





LAND *of the* ANCIENTS

AS WELL AS BEING A PLACE OF **JAW-DROPPING NATURAL BEAUTY**, THE CENTRAL AMERICAN COUNTRY OF **GUATEMALA** IS A LIVING MONUMENT TO THE **MAYA PEOPLE**, AS CLAIRE BOOBBYER DISCOVERED

Squashed between the borders of Mexico, Belize, Honduras and El Salvador, Guatemala is a small country with many impressive features. Dominated by erupting conical volcanoes in the south, it boasts the largest number of lava-cloaked mountains in Central America and its jungles shelter some of the most impressive sites left by the ancient Maya, a Mesoamerican people who have survived in the area from 2000 BC.

The country is Central America's most colourful nation. Its 22 groups of modern-day Maya wear brightly hued, tinted textiles unique to their culture, and it basks in the architectural glory of Antigua – the resurrected ochre-hued colonial capital of Spanish Central America. Although a modern state, it is the traditions and fortitude of the steadfast Maya that still imbues this land with spirit and great beauty today.

Four thousand years after the Maya first settled in the humid tropics, many Westerners – wrongly – whipped themselves into a frenzy about their prediction that the world would end in 2012. In fact, what the Maya priests actually marked on the Long Count, one of three calendars used by the ancient people, was the dawning of a new age next year – as one of their 5126-year cycles comes to an end.

Tikal, in remote northern Guatemala, is one of the greatest of the Maya city-states. Grey perpendicular pyramids (some a neck-cracking 154ft high), cut through with steep steps, soar out of the jungle canopy and howler monkeys roar in the dense green stew. You might also spy jaguars skulking under shadowy leaves and brilliantly coloured toucans swooping over the abandoned ancient city.

But the beauty of the place is in stark contrast to its bloody past, as our Tikal guide explained. Between AD 300 – 600, warring states in this Mesoamerican (literally, 'middle America' in Greek) region would usurp rulers then sacrifice them and their entourage. Victims would be trussed up in a ball and rolled down the pyramidal steps to their deaths. The Maya ▶

Tikal is one of the largest and most impressive of the Maya pyramid sites in Central America – here visitors can climb the ancient skyscrapers to view the dense jungle that surrounds the site



also sought to appease the gods who had made them; the kings would pierce their penises and tongues with stingray spines and spill their blood onto paper. This bloodied paper votive was burnt to honour the gods, the swirling smoke a means of communication with the deities. If the gods were thought to be angry or the Maya in need, human sacrifice was also part of these ceremonies. The city of Tikal originally covered 100sq km of jungle territory, and the ruins reveal plazas, steep-stepped temples, ball courts (for games) and stelae (carved stone pillars) engraved with civil registers and events. Our guide showed us the burial treasure found in the tomb of Tikal's greatest ruler, Ah Cacaw (Lord of Cocoa) (AD 682 – 721). The haul included treasure of jade (to use as currency in the next world), shells, ceramics and bones. We also listened, wide-eyed, as he told us he had once seen a jaguar, a Maya deity, pad across Tikal's central plaza under moonlight.

From the temple complexes, we journeyed to the tiny island town of Flores and capital of the Petén region to relax before heading further south to Guatemala's tiny pinch of Caribbean coast. After a night at Hotel Hacienda Tijax, an ecolodge in the heart of the jungle at Fronteras, we boated down the Río Dulce towards Livingston. Here, glassy, bottle-green waters flow through the Dulce canyon, a river enclosed by craggy limestone walls draped with curtains of vines, ferns and gnarled roots.

The tiny tropical town of Livingston is fringed by palm trees and hemmed in by tiny pockets of white sand. Unique in Guatemala, it is home to the Garífuna, descendants of Nigerian slaves and Caribbean Arawaks. Their fortuitous existence derives from a shipwreck of slaves near the island of St Vincent in the 17th century. After a fish dinner followed by the local sweet delicacy of *cocado* (coconut, sugar and ginger candy), we ventured out to experience Garífuna *punta*, a highly energetic and invigorating fertility dance and style of music, taking place along the main street of charming ramshackle wooden balconied buildings.

Returning to Fronteras by boat, we drove the long haul south to the capital, Guatemala City, stopping at the Maya site of Quiriguá. Here, the tallest stelae in the Maya world appear as a graveyard of monumental pillars

detailing the coronations and conquests between the 5th and 9th century, and feature a carved menagerie of mythical beasts and skulls.

Most travellers avoid the country's capital, Guatemala City, because of its edginess, grime and pollution, but it contains some outstanding museum highlights. The Museo Popol Vuh displays dozens of pre-Columbian artefacts; the National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology is a treasure trove of Mayan remains; and the insightful Museo Ixchel del Traje Indígena provides an attractive and comprehensive overview of Mayan costume.

Each of the 22 Maya communities can be identified by their own sartorial threads, and for many visitors, travelling to Maya highland towns and seeing the traditional clothes worn by both men and women is a real visual delight. One of the most stunningly intricate outfits is that worn by the men in Santiago Atitlán. White shirts and half-length trousers are exquisitely embroidered with the emerald-green and red quetzal (Guatemala's national bird) and other flora and fauna; women's purple blouses (*huipiles*) are emblazoned with butterflies and birds in multi-coloured threads.

Santiago Atitlán is a Tz'utujil Maya town banked on the southern shores of Lake Atitlán. This beautiful lake of midnight blue lies sky-scrapingly high in the Western Highlands, in an ancient volcanic crater. Over the geological time scale, three new volcanoes have evolved around the high-slung lake, providing a truly stunning backdrop to what is surely one of the world's most gorgeous settings. To the Tz'utujil Maya, who believe the world was born from its primordial waters, the lake is a place of sanctity, and visitors cannot help but be seduced by the natural beauty of the place, too.

There, our guide Dolores introduced us to Maximón, a cigar-smoking, scarf-wearing idol worshipped by the Maya, who is petitioned for good health and a successful harvest. She showed us the church and plaza where fascinating, colourful Easter celebrations take place and Mayan gods are willingly embraced by Christian protagonists. Dolores also introduced us to weaving co-operatives where clothes and textile spreads can be bought.

Before our journey east to Antigua, the former colonial capital of the country, we visited Chichicastenango, a highland town cooled by pine trees ►

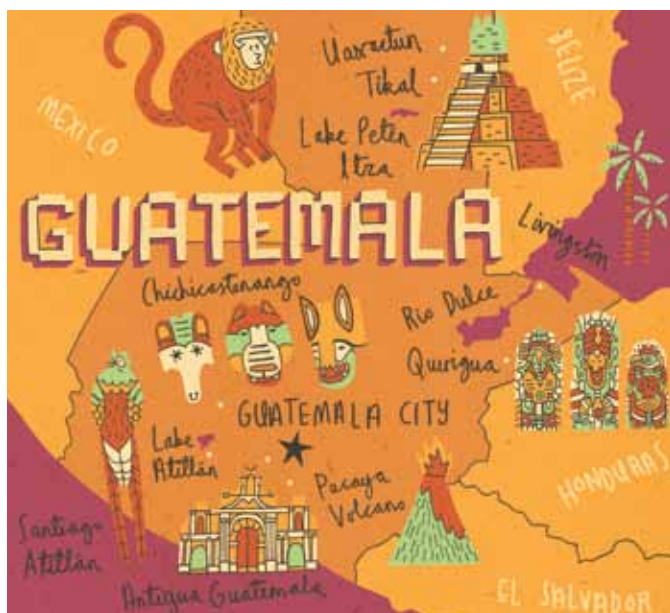
Above: Visitors can choose to climb a volcano or the steps of an ancient Mayan site, freshly made corn tortillas are a staple in Guatemala.

Opposite: Set in the Western Highlands, the volcanic Lake Atitlán (top) and the market at Chichicastenango (bottom) are revered by tourists and locals alike



Blessed with rich and varied scenery, Guatemala is also Central America's most vibrant nation, thanks to the brightly-hued textiles worn by modern-day Maya





Stunningly intricate and colourful, the traditional clothing worn by men and women is a visual delight

and known for its market where dozens of stalls groan under the weight of handmade crafts. Colourful wooden masks, textiles and blankets are piled high on stalls that are crammed into the central plaza every Thursday and Sunday. While tradesmen ply their wares fast and furiously, worshippers defer to a pantheon of gods at the white colonial church that dominates the plaza. Copal incense, made from the resin of plant sap, floats out into the air, creating an atmospheric fug that envelops worshippers and shoppers alike. Occasionally, the melodic timbres of the marimba, a traditional giant xylophone, can be heard, adding to the intensity of the experience.

Antigua is a beautiful colonial town of squat custard and terracotta homes set within the gaze of three volcanoes. It was the centre of Spanish colonial manoeuvres in Central America between the 16th–18th century and is accordingly embellished with grandiose civic buildings. In 1773, an earthquake toppled the town literally and politically, and its inhabitants fled to establish a new capital at Guatemala City.

Antigua's shattered yet elegant remains were left to gracefully decay for the next 200 years. Today, it's a UNESCO World Heritage Site and visitors can explore its cobbled streets, mansions, churches and courtyards draped in bougainvillea, while drawing deeply on the crisp mountain air. Its boutique hotels, varied restaurants, cafés and bars are a diverting draw, and packed to capacity during the world-famous Easter celebrations.

To the south of Antigua, the Pacaya volcano regularly erupts, showering blood-orange lava into the sky. If you can get close enough to the crater lip (on a guided excursion during officially safe periods), the roar and stench of steaming magma is a reminder of Guatemala's volatile geology and the Maya's physical reliance on and relationship to this fertile land.

As the doomsayers watch the approach of December 2012 with impending gloom, so the Maya will welcome their fifth new world, and prepare to celebrate the beauty of their country for the next 5000 years.

The bright plumage of the quetzal (top right), Guatemala's national bird, is also reflected in the vibrant traditional costume, or *traje*, worn in the villages



THE ESSENTIALS

WHEN TO GO

Semana Santa (Easter week) is celebrated with plenty of pomp and ceremony in religious processions in Antigua. Semana Santa in Santiago Atitlán is no less fascinating but it is less touristy. The best months to visit the highlands of Guatemala are from November–April, but remember that much of the country is at high altitude so the tropical sun can be tempered by a chill, especially at night.

WHAT TO EAT AND DRINK

The Guatemalan diet is corn-based. Tortilla (maize pancake) is a staple, as are black beans. *Tamales* are corn dough steamed in banana leaves. *Mole*, a chocolate sauce with chilli and cinnamon (among other ingredients), is a delicious accompaniment to meats. *Atol de elote* is a popular thick, sweet drink made from fresh corn.

COSTS

Costs in Guatemala are low. A three-course meal costs less than £15 in most restaurants. A beer costs around £1.50. Car hire is not recommended but tourist shuttle buses (adrenalinatours.com) are a reasonable way to travel. A shuttle from Flores to Río Dulce costs US\$20; from Río Dulce to Guatemala City US\$20; from Lake Atitlán to Antigua US\$20; and from Guatemala City to Antigua US\$12.

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