

Guatemala - the cultural gem of Central America



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Antigua charms visitors with its 17th

century Spanish colonial architecture, cobblestone streets and quaint shops.

Guatemala is the crown jewel of Central America. Its scenic beauty, colorful culture, exotic wildlife and ancient history dazzle visitors from all over the world. And its warm, comfortable temps make it appealing for travelers at anytime of the year.

Unlike its oft visited neighbors, Belize and Costa Rica, however, Guatemala is not a major tourist mecca – yet. Those who do venture to this "land of eternal spring" come for its unpolished appeal – for its authenticity and genuine character. And they delight in the hospitable nature of the people, who take pride in sharing their rich heritage with others.

Though it is only about the size of Tennessee, Guatemala's diversity in its geography, wildlife and inhabitants is impressive. It has everything from tropical jungles and active volcanoes to mountain cloud forests, lakes and beaches.

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Thousands of species of plants and hundreds of species of animals and birds make their home here. And as for the people, there are almost two dozen Maya ethno-linguistic groups, each with its own dialect and set of indigenous customs.

If you're thinking of visiting the country for the first time, you might want to opt to go on an organized tour, especially if you don't have a good command of Spanish.

I chose Viaventure, a company with a well known reputation for providing quality, small group tours that are custom designed based on interests.

I wanted to see Guatemala's major highlights, but I also wanted to explore some small villages and get a more up close and personal connection with the people.

I started in Antigua, one of the most charming destinations in the world, with beautifully restored Spanish colonial architecture, narrow cobblestone streets, manicured parks and a picturesque horizon shaped by several volcanoes.

This lovely locale has managed to retain the ambiance of the 17th century capital that it once was, while incorporating modern amenities to appeal to visitors from all corners of the globe. Here you'll find eclectic shops and art galleries, fascinating museums and traditional markets packed with locally made textiles, jewelry and woodcrafts.

Antigua's heartbeat is its main square, which serves as the local gathering spot. If you're lucky, you'll get to see a festival, wedding or parade in this lively arena. And don't be surprised if you're invited to join in on the fun.

Guatemalans are friendly people, who will make every effort to make you feel welcome in their country. From Antigua, it's easy to make several day excursions to tour a coffee plantation, macadamia nut farm or women's textile cooperative. Viaventure arranged for me to connect with As Green as it Gets (GAIG), a charity working to support small independent coffee producers, while promoting environmentally responsible agriculture in Guatemala.

The organization takes guests to visit some of the families it supports and encourages them to learn about the bean-to-cup coffee process by working side-by-side with small coffee farmers. The experience is an eye-opener and it is guaranteed to give you a newfound appreciation for your daily cup of java and the efforts of the dedicated growers to produce quality coffee.

I also made a visit to the nearby village of Santiago Zamora, a collective where women work together to produce and sell traditional weavings and other products and then distribute the benefits equally in order to improve their families' living conditions.

As I watched the women demonstrate the weaving process, I was hypnotized by the speed and intricacy of their finger movements.

At lunchtime, they typically share a traditional Guatemalan lunch with visitors. The meal consists of "pepian," a type of sauce made from tomatoes, chilies, cilantro and tomatillos, which contains meat and/or veggies. You pour it over rice and then scoop it

up in homemade tamales.

As you drive around the countryside, you'll note that volcanoes dominate Guatemala's landscape. The country has 36 of them to be exact, with three that are currently active.

Hiking up one of them is a must-do adventure during your stay. Mt. Pacaya, at 8,371 feet, has been in a state of continuous eruptions for many years. Its close proximity to Antigua makes it very accessible to hikers. You'll trek through a pine forest as you gradually make your way to the mountain's section of volcanic ash and finally to the sulfur smoking cone.

Most likely, you'll see some small eruptions and have the chance to get a close-up view of a fiery orange river of lava as it flows down the mountainside.

The place has a Mt. Doom atmosphere with craggy, sharp rocks, sauna-like conditions and steam as thick as pea soup. It's an other-worldly experience and definitely one for the memory books.

For a change in scenery, head to mystical Lake Atitlan in the Central Highlands of Guatemala. This renowned body of water is regarded as one of the most beautiful lakes in the world because of its crystal blue color and the dramatic volcanoes and escarpments that surround it.

Communities of proud Maya people live along its shores, clinging to the essence of their cultural identities while adapting to modern conveniences.

Visitors tour the lake by boat, stopping at the local villages, such as San Juan La Laguna and Santiago Atitlan. In San Juan La Laguna, you'll be able to watch the back strap loom in use at a woman's weaving association and learn how natural dyes are created.

Another cooperative in the village consists of painters, who create vibrant pictures from bird's eye and ant's eye perspectives. The artisans encourage visitors to watch them in action and keep the doors to their workshops and studios open.

A short boat ride away is Santiago Atitlan, a traditional village known for its historical church and its primitive art and beautiful textiles, particularly women's tunics or "huipiles." This town has a distinct religious character that is flavored by the veneration of the Maya quasi-deity, Maximon, a figure that combines the identities of the pre-Columbian god Maam and the Christian Saint Simon. Maximon is cared for by a different "brotherhood" each year and his effigy (a wooden figure in a black suit with a wide brimmed hat and a lit cigar or cigarette in its mouth) is rotated among these men's homes. A visit to see Maximon is a unique experience that provides an intimate look at age-old beliefs and practices.

There are a number of picturesque accommodations around Lake Atitlan, but none can boast the eco-friendly environment of Laguna Lodge. Perched on the shores overlooking the lake, the lodge is a testament to sustainable environmental and socially responsible practices which protect and contribute to the cultural and bio diversity of its surroundings. This luxurious property, which is set within a private 100-acre nature reserve, was constructed from all natural materials including volcanic stone, wood, palm and adobe. The owners strive to minimize their impact on the environment through the use of a variety of water conservation methods, solar lights and a reduction in chemicals and plastics. An on-site garden produces an array of organic veggies that inspire the creative eco-cuisine served in the lodge's vegetarian restaurant, Zotz.

About an hour away from the lake is Chichicastenango, a highland town known for its famous market. It is the largest indigenous clothes and handicrafts market in the country. But, you'll also find everything from fresh produce and everyday household items to medicinal plants, machetes and even chickens and pigs. Maya people from all over the area, along with a fair share of tourists, head to 'Chichi' on Sundays and Thursdays, which are the market days, to roam the maze of passageways and peruse the endless variety of wares. It's an amazing sensory experience, full of colorful chaos, intriguing aromas and the din of vendors' voices enticing you to buy their goods. Bargaining is essential and expected.

A trip to Guatemala would not be complete without a visit to El Peten, the largest tropical forest in Central America and the heartland of the Maya people. It's the site of thousands of ruins from the ancient Maya civilization, among them, wondrous Tikal. Known as the "New York of the Maya World," Tikal is a sprawling complex of more than 3,000 structures, many of which still remain shrouded by the dense forest overgrowth. Its spectacular temples tower high above the jungle canopy, appearing as grand sentinels of a mysterious world. These immense creations conjure up images of a once thriving and flourishing society. You can almost hear the voices from the past as you walk through the emerald forest among these incredible engineering and architectural masterpieces. Competing for your attention will be noisy howler monkeys, a host of brightly hued, tropical birds and entertaining spider monkeys, who will make you dizzy with their outrageous gymnastics.

If you're not rendered speechless at this point in your experience, climb to the top of one of the temples at sunset and prepare to become mute with awe as you gaze out at this magical fusion of historic heritage and overwhelming nature.

If you go:

Viaventure tours: www.viaventure.com

Laguna Lodge: www.lagunalodgetitlan.com

Guatemala visitor information: www.visitguatemala.com