

Ring's Reflections

by Bob Ring

Lake Atitlán Guatemala – Scenic Paradise

Last week I talked about Pat's and my stay in Antigua Guatemala; this time I'll tell you about our visit to beautiful Lake Atitlán.

Our "relaxation retreat" group left Antigua early in the morning by modern, comfortable bus for a mountainous, winding 30-mile trek to the northwest. We passed through small villages with terraced vegetable farms and a larger town that was a center of car and truck sales, hardware supplies, and brick making. We were passed on the road several times by chicken buses – each event producing exclamations of awe and concern from our people.

We stopped to visit the impressive ruins of a major Mayan city named Iximché, built about 1470 as the new capital for one of the more than 20 indigenous Mayan tribes. At first the Iximché Maya joined with the invading Spanish to help defeat their many other Mayan enemies, but eventually rebelled against forced tributes and suffered the destruction of their city.

We marveled at this ancient civilization, known for fully-developed written language, art, architecture, and mathematical and astronomical systems, including their famous Mayan calendar. We were assured by our knowledgeable Mayan-heritage guides that the world will not end on December 21, 2012; that date represents the end of a Mayan calendar cycle and a rebirth of the Mayan culture for a new cycle.

After leaving Iximché, we began a gradual descent from over 8,000 feet towards Lake Atitlán at 5,128 feet elevation.

We passed through a small town with narrow streets that were busy because it was market day. We had to get through town going the wrong way on a one-way street plus our long bus had trouble negotiating some of the sharp turns at busy intersections. A combination of hand directions from sidewalk onlookers, moving some of the parked vehicles, or finding an alternate street got us through – but it wasn't easy.

On the final switch-back descent we had many views of breathtaking Lake Atitlán, reputed by some to be the most beautiful lake in the world. The lake is about 50 square miles in size and about 1050 feet deep (compare to Lake Tahoe at about 190 square miles and 1650 feet deep).

Lake Atitlán fills an enormous volcanic crater formed in an eruption 84,000 years ago. The lake is shaped by steep slopes that surround it and three massive volcanoes on its southern side. The lake shore is home to a number of isolated Mayan villages that are accessible only by boat from the lake.

We arrived at Panajachel, a town of about 12,000 people that has become a tourist center and a base for visiting the lake.

Our home for the next few days was a fabulous hotel right on the shore of Lake Atitlán; our room looked right out on the lake and the three volcanoes. The hotel had beautifully kept grounds with all sorts of trees, flowers, and singing birds, plus a very nice restaurant where Marimba players entertained us frequently.

Panajachel is just big enough to provide a variety of interesting restaurants and plenty of shopping for Guatemalan handicrafts like textiles and jewelry. Aggressive street vendors were definitely an irritation, even approaching us inside street-side restaurants.

From Panajachel we had a bus-trip outing about 15 miles north to Guatemala's largest market in the town of Chichicastenango. The market was centered in the town square, in front of a 450-year-old church, and extended for blocks in all directions. Everything from handicrafts to flowers, food, pigs, and chickens was available.

Pat was challenged bargaining with the vendors, but persisted to end up with a beautiful bright red embroidered jacket and three purses.

Our favorite outing was an all-day boat tour of Lake Atitlán; the view of the three cloud-shrouded volcanoes from the middle of the lake was incredible. We made visits to three Mayan villages, each with its own unique culture and handicrafts.

Santa Cruz la Laguna, dating from the 1540s, is located on a steep mountain-side next to the lake. We rode in the back of small trucks up a winding road to the plaza at 325 feet above the lake's surface. Here we found a traditional Mayan village with an untraditional trade school.

Efforts started 14 years ago to teach the people of Santa Cruz hands-on career skills that could lead to better jobs and improve their lives. Funding is provided by the Amigos de Santa Cruz Foundation (www.amigosdesantacruz.org) and private donations. A vocational center opened in the fall of 2010, featuring sewing and weaving, carpentry, art, a computer lab, and a new culinary school with its own student-run restaurant. Recent culinary school graduates all got jobs that pay more than their parents are able to earn.

The Center for Training was so impressive that Pat plans to nominate the program for financial support from Tucson's Weaving Guild.

While in Panajachel on February 14th, Pat and I celebrated Arizona's 100 birthday and also exchanged Valentines Day cards. Eerily, we discovered that we had each carried identical cards all the way from Tucson!

Our visit to Guatemala ended with a bus ride back to Guatemala City and an airplane the next morning to the US – completing a trip we will forever remember fondly.



High clouds shroud the tops of three volcanoes – as seen from the middle of Lake Atitlán Guatemala. (Courtesy of Bob Ring)



The Center of Training in the small Mayan village of Santa Cruz la Laguna successfully teaches important job skills. (Courtesy of Bob Ring)



Three volcanoes as seen from our Lake Atitlán hotel. (Courtesy of Bob Ring)



The sun sets across the Lake from our hotel. (Courtesy of Bob Ring)



*Clouds and sunlight dramatically affect this view of San Pedro volcano from mid Lake.
(Courtesy of Bob Ring)*



Pat taking it easy at our Lake Atitlán hotel. (Courtesy of Bob Ring)