

Stepping into Guatemala's mystical, colourful past

By Beverly Mann | Epoch Times Contributor

I awoke to the soothing songs of toucans and parrots amid a palatial paradise. Was I still dreaming or truly surrounded by sculpted gardens of colourful tropical foliage, three towering volcanoes, and a massive mountainside with houses clinging to cliffs?



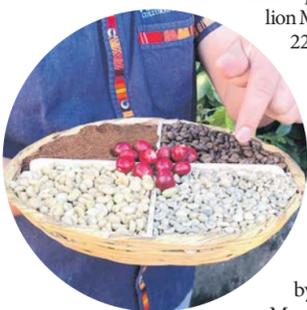
View from Hotel Atitlan of volcanoes and Lake Atitlan.

PHOTOS BY BEVERLY MANN

I was at Guatemala's Hotel Atitlan located next to Lake Atitlan, a huge crevice created from a volcanic collapse some 85,000 years ago. This was quite a culmination to my nine-day adventurous journey with Caravan Tours, visiting mystical Mayan cultural sites thousands of years old.

Our guided scenic bus tour took us in a loop from Guatemala City, established by the Spanish as the capital in 1776, to the UNESCO World Heritage and archeological sites of Quirigua and Tikal. From there we continued on to the colonial cobblestone city of Antigua, just two hours from Lake Atitlan and the Mayan town of Panajachel, before returning to Guatemala City.

Guatemala, a 42,000 square-mile country of 16 million people—with eight million Mayan natives speaking 22 different languages—consists mostly of agricultural land producing everything from corn to cocoa to melons. Some 65 percent of terrain is mountainous, where much of our journey was artfully navigated by our patient driver, Manuel, and informative tour guide, Oscar.



Most of our meals were bountiful buffets featuring fresh local vegetables and fruits such as papaya, melon, and fried plantain. Dinner and lunch choices also included pork, beef, or chicken dishes, along with tasty local stews and soups.

Our 42 well-travelled, active, and educated tour participants were from the United States and Canada, with an age range from 40s to 80s—all raring to explore Guatemala's rich Spanish and Mayan heritage, which goes back as far as 2,500 B.C.

Guatemala City and beyond

A two-day stay in Guatemala City, with a visit to several museums, was a good introduction to the country's historical background.

Our first stop, the archeological museum Museo Popol Vuh, was an introduction to Mayan artifacts: decorative pottery, jewelry, sculpted urns, elaborate collars, and Mayan masks. It was a precursor to our visit to the ancient sites where we would soon experience history firsthand.

Museo Ixchel, our next stop, exhibited the intricate weaving designs of multi-coloured fabrics and looms for making textiles. Our tour included the main square, the Metropolitan Cathedral of 1782, the flowing central fountain, and a full view of

the grand National Palace with its Moorish Arabian-style architecture.

However, it was on our next day's tour that the true discovery began, heading into the rainforest, with its wildlife and lagoons, and on to the archeological site of Quirigua, from 720 A.D. Here, we walked amid some of the world's largest carved stone monoliths, or stelae, depicting the 260-day Mayan calendar and carvings of priests and gods.

We stayed several nights in Petenchel at the 67-acre preserve of Villa Maya, which overlooks the scenic shores of the Pentenchel Laguna and lush nature trails. Enchanting sounds of exotic birds lulled me to sleep in preparation for the wilds of nature to come.

Perhaps the most memorable part of my venture into the past was our visit to Tikal, the grandest of all the Mayan cities, and its ancient temples deep within the rainforest and jungle terrain 1,300-feet above sea level. Here, I actually climbed Temple II, a 125-foot pyramid overlooking the Gran Plaza in view of Acropolis Norte and Temple I. Just recently, laser technology has uncovered nearby a lost world of thousands of Mayan homes, palaces, and tombs buried below. The discoveries here are never-ending.

A fellow traveller on the tour, Bernard Shramko of Tennessee, waited 25 years to fulfill his dream of visiting Tikal. "I can't believe that I am finally here and actually climbed one of the tallest pyramids. I don't know why I didn't do this sooner," he said.

Antigua and coffee

Our stay at the amazingly well-preserved colonial city of Antigua added yet another highlight to the trip. Antigua stood as the country's capital until a massive earthquake destroyed the city in 1773. It's a museum piece in itself. Founded in 1543 by the Spanish, the city's elaborate Baroque-style church facades are exquisitely designed, especially church La Merced. Also, the marketplaces, with their wide variety of handcrafted souvenirs and textiles, were a bit less crowded than elsewhere.

We couldn't leave Guatemala without a visit to a coffee plantation. La Azotea Cultural Center included a guided tour of the neighbouring plantation and unique musical museum showcasing ancient Mayan instruments. A local saying goes, "Coffee should be black, strong as passion, sweet as love, and hot as hell."

Passion and love certainly prevail beyond the coffee in this welcoming country, as seen throughout the ancient villages, the creation of colourful handcrafted clothing and wares, and the unending architectural preservation and exploration of the Mayan ruins and culture.



National Palace, built in 1843, in the main square of Guatemala City.

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For more information, contact Caravan Tours at 1-800-227-2826, www.caravan.com

Beverly Mann has been a feature, arts, and travel writer in the San Francisco Bay Area for the past 30-plus years. She has received numerous accolades in various fields, including a Bay Area Travel Writers Award of Excellence in Newspaper Travel Writing.



Typical Mayan dress in the colonial town of Antigua.



Tikal Gran Plaza and Acropolis Norte.



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