



San Pedro volcano overlooks the shore of Lake Atitlan, Guatemala. | ARLENE AND ROBIN KARPAN PHOTOS

TALES FROM THE ROAD



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GUATEMALA | RELIGION, COMMERCE

Guatemalan Highlands alive with culture, colour



Women selling flowers and baskets of petals spill over the steps near the entrance to Santo Tomas Church in Chichicastenango, Guatemala.



ABOVE: Women buy flowers at the market.

LEFT: Devotees swing containers of incense at the entrance to the church.

We're overwhelmed with a riot of sights, smells and sounds. The market at Chichicastenango is considered the most colourful in the Americas, attracting buyers and sellers from around Guatemala, trading in everything from food and livestock to finely woven textiles and cheap tourist knick-knacks.

On Sunday, commercialism in this mountain town melds with religion. The action centres on the steps of Santo Tomas Church, now chock-a-block with women selling flowers.

A man tends a fire to make coals for sweet smelling incense that devotees carry in tin cans and wave back and forth at the church entrance.

Outside, the thick acrid smoke drifts like a permanent cloud, and inside, we can barely see as incense mixes with the smoke from hundreds of candles.

Though the church is Roman Catholic, many rituals have more to do with Mayan mysticism. The church had to make significant concessions to ancient local beliefs to thrive here.

Guatemala's highlands are the centre of traditional Mayan culture, where it's like taking a step back in time. Many people (especially women) continue to dress in elaborate, colourful outfits that seem straight out of a museum. The designs are so distinctive that you can often tell which town a woman is from by the patterns in her dress.

What makes the highlands appealing for travellers is that this exotic culture lies in spectacular scenery.

Most famous is Lake Atitlan, a deep caldera formed by previous volcanic eruptions, now ringed by high hills and three perfectly formed volcanic cones. It is one breathtaking view after another as we wind down the switchbacks to the lakeside town of Panajachel.

The rainy season is ending during our late October visit, and forested

hills are vibrant green, with waterfalls streaming down slopes.

We spend a couple nights in the tiny community of Jaibalito, with no road access, no motor vehicles and only two narrow pedestrian streets. A thin slice of level land lies immediately next to the shore and then the slopes rise sharply, with houses clinging to cliff faces and tiny plots of corn covering steep hills that would make a mountain goat dizzy.

Nearby San Juan is known for its small scale organic farming. Coffee is big business in Guatemala, but here coffee trees are grown in the shade so as not to destroy the forest.

Another business makes traditional medicines from native plants. Most intriguing is the women's weaving co-operative, where not only is the cotton grown organically but all the dyes are vegetable-based, producing deep red from beets or a soft orange shade from carrots.

In Santiago, we visit Guatemala's most famous, unofficial saint. Maximon melds the trappings of a Mayan deity with a Christian saint, although the church thoroughly disapproves.

We're led along a narrow alley to someone's house. The cramped dark room is filled with flickering candles, wafting smoke and incense and decorations galore.

In the centre sits the statue of Maximon, looking more like a bandit than a saint, wearing two cowboy hats and adorned with garlands and scarves with a cigar stuck in his mouth.

Two proud attendees watch over him, passing devotees' offerings to the saint. People bring gifts of candles or often a dose of cheap but powerful booze.

Believers pray to him asking for favours, and he is said to grant less than saintly wishes, such as helping you take revenge on someone. The setting is surreal, with everything taken quite seriously.

Maximon changes houses once a year. When we ask an attendant how they decide where he goes, he answers without hesitation: "Maximon tells us, of course."

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