

Dolores in San Juan la Laguna



Lake Atitlán



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Amalia, foot loom weaver



Mingling with the Mayans

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Guatemala is a country with a rich cultural heritage and a diverse population, ranging from the Garifuna in the east to the Spaniards around the colonial city of Antigua and the Mayans in the Western highlands.

Lake Atitlán, in the west of Guatemala, is a fascinating place, with various Mayan villages, mainly comprised of Kaqchiquel and Tzutujil Mayans, around the shores. Many of the inhabitants of the villages have never even crossed the lake and still live a very traditional lifestyle. During my time there, I visited some of the villages and spoke with the local people about their customs and way of life.

Traditional Guatemalan life in the highlands is male-dominated and agriculture-based. The majority of families are supported by the husband/father who does agricultural work and earns approximately \$2 per day. Since this does not bring in enough to support the average family, the women in the area have started to use many of their age-old traditions in order to

supplement the family income – including weaving, painting, and growing medicinal plants.

In the enterprising village of San Juan La Laguna, I met with various co-operatives, mainly run by women, with exactly this idea in mind. At the textile co-operative where 65 local women work, I was shown around by a young Mayan girl, Amalia, who explained the whole process of weaving from beginning to end, and tried to teach me how to use the foot loom. This tradition is passed down from mother to daughter, and is truly an art form with some pieces involving many different women and taking weeks to create. Using the loom itself is a difficult skill to master as I quickly found out when I lost the thread and sent the weaving block flying out of reach across the floor! I asked my tutor how long it

normally takes to learn to weave expecting an answer of a number of years, at which point, she burst out laughing with a glint in her eye and responded ‘If the girl is intelligent, normally around a week!’ – ‘don’t give up your day job’ seemed to be her overriding message. The textile co-operative is a great way for the women in the village to work together to sell their crafts and make money for their families. They do sometimes export to the USA, although Amalia expressed her concern that since the economic downturn they are no longer getting the orders they used to, but she hopes it will pick up again soon.

Guatemala suffered the longest civil war in Latin American history from 1960-1996. During this time many of the indigenous Mayans were massacred, notably in the highland areas such as Lake Atitlán,



Frenetic market at Chichicastenango

which had a profound impact on their culture and society. Many of the local men abandoned their traditional dress since the government associated the Mayans with the guerrillas during the war. Like many traditional cultures, the influences of the modern western world arriving through television have led to concern about the erosion of the Mayan way of life.

One lady who is making a conscious effort to preserve her culture is Dolores Ratzan, a local Tzutujil Mayan living in Santiago de Atitlán. Speaking four languages: English, Spanish, Tzutujil and K'akchikel, and born and raised in the area, she has an intimate knowledge of her community and now works for us as a guide. Dolores only went to school for four years between the ages of six and ten years old, before she left to

become a weaver. At 19 years old and with the war beginning in Guatemala, she moved to the United States with her American husband, but never left behind her traditions. She continued to dress in traditional Mayan clothing, dressed her children the same way, only spoke to her family in Tzutujil Mayan and gave traditional backloom weaving demonstrations at local museums. Whilst away, she missed the culture, weaving and spending time visiting friends. She did, however, make friends with some Cheyenne Indians from Montana, who usefully taught her beadwork, which she still uses today to make belts. After twelve years in the USA, she returned to Lake Atitlán and met her second husband, a traditional Mayan man from the community. He grows corn and beans for the family and coffee plants to sell. He only began school

for the first time last year, since he never went as a child, and is now learning to read and write and speak Spanish. When she is not guiding in the area, and in the evenings, Dolores carries on her traditional weaving, intricate embroidery of huipiles (blouses) and makes bead belts.

Far from losing their culture, my experiences of spending time with these local craftsmen and women show that the outlook is bright for the preservation of their ancient traditions, with many of the younger, more resourceful members of the community looking to their past to improve their future. Certainly, meeting the Maya and gaining an insight into their lives is a key reason for anybody to visit this wonderful country.



FACT file

A ten-night trip including Antigua, Lake Atitlán and the Mayan ruins of Tikal in the north of the country would cost from **£2,700 per person**, including shared excursions and transfers. An extended 14-night tour including some of the lesser known highlights, with private guides and transfers, costs from **£3,950 per person**. For more information, please call our Guatemala specialists on **01993 838 695**.

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