



In Living Color

In Guatemala, where mighty Mayan ruins and smoking volcanoes shoot up through sweeps of jungle, a rise in locally minded eco-retreats and arts collectives is creating a fresh style of Central American sophistication

By Alex Postman Photographs by Julien Capmeil

Antigua's Santa Catalina Arch with the Agua Volcano in the background







ABOVE
A bedroom
at Las Cruces
in Antigua

LEFT
Beyond
Expeditions'
tented camp,
high above
Lake Atitlán

PULLING AWAY FROM LIVINGSTON, a ramshackle, cheerfully painted town on Guatemala's short Caribbean coast, the captain cut the engine. The tinny percussion of punta rock from a dockside bar and shouts of fishermen cleaning their nets gave way to a cottony silence. The boat drifted into the narrow mouth of the Río Dulce as if being swallowed whole. We were alone in the jungle, with 27 miles between us and Lake Izabal, the largest lake in a country of lakes. Soaring, leaf-shrouded bluffs sprang up on either side. Except for the bellow of a howler monkey in the canopy, everything seemed to hold its breath: the pendulous foliage and thatched houses by the muddy riverbank, stoic egrets and a fat iguana on a branch, two shirtless men line fishing from a dugout canoe. Four centuries ago, when this was a Spanish colonial stronghold, pirates routinely attempted the same stealthy entry to loot Izabal's caches of gold and jade and cacao, only to be tripped up at the river's end by a massive chain that was winched out of the water at the Spanish fortress of San Felipe de Lara.

As we passed under a limestone cliff, its craggy façade morphed into the face of a man, its mouth a yawning cave. The sight made my neck prickle. The ancient Maya—whose

Listening to the cries of jungle creatures, I have rarely felt more alive than now

civilization stretched from the Yucatán Peninsula through present-day Guatemala to El Salvador and Honduras—believed caves were the entrance to the underworld, called Xibalba, or “place of fear,” in today’s K’iche’ language. Guatemala, I would learn, is rife with such visual trickery, and with portals that seem to deliver the visitor into a living past.

The Mayan concept of time is famously precise. Based on the number 20, a solar year, or *tun*, comprises 18 months of 20 days—360 days—plus an omen-filled month of five days at the end. But their genius was the Long Count, the system used to track eras and epochs in which 20 *tuns* make a *katun*, 20 *katuns* make a *baktun*, and 13 *baktuns* complete a Great Cycle, when the universe is destroyed and re-created. The latest one ended quietly on December 21, 2012, despite all the global hysteria.

But time hasn’t smiled on the Maya, whose descendants make up nearly half of Guatemala’s population (the rest are largely ladino, a Spanish and indigenous mix). After building a flourishing civilization of cities, roads, and reservoirs without the benefit of the wheel, the society collapsed around A.D. 900, due to drought, deforestation, and overpopulation. Rather than disappear, however, the Maya dispersed. The arrival of the conquistadors in the 1500s brought slavery and subjugation until independence in 1823, which led to serial dictatorships. A brutal 36-year civil war, sponsored by the United States and the Soviet Union, left more than 200,000 dead before ending in 1996. Today, government corruption and an intransigent power elite keep much of the indigenous population in poverty. Media coverage of “caravans” of migrants and drug-related gang violence has helped scare away much-needed tourism dollars.

Still, in-the-know travelers have long been drawn to Guatemala’s sprawling pre-Columbian ruins, volcanic lakes, sophisticated cities, and artisanal communities. Now a mix of stalwart defenders—including tour operators, hoteliers, and NGOs—are spreading the word about Central America’s most beguiling hidden treasure. One of the country’s staunchest allies has been Francis Ford Coppola, who, after opening Blancaneaux Lodge and Turtle Inn in Belize, added La Lancha, in the northern Guatemalan department of El Petén, in 2003. The boat had brought me from Turtle Inn to Coppola’s newest retreat, Cassa Zenda, a rustic-luxe cluster of thatched villas surrounded by palms, rhododendrons, and orchids on the fringes of Lake Izabal, a quiet region in the southeast that is home to commercial fishermen and weekend houses of Guatemala’s wealthy.

On my first day here, I climbed beside a waterfall to a bubbling

sulphuric stream whose healing mud has been sought out for centuries. After dinner I water-skied on the silky lake, the darkness and warmth blurring the lines between skin and air, water and sky. Listening to the susurrations of trees and the cries of jungle creatures, I have rarely felt safer than I did in that moment—or more alive.

T HIS SENSE OF COSMIC VASTNESS shadowed me across the rolling farms of the Maya lowlands to La Lancha, where cheery wooden casitas hung with traditional textiles sit on a hillside so steep there’s a funicular to get guests to Lake Petén Itzá below. It’s an ideal base for exploring the ruined city of Tikal and the astronomical observatory of Uaxactún. This part of Guatemala draws fanatics: An American teacher I met at La Lancha told me she’d been “called by Tikal to experience a parallel Mayan universe.” There are also the *Star Wars* pilgrims, who know the jungle-draped ruins as the location for the rebel base in the first movie. But these sites’ remoteness within the 5.2-million-acre Maya Biosphere Reserve inoculates them from the crowds of, say, Chichén Itzá, in the Yucatán. The grandest city in the Mayan world, Tikal snoozed under tangled vegetation until explorers discovered it in 1848. Soon after, neighboring Uaxactún was detected by *chicleros* (sap extractors) from Wrigley’s, who were feeding the American craze for chewing gum. The sites are still connected only by a dirt road.

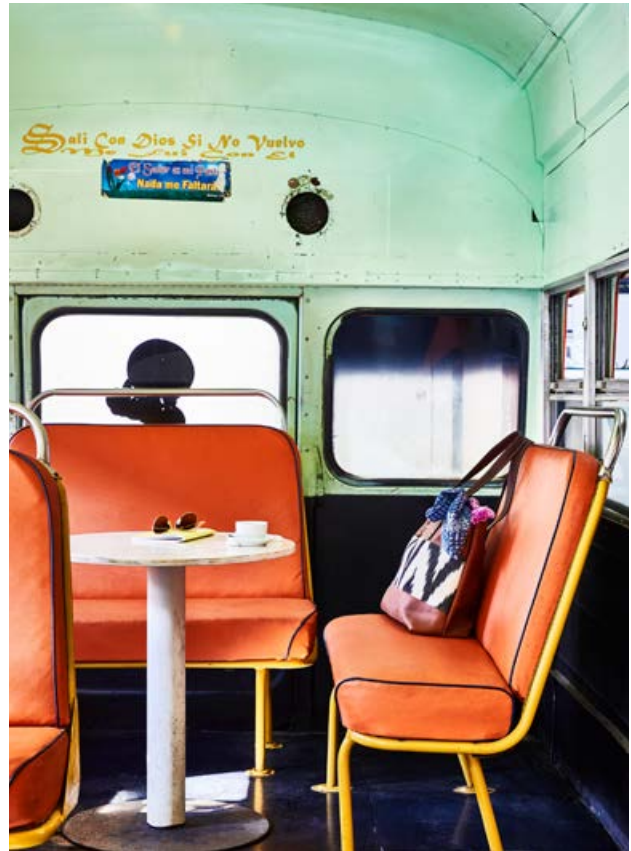
My bearish, garrulous guide, Antonio, who had a habit of interrupting his monologues to point out a pack of raccoon-like coati-mundis or rainbow-billed toucans, grew up playing hide-and-seek in Tikal. When he was 9 or 10, one of the pilots of the orange cargo planes—nicknamed “flying papayas”—took him and his friends up to view the ruins by air. “It was his wife’s birthday, and he gave us cake and candy,” Antonio recalled. “It was the best day of my life.”

Recently the Pacunam Foundation, an NGO focused on conservation and sustainable development, created an enhanced version of this view using LiDAR, a 3D-mapping tool that revealed 60,000 more houses, temples, and palaces under the trees. The discovery suggests a sophisticated civilization comparable to ancient Greece or China, with highways, irrigation, and agricultural terracing that could support 10 to 15 million people—twice previous estimates. The organization and government are working to create a circuit to connect Tikal, Uaxactún, and other sites still hidden in the jungle.

The closest I could get to this god’s-eye view was to climb the wooden scaffold up the pyramid of Temple IV, at 230 feet, the tallest pre-Columbian structure in the Americas. The forest was pierced by five more temples, their crumbling roof combs reaching into clouds the color of steel wool. From these temples, Mayan astronomers calculated the rising and setting points of the sun and moon.

Like other ancient civilizations, the Maya had necropolises and

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
Tikal Temple 1, or Temple of the Great Jaguar, in Tikal National Park;
Antigua’s colorful Felisa Café inside La Nueva Fábrica; the sustainable Cassa Zenda is surrounded by jungle and accessible by riverboat; a woman in the township of Santiago Atitlán







OPPOSITE
The gardens at
Hotel Palacio de
Doña Leonor

ABOVE
Artista de Café,
a coffee shop in
Antigua

buried their dead with maize in their mouth—food for the journey to the underworld and a symbol of rebirth. That afternoon, an archaeologist from Pacunam would take me into a dig behind Temple IV, where in a narrow tunnel a team of young Guatemalans caked in white limestone was gingerly tapping away through layers of history, one edifice built on top of another in cycles of 52 years, said to be the life expectancy for royalty.

“To die was not the end, but a transition,” Antonio explained as we crossed the grassy main plaza, where indigenous visitors still use the ceremonial firepit. The spirit, he added, was thought to descend underground to the sacred ceiba tree, then rise up to the sky. “To do what? To feed the stars to keep them guiding new generations. Under that philosophy, you are never alone. It’s very common to see people at night outside their houses looking to the sky and talking to those who are one step ahead. This is one way you get to understand how people living with not too much in this country always smile.”

Back at La Lancha I paddled out on Lake Petén Itzá until the guests drinking sundowners on the thatched jetty were the size of the worry dolls in the local souvenir stalls. From my canoe I

watched the sun sink into a mountain on one side and a nearly full moon rise on the other—yesterday and tomorrow held in momentary balance before the Long Count plunged the lake into dusk.

GUATEMALA MEANS “PLACE OF MANY TREES,” but it is also a place of many volcanoes: 37 of them. This topography rises up to greet you when you fly into Guatemala City, the entry point to the country’s rural western highlands. The roads out of the city are smooth yet choked by traffic and “chicken buses,” old U.S. school buses repainted like spaceships and decks of cards.

Along the Pan-American Highway, the cement-block commercial strips soon yield to rich volcanic farmland growing sugarcane, coffee, squash, and, most significantly, bananas. This is the fertile cornucopia that the American-owned United Fruit Company controlled for decades. When, in the 1950s, Guatemala’s president attempted a more equitable land redistribution, the CIA deemed the move to be a Communist plot and instigated a coup, unleashing the civil war, whose effects were felt most deeply in this region.

I spent the night at a temporary camp called Beyond Expeditions, high on a cliff above Lake Atitlán, a stunning crater lake that is the deepest in Central America. Cows nibbled at the grass behind the airy white canvas tents outfitted with woven blankets, lanterns, and wood-fired stoves. Children came from the village to try out their English and throw sticks on the campfire. Across the lake the notched silhouette of Volcán de Fuego, one of the country’s three active volcanoes, puffed ribbons of smoke.

The operation is managed by Noé Carrillo Vasquez, a 40-year-old Guatemalan with shining eyes and an athletic build. At 10, he left his highlands village on foot and traveled more than 1,000 miles to the U.S., where he found work cleaning toilets in an IHOP in Rome, Georgia. He earned a college soccer scholarship but missed his family and returned home, finding work with an eco-tourism company, which has allowed him to put eight of his 11 siblings through school. “It’s no big deal,” he said with a shrug. “Everyone here has a story like it.” The small tented kitchen is run by his sister Carolina, a pink-cheeked 27-year-old who is studying for a business degree. Wearing a traditional woven huipil shirt and ikat wrap skirt, she wordlessly prepared her mother’s pepián. A cold wind hammered the tent as we devoured the stew of tomatoes, potatoes, and corn, thickened with ground sesame and pumpkin seeds and spiced with dried chiles.

The next day we took a small fiberglass boat to Santiago Atitlán, the largest of the 11 towns on the lake. It was market day and the narrow, sloped sidewalks were jammed with women in colorful textiles and hair sashes, carrying sacks of produce. Children used head straps to haul wood. On a corner beside two women palming corn tortillas, a young man preached salvation from his Bible, one of the growing ranks of evangelicals in the western highlands.

The town of Santiago Atitlán was the site of terrible violence during the civil war. In 1981 pro-government gunmen killed the American priest Father Stanley Rother, who had established a school for his Tzutujil parishioners. A military massacre of civilians followed in 1990. I found Guatemalans to be almost uniformly friendly, but here the townspeople hurry along, avoiding eye contact.

It’s also the home of the Mayan idol Maximon, eccentrically

represented by a carved wooden effigy in a suit and brimmed hat, who is said to have foretold the arrival of the Spanish. He is guarded in a different household each year, though locals will share his whereabouts. I found him in a candlelit home, where a young couple had come to ask the deity to bless their new business. A *bruje*, or shaman, with a wide face and gold teeth knelt beside them and waved a can of incense, while two guards sat beside Maximon lighting a cigarette in his lips, occasionally replacing it with a bottle of moonshine—earthly pleasures to keep the deity happy.

Mayan religious tradition has blended with Catholicism over the generations, shape-shifting to survive. In Father Rother's old church, a carved tableau depicts Maximon and Mayan gods alongside the saints. Other messages hide in plain sight. Through color, material, and patterns on their huipils, indigenous women can read complex encoded information about one another, like birthplace, religion, or social position. But with the influx of cheap, global factory-made garments, the traditional way of dressing is quickly vanishing.

In the nearby village of San Juan La Laguna, there's a movement to preserve this ancient craft and harness it for economic empowerment. Here, in a kind of female creative Arcadia, dozens of women-run weaving co-ops produce gorgeous artisanal textiles from natural dyes, steering profits back into the Tzutujil community. The town has a chillier vibe than Santiago Atitlán, with neat streets, trippy murals, and leafy cafés selling the region's famed coffee, and tapestry-lined workshops where women weave on traditional backstrap looms, using spools of organic cotton in colors squeezed from indigo and cochineal, the insects that produce carmine. Across from a chocolate maker, a collective of herbalists, midwives, and bone-setters operate a small medicinal garden with plots of mugwort and rue, selling soaps and supplements out of their shop.

At Galeria de Arte Chiya, Angelina Quic Ixtamer paints canvases in the Mayan "naïf" style. As she tells it, she was standing on the lakeside mountain known as Indian Nose (for, yes, its resemblance to a man's profile) and was seized with the urge to paint the world from above. Back home she told her kids to fill baskets with fruit and corn and sit outside, and she sketched the tableau from the balcony. Her signature aerial views of local life in gumdrop colors—women in a flower market, men gathering coffee beans—have been widely emulated, as has her enterprising spirit: There are now six working woman artists in San Juan La Laguna. But Angelina is the original.

The country has portals that seem to deliver the visitor into a living past

THE PAST AND PRESENT COLLIDE IN THE CITY OF Antigua, the onetime Spanish capital with UNESCO-protected cobblestone streets and colonial façades of ochre, pink, and umber. The scars of many earthquakes are evident—the Cathedral of Santiago, destroyed in July 1773, is a haunting shell of archways and pillars favored by the city's pigeons. The city's high-ceilinged residences with leafy courtyards have drawn many expats, who can be spotted sitting in tiled cafés sipping matcha lattes and mezcal, or browsing La Nueva Fábrica, the city's excellent contemporary art gallery.

Above the city, on a 150-year-old coffee farm, a modern glass box houses Luna Zorro, a "weaving workplace" where San Francisco expat Molly Berry offers workshops and advises young artisans. One morning two sisters in their 20s from a highlands village wove on backstrap and foot looms; they're learning about management and accounting while supporting their family back home. "Textiles are the heart and soul of Guatemala," said Molly, who moved from Panama City with her Guatemalan husband and young children six years ago. "By helping women understand how much it's valued, and that they in turn are valued, I hope more will decide to stay with it."

On my last afternoon I found the streets around Parque Central blocked off. Ducking through the crafts vendors, balloon hawkers, and marimba players, I spotted a procession carrying a carved painted Virgin on an enormous platform around the square. The platform was borne by older women in red skirts and dainty lace headscarves. As they shuffled along to the strains of the brass band following them, they swayed in unison, stopping every few minutes to allow a team of young men to lift the weight off their shoulders. Like their country, they were moving forward, with patience and persistence, to the steady tempo of the Long Count. **T**

DOING GUATEMALA

Where to Stay

Family Coppola Hideaways now runs a circuit among its Central America hotels. I started in Placencia, Belize, at the barefoot-luxe **Turtle Inn** (doubles from \$329; thefamilycoppolahideaways.com), before heading to **Cassa Zenda** (from \$3,500 for eight people; cassazenda.com), a jungle-ensconced cluster of

four thatched-roof cabins and plain air lounges. Next I was driven to **La Lancha** (doubles from \$179; thefamilycoppolahideaways.com), a collection of 10 hillside bungalows on Lake Petén Itzá, the gateway to Tikal National Park. A short flight to Guatemala City and a three-hour drive through the mountains got me to Viaventure's **Beyond Expeditions** (doubles from \$739; viaventure.com), a

temporary tented camp that creates jobs for the villagers and leaves no trace when broken down. Across the water, **Casa Palopó** (doubles from \$298; casapalopo.com), the country's only Relais & Châteaux, has 12 stylish rooms. In Antigua, stay at classy **Hotel Palacio de Doña Leonor** (doubles from \$172; palaciodeleonor.com) or **Las Cruces** (doubles from \$208; [lascrucesboutiquehotel](http://lascrucesboutiquehotel.com)

.com), an 11-suite former private home with 17th-century silver and paintings.

How to Book It

Luxury outfitter **Black Tomato** (blacktomato.com) designed this trip. They can arrange this nine-night itinerary to Belize and Guatemala from \$11,900 per person based on two people, including accommodation, tours, and local transfers. —A.P.



The brightly colored rooms and common spaces at Casa Palopó are as captivating as the hotel's surroundings on Lake Atitlán