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MAL

BY ELLEN FIX

Enchanted Latin Holyweek

This year my husband and I decided it was time to expose our kids to a culture not dominated by cell phones, TV screens and incessant online chats. We wanted the trip to be educational, but also understood that such thoughts of museum visits and architectural odysseys usually inspire nothing more than the rolling of their eyes, which forced us to narrow our choices.

Further, we wanted to escape anything remotely resembling the sameness of suburbia without sacrificing creature comforts and the ability to explore our environs in relative safety—and do all of

this within a reasonable budget.

The colonial city of Antigua, Guatemala proved to be the ideal choice.

Picturesque and laden with charm, Antigua conveyed the ideal balance of modernity and antiquity, local culture spiced with Western convenience, and an opportunity for the kids to practice Spanish.

Fortunately, their Spring Break coincided with Holy Week, or Semana

Santa, which is lavishly celebrated in Latin America and Spain during the seven days proceeding Easter Sunday. The popularity of the event was evident as I began to plan our itinerary and discovered that several of the more desirable hotels were booking fast.

Airfare for the four of us from Atlanta was a little over \$2,300, which did not include the \$50-per-night hotel Casa Rustica that set us up in a large, clean

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room with four beds, a private bath, and use of a kitchen, pool table and a computer with Internet connection (for a fee of \$1.50 an hour) and just two blocks from downtown. I found the hotel through an Internet search and made reservations online.

Owned by an American ex-patriot, it is a popular place for American women in the process of adopting babies and had a cozy, familial flavor.

We expected a Mardi-Gras-like atmosphere as our van entered the cobblestone streets of Antigua after the 45-minute drive from Guatemala City, but Semana Santa is a sacred religious festival for Guatemalans and they don't celebrate with alcohol and partying in the streets.

On the Thursday night before Good Friday however, Antiguans stay up all night to participate in the once-a-year laying of the flower carpets, a dazzling visual display that starts in the wee hours of the morning when Antiguans bring bucket-loads of tropical floral and plant material and weave meticulously detailed, elaborate living creations along the narrow cobblestone streets.

The cars, motorcycles and tuk-tuks (tiny 3-wheeled, open-air taxis) that pedestrians normally dodge at their own risk (there are no street lights or stop signs in Antigua) are banned from the town center for three days. Each carpet is an awe-inspiring work of art. Flanked by other onlookers, my husband and I wandered from one block to the next, watching each floral 'painting' come to life. The carpet creation continues for hours on end, and each is eventually trampled by the parades which ebb and flow throughout the day. Young men in bright purple robes and women in white, carry huge floats that depict the Easter story. The weight of these massive floats on their shoulders causes the



floats to sway back and forth, mimicking the rhythm of the slow, melancholy dirge played by the accompanying musicians. The incense is so thick at times that the air becomes too fogged to see, and the aroma so intense it's hard to catch your breath. Adding to the experience is the fact it's taking place in a city filled with fascinating

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ruins of buildings razed by repeated earthquakes, secret courtyards, and the warmth of tradition that refuses to allow the

PHOTO: ROBERT LERICH

Women wear intensely colorful and elaborate brocaded shirts called huipiles.

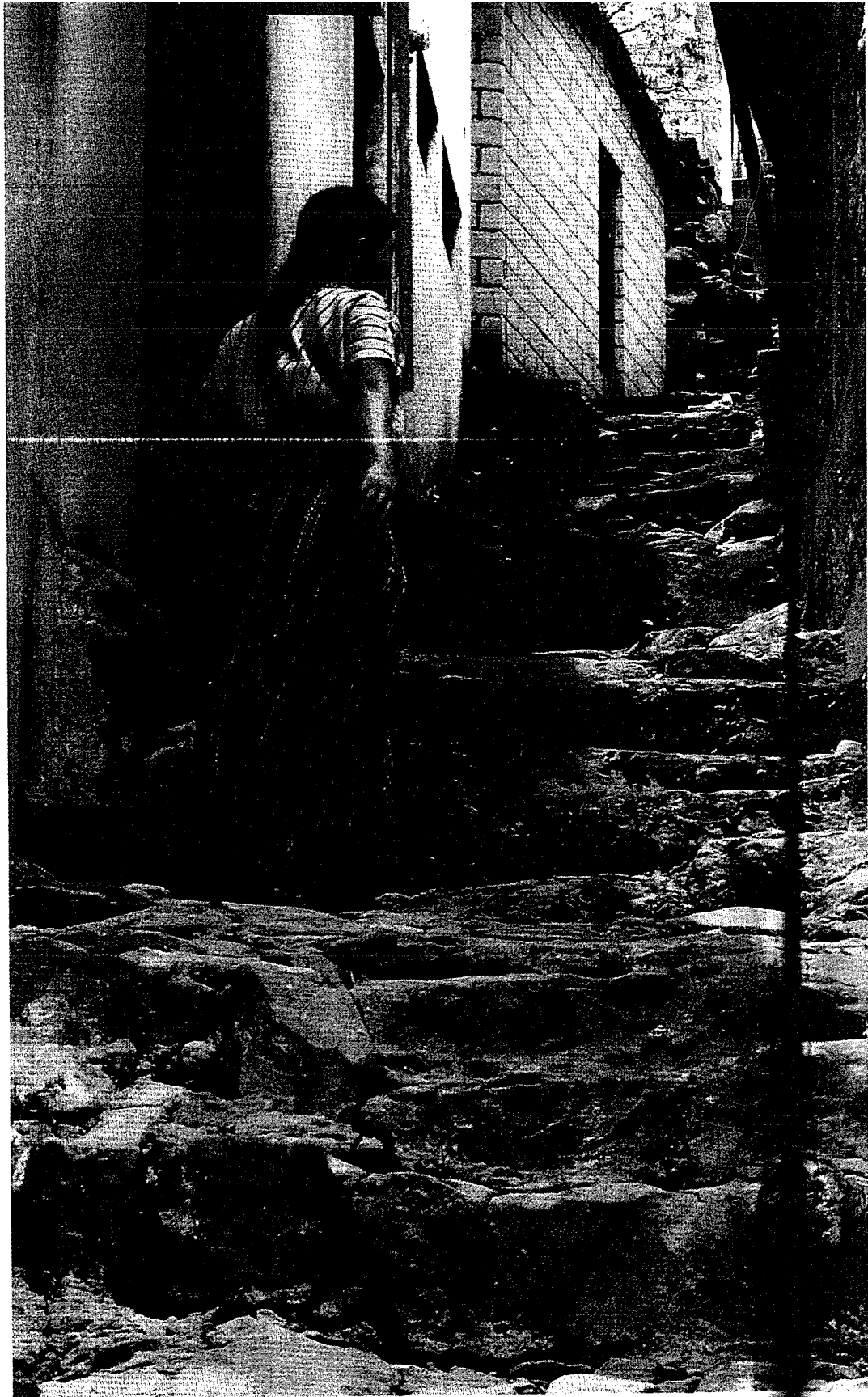
many new small boutiques and cafes—including a very popular “Bagel Barn”—to detract from its old-world charm.

Although there are a few notable upscale shops, the true attractions are the storefronts filled with native crafts. Jewelry, purses, blankets, scarves, paintings, belts, and wallets embroidered in vibrant colors are a feast for the eyes. Show the slightest interest in any item and you’ll immediately be drawn into bargaining, which is expected. But the best values are found at the mercado, or market, about seven blocks from el parque central. This is where the Antiguans shop.

Take some time to wander the stalls, and don’t miss the indoor display that features many finer crafts. Although it’s not advised to eat street food, at a nearby tienda (store) two young girls were making chili relleno sandwiches with burritos grilled on-the-spot that my husband and kids couldn’t resist. They even had seconds! (Be sure to try the fresh papaya slices-on-a-stick).

Crumbling churches and facades dot the landscape and a casual exploration inevitably leads to one of these 16th century remnants. A ten-minute walk from the center of town, we stumbled upon the Hotel Casa Santo Domingo one evening, which is a former convent, now partially restored as a five-star hotel. With its candle-illuminated reception area, the baroque artifacts on display and the stone walls of its maze of underground tunnels, we were lost in another era.

Short side trips are also available, and you can tour a coffee plantation, popular crafts cooperative, and/or take a trek up Mount Pacaya, one of the three active volcanoes that lend drama to the Antigua skyline. (Regarding the latter, stories of people burning the soles of their shoes and being overtaken by noxious fumes filled with hot ash made me thankful we missed that experience). We did, however, schedule a side trip to nearby Lake Atitlan (two hours away by hired van). Along this route, steeply terraced farmland on both sides of the twisting road seemed stuck in time, and the scenery was identical to the photos I had studied in my social studies

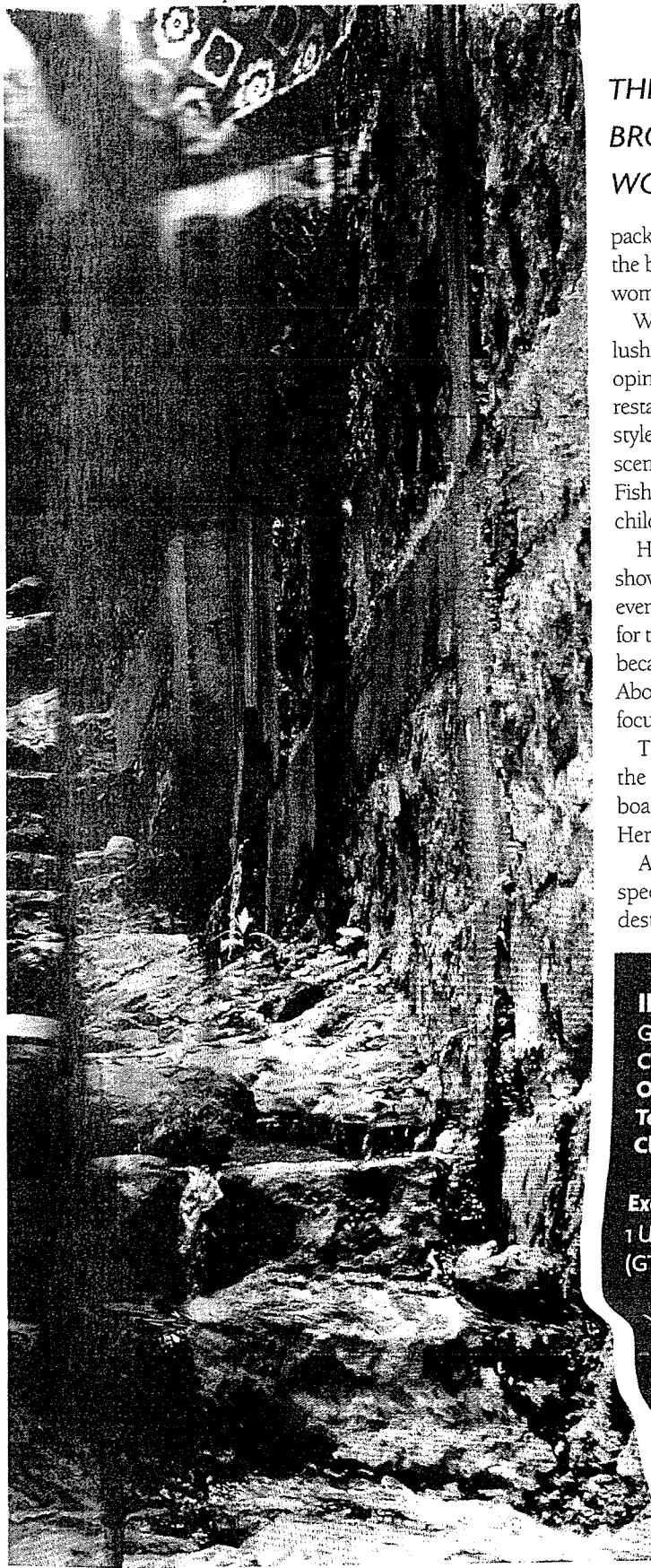


textbook 40 years earlier.

Arriving at the largest lakeside town, Panajachel, we stopped for a delicious lunch at one of the many restaurants; I

enjoyed yogurt, granola and fruit - a meal that is readily available throughout Guatemala’s Western Highlands. Then we made our way to the shore where small,

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packed like sardines. I sat in the front (bad mistake) and held on for dear life as the bow did a bump and grind through the choppy water, while the Guatemalan women sitting in the back laughed at my needless fear the whole time.

We stayed two nights in the stunning Hotel Bambu. Nearly hidden amidst lush flora along the banks of Lake Atitlan - which author Aldous Huxley opined as the "most beautiful lake in the world." Bambu has its own restaurant and swimming pool and provided us with our own Mediterranean-style, two-story cottage. The master bedroom's private balcony offered a scenic view of the adjacent hillside Mayan village of Santiago Atitlan. Fishermen plied the smooth blue-gray waters while Mayan women and children used the lake to wash clothes.

Hiking from Hotel Bambu to Santiago Atitlan, we met up with a family eager to show us their plot of land and the garden maintained by school children. They even allowed us to take pictures, and graciously accepted a few coins in exchange for the privilege. Not everyone, however, shared this perspective of tourists because some shielded their faces and refused to be photographed at any price. About 20 minutes into our hike we arrived at the Holy Week festivities that were focusing on live music in front of the main church in the village square.

The intensely colorful and elaborate brocaded shirts, or huipiles, worn by the women were a captivating visual delight. Each Mayan section on Lake Atitlan boasts its own dialect and vibrant costumes in distinctive patterns and colors. Here, the men wore traditional white pants with blue stripes.

Although Holy Week infuses the Western Highlands of Guatemala with a special excitement, Antigua is a city to savor any time, and an enchanting destination for people of any age. 

IF YOU GO:

Guatemala is about the size of Tennessee.

City: Capital — Guatemala City (metro area pop. 2.5 million).

Other major cities: Quetzaltenango, Escuintla.

Terrain: Mountainous, with fertile coastal plain.

Climate: Temperate in highlands; tropical on coasts.

Exchange Rate

1 US Dollar = 7.76300 Guatemalan Quetzal 1 Guatemalan Quetzal (GTQ) = 0.12882 US Dollar (USD)

When to go

The dry season is November to April and the wet season runs from May to October and from November to December in the north and the east. The busiest season for tourists is during Easter.

PEOPLE - More than half of Guatemalans are descendants of indigenous Mayan peoples. Westernized Mayans and mestizos (mixed European and indigenous ancestry) are known as Ladinos. Most of Guatemala's population is rural, though urbanization is accelerating. The predominant religion is Roman Catholicism, into which many indigenous Guatemalans have incorporated traditional forms of worship. Protestantism and traditional Mayan religions are practiced by an estimated 40% and 1% of the population, respectively. Though the official language is Spanish, it is not universally understood among the indigenous population.

privately-owned boats await to make the crossing to various smaller villages. But be forewarned: the boats are old, wooden and rickety. There are no visible life vests, and they don't leave shore until they are