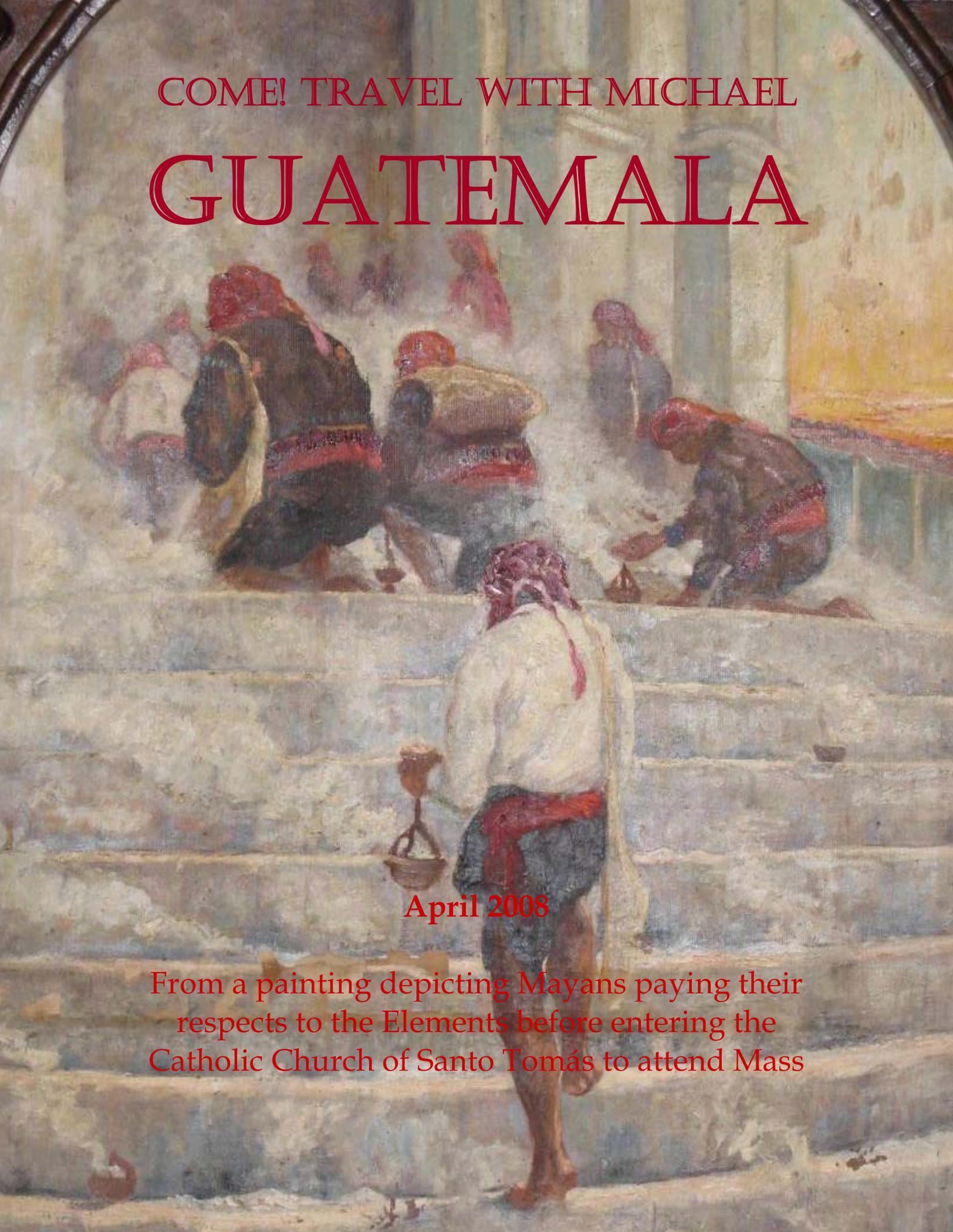


COME! TRAVEL WITH MICHAEL
GUATEMALA



April 2008

From a painting depicting Mayans paying their respects to the Elements before entering the Catholic Church of Santo Tomás to attend Mass

Alone

I fly alone often, but

I haven't toured alone in years.

When plans for friends to join me on this trip to the Americas changed, I think to an extent I relished the thought of travelling alone.

My first three nights in the Guatemalan Highlands are spent at Casa Palopó, a pumpkin, blue and white coloured small villa on a hillside overlooking three magnificent volcanoes across misty waters of Lake Atitlán - alone.

I enjoy the sightseeing in the mornings but choose to return to the hotel for a late lunch and to while away the rest of the day reading, writing or relaxing. There is no television, nor any English-language newspapers. I revel in being cut off temporarily from the outside world.

Rising very early on the morning of the third day, and waiting for breakfast alone on the terrace, I'm truly relaxed and enjoying an almost meditative silence.

The volcanoes are back-lit by the rising sun today. A lone fisherman in a wooden dug-out boat floats silently past over the mirror surface. Clouds slowly drift away from the top of the volcano San Pedro. Where's the camera?



Michael – alone after breakfast - with the San Pedro, Atitlán and Tolimán volcanoes on the other side of Lake Atitlán

Birds sing, trill and tweet, flying and flitting between the branches of the trees. Tiny ones so small and no larger than a key ring flit at the greatest speed. Blackbirds make a hooting sound while distant roosters crow. Cicadas add their incessant chatter. A small bird, the chiquirin makes sounds like its name. It's said to be calling for the winter to come and bring the rains to grow the corn. I wish it would shut up and let the sun shine.

The bark of a stray dog pierces the peace.

A pot of tea arrives. I let it steep.

Ramiro now brings a basket of hot toast wrapped in a serviette – not the brown I asked for but not to worry. The flavoursome mulberry-coloured jam of locally picked small purple berries soon disguises his mistake.

Now for breakfast with perfect four-minute boiled eggs - with whites as full and tasty as the golden yolks – mmmm! Where's the salt?



Ramiro and Carlos-Rodrigo

Finally, with patience, and my prayers to the Mayan Gods, the clouds finally clear from the top of the largest of the volcanoes, Atitlán. And a couple of cups of tea later – the top of Tolimán is also clear. I feel really good.

Cups and saucers rattle as Ramiro and Carlos-Rodrigo start setting up for the later-rising breakfast guests. It's now eight thirty – my time for reflection is over – Michael is no longer alone - Luis will be along shortly.

Let's step back a little . . .

Why am I in Guatemala? One of my first tasks after arriving in New York in 1975 was to re-vamp the tour products on sale through travel agents in the US market. A smart Madison Avenue advertising agency more attuned to women's hair products and kitchen cleaners was hired to work with me on the new tour brochures. Little surprise that sales on the once steady selling "Marimba" tour to Guatemala dropped dramatically after it was re-named "Gotta Go to Guatemala". Not even 70's New York was that 'hip'. It's taken me more than thirty years to see what going to Guatemala is all about. In fact, this is my first-ever sortie into Central America.

I fly from Miami over the Gulf of Mexico on TACA Airlines into an airstrip flanked by old igloo hangars in the middle of Guatemala City. Luis, my part Chinese, part Mayan-Indian, Catholic driver (what does this tell me?) is there at the exit of the brand new terminal to greet and drive me up to Lake Atitlán in the Guatemalan Highlands. With night falling, we leave honking traffic in the dirty and dangerous city behind and drive tortuously in his little Toyota Corolla through thunderstorms and blinding rain up and down mountains along the Pan American Highway built in the Fifties. Thank God for the chicken bus crawling around the bends in front of us lighting the curves. Better it swerves to avoid big rocks lying on the road

after careless earth-moving works, than we. No bandidos dressed as police stop us along the lonely stretches of the 145 kms, four-hour marathon ride, although at times I wonder. I arrive at Casa Palopó with a bone aching in my left buttock.

In the Guatemalan Highlands on Lake Atitlán

Morning light reveals a marvelous view of a lake with mist rising. How peaceful it is to look out from the bed across to the volcanoes. Driving back to Panajachel, we pass pastel-coloured homes with dress-circle views over the lake and the three volcanoes - protected by high fences draped in purple, red and orange bougainvillea. A small boat waits to sail us across to the village of Santiago de Atitlán on the southern side. Climbing up onto a rickety wooden jetty, we head off over the sand into a swarm of tuk-tuk drivers vying for our business. I want one of those 'being there' experiences so we choose to climb the steep rocky road. We pop in to the cultural museum on the way up to watch a video (yes I did) before reaching a fairly colourless town on top of the hill.

Here we visit the church of St James the Apostle which from the outside with semi-circular stairs, columns and a covered balcony is not like any other colonial structure I am familiar with. On the inside, the altar combines both Mayan and Christian images including snakes and the Corn God sacred to the Maya, and statues colourfully dressed in the local garb including



Family of 13 enjoying a mango treat on the street in Santiago de Atitlán

head dress, cloak, and scarf and leather cowboy boots. In this town, butterflies and birds provide inspiration for the colourful embroidery for the men's shorts and appliqué for their shirts but in the main, life looks pretty dismal. The town is poor. The brightest spot in the day is a happy family of thirteen sitting on the side of the street all sucking on delicious-looking mangoes.

In this area of Guatemala, Mayan culture still rules. There are fourteen villages around the lake and all have their own Mayan dress and speak different languages. In San Antonio Palopó for example, the men wear cowboy hats and mini skirts while the women wear long skirts and blouses made of the same material as the men's shirts. The variety is endless. In Sololá, a man wears skirt over colourful trousers, and a bullfighter jacket with symbols of the Mayan Kaqchiquel dynasty and cowboy hat. His wife embroiders his white underwear with horses and lions which are meant to be seen when they sit! I didn't get that close.



Mother and blind daughter at the waterfall wearing the local dress

Looking out from higher vantage points around the lake, I see colourful little villages like those that hug the shores of Lake Como in the north of Italy. However, in the towns themselves, the litter and lack of maintenance has me turned me right off and I prefer to escape back behind the gates of Casa Palopó and the comforts of my lake-view room - alone. Awaiting the next thunder clap while listening to the rain on the roof and the wind in the trees is a rather cosy way of spending time alone under a warm eiderdown and nicely pressed cotton sheets leaning against a stack of pillows with a good book or on the free wireless internet. It has been somewhat wet and chilly since my arrival. The Carpenters "Rainy Days and Mondays always gets me down" has been gnawing at the recesses of my mind for days.

Self preservation and absolutely no desire to meet neither Montezuma nor his terrible 'revenge', has me eating all meals on the open hotel terrace under a bamboo roof. Of course, after three meals a day, the staff starts to dance attendance on this strange visitor who never wants to seek the bright lights and dining dens of downtown Panajachel or Sololá like the other guests. I'm not complaining.

When I order the same meal two nights in a row, it either has to be very good, or something so easy I can prepare it for friends when I get home. Next time you come for dinner, be ready for

an extravaganza of - black bean soup! Can you believe something as simple as that? It's the condiments that really make the total culinary experience – chopped avocado, white onion and coriander; toasted croutons, grated parmesan, a soft cheese (and rice if you're hungry!)

The market town of Chichicastenango

I finally get to a Market Day in the little village of Chichicastenango – once purportedly the most colourful market in the world. Gee am I disappointed! It's just a big bustling handicrafts market under alleys and alleys of canvas and orange plastic sheeting that reach right up to the stairs of the church. The vegetable market is indoors on a basketball court. I find myself constantly clutching my shoulder bag and camera, imagining little fingers at my hip where my wallet usually resides, and being pushed and shoved in the milling mass of people half my size with either children or the week's shopping tied to their backs.



Flower market on the steps of the 400 year-old white-stuccoed Church of Santo Tomás in Chichicastenango

Luis has been educating me on the cross-over between worship of the Mayan Gods and worship of Jesus Christ by the local population. The priests who came with the Spanish *conquistadores* in the 16th Century were quite enlightened when it came to conversion practices. They acknowledged the Mayan's beautiful and colourful ceremonies and respected their worship of the Elements - Wind, Rain Sun and Moon. They recognized how important it was for the Mayans to keep customs and traditions across the generations but they taught them 'to worship the one God who created all this', eventually convincing them to follow Jesus Christ and the practices of the Catholic Church.

Through a smoke haze of incense and candles above the flower-sellers at the top of the stone steps of the 400 year-old white-stuccoed Church of Santo Tomás, I see people bowing to East and West before entering the church. The church is built atop a Pre-Columbian platform, and the steps originally leading to a temple of the pre-Hispanic Maya civilisation remain venerated. The wide central aisle in the Catholic church has twelve low square platforms between the entrance and the main altar. Each one of these is a Mayan altar representing the evolution of life commencing with birth and continuing through twelve stages of life to include baptism to marriage to old age and finally death nearest the main altar table of the church.



Candles in the markets for use in Mayan rituals

After paying their respects to the Elements outside the Main Entrance to the Church, some kneel beside these Mayan altars in turn. They light candles; lay petals or pine needles in a small carpet between the lit candles; and some pour home-made rum of brown sugar, dried plum and crushed ginger root around the outside, or sprinkle water depending on what their petition to the Gods might be. This practice looks like a two-way bet to me but who am I to question? It was a welcome distraction from the visiting choir of discordant old people with guitars from another parish who took the place of the local singers with marimba players whom I'd been looking forward to.

The Spanish Colonial City of Antigua



The clouds finally peel away from the Volcán de Agua on the morning I am leaving Antigua

We leave the highlands and drive to the old colonial city of La Antigua Guatemala. Entering the outskirts, I see trees that remind me of the Australian Silky Oak. Luis quickly informs me that they are *Grevillea robusta*, and yes, that means they are Silky Oaks. On the Pacific coast, coffee grows in the sun on the hillsides, but here the coffee is of a yellow variety that requires protection from the sun. The crop is further protected from thieves with stinging nettle hedges of chichicasti forming an impenetrable fence around the plantations.

Antigua is nestled in a valley surrounded by three imposing volcanoes, the most commanding, to the south of the city, is the Volcán de Agua or "Volcano of Water", some 3,766 metres (12,356 ft) high. Colourful rows of single-storey houses with terracotta tiled roofs in yellow, red and blue sit on wide cobblestone streets behind high walls. Over-arching bougainvillea add further dimensions of colour. The modest fronts belie the beauty of the flowering courtyards and splashing fountains inside.

The Hotel Museum Casa Santo Domingo where I am staying was the bastion of one of the largest convents in the Americas – the monks had enough room to farm fish and needed a canoe to go catch them. Treasures from the baroque period have resurfaced from within the bowels of the monastery filling many lost pages in time. Atmospheric baroque music adds a haunting touch as it is played throughout the gardens all day. This music of the monks is even piped into the garages to welcome me on arrival – and the monk theme carried through to the women on the Reception Desk all decked out in a cream Dominican monk's habit with a

decorative shawl – most attractive. I'm happy to explore this living museum on my own on the first afternoon before taking a relaxing massage.



Hotel Museum Casa Santo Domingo where I stayed in Antigua

Flowering vines and well-tended flower beds add wonderful colour to the courtyards and stone buildings. Long strands of flowers hang down from vines along all the covered pathways. The red flowering Quisqualis (Rangoon creeper) that I grew on my side fence in Galloway's Hill as a teenager trails here in greater glory. Huge red parrots are tethered on perches outside their own little houses under the trees. The colour and variety of the landscaping is boundless. I don't like my room though. It is huge, dark, and poorly lit. Cells for at least ten monks could easily fit in this space.

Earthquakes have flattened this UNESCO protected old Colonial Town on more than one occasion. During the morning walking tour, I try to take in the magnitude of the 1773 earthquake that destroyed the cathedral, and so many of churches and cloisters. Much of the devastation still lies where it fell.

The Convent and Church of San Francisco El Grande dates from mid-1500 but what I see in this relatively unadorned church here today is from the 18th century. We visit the tomb of a recently canonized Franciscan brother Saint Hermano Pedro de San Jose, after taking in an unusual depiction of souls suffering in Purgatory, all male and all looking like monks. I buy rosary beads made from sweet-smelling wood of the local esquisuchil tree as a gift and first souvenir of the trip. The jasmine-like scent would bowl you over.

On walking inside the walls of the destroyed Santa Clara Cloister around the next corner, it isn't the decorative Serlian columns on the facade of the church, or the large fountain in the central courtyard that occupies my mind. How did those poor women survive closeted behind high walls cut off from the outside world with their Confessor as the only visitor? Thinking of that, what would they have to confess? Perhaps averting one's eyes in the Refectory knowing full well that fellow Sister Anunciata Rosa was waiting for the salt and pepper shaker to be passed up the table could be sinful. Is a lifetime of prayer with an occasional walk into the back yard to tend the vegetable patch that sustaining? Would Mother Abbess know how to deal with problems of depression? To me, the whole business conjures up horror not holiness. It doesn't bear thinking about. (My old friend Edmundo in Miami makes his very Catholic rejoinder. "The contemplative life was very rich. Those women lived in heaven.")

All this worry about the poor sisters; in addition to wishing the clouds would roll back to reveal the cones of the three volcanoes for me to photograph is not what sightseeing is about.



One of the churches still in ruins after the devastating earthquake of 1773

Another large structure destroyed in the 1773 earthquake was the main Cathedral where a huge column and capital still lay fallen and broken on the floor. These columns and the building they supported were built on the bare earth with no foundations! I'm glad I didn't know this last night when the earth shook, and the room in my hotel trembled rattling the glass on the table top and setting the poker hanging on a hook next to the fireplace swinging to and fro.

Dozens of buses of tourists from a large cruise ship docked 100 miles away on the Pacific coast hits town around lunch time. Time to get outta town. We drive out to San Antonio Agua Caliente and stop to visit a co-operative of artists, mainly mothers who work at home and who sell their quality handiwork through this outlet. I see some wonderfully colourful work – but for what use? We are stopped along the way by a funeral procession in a nearby town with the mourners taking over the street following the coffin into the local church – very touching.



A funeral procession halts traffic on the main street of the little town

In Guatemala, most people still use wood for cooking as the cost of bottled gas is beyond reach. Nothing has changed from colonial times. Ten years ago, 70% of the country was



Acrid black fumes from clapped-out old buses everywhere you go. They will eventually ruin not only the old cities but also the Environment.

forested, now it is less than half that. The trees you see mostly are Australian eucalypts as they grow quickly. What were once beautiful waterways are now polluted and foul-smelling with methane gases generated by the decomposition of the trash thrown in. There's an explosion of cars and bikes on the roads. Clapped-out old buses belching acrid black fumes and cars are being driven from the USA south through Mexico to Guatemala. What chance is there for a clean(er) environment here?

Thirty years ago, Guatemala City was clean and cool but undirected development without planning has brought chaos. A concerned Felipe, a waiter at the hotel in Guatemala City who has returned home after years in the US says "People here are living only for today. They don't realise we are all in this together - we are on the same spaceship."

The Mayan ruins at Tikal

I fly from Guatemala City to Flores on the Yucatan Peninsula to visit the Tikal National Park reputed to have the largest Mayan ruins in Central America. It has UNESCO heritage protection for both natural and cultural reasons.



Ryon, Ed and Aquilino, my little group of fellow ‘explorers’ at the Great Pyramid. It is right here that the Mayans first measured the 365 days in the year which we now observe as our calendar

I join others today and we split into small groups for the tour. The small English-speaking group on my mini-bus comprises young men only with our certainly not bashful, blue-eyed Mayan leader Aquilino leading the group. (His mother explained to him that his father was not of the Mayan race and hence his looks.) There’s Ryon, yes Ryon the blonde tomato seed specialist of Turkish/Czech parentage from California, who had a day to kill before his flight back to the US and decided this tour would be the go. And then there’s Ed, the black professional basketball coach, also from California, who is staying alone for a week on the nearby Isle of Flores writing his memoirs. I’m just a retiree from Australia. An interesting touring party, yes?

Leaving the lake, Aquilino decides to take this intrepid bunch off the touring path and into the forest setting the scene saying “Keep your eyes open for a Jaguar but more importantly, if you see a root moving, please don’t step on it”. Jaguars and snakes are intricately woven into the Mayan traditions.

I can smell the jungle. Unseen birds are calling. A large ball of a seed pod thuds on the ground barely missing my ear. The four-fingered spider monkeys chatter from high in the trees as I climb up over roots and rocks of the forest floor to reach my first Mayan platform, this one barely distinguishable with undergrowth sprouting from between the small limestone blocks and surrounded by tall hardwoods, tropical flowering trees and giant ferns. We stop and look at a soft wood tree from which the Maya used to extract a gum that they used in their mortar and stucco. The Mayan temples were made of limestone then stuccoed and painted in bright colours of red, blue and yellow. The intricate decorative carving in the soft limestone is long lost to the elements.

As with ancient Egyptian Pharaohs, Mayan rulers filled vast cities with sky high pyramids, ornate and lavish palaces personifying the power of the great kings and their connections to the gods, and astronomical observatories which helped them created their calendars and plan their lives. We are about to see what remains

Only fifteen percent of the National Park has been retrieved from the jungle since this ancient Mayan area was re-discovered in the nineteenth century. Archaeologists from the University of



Pennsylvania commenced a long restoration process on the piles of stone in the early Twentieth Century.

Out of a jungle clearing in the distance, soaring 50 metres into the sky is the imposing restored Temple of the Grand Priest. The wood carved portal where the main image was wearing a Jaguar-skin suit was ‘stolen’ by the Swiss. The trip is already worth the effort! Basketballer Ed bounds for the first platform with his red and white Santa hat to be photographed for his 19th Annual Christmas letter shot that he tells me now goes out to 900 fans worldwide. And we all do our ‘Annie Liebowitz’ for the cameras. Ryon thinks its Christmas already.

We then come to the Central Acropolis, a grassed area surrounded by old residences and palaces and climb up steps over the ruins for views of the surrounding area. Through the trees the

‘Indiana’ Michael and the Temple of the Grand Jaguar

crown of the 70 metre high Temple of the Double-headed Serpent pokes skywards. Skirting a

narrow stone ledge we then reach a vantage point to view the main highlight of the day – the Grand Central Plaza with the 45-metre high Jaguar Temple (Temple I) oriented to the west where the sunset occurs, and the 38 metre high Temple of the Masks (Temple II) oriented to the east where the sun rises. I wish I could transform the scene into colour, costume and music.

The Plaza of the Grand Pyramid or The Lost World is a little further along the path. The Grand Pyramid is 35 metres high among a complex designed for astronomic observation and sun and moon cycles as well as the solstices and equinoxes. It was the Upper Class of the Mayas who carried out these scientific calculations and it was they who measured the 365 days in the year which we now observe as our calendar. The Mayas followed the Sun in ways similar to the Druids of Stonehenge in England.

I hear and see the oropendola bird with a tail of brilliant yellow feathers that splay when it flies from branch to branch, but fail to see the one yellow and black Toucan sitting high above us in the trees. There's no avoiding the presence at least of the Howler monkeys somewhere deep in the forest. The loud barking whoop of the males fills the forest like a powerful roar whereas the responding females' vocalizations sound like a pig's grunt. T-Rex in stereophonic sound.

I'm walked off my feet by this and don't fancy hanging around till nightfall. The rest are stopping for lunch in the park but I arrange to get back to Flores and catch an earlier flight to Guatemala City – back to the Vista Real Hotel with its Arabian arches and other flourishes like bath towels rolled and tied with ribbons. I can't be bothered dressing for dinner and sitting with the bejewelled and extravagantly dressed people I see downstairs on my return. A hamburger and an early night will do me just fine.

Tomorrow, I wing south to Lima in Peru to continue my journey of discovery – alone.



Flying out of Flores in the Yucatan Peninsula of Guatemala

Photos in Slideshows



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