

# GUATEMALA *Central America*



## Guatemala City

*Aka Guate. Located in a mountain valley, all roads are said to lead out of the capital city - but it's worth a short stop. Home to 2 million people, split into 13 zones, Zona Viva (10) is the upscale business district with many restaurants & hotels. Yes, you need to be street wise, but you can enjoy the different neighborhoods of the capital by day and with a little common sense enjoy a few of them after dark too.*

**Chichi - dead or alive. P2**  
**Bulldozers & Bandits. P3**

## ✧ Shh... We've Found A Gem ✧

*It's day two of our trip and I'm wondering what took us so long. Why have we never visited before now? It's what every traveller hopes for, a hidden gem - the proverbial box of chocolates, history, scenery, ruins, textiles, mountains & Adventure...with a capital A.*

## COUNTRY IS MADE FOR A CAMERA

Neighboring Belize, Mexico, El Salvador, and Honduras, for many travelers, the capital Guatemala City is a jumping off point. The Museum of Archeology and Ethnology has a great collection and displays Mayan history well. Just 40 minutes away lies the charming colonial city of Antigua, with its well preserved buildings and photogenic volcano's it's calmer and safer than the city, making it

an ideal place to wander the cobblestones, admire the Spanish architecture, take in the ruins, or take salsa classes with the locals. In total contrast, 3000+ people live or work in Guatemala City's infamous rubbish tip. While visiting the area and clicking your camera is not recommended, several organizations can help boomers connect with the 'dump dwellers' by marking their visit to the city by doing a good deed.



## Tikal

*Visit the UNESCO World Heritage Site from Guate, fly to Flores; the ruins lie 40 mins away by road.*

El Peten, northeast Guatemala, is the protected tropical rainforest setting for Tikal, the largest of the ancient Mayan's ruined cities.

A sprawling complex of more than 3000 structures, whose spectacular temples rise above the dense jungle canopy. An early morning flight can have boomers back at the hotel in time for a nightcap. Or, take your time, and enjoy a two/three day tour with one of several operators.





## Going Nowhere - Just Sitting Pretty

There's roadworks ahead and homemade stingers straddle the tarmac, there's nothing to do but sit and wait. We're on our way to a famous local market in Chichicastenango, but the side show gathering at our impromptu pit stop is so entertaining, there's little time to think about what

we could be missing elsewhere. Local buses join the queue and a swarm of village peddlers appear from nowhere. Outdoor kitchens are set up and hot chicken skewers are relayed onto the waiting busses. With a shy smile, children, as cute as can be in traditional dress, sell fruit and small bags of nuts.



### WORTH WAITING

We opened the car door and Chichicastenango charged right at us. Nearby is some kind of event, the blaring music takes us in for a closer look. In a back room straw is strewn over the floor, more chicken is served, there's dancing



and drinking, lots of drinking, and it's only 10 a.m. This town sure likes to celebrate.

### SANTO TOMAS

The steps of the church are strewn with flowers,



we walk through a cloud of incense to reach the door. Behind us, the market is in full swing, vendors and locals mix in a sea of candles, textiles & colorful masks, there's pigs and chickens - there's always chickens.

### FULL OF LIFE

A funeral procession passes with smiles all around. Down the hill sit's a colorful cemetery, we go off to investigate. The sound of benzine bombs fill the air, locals signal us to duck for cover - evil spirits are being blasted from our path. Boomers, leave plenty of time for your trip to Chichi.

In this town, even the dead are lively.



## Lake Atitlan - It's Unforgettable

Our memories of this area come from both ends of the compass. Les remembers the scenic beauty, the deep lake surrounded by towering volcano's; he claims that driving up through the highlands was a treat too. Farmers in traditional textiles worked the fields, mist rolled in and out over the mountain tops, it was all very picturesque. Me? I remember it quite differently. I remember bulldozers...and bandits.

**SOLOLA MARKET TOWN** Heading back from the traditional outdoor market in Solola, life was good. We had the entire market town to ourselves, there wasn't another tourist insight, a rare treat. We squeezed ourselves between locals, inching our way down tiny isles with everything you might possibly need to sustain another week in a rural Mayan village. Solola was a riot of color, a cacophony of sound. Vendors were shouting, neighbors were laughing, pigs were squealing and there we stood, in the middle of it all, smiling.

**BULLDOZERS** On the way back we called in at a small lakeside village where you either arrive by boat or crossed a narrow concrete bridge, it was so peaceful - a complete contrast to the market. We wandered, watching weavers and carpenters, we sat down by the dock to admire the view, I guess we stayed longer than we intended, it was time to go. We turned the corner and slammed on the brakes - a massive pile of dirt lay between us and the bridge. We tried explaining, but nobody spoke a word of English and we speak only restaurant Spanish. A chap walking down the hill overheard our accent, a conversation with more hand movements than words began, "You English, Si?" "Si, English" "Football. Manchester United. Good" "We're from Manchester, going back to England on the plane" Les embellished by stretching his arms out at 45 degrees and looking up-to the sky. A crowd gathered, all very proud to have visitors in their village, they would have warned us before starting work, but tourists don't usually come here (we think) they explained. Several animations later - we were rescued by 11 guys in red and white shirts. Manchester United's number one fan called for reinforcements, and never, have I been so glad to see two large bulldozers trundle down a remote mountain road. An hour, (or so) later, we were on our way back, not to England, but to Guatemala City.

**BANDITS** We pulled in for one last photo of the lake, a car flew past us. Is that more benzine bombs we can hear? Moments later, the same car hurtled back in the opposite direction, slowing briefly, just long enough for the driver to wave his arms and yell "Bandido's! Back. Go back". We jumped in our car and hurtled off, following in the wake of his exhaust fumes, but less than a mile down the road we came to a complete stop. Our 4 wheel drive car had just become a three wheeler. Here we are in the middle of bandit country, gun shots ringing out and we're stuck - again. A party from the Red Cross came by warning us about danger in the area, bandits were stopping traffic and stripping both driver and car naked. Many hours, and many events later, we were rescued. His name was Oscar and he drove a VW Golf with all 4 wheels attached. Long after the sun had set and the thin mountain air had become chilly, the car hire company arrived to tow our vehicle, but with no room for passengers. It was Oscar - the knight in a shining VW - who eventually delivered us back to Guatemala City and the safety of our comfortable hotel.

