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# THREE PERFECT DAYS

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*Antigua's Quinta Avenida  
passes under the Arco de  
Santa Catalina, part of  
a centuries-old convent*

## GUATEMALA

**THOSE WHO HAVE HEARD ANYTHING ABOUT GUATEMALA** are aware of its troubled history: the earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, the civil war that persisted from 1960 to 1996. But those who have actually been there know it to be something else: a place of extravagant beauty, soaring mountains, pristine lakes and dense jungle, dotted with archaeological treasures. Then there are the people, who are among the friendliest you'll meet anywhere. This may be a humble country, but the list of wonders it offers is truly something about which Guatemalans can boast. →



DAY ONE

*In which Justin conquers his fear of heights by climbing ancient Mayan temples and ziplining through the jungle*

**IT'S JUST AFTER DAWN**, and I'm in the back seat of a car that's pattering along the east shore of Lago Petén Itzá, a massive lake in Petén, a tropical state in the northeastern corner of Guatemala, about 30 miles from the Mexican border. I'm munching on chile-lime peanuts as my guide, Eric García, gives me the rundown on Tikal National Park, the famed archaeological site that's also a part of the Maya Biosphere Reserve.

"This is one of nine sites in the world that UNESCO made a natural *and* cultural preserve," he says of the park. "NASA came here five years ago and took satellite pictures, and they discovered 2,000 archaeological sites in Petén alone."

García has reason to be proud. He comes from a small nearby village called Caoba (the Spanish name for the mahogany tree). Like many Guatemalans, he is of Mayan descent (his grandfather doesn't speak Spanish), and he

"GUATEMALA IS NOT SO BIG, BUT WE HAVE A VARIETY OF ATTRACTIONS. IN THE HIGHLANDS YOU CAN SEE PEOPLE TRYING TO PRESERVE THE MAYAN TRADITIONS. WE HAVE ANTIGUA, WITH AN ENVIRONMENT THAT IS REALLY AMAZING. AND IN TIKAL, THERE IS A NICE COMBINATION OF NATURE AND ARCHAEOLOGY."

**ERIC GARCÍA**  
Guide, Tikal  
National Park  
(in front of Temple II)



occasionally supplements his narrative by pulling a small Mayan flute from his bag and playing a few notes.

"Tikal is the center of the Mayan world, like Mecca or the Vatican," he says. "Mayans would come to Tikal from smaller villages to celebrate ceremonies."

Just inside the park gate, García stops and points to the top of a ceiba tree, where black-brown birds with bright yellow tails are flitting and bickering around a bunch of teardrop-shaped nests. "They're called Montezuma oropendola," he says, "for the gold tails and the way their nests hang."

After a half-hour drive down a tree-lined road, we begin our hike through the jungle, the thunderous calls of howler monkeys roaring overhead. We pause to watch a female spider monkey and her baby scamper across a bough, then make our way toward El Templo del Gran Jaguar, also known as Temple I. As we near the temple, we hear a frenzy of scratching—it's an anteater, halfway up a tree, tearing away the bark to get at a nest of termites. "That's a rare sight to see," García tells me.

We skirt the edges of the stepped, 154-foot pyramid and emerge into the Great Plaza, a broad clearing with stone ruins—dating back more than a thousand years—rising on all four sides. Directly across from Temple I stands El Templo de las Máscaras, or Temple II, which I climb, eager to see the carved namesake masks at the top. The summit also affords stunning views of the surrounding ruins: the Central Acropolis, a crumbled palace complex where the city's elite lived, and the North Acropolis, a collection of burial chambers, the walls of which bear more stone masks representing Mayan gods.

Down a trail, surrounded by dense vegetation, are Temples III and IV—the latter the tallest in the park, at 213 feet. "We have a big conflict between ecologists and archaeologists," García explains as we make our way through the brush. "Ecologists say, 'Don't touch anything,' and archaeologists say, 'We want to discover more.' Of the 4,000 buildings that have been found here, only 15 percent have been restored."

I climb to the top of Temple IV and look out across miles of jungle canopy. George Lucas showed the Millennium Falcon cruising over this location in *Star Wars*, and the view is so spectacular that I can (mostly) quell my fear of the vertiginous height. I can also understand why some people think aliens built these temples; there's an otherworldly vibe up here.

As we hike back through the jungle, the skies open up in a torrential downpour. By the time we get to El Mesón, a restaurant near the park entrance, I'm drenched. We take a seat at a picnic table beneath a thatch roof, where we receive a delicious and hearty homestyle lunch of spicy grilled chicken and fluffy, buttery rice, with a dessert of cinnamon-laced stewed banana.

Fortunately, I came prepared for the precipitation—it's called a "rainforest" for a reason—and

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Tikal National Park's  
Temple I, seen across  
the Great Plaza from  
the top of Temple II







have a change of clothes in the car. I'm ready to get back into town and take a nap, but as we pass through the gate, García points out Canopy Tours Tikal. "Do you want to do the zipline?" he asks. I remember my dizziness atop Temple IV and say no. Then I think again. The rain has stopped. I'm on vacation. Why not? Minutes later I am screaming and flying, Superman-style, through the treetops. Fear of heights: conquered. Need for a nap: also conquered.

We drive for an hour or so to Flores, the capital of Petén, which occupies a small island in Lago Petén Itzá. We cross the bridge into town and García drops me off at the red-and-white, chalet-style Ramada Tikal, which opened last year on the sleepy waterfront. At check-in I'm given a glass of watermelon juice, which soothes my throat, still scratchy from jungle-sweat dehydration and zipline banshee wails. Just beyond the lobby I pass an indoor pool and head up to my room, which

↑  
Purple-robed cucuruchos at a religious procession in Jocotenango

→  
Fried mojarra fish at Restaurante el Pescador, in Santiago Atitlán

has a balcony overlooking the lake. The view is great, but the sight of the bed is even better. I feel my need for a nap returning.

It's dark when I wake up, and I make my way down the road that rings the edge of the island to Raices Grill. I take a seat on the deck, which juts out over the lake, and order a plate of *camarones al ajo*, huge shrimp stuffed with garlic and served over grilled pineapple. Even at night it's tropically steamy here, and I fight back the heat with a few rounds of the national lager, Gallo, whiling away the evening by tossing crumbs of tortilla to the fish swarming around the boards.

## DAY TWO

*In which Justin visits crumbled churches, momentarily finds religion and witnesses a volcanic eruption*

**I'M UP BEFORE THE SUN** in order to catch the hourlong flight from the nearby Flores airport to Guatemala City. By midmorning, I'm in a car and on the way to Antigua, one of the New World's great cultural landmarks. The UNESCO World Heritage Site and former capital of most of colonial Central America is a jumble of cobblestone streets, colorful houses and crumbled churches (due to a 1773 earthquake that destroyed most of the city). It also plays host to frequent, lively festivals.

I drop my bags at Mansión de la Luz, a seven-room boutique hotel that opened last year. The open courtyard looks like a setting from a García Márquez novel, with sprays of calla lilies, tile fountains, arched windows and mannequins dressed in Mayan garb. I head to the restaurant for a late breakfast with my friend Norman Raxón, a cheerful 29-year-old who works as a guide for the Guatemalan tourism agency. I get a *desayuno típico*: scrambled eggs laced with tomato and onion, black beans, fried plantains, cheese and a spoonful of cream. The salsa I ladle over my eggs is so ragingly *picante* that I frantically hail our waiter for a **mint lemonade** >



Now we're ready to tackle those cobblestones. We stroll down Tercera Calle, toward the town center, making a detour into Iglesia y Convento

\* 37 VOLCANOES IN GUATEMALA (FOUR ARE CURRENTLY ACTIVE)

de Santo Domingo. A former monastery, founded in the 16th century, Santo Domingo still holds services, and it's also home to a museum—the highlight of which is an ancient crypt, its disintegrating tombs stacked like bunk beds—and a luxury hotel. We wander the courtyard, past bright macaws on perches hung from avocado trees, then find a candle shop in back, where we watch wax being hand-twisted into resplendent centerpieces.

We're barely able to walk another block before I'm hooked again, this time by the chocolatey smell wafting from ChocoMuseo. A fast-talking employee named Pablo leads us on a tour of the shop, complete with a brief history of chocolate, which, he tells us, started as a humble Mayan drink (*chocolatl* translates as "spicy bitter hot water") and became an increasingly valuable commodity. Mayans would trade more than 100,000 beans for a jaguar skin, while Europeans would later exchange just 100 beans for a human slave. Pablo punctuates his lesson with samples of candy and spicy tea that I can't help but accept, despite my recent, weighty breakfast.

We continue on across town—spanning the city on foot takes just 15 or 20 minutes—to meet a friend of Norman's, Fausto Sicán, a guide from the nearby village of San Juan del Obispo. "He knows everything about this city," Norman tells me. Sicán began leading tour groups as a kid to help pay for school. He studied law, but to be a student during Guatemala's violent civil war was a risky proposition, so he left school and now uses his considerable intellect to educate people like me.



"GUATEMALA'S HERITAGE DERIVES FROM TWO DISTINCT SOURCES: MAYAN CIVILIZATION AND SPANISH PRESENCE. VESTIGES OF BOTH THESE CULTURES ARE FOUND THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY. SO GUATEMALA NOW IS A MULTICULTURAL COUNTRY."

FAUSTO SICÁN  
Guide, Antigua  
(at Convento de las Capuchinas)



"This city is considered the best expression of the Spanish presence in Guatemala," Sicán says. "My favorite place is the Convento de las Capuchinas. It's one of the most important places in the city. It was the last [major] building constructed here before the capital moved to Guatemala City."

Sicán agrees to show us Capuchinas, a fortresslike, carved-stone convent that was consecrated in 1736. He leads us into the main hall, light streaming down from above, where a huge dome once rose, then through the sanctuary, where nuns would fast and flagellate themselves, and finally into a circular subterranean room. It's chilly down here, and with just two windows a little dark, but it's strangely peaceful. Standing in the slanting light, Norman nods at me. "This is the best place," he whispers.

This room, Sicán tells us, managed to escape the ravages of earthquakes, and there are many theories about what it was used for. "The best version," he says, "is that this is like the Gregorian places, where the people went to sing, thinking that their voices go directly to heaven." He demonstrates by walking around the perimeter of the room, singing in a deep voice that resonates throughout the chamber.

Before he leaves, Sicán tells us we should check out a religious procession happening in the adjacent village of Jocotenango. We take his advice, hailing one of the ubiquitous three-wheel *tuk-tuks*, and 10 bumpy minutes later we're stepping out into the central square of the village, which is like a smaller, less touristy version of Antigua.

The streets are decorated with colorful *alfombras*, or carpets, painstakingly pieced together from dyed sawdust and fruit. Over these decorations passes the procession. First come the *cucuruchos*, men in purple robes carrying a giant casket, atop which stands an effigy of Christ. A smaller casket for the Virgin Mary, borne by solemn teenage girls in black skirts, follows. The floats sway as the pallbearers, some weeping, rotate in and out.





I'm not a religious man, but for a moment the sight is enough to make me wish I were.

Later, we walk back through the main square, scoping out the many food carts. Norman points to a grill, over which roasts an entire pig. It's time for another religious experience: We chow down on pork tacos topped with virulently spicy green salsa, then *tuk-tuk* it back down the hill to Antigua.

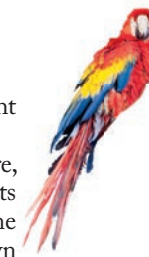
We alight in Parque Central, the city's main square, and stroll beneath a bursting purple bloom of jacaranda flowers, past canoodling couples, breakdancing teens, kids pushing wheelbarrows of peanuts for sale. We stop at the 450-year-old Iglesia de la Merced, whose Baroque detailing includes stucco carvings of saints and coffee plants on its dazzling yellow facade. We poke our heads inside—there's a service going on—then continue on to Quinta Avenida, a ramble of shops, bars and restaurants that the locals call "Arch Street" because it passes under the Arco de Santa Catalina, a 17th-century archway and bell tower. We stop in at Nim Po't Centro de Textiles Tradicionales, a cavernous shop filled with ceremonial masks, *güipiles* (traditional blouses) and immense circular kites that Guatemalans fly as part of their Día de los Muertos celebration. I want to take one home, but it's not gonna fit in my carry-on.

We stop for dinner at Los Tres Tiempos, a bright blue restaurant that serves expertly executed Guatemalan standards. We sit amid bougainvilleas on the second-floor patio, listening to a pair of mariachis as we munch on fried sticks of Guatemalan *chancol* cheese and a ceviche of shrimp, fish,

conch, octopus and avocado. For an entree, I order *pepián*, a soup of pork, rice, potato and carrots in a broth laced with tomato, chile, pumpkin and sesame.

Next, we hoof it across town for sundowners at the third-floor rooftop bar of Café Sky. Thanks to preservation regulations (and the fear of earthquakes) three stories is tall for Antigua, so we're blessed with views of Fuego, Agua and Acatenango, the three 12,000-plus-foot volcanoes that

← From top: Jacaranda trees in bloom at the Convento de las Capuchinas, in Antigua; nightlife on Calle Santander, in Panajachel



← A scarlet macaw at Iglesia y Convento de Santo Domingo

"THERE ARE 50, 60 ARTISTS IN SAN JUAN—A LOT OF ARTISTS—AND THAT BRINGS A LOT OF TOURISM, FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD. I'M VERY HAPPY ABOUT THAT. WHEN PEOPLE THINK OF SAN JUAN, THEY THINK OF ART."



ANTONIO COCHÉ MENDOZA, Artist, Galería de Arte Chiyá y Creación Maya (with wife and fellow artist Angelina Quic)

surround the city. As I sip a mint-heavy mojito, a puff of dark smoke rises from the top of the appropriately named Fuego. "That's a small one," Norman says. "A few weeks ago there was a big one that covered the city in ash."

On the way back to the hotel, we come across a guarded motorcade in front of the Santo Domingo. Apparently the president of Guatemala and the prime minister of Spain are meeting here. "Everyone who comes to Guatemala runs to Antigua," Norman observes. I can see why.

#### GO FISH Guatemala is a surprising paradise for anglers

Guatemala may not be as internationally renowned for its sportfishing as Key West or Cabo San Lucas, but as any fisherman knows, the best spot to wet your line is the one nobody has heard about. As it happens, the water off the

Pacific coast of Guatemala has a high oxygen content at relatively low depths, making it a magnet for marine life. Meanwhile, the government has instituted a strict catch-and-release policy for sailfish, ensuring that the stock is not depleted.

The results are undeniable: Charter boats often hook upward of 20 big-game fish in a day. I spent a half day out on the water with a boat from Casa Vieja Lodge, and we reeled in nine sailfish (pictured at right), several of them over 100 pounds, along with one *dorado*

(mahimahi) that we were allowed to fillet and keep. Sightings of whales and sea turtles are common as well.

In addition to a charter fleet of nine boats, Casa Vieja has a luxurious, all-inclusive lodge in Puerto San José, just five minutes from the marina. [casaviejalodge.com](http://casaviejalodge.com)





DAY THREE

*In which Justin chats with Mayan artists, watches the sun set over a pristine lake and meets his spirit guide*

**AS I STEP OUT ONTO** the courtyard balcony at Mansión de la Luz, the only clouds I see are a few white wisps skirting the peaks of Fuego and Acatenango. I feel a volcanic rumbling and look for more smoke from Fuego, but it's only my stomach, so I cross the courtyard to the hotel restaurant, where I eagerly order another *desayuno típico*, topping it off with a cup of strong Guatemalan coffee.

After breakfast, I meet Norman in the lobby. He's agreed to drive me the hour and a half to Lago de Atitlán, one of Central America's greatest natural wonders. "The lake is my favorite place in Guatemala," he tells me as we drive through a rocky mountain pass. Soon, a switchbacking road drops us into the lakeside town of Panajachel. Past the shops, restaurants and food carts of Calle Santander, we reach the Porta Hotel Del Lago. I drop my bags in my room and step out onto the balcony. Three huge volcanoes—Atitlán, Tolimán and San Pedro—rise from the flat blue surface of the lake, itself nearly a mile above sea level. I've got to get out on that water.

I walk down to the docks, where Norman has hired a motorboat to ferry us around the lake. We skip across the surface, curve around a fisherman, who waves at us from his small *cayuco*—the simple wooden canoe used by locals—and traverse a patch of improvised crab traps before pulling up to the docks of the village of San Juan la Laguna.

Up a steep incline from the docks, we find Galería de Arte Chiya y Creación Maya, run by local husband-and-wife artists Antonio Coché Mendoza and Angelina Quic. We step inside the gallery, its walls filled with vivid depictions of marketplaces painted from a bird's-eye perspective. Quic and Coché have taught the technique to many students over the years.

"I got the idea 24 years ago, at Cerro de la Cruz, while looking down from above the town," Quic says. "Then we took photos from a rooftop of children with baskets at a market, and started to make these paintings."

Coché, a self-taught artist who has been painting since age 10, leads me into a back room, where he hangs his own works, canvases bursting with fruit, Rivera-esque callalilies and Mayan villagers. "I paint the life of the peasants that you see in the coffee plantations here," he tells me. "The streets, the lake. A little of everything."

After buying a couple of paintings, Norman and I continue up the street. At the top of the hill, we reach Asociación Ixq Ajkeem Mujer Tejedora, a cooperative of local women who hand-weave textiles in traditional Mayan fashion.

Co-op member Catarina Méndez demonstrates how the cloth is spun, dyed and woven. It's about to get chilly again back in the States, so I pick up a marvelous new scarf.



Fried chancol cheese sticks from Los Tres Tiempos, in Antigua



Sunset over Lago de Atitlán, seen from the Panajachel public docks

We head back to the boat and zip over to another lakeside town, Santiago Atitlán. We slog up another hill to Restaurante el Pescador, where we sit on a second-floor deck and watch the locals below: women in Mayan garb leading children by the hand, young men standing in the beds of moving pickup trucks. I order a fried whole *mojarra* fish, accompanied by rice, vegetables and a mountain of chips and guacamole.

After lunch, we walk through the plaza, stopping at the Iglesia Parroquial Santiago Apóstol. The plaques here offer a sobering reminder of Guatemala's turbulent past. The civil war was particularly brutal in this region, and the pastor, Father Stanley Rother, allowed many families to sleep in the church for safety. A death squad killed him for his kindness, but the grateful townspeople buried his heart in the church.

The late-afternoon wind is picking up and the lake is getting choppy, so we head for the boat and back to Panajachel. After docking, we follow a row of lakeside eateries and settle on the deck at Restaurante Los Cayucos, hanging out over the

water, where we enjoy a couple of large Gallos and a platter of *boquitas*, tasty bites of tortilla, guacamole, steak and salsa. The waves are really rocking now, and Norman recalls a Mayan legend that explains why.

"A princess and a Tz'utujil man from the other side of the lake fell in love, but the Spaniards wanted the girl," he tells me. "So they tied a stone around the man's neck and threw him in the water. And then the princess took a *cayuco*, and she jumped in the water. And so every day, between 4 and 5 o'clock in the afternoon, people believe that the princess and the man dance together."


We knock back a few more Gallos, watching the waves dance, and then take a walk up Santander, where the taco carts are still doing a brisk trade. We cut left onto Calle Principal and up to Bar Circus, where we find a small dog sitting on the sidewalk out front. "We call that a *cadejo*," Norman says. "He's good luck. If you see a *cadejo* in front of a bar, he'll help you get home when you're drunk."

Our canine guardian follows us inside and sets up camp under our table, waiting for handouts. When a couple of guitar players take the stage, he jumps up and lies at their feet. The musicians take Latin rock requests from the crowd, and we split a pizza topped with salami, mushrooms and olives, with more than enough margaritas. As I drain the last of the tequila from my glass, the dog wanders back over, and I scratch his ear. "What do you think, *cadejo*? Time to go home?"

As if in answer, he springs up and dashes for the door. On to the next adventure.

Hemispheres managing editor **Justin Goldman** needs a full-time *cadejo* for all of his travels. 



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