

Guatemala

YOU WERE THERE: Knowing

This past January, my husband and I decided to explore more of Central America, so we headed to Guatemala. Part of our motivation was to demystify the aura of danger that this country is known for.

We started our trip with Antigua, one hour away from the airport. This is a wonderful town steeped in colonial history and rich cultural traditions. Three volcanoes overlook this small town of 40,000.

It really struck us how pleasant the people were, always acknowledging us with a friendly "Buenos Dias."

Knowing a little bit of Spanish is handy as people are very approachable. Merely sitting in the town plaza can be a very rewarding experience, as all it takes to get people talking is a greeting.

We then headed to Chichicastenango for the popular and colourful Sunday market. This is an experience not to be missed.

Mayans from surrounding villages bring beautiful textiles; masks, woodcarvings and many other crafts. Sometimes religious processions take place on Sundays and we were lucky to witness this.

Men clad in traditional costumes swung incense burners while others carried life-size religious figures to the 400-year-old white church. The hazy air and beating drums added an aura of mysticism.

Little children also sell small crafts, sometimes approaching you in cafes. They are persistent but polite.

After the market, we headed to Panajachel, a town around the beautiful Lake Atitlán. Although Panajachel is a tourist attraction, it is the lake scenery with volcanoes that makes this a striking place to visit.

Small Mayan villages are laid out around the lake and can be reached by lancha (passenger speedboats) and some by walking paths. We visited Jaibalito, San Pedro and Santiago Atitlán. Our favourite was San Pedro for its laid-back atmosphere.

Back to Guatemala City to catch a five-hour bus ride to the Caribbean coast and then a lancha to laid-back Livingston, a small coastal town populated by Garífuna blacks, Mayans and ladinos (Guatemalans of European descent).

Then we headed inland by

warm and friendly

some Spanish lets you chat with the locals

lancha to Rio Tatin. We stayed at a place called Finca Tatin, surrounded by lush jungle and the river on one side.

Our cabana was rustic and comfortable, electricity was only available for a few hours in the evening and the food was great. We hiked in the jungle, kayaked and lounged around in one of the many hammocks.

Our last stop was Tikal, an ancient Mayan village buried under the jungle. This was a spectacular sight abundant with howler and spider monkeys, birds, crocodiles, and gigantic frogs. Our guide, Ramon, was very knowledgeable and entertaining, sharing with us local nicknames for some of the flora and fauna.

The people were very friendly, making this trip

stand out. Safety was never a concern and we are planning to return to Guatemala, this time for a much longer stay.

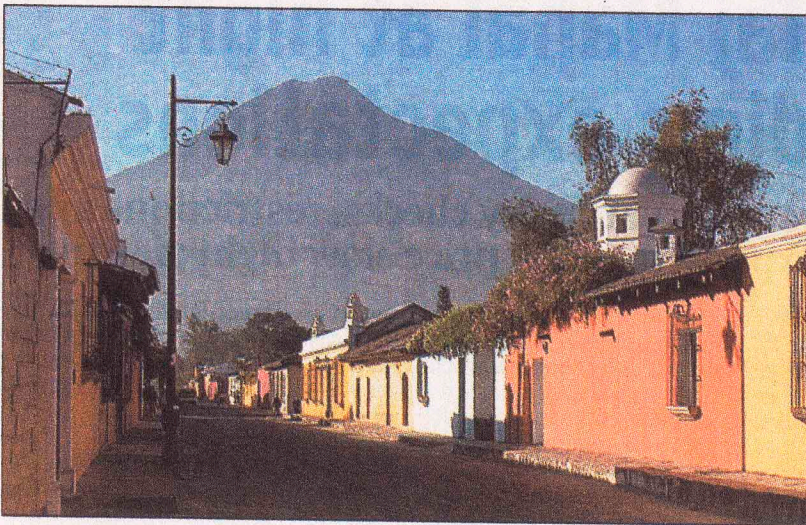
— Laura Buccì,
Vancouver

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The Agua volcano dominates the landscape near Antigua, Guatemala.