



antigua

Left abandoned amid glowering volcanoes at the height of Spain's central American empire, Sarah Murray discovers that Guatemala's aspic city has restored its gift for gracious living.

A perfect day in Antigua goes something like this: crisp blue skies with a cool morning edge make way for warm sun that spreads generously across the stones of ruined churches and colonial buildings until afternoon, when the heavens darken, thunder rolls and cobbled streets turn briefly to rivers of rainwater before clouds clear and calm is restored. And that's in the rainy season. For, with the sun's heat tempered by a lofty position at 5,000 feet above sea level, this ancient colonial capital in the central highlands of Guatemala offers a permanently spring-like climate to the weekend visitor seeking luxurious refreshment.

The Spaniards clearly liked the weather – for two centuries they turned Antigua into one of the Spanish empire's most elegant and influential cities. That is, until series of devastating earthquakes hit in 1773. The destruction proved too much for its citizens and the capital was relocated to what is now Guatemala City, 40km to the east. But seismic activity inadvertently acted as a historic preservation mechanism, leaving the city untouched by modern developments.

Strolling around this architectural jewel of elegant mansions, baroque churches

and cobbled pavements, it's hard to believe it was only in 1996 that Guatemala's brutal civil war ended. And much of the country remains extremely poor. But with a new president at the helm, Guatemalans are enjoying a tentative mood of optimism.

And elegance has returned to Antigua's historic streets. Now a Unesco World Heritage Site, this is a place where you can sample the subtle flavours of a Moroccan tagine in a verdant garden at Sarandib, linger over cappuccinos in a

sun-dappled courtyard at Café Condessa or sip margaritas in the magnificent grounds of the Hotel Casa Santo Domingo, a ruined monastery that is now one of the city's better hostels.

But while, with candlelit cloisters, lush gardens and a classy restaurant, the Casa Santo Domingo, is a spectacular setting for dinner or cocktails, the rather ordinary guest rooms are certainly not the only choice of accommodation. For as Antigua has become the destination for an up-

market bunch of visitors – both foreigners and affluent locals making a weekend escape from the grime of Guatemala City – many of its villas have been converted into exquisite boutique hotels.

Hidden behind an unassuming entrance door, to which turquoise paint clings only tenuously, is the enchanting interior of the Posada Del Ángel, where eclectic collections of

Above: under the Agua volcano, one of the city's three volcanic peaks. Left: floral route of a Holy Week procession.

antiques furnish rooms that cluster round an open courtyard along which a long narrow pond framed by verdant foliage turns out to be a small swimming pool.

And just round the corner is another gem. The chief attraction at Casa Encantada is its wonderful rooftop suite and breakfast on a terrace from which, to one side looms the majestic Agua – one of three volcanoes that watch over Antigua – and to the other are the terracotta roofs and rampant bougainvillea that characterise the town's skyline.

Antigua's elegant charms are a far cry from the familiar image of central America: dusty roads, chickens on buses and refried beans. And yet, when Semana Santa, or Holy Week, gets into full swing, thoughts of hedonistic pleasures are soon lost in the religious fervour that draws visitors from across Latin America. Elaborate processions of costumed penitents make their slow progress around town, passing over intricate carpets of flowers and pine needles while devout onlookers cross themselves as holy figures are carried past.

Even when festivals are not taking place, reminders of colonial Catholicism's clout are hard to escape. On the yellow and white façade of Iglesia de la Merced, Guatemalan



how to spend it

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craftsmen clearly had a licence to decorate, for the ornate baroque style has a distinctly local flavour. With curling tendrils and intricate details, the relief work echoes the densely embroidered traditional clothing of the Maya women who gather to sell beads and textiles in the Parque Central, the town's leafy main plaza.

The religious theme also permeates the town's shopping opportunities. At Casa de Artes, among the ceremonial dance masks, furniture, ethnic jewellery and ceramics is a selection of religious painting and statues of saints. At El Patio, silver and wooden religious paraphernalia sit among pieces of rustic antique furniture and ceramics.

The monumental churches and monasteries that once housed these sorts of artifacts dominate almost every street corner here. Often in a ruined state, many remain much as they fell after the 1773



Antigua likes to deceive. An inscrutable exterior conceals a grand mansion of courtyards and reception rooms.

earthquake. At the Convent de la Recoleccion, giant chunks of the once-solid walls are strewn around grassy grounds – a dramatic reminder of the devastation wrought by the earth's movements.

The ruined Convento Las Capuchinas – a labyrinth of cloisters, chapels and dormitories clustering round a strange circular structure for which no one seems to have a satisfactory explanation – provides a glimpse of the Catholic church's former might. Scale models at the entrance look a little dusty but they convey an impression of an empire with boundless ambition, creating grand plazas, religious institutions and palaces wherever it set up camp.

It's hard to believe so much power once emanated from this tiny town. But

Antigua likes to deceive. Behind low-slung adobe walls – thick and squat to withstand earthquakes – Spanish colonialists lived in style, as the Popenoe House museum reveals. An inscrutable exterior conceals a grand mansion of courtyards, gardens, reception rooms stuffed with dark, deeply carved pieces of furniture and a large kitchen whose blackened walls and collection of brass pots are evidence of the lavish meals once whipped up here.

These days, lavish meals are back on the menu in Antigua with the emergence of a growing number of excellent restaurants. Much talked about is Norwegian chef Nils Rykken's Nicolas, which opened earlier this year in a historic mansion where, curiously, in 1774 Dr Manuel Avalos y Porras gave the continent's first demonstration of the blood circulatory system. The affable Rykken, who has lived in Guatemala for eight years, has managed to find an impressive selection of wines to accompany mouthwatering dishes such as shrimp in garlic and virgin olive

oil, tenderloin with pepper sauce, mousse au chocolat and crème caramel.

Another eatery that attracts the local glitterati is at Mesón Panza Verde, a charming boutique hotel where crystal chandeliers hang above earthy terracotta floors and local textiles add colour to the proceedings. At night, Christophe Pache, a French-trained chef, turns out delights such as organic rocket and parmesan salad and trout filet in a wine and grape sauce in a restaurant where stone arches and candlelight provide a suitably antique ambiance.

For fine traditional Guatemalan food, and somewhere that has had more than its fair share of celebrity diners, go to Fonda de la Calle Real. The restaurant still revels in its visit from Bill Clinton in 1999, then attending the Central America Summit, and this year Infanta Cristina of Spain. Don't expect haute cuisine, but look out for dozens of photographs of Clinton standing behind the restaurant's staff of tiny Antiguenos, few of whom stand much taller than his waist. Lucky diners get to sit in a chair bearing the former president's name.

Whether Clinton had time to pick up any souvenirs is doubtful. But had

he wanted to, plenty are at hand. Jewellery lovers can browse round smart boutiques whose display cases are stuffed with gold and semi-precious gems. But jade is what this region is famous for and there is a jungle-hewed palette of greens, black, the unusual lavender jade and rare Mayan Emerald to choose from. At the back of the Jades boutique you can even watch the stones being cut and polished in what is Antigua's largest jade factory.

If you tire of jade, however, pop into Joyeria Del Ángel, just round the corner from the Parque Central. The Texan owner, Mary Sue Morris, is also responsible for Posada Del Angel, and the shop represents jewellery designers from around the world, including Guatemalan artist Isaías Chiquitó.

Chic textiles are available at places such as Textura, Colibrí and El Telar, where traditional Mayan fabrics take on a rich baroque or contemporary flavour in everything from table napkins to cushions, throws, tablecloths and curtains with huge tassels. At Textura, fabric can also be bought by the yard.

At the other end of the price scale, the Mercado Artesanal on the edge of the town sells everything from miniature wooden buses in lurid colours to equally vibrant embroidered skirts – all in extremely large quantities. Small shops and stalls spill over with a generous supply of cheap and cheerful textiles, jade and silver jewellery, leather bags and ceramics.

Even if you're not buying, the market is fun to visit as it's in one of Antigua's liveliest districts and provides a taste of everyday Guatemala. Hawkers, buses and traffic add to the chaos while diesel fumes mix with the smell of laundry soap creating a heady atmosphere. It all comes as a sharp contrast to the quiet elegance of Antigua's centre and serves to remind the weekend visitor just how unique this remarkably preserved city is. ♦



Top: saints find their niches in the 17th century façade of Santiago Cathedral. Above: colourful country buses come to town. Left: Santa Catalina arch dominating low-rise streets.

THE HIT LIST

HOTELS

Prices are for a double room based on two sharing with breakfast.

Casa Encantada, 9a Calle Poniente 1 (00502-7832 7903); £55. **Posada Del Ángel**, 4a Avenida Sur 24a (00502-7832 5303; www.posadadelangel.com); £97.

Mesón Panza Verde, 5 Avenida Sur 19 (00502-7832 1745; www.panzaverde.com); £72.

RESTAURANTS, CAFES

Prices are for a three-course meal for one with half a bottle of wine.

Nicolas, 4a Calle Oriente 20 (00502-7832 0471); £28. **Sarandib**, 3a Calle Oriente, in front of the Hotel Casa Santo Domingo (00502-7832 2604); £22.

Café Condesa, west side of the Parque Central (00502-7832 0038). **Casa Santo Domingo Hotel**, 3a Calle

Oriente 28a (00502-7832 0140); £28.

Fonda de la Calle Real, 3a Calle Poniente 7 (00502-7832 0507); £17.

Mesón Panza Verde, 5 Avenida Sur 19 (00502-7832 1745); £17.

SHOPS AND MARKETS

Casa de Artes, 4a Avenida Sur 11 (00502-7832 0792). **Colibrí**, 4a Calle

Oriente 3b (00502-7832 5028). **El Patio**, 7 Calle Poniente 8 (00502-7832 3481).

Jades, 4a Calle Oriente (00502-7832 3841). **Joyería Del Ángel**, 4 Calle

Oriente 5a, one block East from Parque Central (00502-7832 3189). **Mercado**

Artesanal, 4 Calle Poniente, near the bus terminal. **Textura**, 5a Avenida Norte

33 (00502-7832 5067). **El Telar**, 5a Avenida Sur 7 (00502-7832 3179).

SIGHTS

Convento de la Recoleccion, near Iglesia de San Jerónimo at 1 Calle

Poniente and Alameda de Santa Lucía.

Convento las Capuchinas, 2 Avenida Norte and 2 Calle Oriente. **Iglesia de la Merced**, 1 Calle Poniente and 6 Avenida Norte; daily 9pm-5pm. **Popenoe House**, 1 Avenida Sur and 5 Calle Oriente; Mon-Sat 2pm-4pm.

LESS THAN AN HOUR AWAY

One of Antigua's most astonishing sights is the view from the **Cerro de la Cruz** (The Hill of the Cross). While the cross



itself isn't much to write home about, the vista certainly is. With volcanoes looming in the distance, the city is laid out before you, revealing the neat geometry of colonial grid planning and underlining how untouched this place is. The hill is a short taxi ride from town, but can also be walked (take a guide, as thieves occasionally lurk about the place). A fine way to get a glimpse of some of the lush countryside and coffee farms around Antigua is by horse.

Ravenscroft Riding Stables (00502-7832 6229) arrange guided tours in the mornings from their property in the village of San Juan del Obispo, about 15 minutes outside town.

Left: Posada Del Ángel, a

townhouse turned hotel

offering eclectic styling.

WHEN TO GO

With its mild climate, there are few bad times to visit Antigua. Accommodation should be booked early for Christmas and Holy Week.

HOW TO GET THERE

Sarah Murray stayed at the Posada Del Ángel and Casa Encantada and flew with **Continental Airlines** (0845-607 6760; www.continental.com), which flies direct to Guatemala City from New York Newark every Saturday from £??? and from Houston twice daily from £???. **American Airlines** (0845-789 789; www.americanairlines.co.uk) flies to Guatemala City from Miami twice daily from £435 and from Dallas/Fort Worth daily from £488. **Mexicana** (020-8492 0000; www.mexicana.com) flies twice daily to Guatemala City from Mexico City, from £272. Antigua is about 40 minutes by taxi from Guatemala City.