# QCA



## **CENTRAL AMERICA 2013**

## with Victor Romagnoli

**32 days** 

#### Day 1 Arrival in Panama City

WELCOME TO PANAMA! Arrival at Tocumen International Airport, Panama City.

Undoubtedly the most cosmopolitan capital in Central America, Panama City is both a gateway to the country's natural riches and a vibrant destination in its own right. As a thriving center for international banking and trade, Panama City sports a sultry skyline of shimmering glass and steel towers.

Overnight in Panama City. Meal plan: Dinner, if required.

## Day 2 Panama City Tour

Today we tour Panama City. Our tour includes a visit to the ruins of Old Panama and Casco Viejo (the old city compound), which dates from the late 1600's. We will learn of the events in history leading up to the eventual movement of the capital city to its present location. Casco Viejo is home to monuments to Ferdinand de Lesseps and others who were instrumental in the ill-fated French attempt to construct a canal through Panama. Here we visit the Altar de Oro at the San Jose church. As it's name would suggest, this large barouque altar is made of pure gold. The church was built soon after the first Spanish settlement was established on the Pacific Coast in 1519. In the 17th Century this settlement was abandoned and moved to it's present location on the small peninsula that that contains the San Felipe district of the city. When the church itself was moved so was it's most famous possession. Our tour ends with a visit to the Panama Canal Museum.

Overnight in Panama City. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

#### Day 3 Panama City: Interoceanic Train

Today we board the Interoceanic Train for a scenic journey to Colon (approx one hour).

The Panama Railroad became the first transcontinental railway when it was completed in 1855 -- of course, a "transcontinental" line is a lot easier to make when you've only got 50 miles to cross! The California Gold Rush brought the new railway lots of business; eventually it was sold to first the French, and then the Americans in conjunction with the efforts to build the Panama Canal, and it eventually passed to Panama in 1979 under the terms of the Panama Canal treaty. Now it's a private venture, completely rebuilt, with elegantly refurbished passenger coaches.

The passenger trade is just a sideline. The real business of the railway is freight -- moving containers between the Atlantic and the Pacific in less time and at lower cost than a canal passage. The train follows the canal and runs across narrow artificial causeways in Lake Gatun that are indeed spectacular, and the ambiance of the train is pleasant.

On arrival we proceed to Portobelo for a visit of the historic area and the Canal Free Zone. Portobelo was the port of entry and of exit for all of South America. The exchange of merchandise took place annually at Portobelo in the form of

a fair which lasted from 30 to 60 days. During this time, this sleepy little place was a beehive of activity. Transactions frequently totaled from 10 to 12 million gold pesos. These fairs took place once each year until 1738 when, as a result of continual attacks by pirates, Spain was forced to abandon the Isthmian route for the longer but more secure one around Cape Horn. The frequent pirate attacks forced the Spaniards to adopt a convoy system. Each year two fleets of 40 to 70 ships sailed from Spain, one bound for Veracruz, the other for Portobelo.

We also visit the Maria Chiquita coastal area before returning to Panama City by bus.

Overnight in Panama City. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

#### Day 4 Panama City: Partial Canal Transit

We have an early morning pick-up at the hotel for the 15 minute drive to the port of Balboa where we board the passenger ferry that will take us on the world famous journey through the Panama Canal. For many, this tour is a once in a life time experience. At the MiraFlores Locks we experience how ships are raised 16 m / 54 feet in a two step process. This activity is achieved by sending water from Pedro Miguel's lake by gravity to fill the chambers where the ship is locked. Once the first set of locks is transited, the vessel arrives at the Pedro Miguel locks to be raised up to 26 m / 85 feet. Again no water pumps are use; they take advantage on gravity to transfer water from Gatun Lake, filling the last Chamber of the Pacific site. We cross the Continental divide and narrowest part of the Panama Canal arriving at the town of Gamboa, home to the dredging division, an important part in the functioning of the canal.

The tour includes breakfast and lunch and a specialist guide. Light clothes, insect repellent, hat, sunscreen and very comfortable shoes, are suggested. Do not forget your camera.

Overnight in Panama City. Meal plan: Breakfast, lunch and dinner.

#### Day 5 Panama City, Panama - San Jose, Costa Rica

Today we fly from Panama City to San Jose, Costa Rica.

San Jose, the capital, is on a plateau in the Central Valley at 1200 m (3,700 ft) elevation and is pleasantly ringed by lush green mountains and valleys.

Overnight in San Jose. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

## Day 6 San Jose - Tortuguero

This morning we travel by bus from San Jose through Braulio Carillo National Park, one of Costa Rica's largest. Later we visit a working banana plantation and pass through a region known for its cocoa production. We then board our riverboat and spend the afternoon journeying through myriad interconnecting rivers and canals that take us finally to the Caribbean coast and Tortuguero Park.

The park is a water thoroughfare which is a 160 km (100 mile) stretch of natural rivers, lagoons and estuaries, and connecting man-made waterways that run almost to the Nicaraguan border. The canal is the main "highway" of the northern coastal region, complete with directional signs and branches from the main trunk route.

As we go along the canal, keep a keen lookout for views of pastel-coloured toucans and monkeys of various type; if we're lucky, a lazy sloth hanging from a branch, and maybe a coati or two roaming the forest. Stands of mangroves and

water hyacinth appear here and there. Scattered along the way are people, too -- fishers and farmers whose dugouts serve all the purposes of pickup trucks elsewhere. Mostly the banks remain wild, and the calls of monkeys and whistles of birds predominate over the noises of humans.

Overnight in Tortuguero. Meal plan: Breakfast, lunch and dinner.

## Day 7 Tortuguero: Forest Walk & Village

Tortuguero Park is a fascinating place to explore. An early morning boat ride offers an opportunity to observe an awakening coastal rain forest full of lush vegetation and unique bird life.

After lunch we visit the village of Tortuguero accessible only by river boat; you may choose to walk on the Caribbean beach where several turtle species lay their eggs each year. We will visit the Tortuguero Museum with its excellent displays pertaining to the ecology of the area and an informative video presentation specific to turtle conservation in Tortuguero and the entire Caribbean region.

NOTE: The exact order of our activities in Tortuguero may vary depending on weather and other variables.

Overnight in Tortuguero. Meal plan: Breakfast, lunch and dinner.

#### Day 8 Tortuguero - San Jose

Today we travel by road back to the capital, arriving in time for a look at San Jose.

Undoubtedly the highlight of this compact, walkable city is the Teatro Nacional, located on the central square in the heart of the city. The building is considered the finest historic building in the capital, and it is known for its exquisite interior which includes its lavish furnishings. Constructed in the late 19th century, when San Jose's population was only around 19,000 people. The inside features the mural 'Allegory of Coffee and Bananas' by Milanese artist Aleardo Villa, which is nowadays featured on the five colon bill. You can review the performace schedule online, and possibly take in a performance this evening - www.teatronacional.go.cr.

Overnight in San Jose. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

#### Day 9 San Jose - Quepos

Today we travel by scenic road down to the Pacific Coast and Quepos, gateway for the Manuel Antonio National Park, an unspoiled haven of natural beauty on the shores of the Pacific. Quepos is a charming, lively place with some attractive shopping, bars, and restaurants.

Overnight in Quepos. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

## Day 10 Manuel Antonio National Park

This morning we enjoy a leisurely walk through part of Manuel Antonio Park. While strolling the forest trails and the white sand beaches, we'll likely encounter monkeys, iguanas, sea creatures and bird life of amazing variety. After our morning walk, you may like to continue to explore the park and return to the hotel by taxi on your own.

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Manuel Antonio National Park is an area of sand curving around a bay strewn with islands of rock, and shaded by green bordering forests. All are backdropped by dramatic cliffs. Manuel Antonio beach is one of the few places in Costa Rica where unspoiled primary forest grows right to the high-tide mark, allowing visitors to bathe at times in the shade.

South Espadilla is the northernmost of the park's beaches, followed by calmer Manuel Antonio beach, offshore of which are some coral spots. Third Beach has tidal pools where brightly coloured fish and eels are temporarily stranded. Last is Puerto Escondido, access to which is made difficult by the bordering rocky promontory.

Overnight in Quepos. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

#### Day 11 Quepos - Monteverde

Today we turn north again and inland up to the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve area.

Covered in a mantle of moss, ferns and orchids, this private reserve is home to over 400 species of birds and a great number of animals. The forest is created by the winds, particular temperature and moisture conditions, and mountainous topography which combine during the dry season to hold a steady cloud cover along the continental divide. The rains and the moisture in the air nourish trees and plants rooted in the ground, as well as many plants that live at the upper levels of the forest, and take their nutrients directly from the mist and dust that pass through the air. The result is an enchanted fairy-tale environment where trees are laden with orchids, bromeliads, mosses and ferns that obscure their branches, where the moisture and mild temperatures and sunlight filtered by the forest canopy encourage the exuberance of begonias, heliconias, philodendron and many other tropical plants in every available space on the ground.

This afternoon we have a guided tour of the "Butterfly Garden" where butterflies and other endemic insects are raised and protected in a controlled environment allowing scientists to study them -- their place in the food chain and their response to things like increased pollution and climate change.

Overnight at Monteverde. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

#### Day 12 Monteverde Cloud Forest

We have a full morning exploring the cloud forest reserve with the help of a local naturalist guide. There is more to the forest than the trees and lesser plants. Of over 320 bird species, the most notable is the quetzal with its long arc of tail feathers. Assorted trogons in addition to the quetzal inhabit the reserve, along with more than 50 varieties of hummingbird. About 500 kinds of butterfly are found at Monteverde. Among the more than 100 mammalian species are howler, white-faced and spider monkeys, coatis and their cousins, raccoons; as well as the rarely observed pumas, ocelots, jaguars, tapirs, and kinkajous.

This afternoon you may choose to go on an optional "Canopy Walk" excursion, located within the cloud forest. Suspension foot-bridges are strung across deep gorges allowing one to get a bird's eye view of the forest from a totally different perspective than we experienced this morning. At a leisurely pace, one can complete this easy and fascinating walk in about 90 minutes. Your Tour Leader can help you plan this activity (optional cost approx \$25-40, subject to change).

REMEMBER: This can be a wet and windy place by definition. You should be prepared for varied conditions.

Overnight at Monteverde. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

#### Day 13 Monteverde - Guanacaste

Today we descend to the Pacific Coast once again and continue our journey north to Guanacaste, CR's sunniest region and most popular resort area. Here our time is free-form with a well-deserved break from our busy pace in a beautiful, relaxing setting.

Overnight Guanacaste resort (TBA). Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

#### Day 14 Guanacaste Resort Area

The day is yours to relax and enjoy and / or to participate in optional activities (there are some fine gold courses in the vicinity). Your Tour Leader and resort staff can help plan your day.

Overnight at a Guanacaste resort. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

#### Day 15 Guanacaste, Costa Rica - Granada, Nicaragua

Our northward journey continues along the Pan American Highway and across the border into Nicaragua and the town of Granada.

Granada considered to be one of Latin America's most beautiful colonial cities. This charming town on the shores of mighty Lake Nicaragua is full of history and Spanish colonial charm and is one of the oldest European settlements in the western hemisphere. Actually, it is the oldest city founded by Europeans on mainland America that still exist in its original location. Granada is historically one of Nicaragua's most important cities both economically and politically.

As with all colonial cities in Central America, Granada is built around its main square (Parque Central) that represents the city's social, cultural, and economic hub. Around the Parque Central visitors find Granada's cathedral, the city hall, important banks, cultural centers, as well as myriad small shops and stalls selling traditional food and handcrafts.

In the late afternoon we will enjoy a walking tour of the historic city center.

Overnight in Granada. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

#### Day 16 Granada: Las Isletas, Masaya Volcano National Park & Masaya Market

We start our day with a private boat cruise on Lake Nicaragua. This journey will take us through the Granada Isletas, an exotic tropical archipelago of 365 tiny volcanic islands. Granada is a port on giant Lake Nicaragua, and a boat journey to visit Las Isletas just offshore is a must for any traveller. Some of the 365 islands are inhabited and most are covered with a vast variety of unusual vegetation. This is also an area rich with bird life.

Canals separate many of the isletas where fishermen, seated patiently on Indian rafts, wait for a bite. Of archaeological interest is the Fortress of San Pablo, placed strategically on an island opposite the city. The fortress was built in the mid-18th century to protect Granada from the marauding pirates. It was restored in 1974. Pre-Columbian archaeological stone pieces were found on Pensacola Islet and are on exhibit in the Museum of the San Francisco Convent.

In the afternoon we will enjoy an excursion to the famous Masaya Volcano National Park, Nicaragua's first national park, established in 1979 and considered one of Nicaragua's most interesting and beautiful natural phenomena. We will

explore the crater rim of this active volcano, which resembles a lunar landscape, and will visit the park museum.

We will also visit the Masaya Marketplace, well known for it's local handicraft selection, such as leather goods, artistic weavings, and colourful traditional clothing. Here we will see a large selection of beautiful and inexpensive paintings in the Nicaragua Solentiname artist styles.

Overnight in Granada. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

## Day 17 Granada: Ometepe Island Excursion

Today we will enjoy a full-day excursion to Nicaragua's famous Ometepe Island, one of the most impressive sights in Central America. From Lake Nicaragua, the same lake that the Spanish conquerors called the 'fresh water sea' because of its sheer size, rises the island Ometepe. The name Ometepe means 'two hills' in the native 'nahuatl' language. The island measures 276 square kilometers and it houses two majestic volcanoes connected through a small strip of land. The two volcanoes, Concepcion and Maderas, are joined by a low isthmus to form one island in the shape of an hourglass.

Ometepe is somewhat isolated from the rest of Nicaragua and therefore maintains its special mystery and charm. After driving along the southern shore of the lake to the boat dock, we will board the ferry for the 1.5 hours ferry ride on Lake Nicaragua to Ometepe Island. When we arrive at Ometepe Island we will enjoy a sightseeing tour of the island, including petroglyphs, Charco Verde, Maderas Volcano and Concepcion Volcano. Concepcion Volcano is still active, and most recently erupted on December 5, 2007. For lunch we will make a break at Santo Domingo Beach, and then we will explore the harbour town of Moyogalpa. At the end of our day we will then travel by ferry back to the shore where we begin our drive back to Granada.

Overnight in Granada. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

### Day 18 Granada - Leon

This morning we depart Granada and drive to Leon. Home to more than 12 colonial period churches, including Central America's largest church, and Nicaragua's greatest passion, poetry, Leon is also the cradle of Nicaragua's 20th century revolutionary movement. Leon was founded by the Spaniards as Santiago de los Caballeros de Leon and rivals Granada in the number of historic Spanish colonial homes and churches.

The first city named Leon was established in 1524 and was located about 20 miles east of the present site. The city was abandoned in 1610, after an eruption of the Momotombo volcano, located only a couple miles away, which left extensive damage in the form of flooding from Lake Managua. The inhabitants decided to move to its current location next to the Indigenous town of Subtiava. This afternoon we will visit the ruins of the abandoned city, known as 'Leon Viejo'. This site was excavated in 1960, and in the year 2000, Leon Viejo was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Overnight in Leon. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

### Day 19 Leon: Walking Tour

Our day will begin with a guided sightseeing tour of Leon. Leon has an architecturally interesting center with many old colonial houses, streets, monuments, and churches. We will see the National University of Nicaragua, Leon Cathedral, the Plaza of Poets, the Plaza of the Revolution, the local marketplace, as well as many colorful political murals.

Leon Cathedral is the most prominent building of Leon and is the biggest cathedral in Central America. Situated in the central plaza, the first construction of this huge building started over two centuries ago. From the rooftop we will have a superb view of the city of Leon.

The Ruben Dario museum is housed inside the former home of Nicaragua's most beloved poet. We will also visit the 300-year-old Subtiava Indian Church in the Subtiava Indian neighborhood of Leon.

Your afternoon is free to explore Leon, where the people are very friendly, warm hearted and generous.

Overnight in Leon. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

## Day 20 Leon - Managua, Nicaragua - San Salvador, El Salvador

Today we depart from Leon and drive to Managua for our flight to San Salvador, El Salvador.

El Salvador is the smallest and most densely populated country in Central America and adjoins the Pacific in a narrow coastal plain backed by a volcanic mountain chain, and a fertile plateau. The origins of the city of San Salvador can be traced to before the Spanish Conquest. It is near the present location of San Salvador that the Pipil groups established their capital of Cuscatlan. Little is known about this city since its inhabitants abandoned it in an effort to avoid Spanish rule.

El Salvador is the country with the highest density of volcanoes on the American continent, and is truly a destination to discover and admire. Volcanoes have forged the history of this land and this is something you will experience when you discover the dramatic landscapes with impressive lakes, valleys and Mayan sites.

Overnight in San Salvador. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

### Day 21 La Ruta De Las Flores

Today's journey will take us through what is probably one of the most beautiful regions of El Salvador, where we visit the towns that are part of the 'Route of the Flowers.' This route received this title because of the many beautiful flowers and plants you can see and the stunning little mountain towns that you can visit. Every town has it's own charm and character, with their churches, markets and crafts.

This route takes us along the road between the city of Sonsonate to Ahuachapan. Here we find a series of towns with a wealth of cultural traditions. The first town will be Nahuizalco, characterized by strong pre-Columbian traditions; This is one of the country's most important indigenous and crafts populations. Baskets and furniture woven from natural fibers such as "Tule" and wicker dress up the streets.

In the heart of the route we find Salcoatitan, with its white colonial church in front of the Central Plaza. It was here where the first coffee tree was planted, a profitable item that supports the local economy. We continue our tour towards Juayua, famous for its Black Christ.

We will also visit the town of Apaneca before ending our day with a visit to Concepcion de Ataco, a pre-Columbian town established by the Piples tribe and located in the heart of the mountains, where its cobblestone streets and lanterns provide a unique atmosphere.

We also visit El Boqueron National Park, one of a kind in El Salvador since it's located in the crater of the San Salvador Volcano named El Boqueron.

We return to San Salvador at the end of our full day of sightseeing.

Overnight in San Salvador. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

## Day 22 San Salvador Area: Joya de Ceren, Tazumal, Casa Blanca, San Andres & Santa Ana

We start our day with a visit to Joya de Ceren, considered to be the most important archeological site ever discovered in El Salvador. Along our drive we will see one of the petrified lava rivers of the last eruption of the Quezaltepeque volcano, in 1917, now known as San Salvador's volcano. We will stop to admire this beautiful landscape and visit the volcano's extinct crater, which is surrounded by beautiful flora. From here we continue our trip to the Laguna Caldera volcano, which was responsible of covering the village of Joya de Ceren 1400 years ago. Today, this preserved city is considered to be a jewel of history and is known as the 'Pompeii of the Americas'.

Joya de Ceren, which was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1993, is the only location in the whole Mayan culture where one can appreciate the day-to-day living styles of the popular pre-Columbian inhabitants. Everything here is well-preserved, thanks to the volcanic ash.

We also visit two archeological sites that are part of the same complex. At Casa Blanca we will witness a set of pyramids; some of which have a unique circular shape, which makes them extremely rare in Meso America. Here we will have the opportunity to go to an indigo workshop where we can witness the making of typical clothing. We will also visit the colonial city of Chalchuapa, built partly in the premises of this pyramid complex during the colonial period. In the historical center is one of the most ancient churches in El Salvador. From here it is just a short drive to El Tazumal -- 'place of many lakes' -- the biggest pyramid that has been discovered in the country.

During our sightseeing today we will also visit Santa Ana, the second largest city in El Salvador. The city of Santa Ana has pre-Columbian origins and functions today as a major processing center for El Salvador's sizable coffee industry.

At the end of our day we return to San Salvador.

Overnight in San Salvador. Meal plan: Breakfast.

#### Day 23 San Salvador - Suchitoto, El Salvador - Copan, Honduras

This morning we depart San Salvador and travel north to the small beautiful town of Suchitoto. This is one of the true hidden gems of El Salvador, known for its central church and cobblestone road. Suchitoto is a place where one can truly take a step back in time.

Originally a Pipíl town, Suchitoto was the nation's capital for 15 years from 1528. Today it's a quaint colonial town with several tourist attractions along its cobblestone streets and rich in cultural and artistic attractions. The town offers fantastic views of the Lake Suchitlan and Volcan Guazapa.

On our tour through the city center, we will learn about history and architecture of Suchitoto. The town has a very relaxed feel and is often referred to as the 'Antigua of El Salvador'. Constructed in 1853, the Santa Lucia Church is one of the best examples of post-colonial architecture in El Salvador and the main focal point of Suchitoto. During our visit we will enjoy a boat tour of the magnificent Lake Suchitlan. This is one of the main attractions of the region with its abundant bird life, including pelicans, herons and storks. During our ride we will be able to take in the countless beautiful views of nearby mountains and various islands, and will also learn about the fascinating human and natural history of the lake.

USA/ Canada 1-800-665-3998 United Kingdom 0114-247-3400 After lunch we will depart from Suchitoto and continue towards the border with Honduras. This is a spectacular drive through a lush green landscape. Time permitting we may stop in Santa Rosa de Copan before continuing on to the quaint and charming colonial town of Copan for our overnight.

Overnight in Copan. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

#### Day 24 Copan: Site Tour

This morning we will visit the Copan archaeological site. The Mayan ruins of Copan are fascinating, beautiful, and unique among Mayan cities. Declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1980, Copan contains some of the most important Mayan ruins found to date, and many unusual artistic features. We will tour the site on foot, walking through grassy plazas filled with intricately carved and decorated monuments, statues and staircases. Huge carved faces stare at you from ancient walls and bring the place to life, and make us wonder at the mysterious disappearance of such a creative civilization.

Often called the "Athens of the New World," Copan features some of the Mayas' most impressive accomplishments in architecture, astronomy, and civic organization. After our guided tour of the archaeological site we will visit the world famous Sculpture Museum, designed to give the visitor a sense of how the ancient Maya viewed their world and to record its most important aspects in architectural and freestanding sculpture.

The Ball Court at Copan is the second largest in Central America; nearby is Copan's most famous monument, the Hieroglyphic Stairway. The flight of 63 steps bears a history, in several thousand glyphs, of the royal house of Copan. We have a guided walk through the Rosalia and Jaguar tunnels, one of the few opportunities to enter a Mayan pyramid to see up close the layer upon layer of temples that make up these magical structures.

This afternoon you will have some free time to explore the colonial town of Copan.

Overnight in Copan. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

#### Day 25 Copan, Honduras - Antigua, Guatemala

Today we depart early from Copan and head towards Antigua, Guatemala. The route takes us across a patchwork of landscapes and spectacular vistas.

Antigua may be the most outstanding and best-preserved colonial city in Spanish America. Travellers are overwhelmed by the natural beauty and wealth of historic monuments. The Spanish colonial style permeates every part of the town: its houses, churches, squares, parks and ruins, as well as its traditions and folklore. Antigua is a city of charm and colour where you can see and buy an overwhelming variety of attractive, handmade products that honour the traditions of generations of artisans.

The city, founded in 1543, was the seat of Spanish colonial government for the Kingdom of Guatemala, which included Chiapas (southern Mexico), Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. Throughout its history the city was repeatedly damaged by earthquakes, and always rebuilt, bigger and better. But on July 29, 1773, the day of Santa Marta, earthquakes wrought such destruction that officials petitioned the King of Spain to allow them to move the capital to safer ground, which led to the founding in 1776 of present-day Guatemala City. Today its monumental bougainvillea-draped ruins, and it's preserved and carefully restored Spanish colonial public buildings and private mansions, give form to a city of charm and romance unequaled in the Americas. In 1979 UNESCO recognized Antigua Guatemala as a World Heritage Site.

USA/ Canada 1-800-665-3998 Overnight in Antigua. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

## Day 26 Antigua: Walking Tour

This morning we will enjoy a walking tour of Antigua, located in a valley and surrounded by many green small hills volcanoes. We will explore both the restored colonial buildings as well as those left as ruins throughout the city. Among the intricate colonial buildings and interesting museums we will visit on our tour, we will explore the ornate La Merced church, the ruins of the Capuchinas Convent and the San Francisco Cathedral, where pilgrims go to see the tomb of Saint Hermano Pedro.

Wandering down the cobblestone streets of this magical city or through the central plaza to view the mermaid fountain, you will quickly realize why people call Antigua "the colonial jewel of the Americas." Our tour will take us to the impressive town square (plaza) where massive trees offer shade; combined with the cold drinks and snacks sold by countless vendors, it is a perfect place to beat the heat. Around the perimeter of the central park are many buildings of note, including the Palacio de los Capitanes and the Museo de Arte Colonial (Colonial Art Museum). Directly east of the plaza is Santiago Cathedral, which has been damaged and rebuilt many times. This cathedral is said to contain somewhere within the remains of Don Pedro de Alvarado, conquistador of Guatemala.

We will see these sights and more. Then after lunch you will have free time to explore Antigua on your own.

Overnight in Antigua. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

## Day 27 Antigua - Chichicastenango & Lake Atitlan - Panajachel

This morning we depart for Chichicastenango (locally known as Chichi) where we will experience the famous market. On Sundays (and Thursdays), vendors sell handicrafts, food, flowers, pottery, wooden boxes, condiments, medicinal plants, candles, pom and copal (traditional incense), cal (lime for preparing tortillas), grindstones, pigs and chickens, machetes, and other tools. The manufacture of masks, used by dancers in traditional dances, are also renown. This market is reputedly the largest outdoor market in Central America, and attracts buyers and sellers from near and far.

Our walking tour through the market will bring us to the 400-year old church of Santo Tomas, built atop a pre-Columbian platform, the steps originally leading to a temple of the Maya civilization. Shamans still use the church for their rituals, burning incense and candles. In special cases they burn a chicken for the gods. Each of the 18 stairs that lead up to the church stands for one month of the Maya calendar year.

After our time at the market we will drive south to the town of Panajachel, on the shores of Lake Atitlan. Arguably one of the most beautiful lakes in the world, Atitlan owes its grandeur to its enormous size and spectacular, volcanic setting. Lake Atitlan was formed after a volcanic eruption. Three stately volcanoes -- Atitlan, Toliman and San Pedro -- rise gracefully from its southern shore, their perfect cones reflected in the azure mirror of the lake.

Overnight in Panajachel. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

## Day 28 Panajachel & Lake Atitlan

Lake Atitlan is volcanic in origin, filling an enormous caldera formed in an eruption 84,000 years ago. It is renowned as one of the most beautiful lakes in the world, and Aldous Huxley famously wrote of it: "Lake Como [Italy], it seems to me, touches on the limit of permissibly picturesque, but Atitlan is Como with additional embellishments of several

immense volcanoes. It really is too much of a good thing."

This morning we will take a boat tour around Lake Atitlan, stopping at one or two of the villages along the shore. Along the way you will learn about local history and customs.

This afternoon is yours to enjoy the town on your own.

Overnight in Panajachel. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

#### Day 29 Panajachel - Guatemala City - Flores (Tikal)

Today we drive back to Guatemala City and fly to Flores (Tikal).

For many, the main reason to visit Flores is its proximity to Tikal, the most famous Mayan ruins in Guatemala. But the city itself is a wonder -- dense with colonial, red-roofed buildings, narrow cobblestone streets, a historic church and Spanish plaza, and restaurants that are easy to stumble upon walking the city's charming streets. Most will find that this island city is more than just a take-off point, but a memorable attraction in itself.

Overnight near Tikal. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

#### Day 30 Tikal Site Tour

Today we have a guided tour to experience the mystique of Tikal, possibly the most magnificent of all Mayan sites. Here we discover ancient temples, pyramids and stone structures dating from 500 BC. The five great pyramids of Tikal give this ceremonial centre a majestic grandeur unique among Maya cities. The height of the temples, crowned with tremendous roof combs; the complicated assemblage of the palace structures of the central Acropolis; and the complexity of the chronology of the North Acropolis are staggering to anyone visiting Tikal for the first time. In ancient times Tikal functioned mainly as a ceremonial centre in which the aristocratic elite and their priests ruled, dictated, and directed the activities of the architects, builders, craftsmen, and labourers. All endeavours in the region of Tikal were directed to enhance the city, to glorify the gods, to amass wealth, and to acquire tribute for the ruling upper strata of society. To sustain this activity for over a thousand years demanded a well-disciplined peasantry.

Overnight near Tikal. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

## Day 31 Flores - Guatemala City

Today we fly back to Guatemala City.

Overnight in Guatemala City. Meal plan: Breakfast and dinner.

### Day 32 Departure

Departure from Guatemala City.

BUEN VIAJE! Meal plan: Breakfast.

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