



A GUATEMALAN TREASURE

ROMANTIC HOTELS, DIVERSE CUISINE, ARTISANAL CRAFTS—AND MORE—
DRAW VISITORS TO ANTIGUA

BY MARY AND CHARLES LOVE

Antigua, Guatemala, is that rarest of places—a destination of historical importance absent the homogenizing effects of globalization and mass-market tourism. Founded by the Spanish in 1547, Antigua—or Santiago de Guatemala as it was called back

then—is the oldest colonial city in Central America. Laid out in a 12-block grid in a valley overlooked by three volcanoes, Santiago was Guatemala’s capital until 1773 when a series of devastating earthquakes prompted officials to relocate the city to present-day Guate-

mala City. As a result, Santiago became “La Antigua Guatemala” (Old Guatemala), and many of her cultural treasures were hauled away. Fortunately, not everyone left. Over the centuries the locals rebuilt their homes, but the crumpled churches and monuments,

showstoppers in their day, were abandoned or only partially rebuilt. For 200 years, the city

- 1. Agua Volcano overlooks Antigua.
- 2. La Merced Church.
- 3. Textile artisan.
- 4. Ceremonial masks.



- PLAN YOUR TRIP**
- Visit the official website of the **Guatemalan Institute of Tourism**, visitguatemala.com.
 - The travel agency **Antigua Tours** can help you plan a soup-to-nuts visit to Antigua and beyond. In addition to accommodations, the company can arrange cooking classes, mountain biking tours, Spanish language programs, weddings and more, antiguatours.net.

- BACKGROUND READING**
- Antigua, The City and its Heritage** by historian and preservationist Elizabeth Bell. (Fifth Edition: 2010).
- Lonely Planet’s **Guatemala** (2016).
- The Antigua Guide**, an online English-language resource with informative articles. theantiguaguide.com.
- Stone of Kings: In Search of the Lost Jade of the Maya** by Gerard Helferich (2012).

- WHERE TO STAY**
- El Convento**, elconventoantigua.com.
- Hotel Santo Domingo**, casasantodomingo.com.gt.
- Hotel Aurora**, hotelauroraantigua.com.
- Mesón Panza Verde**, panzaverde.com.
- Palacio de Doña Leonor**, palaciodeleonor.com.

- WHERE TO DINE**
- Bistrot Cinq** (French), bistrotcinq.com.
- Café Condesa** (farm-fresh soups, salads, sandwiches, etc.), cafecondesa.com.gt.
- Café Sky** (rooftop views), Facebook: [@cafesky.antigua](https://www.facebook.com/cafesky.antigua).
- Hotel Santo Domingo** (creative continental), casasantodomingo.com.gt.
- La Casa del Anafre** (Guatemalan cuisine served in a local home). Ask Antigua Tours for information.

- WHERE TO SHOP**
- Colibrí** (textiles), Facebook: [@shop.colibri.antigua](https://www.facebook.com/shop.colibri.antigua).
- Casa de Artes** (ceramics, masks, textiles and more), casadeartes.com.gt.
- Jade Maya** (jade jewelry), jademaya.com.
- Luna Zorro Studio** (textiles), lunazorro.com.
- Uxibal** (leather boots and handbags), uxibal.com.



Photograph © C. & M. Love

languished. Efforts at restoration didn't begin in earnest until 1969. Ten years later Antigua was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

When you visit Antigua today, you're immersed in a kaleidoscope of colors. Rows of low buildings, in hues of salmon, saffron and teal, line the cobblestone streets. Local women wear floral-patterned blouses (*huipiles*) the color of stained glass and wrap their babies in striped scarves in similar shades. School buses painted in swirls of

crimson, blue and green unload children sporting backpacks that give new meaning to the word "psychedelic."

Once your eyes adjust to this chaos of color, you face a new challenge. With so many temptations, where do you start? Every artisan shop, rooftop bar, garden courtyard and mouth-watering pastry shop begs a visit. Every atmospheric ruin needs to be explored.

A good way to get oriented is with a three-hour cultural walking tour led by historian Eliza-

beth Bell, owner of a respected local travel agency. Bell, born in California, moved to Antigua when she was 14. With degrees in Latin American history and historical preservation, she has, for years, been actively involved and awarded for her work in preserving Antigua's architecture and cultural heritage.

Bell's promenade around Antigua's streets brings history to life. She outlines the city's history, starting with the brutal Spanish conquistador Pedro de Alvarado. She speaks of the

5. Arch of Santa Catalina.

city's famous 18th-century architect, native-born Diego de Porres, who introduced an architectural style inspired by the Italian Renaissance. And she describes how Antigua's low, stocky houses were built to withstand the area's constant earthquakes. By the end of her tour, she has briefly touched on religion, politics and economics, and explained how the city has changed since she arrived in 1969.



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Next, it's time to set out on your own. Among Antigua's 17th- and 18th-century wonders, don't miss the ruins of the Cathedral, where services are still held in the vestibule, and the Capuchinas Church and Convent, which has a museum full of colonial-era art and pre-Columbian pottery. La Merced Church is a center of local activity from dawn to dusk. Its yellow-and-white Baroque-style

facade, flanked by two bell towers, resembles a frosted wedding cake. Just down the street, distinguished by a yellow arch and domed clock tower, is the iconic Convent of Santa Catalina, one of Antigua's landmarks. Inside the arch is a hidden passage that once allowed resident nuns to cross the street without being seen.

The sprawling Church and Monastery of Santo Domingo

includes an active archeological site, a chapel and several fascinating museums. Within the ruins, there's even a luxury hotel and restaurant. This is ground zero for brides, who can wed at the chapel and have a reception in the adjacent 16th-century garden courtyard. Antigua, in fact, has become a popular international wedding destination, since so many of its romantic churches, gardens and private

6. Hotel Palacio de Doña Leonor.

7. Mayan ruins, Tikal.

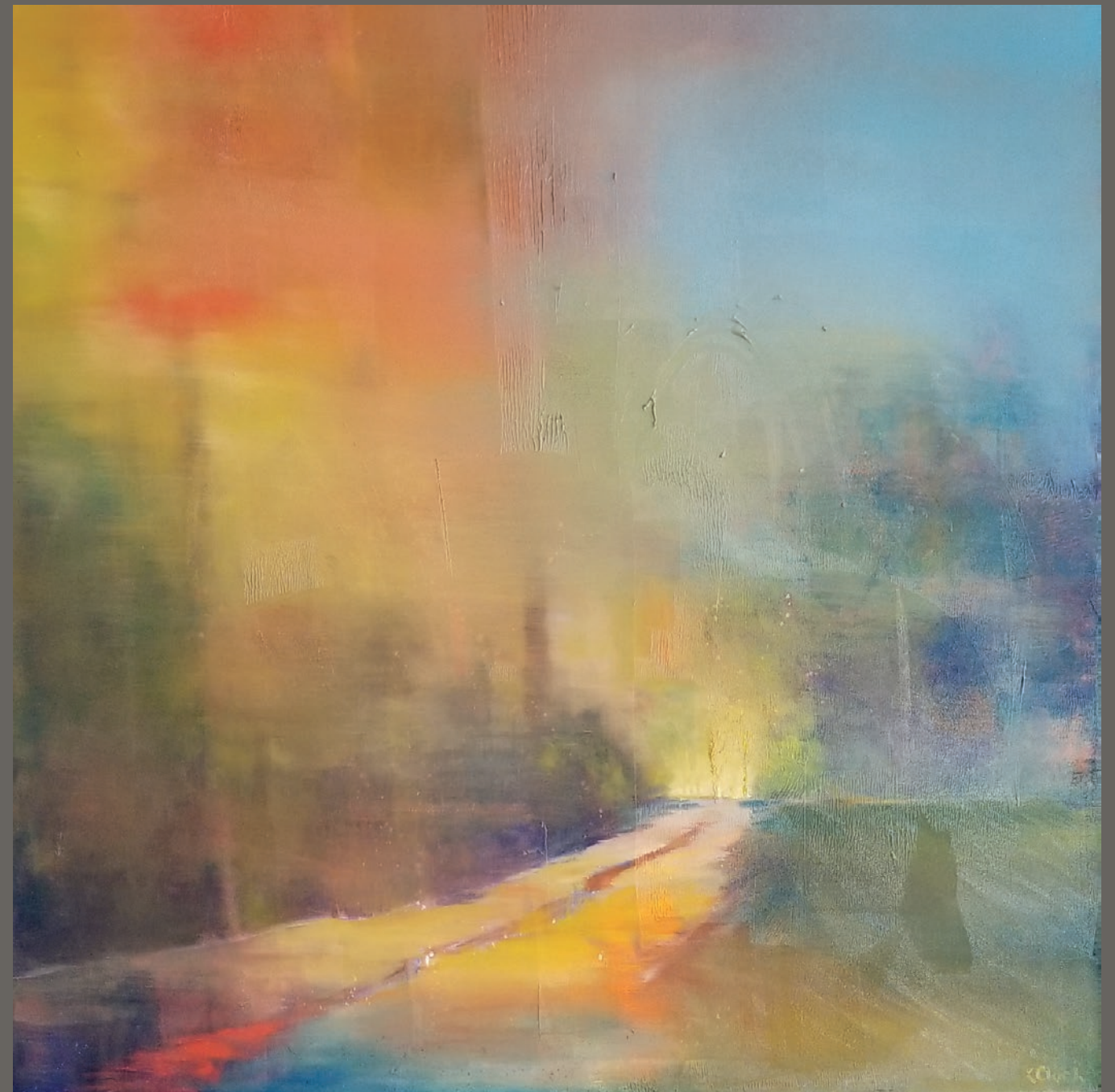
8. A jade necklace.

homes are available for rent.

When you need a break from exploring historic sites, it's time to shop. Handicrafts, especially handwoven textiles, are one of Antigua's draws. Colibrí offers

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textiles woven by a cooperative of local Mayan women. Casa de Artes, family-owned for five generations, is a good place to learn about and purchase masks, textiles, religious art, jewelry and ceramics, both old and new. Uxibal carries unusual leather bags and boots. Jade Maya is a combination jade factory, shop and museum owned by an archeologist who, with her late husband, uncovered pre-Columbian quarries hidden in the jungle for over 500 years. Those mines still supply the shop, which is full of striking designs that feature jade in rare colors, such as lavender and black.

You can find almost any kind of cuisine in Antigua—from Guatemalan to French to Asian. Those drawn to local dishes will love *pepián*, chicken pieces stewed in a sauce made from chilies, tomatoes, pumpkin seeds, nuts, cinnamon and various aromatic spices. Its roasted flavor is sensuous and layered. For fine dining, try the Church and Monastery of Santo Domingo. For casual fare and sunset cocktails, check out Café Sky where a rooftop bar offers fabulous views of looming Agua Volcano.

Other things to do in Antigua? Visit a nearby village famous for weaving or woodcarving. Bike through the mountains or hike up a volcano. Tour Antigua's chocolate museum or a coffee plantation. You can even join a cooking class or study at one of the city's many Spanish language schools.

Beyond Antigua

Antigua is an excellent base from which to explore Guatemala's other highlights, which include the Mayan ruins of Tikal,

the market town of Chichicastenango and the resort area of Lake Atitlán.

Tikal, located in Guatemala's tropical rainforest, is the most famous of Guatemala's Mayan sites. The ruins, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, feature stunning temples and palaces as well as ceremonial platforms and houses. The best way to get there from Antigua is by plane from nearby Guatemala City. Allow two days to explore the entire site.

The town of **Chichicastenango**, a two-hour drive from Antigua, is lively on market days (Thursdays and Sundays). Artisans sell textiles, ceremonial wooden masks, jewelry, ceramics and much more. Next to the market is the 400-year-old Church of Santo Tomás. The high steps to the church originally led to a Mayan temple complex. Mayan priests still perform rites here alongside indigenous women selling large bundles of flowers.

Lake Atitlán, several hours by road from Antigua, is one of the world's most beautiful lakes. Overlooked by volcanoes, the lake is surrounded by indigenous Mayan villages, reachable by boat from the hotels and resorts that border the lake. Panajachel is reputedly one of the most popular of these villages, with plenty of shopping for Guatemalan crafts (jewelry, textiles, leather goods, paintings), excellent restaurants and many choices for accommodations. You can arrange sunset cruises on the water, visits to other towns on the lake and even Mayan cooking classes. ➤

The Loves are journalists and filmmakers based in the Southeast. Website: imagyn.com. Instagram: @clove_imagyn.

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