

GUATEMALA

'The Heart of the Mayan World'

9 days

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Day 1 Arrive in Guatemala City

Today we arrive in Guatemala City.

Overnight in Guatemala City.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Guatemala City - Antigua: Walking Tour

This morning we drive the short distance to Antigua (+/- one hour), located in a valley and surrounded by many green small hills and three volcanoes: Agua, Fuego, and Acatenango. On arrival we'll embark on a walking tour of this beautiful city (we may be joining travellers arriving yesterday from Honduras on tour GU7).

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" and why most vow to return. Our tour will take us to the impressive town square (plaza) where travellers are often drawn to the beauty and activity. The massive trees offer friendly shade, and 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 the 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 also visit the Kojom (music) Museum in Jocotenango during our time in Antigua. Later this afternoon, we may be joining other travellers arriving from Copan, Honduras on tour GU7.

Overnight in Antigua.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Antigua: At Leisure

Today you are free to explore Antigua. Sit and relax in the Plaza de Armas, the central square, and enjoy the view of the Palace of the Captains General, the old City Hall, and the remains of the Cathedral and Archbishop's Palace, excellent examples of Spanish colonial architecture. Antigua is also known for excellent shopping opportunities; this is an excellent place for independent exploration. Your Tour Leader will help you plan your day.

Overnight in Antigua.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Antigua - Chichicastenango - Panajachel

This morning we depart for Chichicastenango (locally known as Chichi) where we will tour this world famous market. On Thursdays and Sundays there is a large market here where vendors sell handicrafts, food, flowers, pottery, wooden boxes, condiments, medicinal plants,

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candles, pom and copal (traditional incense), cal (lime for preparing tortillas), grindstones, pigs and chickens, machetes, and other tools. In the central part of the market plaza are comedores (small eateries). Among the items sold are textiles, particularly the women's blouses. The manufacture of masks, used by dancers in traditional dances has also made this city well known for woodcarving.

Our walking tour through the market will bring us to the 400-year old church of Santo Tomas. It is built atop a Pre-Columbian platform, and the steps originally leading to a temple of the pre-Hispanic Maya civilization remain venerated. 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.

This market is reputedly the largest outdoor market in Central America, and it attracts buyers and sellers from near and far. Originally only the indigenous population of the Quiche region frequented the market, but its fame has reached all corners of Guatemala and beyond.

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.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Panajachel & Lake Atitlan

Today we will take a boat tour around Lake Atitlan and will see some of the many lakeside villages.

Our journey today takes us across the shimmering waters of Lake Atitlan, nestled beneath the three volcanoes of San Pedro, Atitlan, and Toliman. When we visit Santiago de Atitlan you will notice the unusual headdresses that the locals wear which are called Tocoyal and consist of 12 metres/40 feet of material. This is easily the most beautiful and fascinating village on the lake, as well as the largest, with a population of almost 15,000 people if the outskirts are included. Built on the slopes of Volcano Atitlan, it is surrounded on three sides by water and faces Volcano San Pedro across a small bay. Originally the capital of the Tzutuhil Indian nation, Santiago was turned into an important missionary and trading outpost after the Spanish conquest. Today Santiago is one of the most traditional Indian villages in Guatemala, with a purely Indian population that lives much as it did hundreds of years ago.

As our boat approaches Santiago's shore, you will see dozens of women standing knee-deep in water, washing their families' clothes against the rocks, often with babies in colourful slings on their backs. This sets the mood for the rest of our visit. Just wander through the streets of this village and you will catch a firsthand glimpse of indigenous life as it is today.

As we walk around we see towering volcanoes and spectacular scenery. Flowers are abundant; the white blossoms on coffee plants, bright wildflowers and hibiscus cover the landscape. Once again colour is the focus, costumes which are very vibrant are worn by nearly everyone. The women's costume consists of white and purple huipiles embroidered with birds and flowers, bright red skirts and unique headdresses made from narrow, woven red bands (sometimes over twenty feet long) that are evenly wrapped around their heads until a wide brim is formed. The men's outfits are equally vibrant, with purple and white striped knee-length pants, white shirts and multi-coloured sashes worn nowadays with cowboy hats.

While in Santiago we also see Maximon-the mayan "Judas Esacriot" diety. Maximon ("mah-shee-mon") is a popular post-Columbian Mayan folk deity who apparently blends aspects of the Christian Saint Simon with a Mayan god, perhaps Maam, an underworld god.

Overnight in Panajachel.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Panajachel - Iximche - Guatemala City

This morning we travel to Guatemala City.

Our journey takes us through the spectacular volcanic landscape of Guatemala's western highlands to visit Iximche en route, an excellent Maya site which became a model of civic planning. Most of the buildings here were erected around four large courtyards, and there are also

two smaller courtyards at Iximche that may have been used for religious ceremonies. Terraces were leveled from the natural terrain to accommodate platforms for temples, palaces, and other structures. The structures had roofs of thatch or of wooden beams and plaster and have long since perished. Ball courts were common at all civic and religious centers, and at Iximche there are two ball courts, one of which has been restored.

Overnight in Guatemala City.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Guatemala City - Flores - Tikal Site Tour

Today we fly to Flores and, on arrival, embark on a guided tour to experience the wonder of Tikal (+/- one hour drive), 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.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Flores - Fly To Guatemala City

Today we hope to have some free time to visit the island of Flores before flying back to the capital.

Overnight in Guatemala City.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Departure

Departure from Guatemala City.

BUEN VIAJE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast