

**Contact Sonia to  
get energized and inspired!**

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## **Suggested Interview Questions for Sonia Marsh and her travel memoir: *Freeways to Flip-Flops: A Family's Year of Gutsy Living on a Tropical Island***

### **What prompted you to chuck it all and uproot your family to a third-world country?**

Many things, all building up to a point where my husband and I couldn't wait to leave Orange County's comforts and move to a hut on stilts in Belize. My husband was overworked and fed up with Los Angeles' gridlocked freeways. He longed for adventure. I was fed up with our oldest son's teenage defiance, peer pressures facing him and the entitlement attitude of kids in our neighborhood. I wanted my own Caribbean paradise.

### **How did this move change your family?**

Our value system changed: We became grateful for what we had in life. All of us became less selfish, the kids included—and I've heard other parents say that about them since our return. We no longer need to buy "stuff" to feel good, or to show off what we have. We are perfectly content driving used, compact cars; downsizing to a much smaller home; and pursuing our passions rather than yearning for "things." Our kids have not begged for cars, electronic gizmos, clothes or money. They value education because they saw how Belizean kids treated education as a privilege, not a right.

### **What did your kids think about this move?**

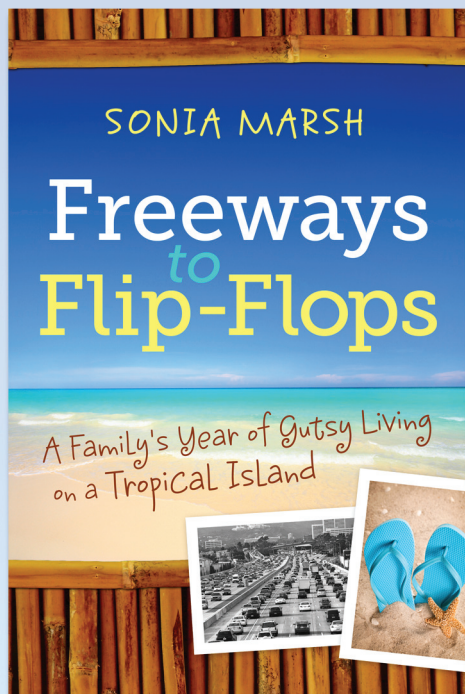
At first, they thought my husband and I were joking when we said we were moving to Belize. My middle son was the most reluctant to leave. He had some very close friends in his neighborhood and was thirteen at the time. Surprisingly, my oldest, a sixteen-year-old who was getting in trouble in high school, never complained once about our move. My youngest son, ten, thought he wouldn't have to go to school in Belize, so he was happy. He didn't seem to mind as long as Cookie, our rat terrier, came with us.

### **What did your children learn?**

Each child is different, so each one learned something different from our year in Belize. My oldest learned that his family loved him enough to pull him away from a bad situation, but as a family unit, rather than send him away to school. He became less selfish and felt

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good about helping our caretaker's four-year-old son learn English. He started bonding with his brothers.

My middle son grew more assertive and independent, and my youngest son far more compassionate. When we returned to Orange County, he decided he didn't fit in any longer and has enlisted in the Army.

### **What did you learn about your children?**

I learned that they react to change in different ways. Adapting to anything new depends on your personality, and I discovered traits about my children that weren't apparent when we were living our daily routine in suburban America. For example, my oldest son almost seemed relieved that we took him away from his complicated life in Orange County. I didn't realize at the time that he might have been waiting for us to "rescue" him from his own bad choices. My middle son was more fragile than I had anticipated, both emotionally and physically. I also realized that he does not adapt well to change and prefers to live in cooler climates. My youngest son adapts quickly to change and can rough it more readily than his brothers. He is easygoing and makes new friends quickly. This may explain why he joined the Army and appears to thrive when challenged physically.

### **What was your day-to-day schedule like?**

A good chunk of our day was spent on the basics: finding a store that carried the food we wanted, buying five-gallon jugs of water and transporting them home on a boat, getting butane gas tanks filled for cooking, cooking meals from scratch and being more creative with the limited number of ingredients available. Washing clothes, but then when your cistern has very little water left due to lack of rain, transporting your clothes to town to wash them.

### **What did you miss the most from back home?**

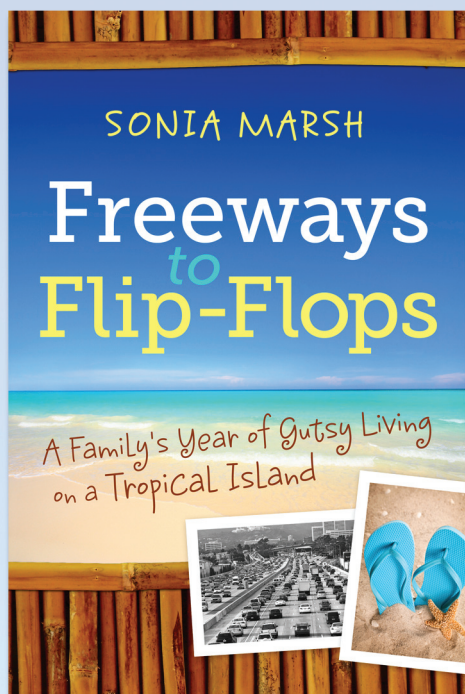
Coffee shops; bookstores; libraries; affordable wine; good cheese, including gorgonzola and Boursin; salads; good steaks; and whole wheat, grainy bread. The kids missed fresh milk, ice cream, and pizza.

### **How did your kids adapt to the lack of a television set?**

They complained at the beginning, until they started fishing, swimming and snorkeling, and learned how to catch iguanas with a strip of palm frond. What is amazing is how they became more social, especially when tourists visited the island of Ambergris Caye, where we lived.

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## **Did you accomplish your goals?**

Yes. The strange part is that even though things were not what I had expected, in the end, we learned some important lessons about life and what's important: relationships, people, expat life, working in a third-world country, and much more. My main goal was to get my oldest son away from negative peer pressure and make sure he got back on track. From that perspective, I can say our goal was accomplished. When he returned to high school as a senior, his grades were excellent and he was able to attend a great engineering school. The kids also learned not to take even simple things for granted, such as water, electricity, the large variety of food choices, and accumulating unnecessary stuff.

As far as me finding "my paradise," I learned that paradise is not a physical location, but a place within yourself.

## **How is the Belizean culture different from our own?**

It's more family-oriented and less money-oriented. Money really drives American society, which I suppose gives us the work ethic we're known for on a global scale. In Belize, as long as you have enough money in your pocket for food today, you're fine. This results in a more laid-back atmosphere, where people don't stress and worry like we do in the U.S. Things get done when they get done; forget rigid schedules. Families help one another out. There are many other differences, such as climate, food, housing, and how kids are raised.

## **How did you support yourself?**

We sold our house when the housing market was doing well in 2004. This gave us sufficient savings to last a year. We did try two businesses, but unfortunately, neither one worked out.

## **Do you have to be rich to just chuck it all and move?**

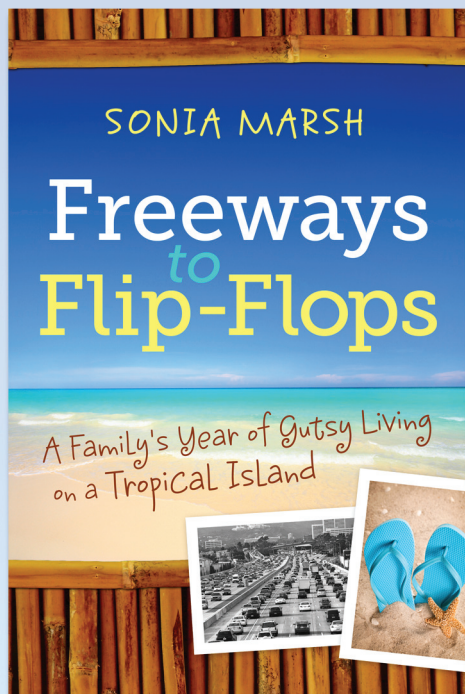
That depends on where you move and your standard of living there. Many Americans retire to Belize because they can afford a small house and live comfortably on their Social Security check. They say they are better off in Belize; and medical expenses are also much lower. When our son had to go to the local hospital, we didn't get a bill. The hospital just asked for a donation.

## **What lessons did you take away from this experience?**

I learned that there are always options in life when you're dealing with problems that seem overwhelming. You just need to take a risk and become flexible in your thinking. If your problems involve family, money, health issues or lack of work, sometimes you can solve them by moving to a less-expensive area, downsizing, selling stuff, or moving

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to another country where you can live for a fraction of what it costs in the U.S. For example, you can get medical treatment in another country where costs are much lower, but doctors have been trained in the U.S. My husband had a year to de-stress and get away from LA's gridlocked freeways. He realized that even in "paradise" there are problems trying to find work and support a family.

### **Did it take awhile to adapt to the U.S. again when you returned?**

Yes, it took us awhile to adapt, especially me. I remember the first time I shopped at a grocery store, I got stuck in the cereal aisle, staring at the vast assortment. A sales clerk thought something was wrong and asked me if I needed help. I replied, "I can't decide which cereal. There are too many to choose from." He thought I was crazy.

You forget how we are surrounded by noise all the time: cars, sirens, planes and helicopters. It took me several months to get used to the hectic pace of life here. I got upset when people were in a hurry and wouldn't make eye contact. People seemed so focused on themselves.

My sons had slowed down, too. After we refused to get TV when we returned, my sons adapted by sitting down together and talking to one another.

### **What did your kids think of the experience?**

When we ask them, they won't admit that it made a difference in their lives, yet I know they talk about it in a positive way with others, especially adults who ask them. My sons have written college application essays where they mention how they mentored a young Belizean kid and taught him English, and how their year in Belize changed them. When they are in their 30s and 40s, I'm sure they will thank us for showing them a simpler way of life. I know this has changed their value systems. They are far more frugal today.