

## Recollections of Guatemala - 6

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**April 7, Friday** ... our eco-touring ends ... we are leaving the jungles of Guatemala and are heading to **Antigua** for **Semana Santa**. We planned to retrace our route through the Rio Dulce but were advised by Oaxaca Bob that route 11, to the west and south, was open. Although the distance in miles was shorter, the time required would be the same. Route 11 was recently paved and passes through **Alta Verapaz**, a high plateau, the **City of Coban** and eventually meeting up with **Siera de Las Minas** (mountains). The road would be interesting, scenic and arduous before we exit at the CA9 to Guatemala City. There would only be a single gap in the road at **Sayaxche** (Sa-ja-shay) ... where we would have to take a ferry. We take this advice and leave Santa Elena by the back road. The road starts picturesque (below, left) ... then turns into flat and rolling (below, center). Along the way we encounter many Guatemalan **taxis** (below, right). These taxis can ferry as many people as can fit in the truck bed.



The long drive south was ... well – long! It took most of the day to reach the CA9. We encountered some stretches on the 11 that were under construction. Bridges out and we had to detour to temporary dirt spans. Oh yes ... we had to contend with the ferry at Sayaxche. This is not what you may consider a “normal” ferry service. The “ferry” is a barge (below, left). It is powered by two outboard motors, one for each direction (below, center). The drive-on, drive-off is on the gravel riverbanks. Nothing fancy here.



After the barge ferry lands on our side, it disgorges its load and it's our turn. Six cars drive on ... 3 cars positioning themselves on each side of the barge. Then a tanker truck drives on ... down the center of the barge. Whoa ... we thought that the barge would sink right there and then. To make matters more nerve-wracking ... the tanker makes an abrupt stop just short of overshooting the front of the barge. OK ... he's on. What now? The barge cannot dislodge itself from the riverbank. The truck driver guns his engine ... moves a few feet forward on the barge and slams on the brakes. The barge rolls back and forth ... disengaging itself from the riverbank. What a jolt to the system. The barge operator jumps in the motor compartment (above, center), starts his little motor and we proceed, ever so slowly, across the river. Two minutes later the truck drives off the barge (above, right) and the six cars follow. Not an experience I would like to repeat but this is Guatemala. Except the unexpected.

Our travel continues ... it's a long way to Antigua by way of Guatemala City.

Our original plan was to drive to the resort town of **Panajachel** (pa-na-ha-shell) on **Lake Atitlan**, some 20 miles past Antigua. Our intent was to use “**Pana**”, as its commonly referred to, as a springboard for exploration of the nearby towns and other attractions. But we figured that because of **Semana Santa**, hotels would be jammed full and finding rooms would be a stretch. Beforehand, we were able to secure a place to stay in Antigua once our “**Pana**” tour was over. A couple Jim knew was away on an American visit and their apartment was made available for our use while in Antigua. Since they were already gone, and we were a few days early, we elected to go to Antigua instead, bypassing “**Pana**”. Hope they did not mind.

We figured we'd be in Antigua by late afternoon – barring any delays and Guatemala City's traffic would cooperate. So on we went. More Guatemalan **taxis** (below, left), changing **Peten** countryside (below, center) and the town of **Chisec** (below, right). By noon the mountains appeared before us and slash-and-burn was becoming common.



The drive through the mountains was at time harrowing as the mad-drivers of Guatemala displayed their careless and erratic skills. Finally we were in coffee country ... **Coban** is one of the coffee regions of Guatemala. Many coffee **fincas** here are recent and planted coffee bushes have inadequate forest cover. Coffee is best grown as an undercover crop, underneath a tree canopy. It's cooler and the shade allows the coffee bean to develop without sun damage. Since forest cover here was less than ideal, the growers improvised and used mesh coverings (right).



We drive on for what seems like hours but eventually reach the CA9 intersection at **San Augustin Acasaguastian**. We opt to stop for a late lunch and pull into a restaurant, called **Sanita's** I believe. We secure a table ... the place is busy with travelers. While waiting for our meal I observe some happenings outside. Of particular note is a pick-up that pulls into the lot. Out step two men ... one with a shotgun and one holding a 45 AUTO handgun. They position themselves some distance away ... they survey the lot ... and flip a signal to the pick-up occupant. Out he steps ... with a handgun strapped to his waist ... and marches towards the restaurant. Most likely he is a wealthy **Guati** and has bodyguards. Maybe he is a **finca** owner with payroll. It's anyone's guess. The guards are menacing but they stand their ground, a little out of the way. How reassuring to be amongst all this firepower. Our meal arrives and we consume it with haste. At a nearby booth sits a Guatemalan couple with a child and nanny. I observe them for a while. The man and woman have no interest in their little girl ... its nanny's job. The kid is obnoxious and runs loose ... the nanny has to follow like a servant and amuse the kid. Spoiled brat. Many rich (or near rich) **Guati's** have nannies ... Indian nannies. I sense arrogance on their part ... "See, I have a nanny for my kid! Look how important I am". This is the message they are apparently sending. I suspect that this couple probably has a few more Q's than the average Guatemalan, consider themselves middle-class but in all likelihood don't have a pot to pee in nor a window to throw it out of. I like to people watch and form opinions ... even if those opinions are at times less than pleasant. Having finished our meal we march out of the restaurant to our waiting car. The two guards look our way ... I sense that they ignored us because we are "gringos". We peel rubber out of the lot onto the CA9 ... Guatemala City is only 25 miles away. We're making decent time.

The CA9 climbs uphill ... we're entering the mountains skirting **Guatemala City**. Traffic is heavy in both directions ... **Guatis** and Indians traveling east to the **Rio Dulce** and many, like us, heading into cooler mountain destinations. Before long we're caught in a construction zone ... all traffic stops. I forgot ... this is the same area that caused a mile-long line on our way out of the city. Now we're in it. We wait for 20 or so minutes. Nothing to do ... have to sit this out. **Vendoras** scurry amongst the stopped vehicles plying their worthless wares. **Putas** (hookers) are among them.

Then the bottleneck frees up and it's a maddening rush forward. Our single line becomes a maze of cars, trucks and buses that push forward trying to gain an advantage. They drive on the wrong side of the road, on the shoulder and push their way to the front of the line. Horns blaring away, jockeying for position these **Guati** morons just push ahead. Anywhere else in the world a policeman would restore order ... but here there's no law and this is the norm. Patiently we weave forward and eventually reach the front of the line and pass the construction. With the road open before us we attain maximum speed and shortly reach the outskirts of the city. It's rush hour by now ... the streets are choked ... our pace is reduced. It takes an hour for us to traverse the city to the other side ... the side that leads to Antigua. The air is heavy with exhaust fumes ... it takes on the color of brown smoke. It stinks ... it makes our eyes water. Please hurry!

Braving the gridlock we make a beeline for the main road to Antigua. In time the traffic lessens and we are descending a roadway that winds and weaves downward. Picking up speed, we pass buses, trucks and slower cars on our way down. The road is decent enough and the ride is exhilarating. Reaching bottom we are relieved to be on the outskirts of Antigua. We locate the main entryway to this historic city and hang a right. Immediately we notice a sign that says that all cars and buses, unless owned by a resident, must pay an "entry fee" (a sort of parking permit). Cost is Q20 (~\$3 USD) ... each time they enter the city. Another Guatemalan rip-off ... something to line the pockets of the town officials. I suppose this is one way to control traffic into the city, for street parking is limited ... but there are ample **parques** (parking lots) that charge, so in essence this is double payment. Like I said, a rip-off. Luckily, the payment spot was unmanned and we just rolled in. We'll find way's to circumvent this.

***Antigua... Antigua Guatemala is colonial town. Sited in the Panchoy Valley, it was designated 'La Muy Noble y Muy Leal Ciudad de Santiago de los Caballeros de Guatemala' by the conquistadors in 1543. It was the capital of Guatemala for more than 200 years (1543-1776) and was one of the three most important cities in the New World. More than 30 monastic orders called Antigua home and built stunning monasteries, convents and cathedrals in the town. In 1944 the government made Antigua a National Monument and in 1979 UNESCO declared Antigua as a World Cultural Heritage Site. Antigua is 1530 meters above the sea level, surrounded by three impressive volcanoes: Agua (3766m), Fuego (3763m) and Acatenango (3976m). The first, and lasting impression of Agua, looming above the city in daylight (right, top), is gorgeous. Walking around on the cobblestone streets (right, bottom) there's a lot to see including many impressive colonial style buildings. Some of these are still in ruins after different earthquakes, while others are currently under reconstruction. Antigua was partially destroyed during the 17th and 18th centuries.***



*In the Department of Sacatepéquez, (Cerro de Hierba), Antigua may be the most outstanding and best-preserved colonial city in Spanish America. Tourists visit Antigua every year from around the world to enjoy its natural beauty and historic monuments. The Spanish Colonial style permeates every part of the town: its houses, churches, squares, parks and ruins, also its traditions and folklore as well. Antigua is a city of charm and color where you can see and buy an overwhelming variety of attractive, handmade products that honor the traditions of generations of artisans.*

*Antigua hosts the largest celebrations for Lent and Easter in the Western Hemisphere. The history of the processions dates back to the early 1500s and began with the arrival of Don Pedro de Alvarado from Spain. While many are attracted to the solemn religious fervor, others enjoy the beautiful "alfombras" (sawdust carpets) that are made along the processional routes. Antigua's most visited attractions being ...*

- ❖ **The Plaza Mayor (Central Park)**
- ❖ **The Palace of the Captain Generals**
- ❖ **The Cathedral**
- ❖ **Palacio del Ayuntamiento (the municipality)**
- ❖ **The churches of La Merced and San Francisco**
- ❖ **The Ruins of Nuestra Señora del Pilar (Las Capuchinas )**
- ❖ **The ruins of Santa Clara**
- ❖ **The ruins of San Agustín**

Jim and Patty lived in Antigua for some time before moving back to the States. Both were familiar with the town's layout. It was time to find the apartment. The city's traffic flow is along one-way streets ... and they were choked with cars and buses. It was the start of **Semana Santa** (Holy Week) and the town was beginning to fill up. We maneuver our way to the north end of town and pass by the **Mercado Municipal** and **Terminal de Buses** ... what a madhouse. Never seen so many inter-city and in-city chicken buses in one place. Buses of every imaginable variety, color and condition of disrepair. The Mercado was bustling with Indians and visitors and the stench of cooking hung in the air. This was a bad omen, for the population of Antigua would swell from the normal 44,000 or so full-time residents to over 80,000 with visitors from other parts of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Panama, Mexico, South America, the United States and other parts of the globe. A short distance beyond we find our apartment ... call upon a neighbor who held the apartment key to let us in ... and we unloaded our luggage. We would not have access to the interior parking space for another day so we had to decide on an alternate parking plan.

The traditional home in Latin America is nothing like any of us experience in the rest of the world, except perhaps in Spain. The exterior of the residence is the perimeter outer wall (right) ... with a main gate leading to the interior and the courtyard. Sometimes a window is located on this outer wall. The exterior is supposed to be unpretentious, simple, stark, and showing no indications of the luxury or ambiance of the interior. It is supposed to be low-key. What's on the interior is another matter ... typically a beautiful courtyard with trees, flowers, fountains and wonderfully laid out patios bordering the living quarters that face the courtyard. The exterior does not reflect the wealth beyond. Although our apartment did not exactly match this profile, we will visit another home later in the day and one next week that fully meets this criterion. Nonetheless, our apartment for the next 11 days is comfortable and adequate for 4 people. Two bedrooms, one bathroom, a kitchen, great room and a small inner, private courtyard. I will not reveal the cost to stay here but, considering Easter Week, it is embarrassingly reasonable, as Al and Sharon the owners, asked for. Some views of these accommodations below ...



Needing a place to securely park the rental car we drive back to the south side of the city ... to **Jim** and **Eliana's** house. **Jim** is an ex-pat from Kentucky and **Eliana** is a Guatemalan. Both lived in various Latin American countries before settling here. Our Jim met them on The River. We enter their secure compound ... shotgun-toting guard at the entrance. Jim the owner was surprised to see his old friend and ushered us into his home. He had other guests at the moment ... a "couple" named "**Mr. X**" and another young man (you assume the rest). **Eliana** was in a wheelchair recovering from recent foot surgery. Before we had a chance to introduce ourselves, the hosts offered refreshments of rum and coke and wine. We settled in for a long conversation. As I never met these people before, I just sat there, sucked on my drink and offered nothing into the conversation. None of us smoked but the hosts and the "couple" did and the room was filled with second-hand smoke. Since we would only be staying here a short time it was tolerable but unpleasant. **Jim** and **Eliana** were gracious hosts ... the conversation spirited ... the reminiscence full of interesting anecdotes. **Eliana** spoke perfect English ... but this "**Mr. X**" dude, although able to converse in English, spoke mainly Spanish. "Rude of him", I thought, to carry on a "private" conversation with the hosts while leaving us agape and unable to follow. But, as I will learn later next week, he is a near-wealthy **Guati** with an air of arrogance and smugness typical of an a\*\*hole (sorry for the language). As the hour was getting late, **Jim** the host gave us a tour of his home (a rental) ... very impressive. Typical Spanish architecture, floor plan and furnishings. Each room had a different motif ... each room comfortable in its own style. I wouldn't mind renting a place like this. The courtyard was green and lush with flowering trees, bougainvillea and other assorted flora. In time we left the car here and walked back to our apartment ... a distance of perhaps one mile. The cobblestone streets were difficult to walk on and the sidewalks, only 2 or 3 feet wide, were equally hazardous. Near the **Central Plaza** we stopped at **Pollo Campero** for a chicken supper. Remember, we ate at some earlier in the trip. Sated, we then stopped at **Bogedona**, a major food mart, for staples to carry us over for the next few days. Crashing early, sleep was difficult to come by. The street fronting our apartment is a major bus route ... you can image the racket throughout the night. Earplugs to the rescue!

**April 8, Saturday** ... a day to orient ourselves to Antigua. The ladies plan to do some more shopping so Jim and I head to the plaza to conduct some business. The inter-city buses (right) are waking up ... the convergence of Indians is beginning. Along our route we pass the ruinous and abandoned **San Agustín Church** (right, bottom). Like many other historic monastic structures, after the earthquakes all were left in their broken and sorry state. Boarded up and protected by iron fences they stand forlornly ... the interior inaccessible because of the danger of collapse. There are many such structures in Antigua and we will visit many of them.



We stop by a bar offering free e-mail service. Jim sends a message to his cat. (?)

Then we move on to the **Central Plaza** ... do some banking ... visit the tourist office for information ... price out some Guatemalan coffee ... and Jim meets up with another friend named Bob.



The **Central Plaza** (left) is the heart of the city ... its pulse is measured here. The fountain, **Fuente de las Sirenas**, built in 1739 by Diego de Porres is its epicenter. Everything of importance happens in this green zone. It's a place to meet friends, sip your morning coffee, read your paper ... plan out your day. If you are bored this is the place to refresh your attitude. The morning is cool and the crowds are beginning to form. **Vendores** are plying their goods, but the police frown upon this practice for it intrudes on the tranquility. We sit and people watch, surveying the adjoining architecture. We see ...



***El Palacio de los Capitanes** (above, left) ... a colonial building that was for several centuries the palace of the Spanish Kings' governors.*

***Catedral Metropolitana** (above, center) ... built in 1543, the cathedral has been semi-destroyed by earthquakes through the years, but is now partly restored and preserves the beautiful colonial details of its Spanish architecture.*

***Palacio del Noble Ayuntamiento** (above, right) ... in colonial times (from 1743) was the headquarters for the **Cabildo Español** and later used as jail. Now located there are **El Museo del Libro Antiguo**, **El Museo de Santiago** and **La Municipalidad de Antigua** (municipal offices).*

Over the next 10 days we will pass by these architectural jewels many times and they will become familiar landmarks.

I am starting to enjoy this quaint little town and delight in the sounds and sights that I encounter. However, nothing prepared me for this sight (right) ... a goat herder milking his nanny. Right there, in the middle of a sidewalk, with plastic cup in one hand and the other hand on a teat the goat had to surrender its milky cargo. The goats were urinating and defecating ... the milking continued. After picking out some debris and loose hair from the warm milk, it was handed over to a customer ... who drank it with obvious relish.

I wonder if the Antigua Board of Health approves of this?



Returning to the apartment Jim met up with **Cor**, another friend from The River. Both arranged for our rental to be parked in the courtyard while **Cor** and his family gets out of town for the Holy Week period. For them, this week's frenzy is too much to cope with. **Cor** is a transplanted Dutchman ... speaks with a broken brogue ... basically a bright man ... deals in educational supplies ... makes a decent living here ... been in Guatemala 30+ years. Married a Guatemalan and has a daughter. Seemed to have adapted to the Guatemalan "bs" quite well. As someone that deals with the educators, he makes an interesting comment that most **Guatis** want to keep the Indians stupid and uneducated thereby the Indians can be made to work cheap and be contained on a low social rung. **Cor** makes room for our car and we leave to go pick it up. Walking back to the south side we pass a street scene indicative of Indian culture ... sell from any spot open (below) ... this market is in front of the ruined **Santa Teresa Church**.



We pick up the car, drive back to the apartment and park it in the courtyard. With the ladies still out, we walk back out again. We have spare keys made ... we price out some more coffee ... shop for some more first-aid items at a **farmacia** ... and stop for lunch. Restaurant is in the inner courtyard of a Spanish mansion. Very appealing to eat in such an environment. I noticed an older man with a very young child. That's another thing ... rich Americans coming to Guatemala to adopt Indian kids. Wonder what is their motivation ... to rear a child from poverty or to say to the world "I'm doing something good?" This guy looked like he was past 65 years of age. An idiot or a humanitarian? Give me a break! Leaving the restaurant we buy some freshly made bread. Today being a "free day" of sorts Jim and I walk over to the **San Pedro Apostol Church** and its adjacent park to people watch. The Indian dress is most captivating ... something we will see over the next week with regularity.



The day was tiring so we headed back to the apartment. Had to stop by some jade shops to learn something about this rare semi-precious stone. Artisans working on beautiful designs mesmerized me and I had a notion to buy something. But common sense prevailed and window-shopping is all that I could afford. Back at the apartment the ladies were making supper ... spaghetti. Two versions were prepared ... one with and one without **ajo** (a-ho, garlic). Along with a salad and the fresh bread ... washed down with rum and cokes or wine ... it was an inexpensive (or as Jim said – cheap) supper. **Cor's** daughter invited herself over ... we could not say "no" (below, left). Before crashing for the night we made another short visit to Central Plaza ... to walk off the supper and to people watch and perhaps catch a Holy Week "procession" in progress. No procession ... but the Cathedral was ablaze in lights (below, right).

