is divided into 17 departments (or states) with the one farthest to the east, Gracias A Dios, making up what is called La Mosquitia (the Spanish spelling) or the Miskito Coast. It is named for the indigenous people who live there and speak the Miskito dialect, not from the insect.



This part of Honduras is isolated from the western part of the country due to the fact that there are no roads going to La Moskitia (the Miskito spelling). The only way to get there is by plane or boat. The northern coast of La Mosquitia is easier to reach than the most eastern part simply because it is closer. The main town on the north coast is Palacios while the main town in the east is Puerto Lempira. A flight from La Ceiba to Palacios takes about 30 minutes, while the flight from La Ceiba to Puerto Lempira requires an hour and a half. The cargo boats make the trip from La Ceiba to Palacios in one day, but it takes 3 days to get to Puerto Lempira.

Send Hope has chosen to work in and around Puerto Lempira, the south eastern point of Honduras, thus this article is written about this corner of the country. In this area only Puerto Lempira has generator produced electricity. None of the other smaller villages have any electricity and only one other has running water. All cargo and supplies are shipped in by small commercial boat. To make matters worse, the 25 mile wide lagoon is very shallow, so only small boats about the size of a small shrimp boat can cross without getting stuck in the sand. Many people find it hard to believe that in this modern age there would be a place that can not be reached by vehicle.

My first trip was in 1991, and since there are no roads from the western side, no electrical or telephone lines, there were no telephones or television. Now Puerto Lempira has both via satellite dishes. To the south of Puerto Lempira is the Coco River which is the border between Nicaragua and Honduras. Several large lagoons lie to the east and north east, and a dirt road runs about 90 miles to the west ending on the Coco River at *Auasbilla*. None of the roads are paved in this part of the Miskito Coast and the dirt road has many pot holes. You can only average about 15 mph, so the trip to *Auasbilla* takes about 6 hours. The small villages across the lagoons can only be reached by boat.

Unless the people from these areas have traveled to Puerto Lempira or into Nicaragua, they have never seen an automobile. Also, some people are surprised to land on a dirt



runway when they first fly into Puerto Lempira.

One of the reasons that Send Hope chose to focus in this area is because of the tremendous need. Of the six countries in which I have worked, I see more need in La Mosquitia than in any other. Because it is difficult to get to this area, most groups choose not to work in La Mosquitia. Also, most of the Honduras citizens have never been to La Mosquitia.

There is little industry and thus, few jobs. Some people in Puerto Lempira have stores and derive income by selling the goods brought in by the commercial boats from La Ceiba. Others can find construction work, but in the smaller villages most people try to grow or harvest from the jungle enough food to feed their families.

Diving for lobsters is one of the few ways to make a living, but this has created a problem. Many of the young men, about 200 of them, have become paralyzed. They stay down too long and come up too quickly causing the “bends” resulting in paralysis.

There is a decompression chamber across the lagoon in *Cauquira*, but either they can not get there quickly enough or the chamber does not work properly. At present Send Hope is working on getting wheel chairs through Rotary International and the Wheel Chair Foundation. These



divers need some way to produce an income. It is really sad to see a young man in the prime of his life trying to move feet that have hardly any sensation along a rocky, dirt road on a pair of crutches.

There are no Methodist churches in the area, but several denominations are represented including, Catholic, Baptist, Moravian, Assembly of God, and Church of God. These same groups are found in the smaller villages outside Puerto Lempira.

Send Hope has four areas of focus:

- (1) Sending short term medical/dental/construction teams
- (2) Sending supplies
- (3) Helping people with medical treatment both in the U.S. and Honduras
- (4) Helping students with their education

#### SHORT TERM TRIPS:

The short term trips are usually 9-10 days. Medical/dental teams normally work in the smaller, remote villages outside Puerto Lempira. It takes 3 days of travel to reach these villages. The first day we travel from the U.S. to La Ceiba; the second day we go to Puerto Lempira and then buy supplies and organize the equipment; and on the third day we travel by truck or boat to our destination. The dental treatment consists of both extractions and fillings using a generator, air compressor, and portable dental equipment. (See article in manual on “Portable Dentistry” at [www.send-hope.org](http://www.send-hope.org) for more information.) We work, sleep, and eat in a clinic, church, or school.



#### CONSTRUCTION:

Dental treatment is also done at the complex outside of Puerto Lempira. Send Hope has two 40', 18 wheeler trailers about one mile outside Puerto Lempira. One is a clinic with 2 dental chairs, and the other is sleeping quarters for teams. The construction teams have placed a metal roof over the complex, drilled a well and installed a water tank, and wired the complex for both generator and solar electricity. There is still work



to be done on the complex. Usually, at least on day is spent doing dentistry in the clinic. There is also a lab for fabricating removable, acrylic teeth. In the future Send Hope would like to

train local people to make removable teeth, clean teeth, do sealants on children, and educate people about dental hygiene, thus utilizing the clinic year round instead of the 6 or 7 times teams are present. More construction is needed on the clinic/bunkhouse complex.

Future construction projects will be to build a complex in town in which students could live. The schools in the village outside Puerto Lempira only go to the sixth grade. If a student wishes to continue their education, they must go to Puerto Lempira where they can go from 7<sup>th</sup> grade to 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Send Hope has helped several students with their room and board, but there have been some problems. When the teenage gets to Puerto Lempira, which to them is the 'Big City', they spend much of their time in town with their friends rather than studying. The complex would include a dorm for the students as well as a house for a family who would monitor their school attendance and study habits. Another dorm would house mothers whose children are malnourished. When a malnourished child comes to the hospital in Pt. Lempira they need a place to live while milk is being provided to their child. The land for the two dorms was recently purchased and construction will begin soon.

#### SENDING SUPPLIES:



Send Hope collects supplies year round. At the end of each school year our elementary school children donate the supplies that they would otherwise throw away. These are sorted and packed and put in a 40' shipping container along with medical and dental supplies, bicycles, typewriters, computers, food, household items, hand tools, etc. They are shipped to Puerto Cortes, trucked to La Ceiba, loaded into a small boat, and taken to Puerto Lempira. These supplies are given to the needy, but those people capable of working are given things in exchange for their help.

#### MEDICAL TREATMENT:

Medical treatment is limited in the southeastern corner of Honduras. There is a government hospital in Puerto Lempira and a private hospital in Rus Rus, three hours by road west, run by the Church of God. There are good doctors in these hospitals, but due to the lack of equipment and specialists, not all treatment can be done. A child born with

a birth defect such as a club foot or cleft palate must fly to the capital, Tegucigalpa to be treated. Most of the parents can not afford the air fare to the capital or to pay for room and board while waiting for treatment. Imagine the frustration of a parent whose child needs treatment, but they can not obtain treatment due to finances. Send Hope has set up a fund to help with these expenses.



For the children needing more complicated treatment that cannot be done in Honduras, Send Hope arranges for them to be taken to the United States. Not everyone can be treated, but for those that can, lives are changed. (See article on “Bringing Children to the U.S. for Medical Treatment” at Send-Hope.org or in the manual for more information.)

#### EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS:

The fourth area of focus for Send Hope is helping students with their education. Those children who receive orthopedic treatment in the U.S. often return disabled with a fused joint and are unable to do manual labor. An education would provide them with an earning capacity. Hopefully some of them would want to become a teacher or nurse.

Two of the most respected groups in the villages are nurses and teachers, because they are among the few who have an education and draw a monthly salary. As discussed earlier under the construction topic, the students must leave their villages after the sixth grade and go to Puerto Lempira to continue their education through the ninth grade. Send Hope financially helps with room and board, uniforms, tuition, and school supplies. Once the student finishes the ninth grade, they must



travel to the western part of Honduras for more education. The expenses are even more in the larger town than in Puerto Lempira.

Send Hope has recently applied for and been approved as a United Methodist project in La Mosquitia, Honduras.