

Antigua, Guatemala

- Colourful Maya culture, colossal volcanoes, and great coffee and chocolate
- Fly UK-Guatemala City, via Madrid; flight time from 16 hours
- Dec-May: dry season



UNDER THE VOLCANO

Volcán Agua is a constant reminder of the gods' capricious nature. No wonder, then, that the Antiguans living in its shadow know how to enjoy themselves: great food, fine coffee and *lots* of chocolate

Words & pictures **Claire Boobyer**

Location, location
Gridded Antigua spreads over the Valley of Panchoy, under Agua volcano

I'd gone to Guatemala to do drugs. Coffee and chocolate mainly – but there were more stimulants than I realised, until I was told to sniff the highland breeze.

“There’s a reason why the valley of Antigua is always tranquil and why people want to stay here,” said Doña Gavi, owner of a herbal emporium embedded in a cubbyhole in the back of the cathedral. “Antigua is surrounded by coffee plantations that are surrounded by the floripondio, a mystical flower that protects from bad spirits. It’s got a beautiful smell but it’s poisonous. Also, the coffee is shaded by gravileas trees: their pollen puts you to sleep.” Floripondio, or angel’s trumpet, sheds hallucinogenic drops when drunk in tea; the gravileas oozes toxic hydrogen cyanide.

I had a feeling, though, that it wasn’t only the scented air that seduced people into staying in Antigua. It was the gorgeous location, the perfect climate, the ravishing beauty of its colonial mansions and convent ruins, and the copious *comida* (food) on offer.

The Very Noble and Very Loyal City of Santiago de los Caballeros de Guatemala was the Spanish conquerors’ headquarters from 1543 to 1773. It was the first planned city in the New World and unfolds in a perfect grid pattern in the Valley of Panchoy. Its cobblestone streets are lined with one-storey homes splashed in a titillating palette of cinnamon, vermilion, ochre and pistachio green. They’re punctuated by petrified churches, wrecked convents and fallen angels, the centuries-old ruins of a devastating 1773 earthquake, historically one of the worst to rumble up from Guatemala’s geologically volatile earth.

From the town’s cute cupola-ed rooftops, the vast, conical Agua volcano leers. Its status as benefactor (for its fertile flanks) and tormentor (for its tectonic tantrum in 1541 that destroyed San Miguel Escobar, the capital city prior to Antigua) is cemented in the town’s lore, as well as its food and drink. >



Corbis

Clockwise from left El Arco epitomises Antigua's colonial style; a leisurely lunch at the Como Como restaurant; one of Guatemala's colourful chicken buses; Doña Maria Gordillo's sweet shop; a variety of chocolate temptations



GUATEMALAN GLAMPING



◊ A TENT BY THE TEMPLES

I was sitting atop a pyramid, part of the oldest known astronomy complex in the Maya world, contemplating the end of the Maya long-count calendar. Secretly I was hoping a jaguar would enter the grounds, stage left, pause to look at the complex and at me, and exit stage right. However, as cedar leaves helicoptered down, the jaguar's understudy, a kinkajou, tightroped along branches instead.

Back at camp - right amid the torch-lit ruins - we dined on fried chicken and baked potato and sipped wine while gazing up at the celestial canopy.

Uaxactún is 24km north of the preeminent temple-dominated site of Tikal in northern Guatemala. Either side of a former runway that smacked a concrete slab through chewing-gum-tree jungle are the ruins of a Maya city that thrived between 1,000BC and AD1,000. At Group E ruins, the astronomical observatory combines the central pyramid, which bears monstrous stucco jaguar and serpent heads.

Viaventure (www.viaventure.com) now runs an exclusive new campsite experience at the ruins of Uaxactún. The package costs US\$527pppn, including transfers, guide, entrance fees for Uaxactún and Tikal, camping in luxury tents (with beds and rain showers in bathrooms), meals and sunset drinks.

Note, in 2012, the autumn equinox and winter solstice will be observed with ceremonies at Uaxactún and Tikal.

◀ After the 1773 quake, the ruling Captains General of Guatemala banished the townsfolk to yet another new capital, La Nueva Guatemala de La Asunción. Built on a plateau shredded with ravines (it was believed earthquakes were caused by gases, which needed deep trenches to escape), this latest capital lasted the distance.

However, many Antiguëños refused to budge; after the order was ignored, the authorities cut the food supply to the valley to force residents to relocate. The entrenched Antiguëños survived on herbs and Guatemala's 18 types of avocado, which won them the nickname *panza verde* (green belly), a moniker still used to this day.

Maize makes the man

The layers of fertile, mineral-rich volcanic soil that supported the 18th-century diehard Antiguëños still produce a prosperous spread. Keen to explore this bio-heritage, I took a street-food tour, starting in the grounds of the Church of San Francisco, where families gathered for the Sunday afternoon ritual of grazing at food stalls.

Central to the Guatemalan diet is the tortilla, made from maize (corn). It has, since time immemorial, supported Mesoamerican civilisation including the Maya, whose empire-building zenith peaked between AD250-900. In the Maya creation story, the

Popol Vuh, man was fashioned from maize; water became his blood.

The Maya Genesis tale made sense of everything around me. As the 'staff of life', maize is at the core of the country's cuisine (its motif is also faithfully woven into *trajes*, elaborate embroidered clothes still worn by today's Maya). I pecked at *enchiladas* (fried stuffed tortillas) and *tamales* (maize dough, tomato, peppers, annatto and chile guaque in banana leaves). I then nibbled at the simpler *elote* (corn on the cob with lemon and salt) and its comic alter ego, *elote loco* ('crazy corn' - doused in mayo, ketchup and mustard) before further filling my panza with *atol de elote*, a rich hot broth of maize blended with cinnamon, milk, cloves, sugar and cocoa.

After this thick, custardy gruel, I wanted to taste an equally ancient brew - a cold chocolate drink mixed with spices and honey, drunk by the elite ancient Maya. It was the Mesoamericans who first drank cocoa, and raised the status of *Theobroma cacao* seeds (or 'Food of the Gods') from plantation pod to elixir of the aristocracy and sacred offering.

The Maya didn't know it, but chocolate is addictive because of its mood-enhancing cocktail of caffeine, theobromine, serotonin and phenylethylamine. I knew it, though, and eagerly signed up for a chocolate-making course at Antigua's new ChocoMuseo. >



'Theobrama cacao - the 'Food of the Gods' - was raised from plantation pod to elixir of the aristocracy'



Previous spread: Corbis; This spread: Claire Boobyer





Clockwise from left
Roast duck in - you guessed it - chocolate sauce, at the Mesón Panza Verde restaurant; enduring the daily grind at the ChocoMuseo; melon munching at the market



◀ I knuckled down to some hard graft – roasting, husk-peeling, crumbling the bean into nibs and grinding. Water, chilli, honey and annatto (to colour the drink) are added before you pour the liquid at a height from one jar to another to whip up a head of foam – the most sacred part of a true ancient Maya chocolate drink. Mass-market bars are now full of sugar, so to sip chocolate stripped to its roots – spice crackling around my tongue – transported me back 1,000 years to the life of a jaguar-skin-clad Maya lord.

Chocololics anonymous

It's only been in the past five years that the country that cultivated the superior *criollo cacao* in the pre-conquest world has brought chocolate to the table with gusto. Keen to know why Guatemala has been slow to embrace its valuable cacao history, I asked Juan Carlos Orellana, whose hummingbird- and herb-filled restaurant-garden, Sabe Rico, undulates over quake-toppled ruins.

"It's something historic that came with the Maya but we haven't given any importance to it until now. It's also ironic. We have cacao plantations but we didn't have the quality. The best quality was exported." Antigua has now embraced its culinary legacy, making

slabs of chocolate, spice-spiked bonbons, sauces, desserts and drinks. It was my mission to gorge on the lot.

At Mesón Panza Verde I ate *magret de canard* slices in a rich chocolate-and-prune sauce, finishing with a calming chocolate-and-raspberry tea, in which the cacao notes were delivered late. At Sabe Rico, a chocolate truffle packed with cobanero chile and rolled in pumpkin seed placed in candy-pink and clotted-cream rose petals packed a spicy punch.

At the HQ of Ixcacao chocolate (named after the Maya goddess of cacao), I was tempted with mint and orange-peel bars. At El Frijol Feliz's cooking class, I helped concoct *mole*, a salsa made from chocolate, plantains, seeds and spices – a recipe inherited from the Mesoamericans that still graces many a Central American table.

Over at French Bistro Cinq, I sank a moreish chocolate-and-blackberry vodka cocktail before winding up with a stunning six-months' aged Guatemalan orange-and-chocolate rum made by Nespresso agronomist-turned-Metiz Deli owner Benjamin Baretzki.

This was all clearly too much of a good thing; I needed to lie down. But by now the

addiction was all-consuming. So I succumbed to a supine ritual – with chocolate: a coffee, vanilla and cacao exfoliating scrub at Healing Hands Spa. I was quickly ejected from my slumberous Willy Wonka world, however, when the masseur slathered me in coffin-cold yoghurt and chocolate goo.

Conscious that my Guatemala gluttony was developing without me having to harvest any of the spoils, I decided to go and labour in the valley. I joined Filiberto Salazar in the coffee plantations of San Miguel Escobar. Here, the co-operative As Green As It Gets – set up by Wisconsin air-conditioner-designer turned coffee wizard Franklin Voorhes – supports local farmers, helping them move from a subsistence existence to producing marketable products. In the eight years of its operation, many farmers have been able to swap houses made of maize stalks for concrete blocks; their sales revenues have increased by between 100% and 600%.

Hiking a mile up the flank of Volcán Agua, we passed bulbous avocado and sapodilla-laden trees before donning baskets to collect the ripe, Arabica Strictly Hard Bean. We then proceeded to strip just enough beans off the bushes to brew a few cups of coffee. ▶

Guatemala Footnotes



Nutty profession
Lorenzo Gottschamer's
macadamia nuts are a
proven elixir of youth

◀ At Filiberto's home, surrounded by some of his 11 children, his wife roasted ready beans before grinding them on a *metate* (grinding stone) and offering us a fresh cuppa. Guatemalan coffee is rightly renowned. The rich notes reflect highland sun, rainfall, altitude and intensely fertile volcanic soil, which combine to produce a glorious, earthy refreshment.

After 'working' the plantation, I figured I needed another rest and set to look for more gathered fruits of the valley. The macadamia tree, an Australia native, thrives in the volcanic earth; its gobstopper-sized nuts are rich in linoleic acid (an age-defying oil). Retired San Francisco fireman Lorenzo Gottschamer nurtures them at his Valhalla farm, near San Miguel Dueñas, where they're de-husked with a handmade contraption. In the lush garden, framed by banana leaves, we indulged in the most delicately textured and delicious macadamia and blueberry pancakes.

As well as dabbing macadamia cream onto my face to slough away the years, I was curious to see how the nut was transformed in the dining rooms of

Antigua. At El Convento, an upright pear was elegantly stuffed with cream cheese, roquefort and macadamia, while culinary nirvana was reached with the *parfait de macadamia* at Mesón Panza Verde.

The end of days

On 21 December 2012, today's Maya will celebrate the end of the 13th B'aktun, a 5,125-year calendar cycle that will draw to a close. So, as cacao was the food of the gods, would Antigueños be offering it up at the 'end of the world' ceremony, I wondered.

Maya Kaqchikel shaman Tojil explained: "It's not the end of the world, it's the end of a cycle and the beginning of a new one. For the Maya, it's not about a food celebration, it's about a spiritual preparation to be closer to our ancestors."

Other *chapins* (Guatemalans) are resisting an apocalyptic ritual for reasons of religion or deference to Maya culture. However, Jean-François Desmoulin, chef at Tartines, wondered out loud about preparing a 'Last Supper'. "It would be fabulous, with plenty of wine," he prophesied, "and then we would die the next day!" **CB**

Access city: Guatemala City

When to go: Rainy season is May-Oct - travel is possible, though some roads may be impassable. **Summer (Nov-Apr) is dry;** the highlands will be warm by day.

Health & safety: Highway robbery and robbery along hiking trails are risks. Don't flaunt valuables; distribute money, etc around your bags/person; carry only what you need, keeping other belongings locked in hotel safes. Be up to date on key vaccinations. Take **malaria** tablets.

Further reading & information:

Guatemala Focus (Footprint, 2011)

www.visitguatemala.com

The trip: The author travelled with **Audley Travel** (01993 838000, www.audleytravel.com). A two-week trip to Antigua including flights, hotels, transfers and tours costs from £2,600pp based on two sharing.

As Green as it Gets (asgreenasitgets.org) offers coffee and artisan tours from US\$25pp; environmental organisation **Valhalla** (nr San Miguel Dueñas; www.exvalhalla.net) runs farm tours. Book cooking classes with **El Frijol Feliz** (US\$45pp; www.frijolfeliz.com), chocolate-making at the **ChocoMuseo** (Q150 [£13]; guatemala.chocomuseo.com) and chocolate therapy at **Healing Hands Spa** (www.healinghandsguatemala.com).

Getting there: Iberia (iberia.com) flies

Heathrow-Guatemala City via Madrid. Returns from around £700; journey time from around 16 hours.

Getting around: Daily flights run Guatemala City-Flores (access airport for Tikal and Uaxactún). Buses are the best way to get around: either tourist buses or local 'chicken buses'. Fares are cheap.

Cost of travel: Guatemala is **one of the cheapest spots in Central America.** Hostel beds cost from US\$4; meals from US\$3; snacks from market stalls mere pennies. It's possible to get by on US\$20-40 a day.

Accommodation: There's lots of choice in Antigua. (Note, prices subject to 22% tax.)

Casa Encantada (9a Calle Poniente Esquina 1; www.casaencantada-antigua.com) is a central, boutique option; from US\$90.

D'Legend (4 Ave Norte 1; www.dleyendahotel.com) has a rooftop Jacuzzi; from US\$80. **El Convento** (2 Ave Norte 11; www.elconventoantigua.com) is opposite the Capuchin convent; from US\$230.

El Mesón de María (3a Calle Poniente 8; www.hotelmesondemaria.com) has elegant rooms; from US\$85. **La Posada del Angel** (4 Ave Sur 24A; www.posadadelangel.com) is decorated in Guatemalan fabrics; from US\$175. **Mesón Panza Verde** (5 Ave Sur 19; www.panzaverde.com) has a romantic restaurant; from US\$85.