

Guatemala

By Barbara Baumer, Willamette International Travel

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We stayed at Casa Encatada, -a small property, only 10 rooms, breakfast is served on the roof with a great view of the volcanoes surrounding the city. Rooms are good size. The rooms are decorated with lovely Guatemalan tile, and my favorite hand blown glasses with colored rims! It seems to be on the edge of town, but not a far walk to the main square, probably as far from the square as Casa Santo Domingo.

We were met on time by our guide for a walking tour of the city – she too spoke good English and was easy to understand. She had a lot of good information. Antigua is a World Heritage City – which means among other things that they are restricted now from building anything over 2 stories, even in the hills surrounding the city. Antigua was one of the three main cities before colonization, before Lima and Mexico, and used to be the Capital. The city is surrounded by three volcanoes, one – Fuego-is still active, it last erupted in July of 07. We had the afternoon to explore on our own.

This is rainy season in Guatemala, it poured in the late afternoon, but we just happened to be inside during the rain – the weather was cool in the mornings, but warmed up a bit in the afternoons. No humidity in the highlands.

We had our own driver guide for Lake Atitlan and Chichicastanego – his wife is a 5th grade teacher in a local school Guatemala City so it was interesting to talk with him about teaching here. It's about a 2.5 hour drive to the lake, they are working on the road, much if it is nicely paved, some is still under repair, but not too bad. We took a 30 minute boat ride from our hotel just outside Panajachel across the lake to Santiago. We toured this area, with lots of little market stands just off from the boat ramp, On our walking tour of Santiago, we saw a demonstration on the traditional dress and headwear. I

was the model! We also had a demonstration on how the back strap loom works. In Santiago, they have an idol to San Simon, called Maximon. It was built and destroyed by the Catholics twice, so the third time it was built they gave it a mask with face of a Spaniard to disguise the idol. It now stays at a different home every year. While in Santiago we saw the idol in the house where it currently resides! then took a tuc tuc for lunch at Posada de Santiago. This hotel is owned by an American, is suited right on the lake, the pool and hot tub have a lake view. The hotel entrance and restaurant have a log cabin rustic feel.



Arco de Santa Catalina, Antigua

We stayed at Hotel Atitlan, as I said it's outside Panajachel. There is a botanical garden on the property and nature preserve within walking distance of the hotel. The botanical garden is quite interesting, many different plants, lots of roses, and also many birds – parrots, toucans, and more! Rooms all have lake view and small balconies, good size rooms and huge bathrooms. This day to Lake Atitlan has a very early start, so we were unable to have breakfast before departure as we left before breakfast was served.

On our way back to Guatemala City we went to Chichicastenango – it was Thursday which was a market day – we saw the textile market as well as the local markets for fruits, meats, local supplies, etc.

We then returned to Guatemala City for one night – we stayed at the Vista Real – it's a lovely hotel, with beautiful rooms, and the grounds are lovely, however it's a little bit far removed, nothing close by to walk to for a meal, shop, find an ATM, etc - we felt kind of isolated there.

We took TAG to Flores for our tour of Tikal. TAG has a 20lb limit on their luggage – so if you have a two-day trip to Tikal, it's best to be in the same hotel in Guatemala City before and after the Tikal trip so you can leave your luggage there and take just a backpack for example. Again no breakfast this morning.

To me Tikal was more impressive than Chichen Itza. The area is much more lush and green than Mexico – and it's about a 45 minute walk on a path through the jungle to get to the ruins. ON the walk we saw howler monkeys, Spider monkeys, tropical flowers, and more. There are many more ruins uncovered here than in Mexico as well. Most of the pyramids are in very good shape. You are allowed to climb the original steps of the pyramid you see in most photos, others have wooden staircases to climb, safer. Here you get a good idea of what life was like – everything revolved around the equinoxes and solstices. As we were there in rainy season, we were warned to use mosquito repellent and we found it very necessary! The Tikal tour is 3.4-4 hours and a lot of walking, not always on even ground, so it can be difficult for older travelers – we did have a 60 yr old and a 70 yr old in our group, who managed although took some of it very slowly. We had two good guides who knew a lot about the area. One in particular also was an entomologist and had studied the birds of the area too, so we learned a lot about the fauna as well. On our second day there we went to Yaxha National Park (where Survivor Guatemala was filmed). There is not as much excavated here, and they don't plan to do much more excavation here because they are learning when they remove the trees and plants from the structures, it affects the integrity of the structure and they begin to collapse. The parts that have been excavated were a joint venture with Guatemala and Germany. This park is on Lake Peten Itza, so you can see that life revolved more around the water here.



Tikal

We stayed at Camino Real Tikal, no longer a Westin property, with a view of the lake, the hotel consists of 5 or 6 small thatched roof buildings with 6 rooms per building, pool, sauna, meeting facilities and lake view dining both inside and outside. The rooms are basic, air conditioned and are being renovated at this time. The hotel offers a tour of the lake to their guests as well. The hotel is about an hour from Tikal National Park, and probably 30-40 minutes from Flores airport.

Our last night in Guatemala City we stayed at Westin Guatemala City, this is actually closer to the airport than the Vista Real, but it's in a better location, there are places to eat and shop within walking distance of the hotel. The rooms are very plush, with the heavenly beds, service was good.

Overall we had a great time, it was busy, as only once were we in the same hotel for more than one night – many early mornings but mostly the day was done by 4 pm or so we did have time on our own as well. We were glad we were able to see everything we did!