

## Recollections of Guatemala - 8

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**April 10, Monday (cont.)** ... we pay a visit to **The San Francisco El Grande Church** ... one of many ruined churches in the city, this multi-domed church is often visited by pilgrims seeking answers to their prayers from **Friar Hermano Pedro**, the beatified 17th-century monk buried inside.

*The San Francisco El Grande Church ... the construction of this church and its adjacent convent began in 1542 by the Franciscan order. The buildings could not survive the many earthquakes. The San Francisco church as it stands today was constructed at the end of the 18th century. More restoration and repairs have since been made including the concrete reinforcement added in 1961 that protected the church from suffering serious damage in the 1976 earthquake. The convent was one of the largest in Antigua and had space for up to 80 clergymen.*

Our visit is short ... we enter ... walk through ... see carpets being prepared ... and exit.



We stroll through the central part of town and pay a visit to a jade shop. This semi-precious stone is unique and we wanted to learn something about it. One of the sales people took us on a brief tour and explained the difference between **Guatemalan jade** and **Chinese jade**. Guatemalan jade is called **Jadite** and is mined only in Guatemala, Burma and Russia. It has a hardness of 6.5 to 7.0 while the Chinese jade is called **Nephrite**, mined virtually everywhere else in the world, and has a hardness of 5.5 to 6. Additionally, Guatemalan jade comes in 24 different colors as is evidenced in the **Tikal Death Mask** shown on the left.

This mask, made entirely of Guatemalan jade, is an exact reproduction of the death mask found in a king's tomb in **Tikal**. The original is in a museum in Guatemala City. This authorized reproduction clearly demonstrates the artistry possible with jade and sort of tickled my fancy. I was inclined to purchase one but the asking price (no haggling possible) was a little out of reach. We looked at other jade jewelry but decide not to impulse-buy ... at the moment.

It was time for lunch ... hamburgers, salads, grilled sandwiches plus **cerveza**. A reward for an interesting morning.



Lunch over we wanted to visit the **La Merced Church** ... and along the way we stopped by a number of former colonial houses that were marvelously preserved (left) and were today either restaurants, hotels or retail stores. One such store carried hand-made furniture that can only be described as exquisite and expensive ... bed on right sells for Q80,000 (~\$10,500 USD). WOW!



On the route to la Merced we pass by the most photographed spot in all of Antigua ... **Arco de Santa Catalina** (Santa Catalina Arch) (right).



***Arco de Santa Catalina** ... a landmark of the city, it's the only part left from the Santa Catalina convent, founded in 1609. The arch served as a communication between the two buildings, so keeping the nuns cloistered. Recently the clock has been restored and chimes at every hour.*

The majestic and extinct **Agua Volcano** looms in the background, visible through the arch. This street is also known as **Royal Street**.

Around the corner is the **Merced Church**.

***The Merced** ... The **Mercedery Fathers**, from Spain, founded their monastery in **Ciudad Vieja**, but after the earthquake, it was transferred to its current site in Antigua. On 1749, construction work started on the monastery at the side of the church. A huge fountain, in the middle of the cloister, was used to grow fish in colonial time. From the second level of the ruins, one can clearly view the volcanoes Agua, Acatenango and Fuego, and in the first row lions surround the elegant cupola.*

***Facade of the Merced Church** ... the overly ornate facade of the church reminds the incredible baroque compositions of the Mexican churches. The earthquake of 1717 had destroyed Antigua but the Merced church did not suffer severe damages thanks to its compact construction. However in 1976 the church was in danger. People could visit it again after 1982. Inside the image of **Jesus Nazareno** is venerated; it's a splendid example of colonial sculpture. Beside **San Francisco** and the **Cathedral**, **La Merced** is one of the functioning parishes today.*



The views of the interior are below ...



Two things in particular one should note on the three prior images ... the center image shows a float or 'andas' that will be used in a procession. Atop this float will be positioned an icon, a statue or a crucifixion scene. This particular float is nearly 50 feet long and about 8 feet wide. 40 men per side, or 80 men total will carry it. Note the shoulder pads under the float ... one per man and spaced about a foot apart. This baby looks heavy. The right image above shows an interior 'carpet', made up of sawdust, flowers and fruit. During mass, later in the week, the fruit stands will be removed and donated to the needy (or sold I suppose) and the 'carpet' will be trampled upon during the service. It will have served its purpose.

We leave the church and wind our way back to our apartment. We stop by the Mercado Municipal to people watch, look for bargains or, if we're lucky, purchase something. Mango stands (below, left) are enticing but we pass ... do not trust how fruit was washed or handled. The fruit stands nearby are selling all manner of produce ... mangos here. Finally Dolores finds a bargain and selects a pair of slacks for exercise.



Satisfied that the day was full and invigorating we return to our apartment for a supper of meatloaf, vegetables and beans. Sleep was again difficult as busloads of El Salvadorans were arriving and making a racket.

**Question** ... where do 50,000 visitors to Antigua find a bathroom?

**Answer** ... anywhere they stand. The city provides 8 port-potties near Central Plaza, there is even an attendant handling out toilet paper so a full roll would not be stolen, but this is inadequate to handle the huge throng attending **Semana Santa**. So, unless you have a room (very unlikely) you do your business wherever you can find an open space ... against a fence, in a doorway, against someone's house, etc. ... even in the middle of a sidewalk. These Indians just do not care and are without conscience. The stench of urine on our street was repulsive; the Salvadorans even brought their own lime to spread over their "fence toilet" but this did not help. The amount of feces one encountered on a morning walk was equally unbelievable. This particular evening, on our way back, I witnessed an Indian woman pull down her young daughter's panties and allowed the little girl to just dump her load at a curb ... in full view of passer-bys (who appeared to just ignore this behavior). When the girl finished, her panties were pulled up and away they went. What does this tell you about this culture and what does this teach the little girl about social behavior? I repeat an earlier statement ... Indian culture is a shitty culture.

**April 11, Tuesday** ... we're off on a day-trip to **Panajachel** (pa-na-ha-shell), or "**Pana**". After a light breakfast we leave Antigua for the 2½-hour drive. The road is the same one we took driving to **Chichocastenango** day before last but at the crossroads we drove straight ahead to "**Pana**". As usual, the road is clogged with buses belching black diesel exhaust and idiot Indian drivers that crawl along at snail's pace and block traffic. One must be assertive and confident and Jim does his level best to endure the mayhem. I wonder if "black lung" is a common Guatemalan malady considering all the exhaust gases? We encounter many a dead dog lying by the roadsides. The roads are not that safe for animals ... or walking Indians.

**Panajachel** ... *Altitude: 5,238 feet (1,573 mts). Population: 14,000. Panajachel is picturesquely nestled in the Guatemalan highlands providing breathtaking views of three volcanoes and Lake Atitlan. The volcanoes, Toliman, Atitlan and San Pedro create an awesome backdrop. Panajachel is the doorway to explore all the indigenous villages around Lake Atitlan. These villages are famous for its women weavers and their typical clothes.*

*During the period of the Spanish conquest of Guatemala, the shore of the lake was the scene of the great battle in which the Spanish and their Cakchiquel allies defeated the Tzutuhils. The Spanish set up a church and monastery in Panajachel soon afterward, and used the town as a center for converting the Indians of the region to the Catholic faith. The original facade of the church stills stands, and is one of the gems of the colonial style in Guatemala. Panajachel's busy market street (Calle Santander) is one of the better places in Guatemala to shop for souvenirs.*

We make our way to "Pana" by way of Solala. It's not easy making our way through this town for Indians are everywhere and streets are either under repair or clogged with **vendoras**. The road continues and we stop at a pullout to admire the lake that lay before us. The scene below and beyond is captivating ...



The lake and sky are blue, the air reasonably clear and the distant volcanoes inviting. This scene is pastoral and serene and certainly beckons one to come and stay a while. The vendors plying their good here are a nuisance and their prices obscene. There is a public **bano** (washroom) at one end but would you believe it ... behind the **bano** squatted a little girl of perhaps 2 years of age (right) doing her business? In full view of passing motorists. Like I said ... unbelievable culture. We moved on.



The road to "Pana" winds down the mountainside and is two lanes wide. No place to pass slowpokes ... no place to pull over for a better view. Arriving in "Pano" we stop by a store to see Jim's old friend, but she is away, so we move on. We enter the business district and find a place to park. The only thing this town has to offer is the main shopping street. As everywhere else, we do the compulsory looking but find few bargains. While the ladies are off to do "comparison shopping" Jim and I buy some beers, park our butts on an empty curb (next page) and people watch. We dismiss all street hawkers but this one particular woman would just not give up trying to sell a table runner. She started at Q100 (~\$12 USD) and was working her way down to Q50. At one point she sat besides us at the curb and fell asleep ... yes, asleep. This must be tiring work to walk the streets all day for a few Q's. Anyway, we could not reach a price we liked so we moved on. She followed us. Price was down to Q40. Eventually she must have gotten tired of us for she called Jim a nasty name and left. We moved to the lakeshore. Our walk was casual and we looked for the ladies. And here comes this Indian woman again ... OK, she said, Q35. Our price was met; we bought. That's how one shops - with oblivion and disregard for courtesy or custom. Nice runner.

We stop for a couple of more beers at the lakeshore, meet up with Dolores and start looking for Patty. Eventually we all meet up and continue our daring shopping. We buy toucan carvings, dolls, more wooden masks, a hammock that was a real steal at \$11 USD, and other assorted bargains. Not the best prices but still inexpensive. Since shopping is tiring we stop for lunch ... pork chops, shrimp, salads ... washed down with some more beer. People watching from the **comedor** we see many Euro-trashes ... a name given to "hippie" type of kids from Europe (especially Germany) that are tramping their way through third-world countries. They strut their stuff, practice their terrible Spanish and just look goofy as hell. Most are skuzzy looking I must add. And some of the American kids are no better at this ... fat and bigheaded, many are boisterous and obnoxious. But the worst bunch of all is the older tourist with groups ... they all think that this is "such a wonderful country and the Indians are so nice". What morons ... they pay top dollars and get screwed at every turn by these Indians but think nothing of it, or at least are oblivious of it. They see this culture only through the eyes of someone that visits markets and stays at 5 \*\*\*\*\* hotels. To this I must add ... these Indians have a habit that I learned soon enough so as not to get screwed myself. Agree to buy something at Q40, give them Q50 and their usual response is "I have no change". I learned ... no change, no purchase and walk away. The dopey older tourist is so charmed by this that they nearly always say, "Keep the change" ... believing after all, I'm still getting a bargain.. The Indians know this ... the tourist get screwed. Enough said. We move on ... Jim spends time at an Internet place retrieving a message from his cat. All is not well ... cat is having a ball and destroying half the house. Market scenes from "Pano" ...

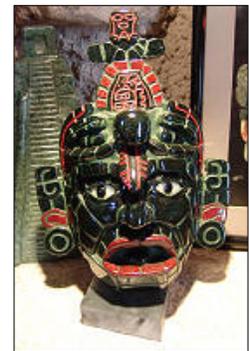


More "Pano" images; left to right - 'curbside' refreshment with persistent hawker; local Indian finery; local relaxing (drunk).



The overall excitement was too much so we retrieved our car, stopped again at the store to meet Jim's friend (she was there) and, after a 15-minute visit, headed back to Antigua. It was 3PM. The drive back was usual in terms of congestion and black exhaust. After all of this excitement I do not recall how the evening was spent or where we ate. Everything is becoming a blur.

**April 12, Wednesday** ... a "free day" in Antigua, of sorts. We're invited to lunch at another of Jim's friends. So until noon, we do some banking (currency conversion), buy some books on Guatemala and Antigua and revisit the jade shop. Been thinking about that jade death mask (right). The workmanship was superb and the subject matter was unique. This **funerary mask of Tikal** was only discovered recently and featured in a **National Geographic** cover story. I knew that if I did not purchase it, I would have qualms about it later. Similar masks elsewhere were either more pricey or lacking in quality of workmanship. Had to do it ... returned to **Jades Impero Maya** and bought it ... don't ask the price ... but if you saw it in person you would say that it is magnificent in design and of museum quality. It is now prominently displayed in our house. Come visit and see it.



Time to leave for our lunch date. We drive out of the city ... to **Werner and Mary Elena's** house, in a gated community on the outskirts. We've been told that live in a fabulous mansion, fit for a king. We'll see about that. In short order we find their community, drive through the security entrance and wind our way down some pretty undistinguished streets. Road is rough and uneven, nothing luxurious here. But I have to remember the Spanish influence ... do not show your wealth on the exterior. And there was their house, on the corner, behind some impressive walls (below, left) ... 20 feet high and enclosing the entire estate. Entering the courtyard, the house itself was amazing (below, center) and the house's inner courtyard (below, right) appealing, colorful and inviting. This is luxury I thought. We were made welcome by the hosts, invited to partake of refreshments and to join the others guests on the patio in the courtyard.



In addition to the hosts, **Werner** and **Mary Elena** and the four of us, there was **Jim** and **Eleana** that we met a few days ago, another distinguished looking older gentleman (I never learned his relationship), and of course the obnoxious "**Mr. X**". The conversation again was spirited as Jim renewed his friendships from The River. **Werner** owned an elevator company in Guatemala City (since sold) and **Mary Elena** was a lawyer, concentrating on managing their vast properties. They were gracious hosts ... everyone spoke excellent English but of course **Mr. X** had to intrude with his Spanish and arrogance. His cockiness and "know-it-all" was anything but tolerant but it seems that I was the only one taking note of this. After about an hour or so of drinking rum and cokes and generally loosening up, the lunch call was made. We sat down to a simple but hearty lunch and continued our chat. Their kitchen was modern, the dining room / salon huge, and the lunch fare delicious. Lunch consisted of **pollo** (chicken), **arroz** (rice), spinach medley, chutney, fruit juices and a dessert that **Mary Elena** made herself. I forgot to mention, there is a maid and cook that they employ to do all the menial tasks. What a life!



Later on **Werner** gave us a dime's tour of the large house ... the three bedrooms were luxurious and inviting. The largest (right) is the master suite on the second floor.



House is 7 years old and took 2 years to build. Three stories tall, it sits on a hilltop with the volcano forming a backdrop. There is an additional smaller building on the property for the around-the-clock two guards. One must have a guard in Guatemala for such a substantial residence. If you ever leave your house unattended, even to go shopping in town, the Indians are sure to break in and steal anything they can carry. The Indian's motto is, "Well, you're out of the house and not using any of this stuff, so we'll just borrow it." Happens with frequency that will spin your head.

Soon enough it was getting late and we bid our thanks for the hospitality and made our way back to town.

Tonight we will experience our first **Semana Santa** procession.