

Recollections of Guatemala -1

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It was highly improbable that we would ever visit a Central America country again. Although we toured the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico in the late 1970s and Mexico's Copper Canyon in 2005, this region of the world just did not inspire us for a return. But ... never say never; an opportunity presented itself that allowed us to pay a visit to a country that is rapidly gaining attention as a destination for world travelers ... **Guatemala**. The beginning is innocuous.



Last November, friend Jim was planning to build a garage for his new home. He asked for some assistance from me that eventually turned into a full endeavor. Before you could say, "Where's my hammer?", this 66-year old and Jim (at 64) were up to our armpits in constructing a 3-car garage. Three weeks later, exhausted and the job finished, we reflected on the job well done by a couple of 60-year old geezers. I suppose in a gesture of appreciation, or the fact that we got along so well during this project, Jim proposed that Dolores and I join him and his wife Patty on their spring trip to Guatemala to visit her family. Patty was born in Guatemala and Jim lived there for nearly 15 years ... both knew the country well, spoke the language and were interested in renewing some friendships left behind. Dee and I debated this invitation and decided that, being adventuresome and open minded, such a trip would expand our horizons. We agreed to join them and spent the next few weeks ironing

out the details, reservations and scheduling of places to explore. Interestingly, our visitation would coincide with the **Semana Santa** (Easter Holy Week) celebrations in Guatemala. We expected these festivities to be wild and chaotic with wall-to-wall people coming in from around the globe. As our recollections will reveal, we were right. Our trip would begin on March 28th and extend a full 3-weeks. We would explore the capital, **Ciudad de** (city of) **Guatemala**, the lowlands near **Rio Dulce** (Sweet River) near the Caribbean coast and the northern jungles that include the renowned **Mayan** ruins of **Tikal**. From the tropics we would travel back through Ciudad Guatemala to **Antigua** (Old) **Guatemala**, the former capital, in the mountains, the most civilized of Guatemalan cities, to participate in the Semana Santa festivities. Using Antigua as a base, we planned to explore nearby Indian communities to get a flavor of the indigenous people and their many habits (good and bad), customs, arts and crafts. We embarked on this journey with no expectations and tried to leave our "gringo" values home. What we experienced and learned ranged from surprising ... to delightful ... to shocking. Guatemala is more than what one hears about. It's the proverbial third-world country in many respects but nonetheless a beautiful country, full of natural and cultural wonders. The "real" Guatemala is a blend of the two and the reality of the country is something in between. It is a paradox, an enigma and a puzzle. To know the real Guatemala one has to be there and see it for oneself.

Note: During this trip, copious notes were taken so that the 'Recollections' would reflect our true experiences. However, time and fading memories may result in some transposition of facts and actual events. We will attempt to give as accurate depiction of this trip as possible



Why Guatemala? Guatemala offers Central America in concentrated form: its volcanoes are the highest and most active, and its Mayan ruins the most impressive. Guatemala is the Mayan heartland within Central America. Its indigenous culture is alive and well in the ancient ruins of Tikal, the Mayan/Catholic rituals of Chichicastenango and the blazing colors of everyday Mayan dresses.

Facts at a glance:

Country name: Republic of Guatemala
Area: 109,000 sq km (42,500 sq mi)
Population: 11 million (growth rate 2.5%)
Capital city: Guatemala City (pop 2 million)
People: 56% Spanish descent; 44% Mayan descent
Language: Spanish, Garifuna and 21 Maya languages
Religion: Roman Catholic, Mayan-Catholic

March 28th, Tuesday ... the trip unfolds with our departure on. Flight was to leave El Paso to Houston at 1:45PM. Friend **Sandra** drove us to the El Paso airport with plenty of time to secure our boarding passes and await the flight. No sooner do we park our butts at the gate than we learn that our flight was delayed. Seems there was a thunderstorm in Houston with major flooding. Our flight would not leave until 3:45PM. Still not bad was our thinking. We would arrive in Houston with ample time to catch our 7:10PM flight to Guatemala City. We sat and waited ... only to learn with disbelief that our flight was further delayed until 4:20PM. Now time was beginning to work against us. Finally, at 4:30PM, the plane arrived ... we were boarded ... and waited some more. Frustration set in as we finally departed at 5:05PM. We had the nagging feeling that we would miss our connecting flight in Houston. When we landed and disembarked we made a mad rush to the interconnecting tram to go to the international terminal. The air was hot and humid. Perspiration soaked our shirts as we scrambled and hurried to the next gate. When we got to the gate at 7:13PM we were greeted not by the flight to Guatemala City but one to Mexico City (or something similar). We missed our flight by minutes.

Exasperated, we hung our heads in frustration and headed to the customer service counter for options. Sure enough, there were others in line with similar problems ... missed connections. Our customer rep was kind enough and was able to secure another flight for the four of us ... but not until 9AM the following morning. We were given vouchers for an overnight stay at a local hotel and four \$6 vouchers for meals (how generous). Being resigned to our dilemma we grabbed our carry-on bags and headed out to the staging area for hotel shuttle buses. If you ever miss a flight and have to endure the horde of people totally angry at the world, try standing in line at a staging point. Courtesy goes out the window, "me first" is the law, and elbowing is the norm. After a 45-minute wait our shuttle arrives, we elbow our way on board and endure a 12-mile ride to the hotel. Not many happy campers on this bus. At the hotel one of us runs to be first in line at the counter and begins the process of checking in. Rooms were available (good luck here) and we're finally off to our assigned cells ... it's 10:30PM. No of us had anything to eat since breakfast because we assumed that we would have a late meal on the flight to Guatemala City. Now our tummies were begging for something to eat. Every eatery near the hotel was closed ... only option, calling for delivery from some carryout place. A Chinese diner was open according to a card in the room and we used our cell phone to order some greasy food ... delivery in 30 minutes. Jim knocked on the door to use our dell phone ... calling from the room required a \$25 deposit. Food arrived in the time promised and at 11:30PM we sat on our beds to a meal that was ample, filling but not nutritious. What a way to start a trip. Had to call the car rental company in Guatemala to advise them of our delayed arrival. Sleep was hard to come by ... considering our full stomachs.

The next morning, **March 29th, Wednesday**, came fast ... foggy and gloomy. We did minimal hygiene considering everything was in our checked baggage. Had to wear the same underwear ... same soggy shirts ... and same smelly socks. Breakfast in our room consisted of putrid coffee and nothing else. What could a \$6 voucher buy? We made do with the inconvenience and checked out at 7AM. Went downstairs to meet the shuttle ... that was absent. A full-sized bus pulled up and agreed to take us to the airport at no charge. "Big Mama" was the driver and gospel music was the entertainment. The 20-minute ride was uneventful but full of anecdotes from "Big Mama" who was expecting a tip from the passengers. We did not have any baggage so none of us left a tip. At the airport we had to endure the security thing and proceeded to our gate. Time was adequate and our \$6 vouchers bought some juices, muffins, and coffee. Jim had a breakfast of sorts' ... burrito I guess. Then it was time to head out to the departure gate and meet our fellow passengers. What a zoo - fellow American travelers and Guatemalans, pushing and shoving, each scrambling to get on board as fast as possible because someone may take their seat. Boarding order ignored ... "me first" ... carry-on's exceeding common sense and rules ... and Guatemalan's that did not understand English instructions. I was half-expecting a Guatemalan to bring live chickens on board for the entire episode resembled a boarding of a "chicken bus." In a way it was humorous ... in another way it was a reminder that air travel has deteriorated in manners and courtesy. That's the price one pays for cheap airfare ... although our airfare was anything but cheap.



Departure was on time ... our seats were in the exit row ... and comfort was our reward. In the future exit rows will command a \$15 premium. The meal served was adequate ... although the screaming kid on board made for an uncomfortable flight. Filled out the Guatemalan Customs declaration ... as if they expected me to bring in something of value other than myself and my few \$\$\$\$. I declared nothing. The 3-hour flight was smooth. As we approached Guatemala City the mountainous terrain made me a little nervous. Volcanic peaks surround the city and the city itself lays in an amphitheater on a high plateau with a 200-foot deep ravine on the approach. The runway slopes upwards as if to catch a runaway aircraft and to assist in braking. The city's high-rise buildings lined both sides of the only runway. Derelict, abandoned and scrapped aircraft appear like ghosts alongside the runway. Every imaginable type of rusty aircraft lies forlornly, harkening for past glory days. Looks like a typical junkyard ... unseen anywhere else in the world that we flew into. Is this an emerging country or one that is left behind as if in a time warp?

Our 737 landing was smooth ... the taxi to the terminal speedy and our disembarking typical ... as soon as the seatbelt sign was extinguished it was a mad rush to the exit.

Passport control was fast; our agent spoke English and welcomed us to Guatemala (one of the few true smiling faces we encountered on this trip.) The terminal itself was clean but stark ... it showed its age. It was undergoing a major renovation so there was rampant confusion everywhere. We lopped along to the baggage claim area and joined the mob in retrieving our luggage. Again courtesy was neglected as people rushed and shoved to take their luggage off the carousel. Did not hear a single "excuse me" as we were pushed out of the way. A Guatemalan marimba band was playing somewhere in the baggage claim area ... supposedly to make everyone feel as if they arrived in paradise. Eventually we retrieved our luggage, submitted our customs forms and exited the terminal to a chaotic scene. We felt as if we were embraced by a moving mass of people as we were pushed and shoved out of the terminal onto the sidewalk outside. "Damn", I said to myself, as the Guatemalan Indian behind me kept hitting me on the back of my legs with their cart. Hurt like hell but they just kept on pushing. No sense asking for patience as these morons did not understand common courtesy. Took a minute or two and with aching legs we made our way to the curb.

We reserved a car and were on the lookout for the rental counter but discovered that it was located, not in the airport, but in the city proper. Saw a "Budget Rent-a-car" placard; the agent was waiting for us and motioned that the shuttle was to arrive soon. In the meantime, as we waited on the sidewalk, the pushing and shoving continued as people with carts tried to ram their way through our foursome without a single "excuse me." "Screw 'em", was our attitude now as we stood our ground and glared with dirty looks. The Guatemalans just did not get it ... they expected us to kowtow to their rude behavior but we did not budge. The overall scene outside was pure chaos as horn blared ... cars parked everywhere including sidewalks ... elbowing and shoving pervasive ... and taxi drivers beckoning for customers. The air was warm but not hot. The humidity was low but beads of sweat started to form on my forehead due to the strain of dealing with mob mentality. Coupled with armed guards patrolling with shotguns our arrival was less than harmonious. Still, we casually waited for the shuttle to make its way to our position ... loaded our luggage and made a hasty departure from the airport and into the city traffic.

About Guatemala City ... there were three attempts to establish a capital before Guatemala City was founded in 1775. The first colonial settlement, called Santiago de los Caballeros Guatemala, was built in 1524 by the conquistador Pedro de Alvarado close to the Cakchiquel settlement of Iximché (near the present day town of Tecpán). After continuing battles with the Cakchiquel warriors, the capital was relocated in 1527 to the Almolonga Valley, near present-day San Miguel Escobar, between the volcanoes Agua and Fuego until an earthquake destroyed it in 1541. A third capital was then established just a few kilometers away on the present site of la Antigua Guatemala in the Panchoy Valley. Established as the new city in 1543, it was decided to retain the name of Santiago while the former (second) capital was referred to as Ciudad Vieja, or Old City. The new capital grew in wealth, size and prestige, surviving a number of earthquakes until 1773, when it was hit by a huge earthquake and eventually abandoned. The capital moved to its present location while the former capital was thereafter known as la Antigua Guatemala or Old Guatemala.

The capital, Guatemala City, lies at the edge of a plateau cut by deep ravines in the Valley of the Hermitage. Few colonial buildings remain but the old quarter, with its low colonial houses, is situated in the northern part of the city. The main plaza, Parque Central lies at its heart and is bordered by the National Palace, the Cathedral, the National Library and an arcade of shops. In the south of the city, close to the airport and the national racecourse, are Parque la Aurora, which contains the zoo, the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology and the Ixchel Museum, housing a good collection of hand-woven textiles.



There was this sense of excitement as the shuttle made its way through the city. The sounds and smells that permeated the air made us acutely aware that we were in for an adventure. The din of traffic was deafening; horns blaring, the in-and-out weaving of cars and buses (left) made for a dizzying ride. The city's architecture was old and appeared chaotic and decaying. Not a single new or modern building to be seen anywhere on our route. To me the city's infrastructure was mystifying. Few things I saw made sense. But, as said before, we left our expectations behind and simply absorbed what we encountered. Twenty minutes later we approached the car rental office. A shotgun-armed guard lowered the barrier chain to the compound. We unloaded our luggage and proceeded to the counter. Jim and Patty conducted the rental agreement while I visually inspected the rental car for dings and damage. Our rental was a 4-door Mitsubishi Lancer ... 4 cylinder ... manual shift ... A/C. Underpowered but adequate for our traveling. Rental contract completed ... we loaded our baggage and happily left the compound after the guard lowered the

chain. Happily here means we were on our way but the happiness would be tempered when we return the rental. Later we would discover, to our dismay, that we were 'screwed.' Partially our fault, Budget found a way to stick it to us. More on that later.

Our holiday begins. Jim knew the Guatemala City reasonably well and made his way to the hotel where we had reservations. Oh yes ... Jim drove the entire trip. Not that I was hesitant to drive but our survival on the road depended on a seasoned and assertive driver who was able to manage the roads, buses and "no rule" driving. Guatemalan roads are not for the faint hearted ... the rule-of-law does not exist here and every driver feels as if the road belongs to them exclusively – especially the bus drivers. Hesitate or be meek and you are road-kill. As our trip progresses we will describe, in detail, just how wild and insanely



Guatemalans drive. But I digress ... we're on our way to the hotel. Guatemala City is divided into zones and Jim chose the **Tally Hotel** (left) because it was in a 'reasonably safe' zone. We maneuvered our way through the traffic, onto narrow side streets and tried to locate the hotel that was poorly marked. Almost immediately we are confronted with a typical Guatemalan woman driver that cut us off and made a right-hand turn from the left lane, nearly ripping off our fender. No signal, no hand gesture, just swinging wildly in front of us. Yes, it is that crazy. Driving in this country vacillates between frustrating and utterly dangerous. But as Jim points out it's their country and they can do as they will. We must have passed the Tally Hotel twice for eventually a small, innocuous green sign pointed the way. We pulled into the small and crowded parking lot that lay behind some massive steel gates. No armed guard in sight. The clerk recognized Jim from previous stays and we went through the check-

in process with ease. Our credit cards were OK here ... room rate was Q480 (~\$62 USD for 2 nights). **Q** in this instance stands for the Guatemalan currency, which is the **quetzales** (spoken as it is spelled - **quen-tza-les**) ... with a conversion rate of roughly 7.5 Q's for \$1 USD. The hotel may have been somewhat elegant in the past but those days have lapsed. Now it is considered "quaint." Our rooms were adjoining and on the second floor. Three beds ... a TV ... tile floor ... wild Mayan-colored wall. Clean ... but with a faint, musty odor. Bathroom included a deep tiled shower and a separate WC. Not the best but adequate; hot water was promised.

Hot water ... now there is a subject worth discussing. As we will learn throughout this trip, hot water is a commodity that is rare in Guatemala. Being a tropical country, the Guatemalans are reluctant to use hot water ... after all, the country is warm most of the time and heating water is considered a luxury and expensive, requiring additional plumbing and energy to heat. But, in a gesture of accommodation to tourists that are used to hot water, most (but not all) hotels have a couple of rooms with hot water, an average of 2 rooms per hotel as we have experienced. But the oddity does not end here ... the hot water is only in the shower. And even then, with ½" plumbing pipes and low water pressure the amount of water ejected is so sparse that showering required a dance around the fine spray. The faucets in the vanity dispense only cold water. Washing your hands and face ... as well as shaving ... has to be with cold water. It is something that one has to get used to with resigned acceptance. For 3 weeks I did not have a single decent shave without a nick or two. A number of times a shower had to be abandoned ... no hot water or no water pressure. Like I said ... a 3rd world country.

A Guatemalan that Jim knew happened to stop by the hotel and the two greeted each other. The conversation was short and to the point ... the Guatemalan asked Jim how many women he had in the US. That was the only point of interest to him ... the women. Jim pointed to his wedding ring and indicated "1". We both laughed about this later for it indicated very pointedly of the **machismo** of the Latino male. Their principal preoccupation is with sex and bragging about it. Any and every conversation includes this topic in some form or another. They believe they are studs and every woman should drool over them. They will whistle at any passing lone female, average to good looking, and blow their car or bus horn to grab their attention. Stupid if not derogatory, but that's their style. Most men sport mustaches because they think it's a female allure. Frankly, most Latino men are sex-crazed with little or no respect for the female gender that they consider discardable. Mistresses and auto-hotels (see my "*Recollections of Mexico, 2005*") are common and accepted as normal. It is not uncommon in any village for a family man to have a second woman and multiple children by her. Many families are common-law ... no formal marriages. Why do women tolerate such arrangements? Because they have no other options ... kick him out and you have no support. Men abandon women and children to move on to other relationships. Girls as young as 13 or 14 years of age carry infants on their backs ... not sisters or brothers but their own children. Children having children is a norm ... believe it! Sadly, I heard someone define a Guatemalan virgin as "a girl who can run faster than her father, her brother and the neighbors." My opinion, but after Mexico 2005 and 3 weeks in Guatemala I concluded that the average Latino man has the principles of an alley cat. Sorry – this is not a judgment call; it's based on observation and many conversations with locals, ex-pats and Guatemalans themselves. But ... in the Guatemalan (or Latino) culture this is accepted behavior and who am I to criticize it, for my Western values and lifestyle may

seem odd and even prudish to them. It does not take long for an intelligent visitor to this country to understand this culture and its idiosyncrasies ... just don't try to change or condemn it. As Guatemalans are prone to say ... "It's my country!"

With some time to spare we hop in the car again and just go for a drive through the nearby areas just to have Jim re-familiarize himself with the city's layout. Familiar landmarks are pointed out and we make a few bad turns (down a one-way street for example), through an underground parking lot by mistake (and have to pay to get out), and past many **vendoras** (street vendors) plying their wares. Needing local currency we park near some banks and tried to locate one that was open and friendly to white faces. We located one, entered, got a number and waited for an open customer service agent. A short time later our number was called, we conducted our business with a non-English speaking young woman who demanded our passports to make sure we were legitimate. Everywhere else in the world currency conversion is a snap – here they do not trust anyone. She even rejected a \$100 bill because it had a very tiny tear in the crease. Yet the Guatemalan currency we received in exchange was as filthy as anything imaginable ... soiled, worn thin and heaven knows where it was stashed by Guatemalan Indians (perhaps in their **chi-chi's**, as women's breasts are referred to). We exchanged enough to get by for a few days. We returned to the hotel.

This foursome is a frugal bunch ... not cheap – frugal. First order of business is to locate a nearby **tienda** (local small market) and procure some provisions ... utensils, knives, cups, plates, paper towels, breakfast items of coffee, oatmeal and juices, Coke and Pepsi, **agua pura** (water) **agua minerala** (mineral water) and that most important commodity – **RUM!** Man does not travel on water alone. We consider rum to be one of the food groups in the pyramid of nutrition. Finding one a few blocks away we enter with trepidation ... shotgun-armed guards are posted on each entry. They do not look happy and have their fingers just too close to the trigger. Wonder if they are properly trained and know how to shoot or are inclined to just point that thing and blast away? Guarding a small market? Just another example of what this country has to offer. By the way ... armed security is the second biggest industry in Guatemala ... probably after banking. Bananas, coffee and tourism are somewhere down the line. Ever see a Coke delivery truck with an armed guard? Yes, drivers were robbed and killed for their day's receipts. Or an optical store posting two guards (not just one)? Pharmacies, **parques** (parking lots), electronic stores (right) ... you name it ... have armed guards. Welcome to a democratic, 21st century Guatemala. And I thought the war ended 15 years ago.



Fully stocked we make our way back to the hotel and unwind with R&C's (rum and cokes – Cuba Libre). Dolores made a purchase of boxed Chilean wine; Patty does not drink. As the hour was getting late and we dare not venture out into the streets after dark we elect to eat in and order 2 Domino's pizzas. Within 30 minutes they arrive – hot and with a familiar odor. Not exactly typical Guatemalan food but one that can offer some comfort. They're not exactly cheap though – American prices, Q230, almost \$15 USD each. Consumed with delight and washed down with R&C the evening was spent planning what to do the next day ... our only full day in Guatemala City. Before long the rum did its job, the eyes got heavy and the "quaint" bed beckoned. Sleep was hard to come by for throughout the night we kept hearing the Guatemalan National Anthem ... the ever-present car alarm blaring. Add to that sleep-robbing racket, the

Tally Hotel was directly under the flight path to the airport. Since the airport is in the city, the all-night cargo planes were approaching very low, an average of 600-800 feet above ground, and shaking the building to the foundation. This called for drastic measures and our earplugs were rapidly retrieved. Dolores slept like a log.

March 30, Thursday morning ... a quick shower (with hot water) followed by breakfast in our room. Jim advised us to bring on this trip a small coffee maker, which we did. Very convenient ... we never had breakfast in any restaurant. So it was Guatemalan coffee, instant oatmeal, juice and fresh fruits to start the day. The plans for the day were not that ambitious but needed good management of time. We would not have much free time to explore the city so off we went to our first appointment ... an optician. Jim wanted to get new glasses here because the prices in Guatemala are a fraction of US prices. We hopped in the car, zoomed through the early morning gridlock and located an optician in a nondescript building with two armed guards. The eye exams are free by (I presume) a trained technician. Jim and I have our eyes examined and Jim orders two sets of single vision replacement lenses. Exam is for lens strength only and does not include glaucoma, cataract, etc. tests. Jim's cost is roughly \$45 USD per set. Quite reasonable I must admit and certainly a bargain. The cost for my tri-focal lenses ran to Q900 (~\$125 USD) so I declined to order a set. The exam was just too fast, the technician spoke passable English, and I felt he did not fully understand my responses. I did not have the confidence in the exam. The lenses were to be ready by 5PM and we left. Nearby Jim ran into an old Guatemalan friend and the two reminisced for a while before it was time to leave and do a little sightseeing.

Back on the road again we headed to **Zona 2** to see the **Mapa de Relieve** (Relief Map) attraction. The roads were cluttered with chicken buses of all manners belching black exhaust. On our way a number of roads were blocked with protesting Indians marching in orderly but long and sinuous masses. I've been told that the indigenous Indians are always protesting something that is in disagreement with the governing administration. They've been stepped on, abused, cheated and literally kept down socially and economically that their only escape is to voice their disdain by marching. Two such protest marches we encountered ... blocking traffic (to the dismay of cars and buses who sounded their horns to no avail) ... chanting and beating their drums ... carrying protest signs ... ignoring the anger around them. But to the credit of the bystanders, no one took this with much seriousness. Traffic did not impede the marches ... no umbrage was directed at them ... no law enforcement was evident ... and within 10 minutes normalcy returned and the flow of traffic resumed. This is considered part of the 'flavor' of Guatemala City. On we drove to the north side of the city to the map site.



What is **Mapa de Relieve**? Built in 1905, this jewel of engineering invites the visitor to admire Guatemala's majestic physiography. The **Relief Map of the Republic of Guatemala** is an open-air geography class. It is made of stone and concrete and its principal cities, capitals, rivers, railroads, roads, bridges and mountain ranges are placed according to scale. When built, there were no airplanes to take aerial photographs of the Guatemalan territory; nor were there modern resources to carry out construction of such magnitude, proving the greatness of this endeavor. We parked nearby, paid our admission (Q50 or \$4.50 USD for foreigners; Q2 or 25 cents USD for Guatemalans) and started our tour. Yes ... Guatemala wants tourists but screws them by this disparity in entrance fees. Practiced everywhere, white faces means more money.



Patty goes off to visit some friends nearby so Jim, Dolores and I do the touring. The relief map is impressive ... huge in its layout and scale. We walk the perimeter ... start at the Pacific side of the map ... north to the jungles and **Peten** region ... to the Caribbean coast and the **Lake Izabal** region and **Livingston**. It is easily seen that the various elevations make for difficulty in traversing the country by road. The central mountains and the sheer number of volcanoes demonstrate just how geologically active is the region. We study the map carefully and trace our planned routes from Guatemala City to the lowlands to the **Mayan** ruins and then back again to **Antigua**. We climb atop one of the two observation decks (green structure, top image, left) to get a better perspective of the country. It is no wonder that the indigenous Indians live in the mountains ... out of reach of mainstream Guatemala and the rule of law. We locate prime banana

regions ... the best coffee growing mountains ... the **Rio Dulce** (Sweet River) playground for the privileged ... the fertile jungles that drew the Mayans and their great cities. Jim identifies the many volcanoes that are still spewing ash and smoke. We linger and absorb the adventures that awaited us. Yes ... I was excited to be here and to start experiencing the 'real' Guatemala.

Satisfied with this geographic knowledge of Guatemala, we exited the map site and drove a short distance to pay a visit to friends that Jim knew from 'The River'. In all future references, **The River** implies the **Lake Izabal - Rio Dulce** region of Guatemala where most sailboat enthusiasts congregate ... being most accessible to the Caribbean waters and adjoining countries like Belize and Honduras. As Jim owned a sailboat, this is the region that he lived in for the majority of time while in Guatemala. Pretty country as we will describe later: hot and humid ... rum and coke heaven ... a playground for rich **Guati's** (as Guatemalans are referred to) ... and about as laid-back as anything desired. Anyway ... we park a short distance away and walk the narrow side street to **Sol** and **Lucy's** place (right). The house is small and non-descript from the outside. The interior is cozy, neat, organized and just right for two people. Kitchen is small but efficient. Bedroom is tiny by my standards but I don't live here. We sit and chat for a spell. Sol is a retired US Navy man ... Lucy is a Colombian by birth (I believe) ... met while on The River. Both been in Guatemala about 15 years and love the atmosphere of the country and this city. Sol returns to the States often for medical reasons. He left The River, sold his



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boat and now lives in the city full time because it's within his budget. Walks daily and rewards himself with a few beers after his trot. I said this was a laid back country. We spend perhaps 30 minutes in their company before we bid our farewells and head back to the hotel.



What to do next? We park in Tally's lot, and head out to explore the nearby **vendoras** (vendors, left) plying their trades. Mind you, these vendors are not your average every-day type of merchants. They set up their tables, mats, tents, and every manner of trade just about anywhere they want to. They crowd the narrow sidewalks (above) ... spill over onto the streets ... block traffic with disregard for right-of-way ... and hawk their goods with loud and obnoxious chatter. Leave your wallets, bracelets,



necklaces and watches in your room for this is the land of pickpockets and hustlers. The city tried to move or disband these vendors from this area but the subsequent riots were too much and the city abandoned the plans and resigned to this chaos. We maneuvered our way from street to street ... past hundreds of interesting but unappealing peddlers. We encountered garbage in the streets ... drunkards asleep in doorways ... the stench of fried, day old **pollo de casa** (chicken of the house, pronounced po-

jo) ... the terrible odor of dried fish swarming with flies ... and tourist trinkets of every imaginable variety. In time we managed to leave this chaotic zone and approached **Plaza de la Consitucion** (Constitution Plaza, the city's central plaza, right). To our surprise the plaza was overflowing with Indians carrying on their protests. But there was a sort of merriment and conviviality in the air. Nothing was apparent that would be disruptive or potentially volatile. Indians were peddling their trinkets and street-food was cooked everywhere. It seemed that we were in a festive environment. We co-mingled with this horde and enjoyed the scenery circling the plaza ... the palace, the cathedral and the fountains. The day was warm and sunny. Beggars kept soliciting us ... we ignored them. We priced the souvenirs but all were ridiculously high. The street-food stench was beginning to get to us. It was interesting to watch the Indian women,



the **vendoras**, sit down to eat at these food stalls. Whatever they made in sales was typically spent on beans, tortillas and **pollo de casa** on the street. Their eating habits were less than polite and the plates from which they ate did not appear sanitary. It was mesmerizing to watch them but it reinforced our conviction that street-food is off limits to us. We left the plaza and headed to the nearby **Mercado** (left) for some souvenir shopping. This particular Mercado was dual in function ... souvenirs on the end and produce on the other. We made our way through the produce section filled with all kinds of fruits, vegetables, **carne** (meat), poultry, fish, flowers, dairy products and a host of other supposed edibles. The combined smell, or stench, was more than we could stomach ... particularly the dried fish. The air was heavy with unrecognizable odors and we did not hesitate to make a fast getaway to the other end. The souvenir section was entirely different ... clean, spacious, cluttered with many appealing stalls selling interesting but overpriced craft items. But as with all merchants in this city, they see a white face and prices are doubled. We found many items of interest but could not negotiate a decent price so we headed out. It is said that cheaper prices are to be found in the country and in Antigua.



We found our way back to the Tally Hotel, spent a little time just unwinding and decided that it was time to head out again. Jim needed to pick up his glasses and to keep an appointment with a Guatemalan banker. We picked up the new glasses ... the optician again tried to get my business by lowering their price to Q700 (~\$95 USD) but I still declined. Next we drove to the bank, sped past security, and waited upstairs while Jim conducted his business. Before we left we paid a visit to another bank floor where there was a splendid collection of **Don Quixote**-related art and sculptures. Magnificent collection that impressed me ... must be worth millions, if not priceless.



The hour was getting late ... our stomachs were telling us it was time to feed. Jim recommended a restaurant near the US Embassy ... **La Estancia Churrascos**, an Argentinean steak house. The place was mostly devoid of customers and we found a table near the front, which was open to the outside. Bad choice ... the traffic noise was horrendous and the smell of car and bus exhaust was unpleasant. We ordered some Guatemalan beer and Chilean wine for Dolores and placed our meal order. The miniscule salad arrived shortly followed by the multi-meat entrée (left). Not sure how to describe the offering but the meat was tough and the sausage rather stringy. One order was adequate for the two of us ... in fact, there was ample left over to take back with us. As much as we tried, chewing the "steaks" was problematic. Since the balance of the meat was still cooking on the hot brazier, by the time we took second helpings the meat was overcooked, tough and hard as shoe leather. Dinner for two was Q250 + Q25 tip (~\$20 USD) ... not a bad price but the meal was not memorable. Live and learn ... not your typical Guatemalan fare. We left for our hotel shortly. Stayed in ... **putas**

(hookers) ply the streets outside our hotel and it's no place for tourists. Again, sleep was difficult. Damn those 747s.

Tomorrow we leave Guatemala City and start our adventure