

Ring's Reflections

by Bob Ring

Antigua Guatemala – Historic Haven of Tranquility

Even though I don't know one end of a knitting needle from the other, I am a veteran of knitting retreats to exotic places; last month Pat and I spent 12 days in Guatemala.

Once again the "relaxation" retreat was led by Green Valley's Bill and Irene York who convinced 29 of us, including three men, to join them.

Guatemala is the northernmost country in Central America, just south of Mexico. We visited the highlands in the south-central part of the country.

The highlands lie in a major fault zone, straddling the boundary of two giant tectonic plates, and have suffered numerous devastating earthquakes; the most recent in 1976 killed 23,000 people. This region also contains eight major volcanoes, some still active today.

In 1524, sixteen years before Coronado first set foot in Arizona, Spanish Conquistador Pedro de Alvarado conquered Guatemala and the remnants of the fabulous Maya civilization that had thrived in Mesoamerica since 2000 BC.

The Spanish colonial empire lasted almost three centuries until 1821, when Mexico and Central America declared their independence from Spain. Since then Guatemala suffered a series of dictatorships, insurgencies, coups, and stretches of military rule with only occasional periods of representative government.

Civil rights violations and even government death squads were rampant in the 1970s/1980s, with the government finally stabilizing as a constitutional democratic republic in 1996.

Guatemala today remains a very poor country, but the exceptional wealth of architectural and archeological remains plus stunning natural beauty make the country very compelling to visit.

We flew into Guatemala City and then spent half our time in Antigua, the old historic capital, and the other half on the shore of beautiful Lake Atitlán.

The Spanish made earthquake-prone Antigua the capital of Guatemala in 1543 but a series of quakes in 1773 destroyed the city and forced the move of the capital 20 miles to the northeast to Guatemala City in 1776.

Antigua is situated in a sweeping valley, surrounded by two volcanoes over 12,300 feet high and a third volcano with two peaks that exceeds 13,000 feet. The view from the

foothills shows a neatly laid out traditional grid system of narrow streets, cobble-stoned in the 1600s. Baroque architecture and ruins of spectacular colonial churches are evident across the town of about 35,000 people. We learned that many of the earthquake-damaged structures have never been fully restored, often only partially restored or strengthened.

Compared to the unrelenting energy of Guatemala City (population 2.7 million), Antigua is a haven of tranquility.

Our centrally-located hotel was an integration of three old colonial homes, beautifully restored, with several large garden courtyards filled with colorful plants and flowers. During the day several artists were at work painting along the edge of the central courtyard; by early afternoon eight marimba (a type of xylophone) players were making music.

A rooftop patio provided a terrific platform for viewing the nearby impressive volcanoes and some of the colonial church ruins. Many in the group also used the upper patio for their knitting or Kumihimo (Japanese braiding) projects.

The food in Guatemala shows both Mayan and Spanish heritage, with lots of corn, beans and rice served alongside beef, pork, or chicken. We especially enjoyed the tasty soups and stews. We found several nice restaurants in Antigua and were pleased to find English translations of menu items.

There is also ample shopping in Antigua – with emphasis on textiles, jewelry, and jade. Guatemalan currency is the quetzal, named after the colorful national bird, but most places accept US dollars. After searching far and wide for finished table cloths, we decided to buy fabric in a pattern we liked so Pat could make our own tablecloth and napkins. Pat also bought a beautiful royal blue jacket with multi-colored embroidery and several beaded bracelets for future gifts.

Three outings were set up for us in Antigua. The first was a walking tour of the city that included a visit to the central square (park) and surrounding colonial buildings, one of which was the partially restored magnificent cathedral.

The second outing was to a coffee plantation. Typically, these plantations line the foothills, particularly of the volcanoes. We learned that coffee is not indigenous to Guatemala; it wasn't introduced until around 1880. Guatemala now has 95,000 coffee producers!

The third outing was a van tour of nearby villages that included a stop at a renowned textile center. Pat drooled over the brightly colored textiles and got to meet the Guatemalan weaver who was judged the “best weaver in the world” a few years ago.

On this outing we saw the first of Guatemala's enormous fleet of "chicken buses." These are old school buses from the US that have been restored (souped up?) and painted in flamboyant colors to provide inexpensive public transportation.

The nickname "chicken" allegedly comes from packing the passengers together like chickens. Baggage is thrown up on the roof of the buses (and retrieved later) by the bus's "packer" who greets passengers and pushes them to the rear of the bus. It's a thrilling (and sometimes fearful) sight to have one these fully stuffed, aggressively driven chicken buses pass you on the road, even on blind curves.

Next Time: Our Guatemalan visit continues at Lake Atitlán.



*This stunning view from the rooftop patio of our hotel shows two volcanoes: at left is Fuego, constantly active at a low level; at right, Acatenango, with two peaks. In the foreground are the ruins of the 16th century La Compañía de Jesús, a former church and school.
(Courtesy of Pat Wood)*



*During our visit to the Maya village of San Antonio Aguas Calientes, Pat got to meet a renowned local weaver, Carolina Perez de Guaran.
(Courtesy of Bob Ring)*



Antigua's old cathedral faces the central plaza. (Courtesy of Pat Wood)



This is a typical chicken bus (from a postcard) that provides inexpensive public transportation in Guatemala.



Agua volcano dominates Antigua's skyline. (Courtesy of Bob Ring)



A puff of smoke comes out of Fuego volcano every few seconds. (Courtesy of Bob Ring)