

TRAVEL



Temple of the Great Jaguar, is seen during a sunny day in northern Guatemala's Tikal National Park. — AP photos



A painter works underneath the Santa Catalina arch in Antigua Guatemala, Guatemala.



Two indigenous women stroll through the central plaza of Antigua Guatemala, Guatemala, with the San Jose cathedral behind them.

ON A TRIP HOME, SEEING GUATEMALA'S GRIT AND GRANDEUR

By Manuel Valdes

My childhood home is gone and so is the Chinese restaurant next to it. But my street in the urban center of Guatemala City remains its bustling old self. Buses growl and spit exhaust. Cars race down the narrow one-way street. Stores sell everything from wedding gowns to candy. But the paint is worn away from some of the buildings, a sign that the years have taken a toll.

I left this street in the gritty Zona 1 neighborhood more than 20 years ago as my family moved north to the U.S. Eventually we settled in Seattle, the city I now happily call home. A recent trip back - my first in five years - was to see relatives and show my girlfriend the country where I spent my first decade. I wanted to show her Guatemala's contrasts: its chaotic center, its poverty and misery, as well as the beauty of its people, its historic grandeur and natural splendor. I needed to see it again too.



An indigenous woman walks on the street where the Santa Catalina arch is located in Antigua Guatemala, Guatemala.

Antigua Guatemala

We visited my childhood street just long enough to snap pictures, then headed out. While a pilgrimage to my hometown was important for me, I usually tell first-time visitors to Guatemala to skip the capital city and head straight to Antigua Guatemala. It's reachable from the Guatemala City airport by shuttle (about \$30) or taxi (prices vary but we paid



A man wearing a torito, a bull-shaped harness equipped with fireworks, dances in front of a procession celebrating the Virgin of Guadalupe in Antigua Guatemala, Guatemala.

\$50). The ride is 45 minutes to two hours depending on traffic. Antigua was established in 1543 as the Spanish territorial capital. After a series of earthquakes, it was largely abandoned, then rebuilt. Its charms include grand colonial buildings and churches, large markets, cobblestone streets, vibrantly painted buildings, traditional and high-end restaurants, bars and even a microbrewery, perfect for visitors like me. Visitors can also arrange for shuttles and guided tours to nearby coffee farms and the volcanoes that tower above the city. Volcano tours can range from a six-hour trip to two-day excursions. Two volcanoes are active and travelers can often get close to the lava flow.

There are hotels in every price range. We splurged on Porta Hotel (\$140 a night), where old colonial homes have been converted into a sprawling estate with a restaurant, pool and small workout room. The city fills up for celebrations of Catholic holidays, including elaborate processions during Holy Week between Palm Sunday and Easter.

The beach

Guatemala has just a sliver of coast on the Caribbean. But on the Pacific side, there are miles of black sand beaches that fade into powerful surf. Among the closest beaches to Antigua is Monterrico, a small and sleepy town about 2.5 hours away. Daily shuttles from Antigua are around \$20. We rented a small automatic car for \$40 a day.

The beach was lined with homes, medium-sized hotels, hostels and restaurants. Our hotel, Cafe Del Sol, was split into a beachfront building with some small rooms, a restaurant and bar, and a larger complex with bigger rooms and two pools. Our room (\$60 a night) was simple, spacious and air-conditioned. We mostly lounged in hammocks and braved the waters, though they are rough and best suited for experienced swimmers.

Tikal National Park

I wanted my return to Guatemala to jumpstart a new chapter in my life. I knew the place for it, too: Tikal National Park in northern Guatemala. We opted for a 40-minute flight there for \$230. The bus from Guatemala City is cheaper but takes over eight hours.

There are group tours and private tours. We hired a private guide for about \$90. The site is in the jungle, so visitors should bring water, though various stands sell water and snacks. Guatemala is also in the zone for mosquitoes carrying the

off in Tikal or at the beach. Among the sights we witnessed was a chicken sacrifice performed by an indigenous group.

As the excavated ruins of a once-grand Mayan city-state, Tikal displays the brilliance of my ancestors, with towering temples, government buildings, housing for the ruling class. Its leaders maintained power through violence and by keeping its people well-fed. Our guide explained that deforestation likely contributed to the disappearance of this mighty civilization, because Tikal's rulers razed the forest to build the stone temples.

The park's central plaza is flanked by two temples. You can climb wooden steps to the tops of two of them, one at the grand plaza and another, called Temple IV. A shot from "Star Wars: A New Hope" was filmed here, depicting the planet where the Rebellion is based.

From the top of the temple, we could see the jungle, seemingly endless, stretching to the horizon, with the temple tops visible above the green canopy of trees. The sounds of birds and other critters filled the air. The setting sun painted the nearly cloudless sky a light pink. I chugged the last of my lukewarm drink and decided this was the place - as a tourist in the motherland - to ask my girlfriend to marry me. She said yes, and a new chapter began. — AP



Three of Tikal National Park's temples rise above the tree line as viewed from the top of another temple, Temple IV.

Zika-virus, and insect repellent didn't completely ward them



Miaofan Chen, left, works her way through the serving line with Thandi Glick during a potluck meal for Chinese exchange students and their host families at a school in Denver.



Foreign exchange student Miaofan Chen, left, of Hefei, China, chats with Thandi Glick during a potluck meal for Chinese exchange students and their families at a school in Denver. — AP photos

What foreign students can teach host families about America

It was Miaofan Chen's first trip away from her native China. At lunch with us in Denver, she looked so bemused that I had to ask: "Is this the first time you've had a hamburger?" "No," said the 15-year-old. "It's the first time I've had such a BIG hamburger." That encounter with supersized American portions was one of many observations that students from abroad have shared with us. Miaofan, from Hefei in eastern China, was the latest of a half-dozen young people from around the world who've called our guest room home. Needless to say, we learn as much from them as they do from us.

Our interest in hosting international visitors comes from our own experiences abroad. My husband, daughter and I returned to the U.S. in 2012 following my two decades as an Associated Press correspondent on three continents. People welcomed us in their hometowns around the world. Even now when we vacation, we meet strangers who offer menu recommendations in Brazil or Slovenia, or who help us navigate subways in Moscow or Tokyo. Hosting foreign students lets us pay those debts forward.

Seeing the US through their eyes

It's also a way to connect with the world from our front door and see our country through another's eyes. An Iraqi student who stayed with us for two weeks was surprised to see people in wheelchairs going to work or school in Denver. Not that her own country, wracked by decades of war, doesn't have people disabled by injury or disease. But in Baghdad, she said, they're hidden away. She helped me see that I'd taken for granted the progress here for Americans with disabilities. The State Department-backed Iraqi Young Leaders Exchange Program and local partner WorldDenver kept this Iraqi teen busy meeting with local development

groups. Other organizations have taken our visitors to basketball games, to mountain retreats and downtown for scavenger hunts. Often our visitors go to school with our daughter.

But I sometimes think our main contribution as hosts is giving them time to rest and reflect. We share meals and show off Denver, including my favorite view of the Rockies, which happens to be from soccer fields near my house. Guests help make pancakes on Sunday mornings. We've sent a French student to work out with our daughter's swim team and a Brazilian to her piano practice. Miaofan went ice skating with us, and handled her first time on the ice with as much aplomb as she'd shown eating a hamburger the size of her face.

English, food and logistics

All our guests knew English well enough for daily interactions. Any young person willing to embark on these trips has the pluck and flexibility to meet us more than halfway when it comes to navigating cultural differences. But these are teenagers. The one place where courage has failed a guest or two has been at the table. I once Googled "hunger strike" to reassure myself that a particularly picky eater could survive the week on only blueberries and coconut water. And pancakes.

Hosting opportunities have been easy for us to arrange through our daughter's public magnet school, the Denver Center for International Studies. Students there can study Chinese, French, Italian, Japanese (my daughter's choice), Lakota or Spanish and have rich opportunities to experience the world through classes, clubs, travel and hosting. A school staff member helps connect organizations with host families. We just check her calendar to see whether we can fit in a visitor. Organizers have accommodated our preferences for girls around our daughter's age and for one guest at a time. So far, we've opted

to host stays of just a few weeks to fit our busy schedules. Also, if my pancakes fail, at least the guest won't be hungry for long.

If you'd like to host

Contact your child's school or one nearby. They might have, or be willing to establish, ties with an organization that recruits host families through schools. Among them are the Ameson Education and Cultural Exchange Foundation, which focuses on US-China relations, and Global Ties US, which connects Americans with people around the world. Organizations you can approach directly include Adolesco, which matches families but lets them work out their own schedules for visiting.

Among the best-known organizations that bring young people to the United States are AFS-USA and Rotary International. Groups offer deep and broad support. Rotary, for example, provides a list of questions in English and in two dozen languages ranging from Afrikaans to Turkish that they suggest hosts and guests answer together the first night. I suppose it's too late to go over Rotary's expectation-setting - including bedtimes - with my own child.

Education First brings young international travelers together in New York for orientation before dispersing them to families across the country. The group orientation eases culture shock as they try new foods together and get used to hearing English. Organizations say these small interactions can have outsized results. Alyssa Fox, a homestay manager for Sister Cities International, which emerged from an Eisenhower White House conference on citizen diplomacy, describes their goals this way: "Achieving peace and creating connections, one person, one community at a time." — AP