



A Different Kind OF Journey

The trip to Lake Atitlán and Guatemala's Ancient Mayan Culture is all at once beautiful, educational and heart wrenching—and one not to be missed.

BY SHAYNE BENOWITZ

It was pitch black by the time we arrived at Lake Atitlán in Guatemala's highlands. An ancient volcanic caldera—Central America's deepest lake, plunges more than 1,000 subaquatic feet. From where we were perched, on a cliffside terrace at Casa Palopó, the lake spreads 10 profound miles to the opposite western shore. Three volcanic peaks border the lake's southern ridge—Atitlán, Toliman and San Pedro—rising to elevations as high as 11,600 feet. I could see nothing through the inky night sky. There were no twinkling lights to spy in far off villages, no reflections of stars on a glassy surface, just pitch black. I only had the vague sense that some deep chasm in the earth was below us. The feeling was disorienting, like my center of gravity was off, which could also describe the feeling I had on the 90 mile drive from Guatemala City to the lake that afternoon, which seemed to take forever.

Claudia Bosch, the owner of Casa Palopó, met us for lunch at Plaza Fontabella in Guatemala City's Zone 10 to drive us herself to the seven-room boutique hotel that was once a private home in Santa Catarina Palopó. Born and raised in Guatemala City, Claudia's family owns the Pollo Campero fast food chain found throughout Central America and across the world, including a location on Miami's Calle Ocho. She bought Casa Palopó from her friend Billy Bickford on a whim over lunch after she stayed there in 2010. "I hadn't spent much time on the lake growing up. We were always busy in

the city working or we'd go to Antigua," Claudia told me. "I fell in love with Casa Palopó and when Billy mentioned he was looking to sell, I told him I'd buy it, without skipping a beat."

The Road to Lake Atitlán

I sat gazing wide-eyed through the windows of Claudia's black SUV as we navigated the chaotic, traffic-choked streets of Guatemala City, the largest Central American capital at 3.5 million people. Chicken buses—North American school buses converted for public transport between Central American cities and painted a psychedelic mural of colors—were crammed with passengers. They whizzed past us, doors open, at breakneck speeds. A pickup truck in front of us was overloaded with young men in the truck bed, swaying with the traffic. A family on foot ran across the multi-lane street,

dodging moving vehicles. My adrenaline was elevated just watching the scenes unfold outside my window.

The landscape changed as we reached pastoral Tecpán with green fields, lush trees and rustic roadside restaurants made of wood logs. Still, no matter how far we drove from Guatemala City, we were never far from dense settlements of homes made of concrete and rebar piled atop one another like an elaborate and haphazard house of cards. The road climbed to higher elevations along deep ravines. Indigenous women in traditional woven garments, baskets balanced on their heads, walked along the side of the road with small children trailing behind them, cars whizzing past. Dusk settled and the road became windy and rough in unpaved patches as we drew closer to Lake Atitlán. The last thing I saw in the twilight before we reached the gates of Casa Palopó was

the tiny town of Santa Catarina set along the narrow road. There was hardly any electricity and I watched shadowy figures walk along the street without sidewalks and peer out from inside ramshackle concrete buildings in the gathering dark.

At Casa Palopó

After dinner, I settled into my room, the upstairs Atitlán Master Suite in a two-story villa located 150 cobblestone steps above Casa Palopó's primary hotel. It's the property's highest and, arguably, most luxurious room, with a private terrace, an exposed wooden beam ceiling, a four-poster mahogany king-size bed and Indonesian wooden furniture with a large, lovely bathroom with a soaking tub, walk-in shower and a beautiful, shabby-chic antique wooden counter with a porcelain sink. I decided to leave the curtains open in my suite that night, so that the first light of

day would awaken me to my first glimpse of Lake Atitlán. The air smelled faintly of brush fire, as it had all day and would through the remainder of our trip. I'd later learn that this was due to slash-and-burn farming, a subsistence agriculture technique widely practiced before rainy season to fertilize soil and create fields. The rain would start next month in May and last through October.

As I climbed into bed, I was still rattled by the drive and everything I saw out the car windows. I pulled up the cool, crisp white Italian linens. The irony wasn't lost on me as I composed an email to my dad. He and my mother had traveled to Guatemala exactly one year earlier on a Habitat for Humanity mission in Zacapa with couples from work. I'd refused to join them, apparently too busy then to do some civic good, but not too busy now to be safeguarded in a luxurious boutique hotel.

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: The terrace at Casa Palopó offers a bird's eye view of Lake Atitlán; grab a drink at the bar to enjoy while taking in the views from the infinity pool (far right), perfectly situated to marvel at the three volcanic peaks in the distance.



LEFT TO RIGHT: Wooden beam ceilings, a four-poster bed and Indonesian furniture set the scene for a luxurious night's rest; the living room at Casa Palapó is warm and inviting; handmade corn tortillas, cooked on a traditional comal, are a Guatemalan treat.

If You Go

CASA PALAPÓ

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 Rates from \$377 peak season (November to April)

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I felt guilty, but also overwhelmed by the kindness of our hostess and the hospitality of the Casa Palopó staff, most of whom are native to the lake.

First Sight of Lake Atitlán

I woke around 5 am to pale light streaming into my room through the terrace's French glass doors. Exhilarated, I threw off the covers and raced to the window. Outside, standing barefoot on the cool terracotta tiles, there she was, Lake Atitlán through the purple haze of morning. Her three volcanic peaks rose at a gradual, elegant rake from their wide bases on the other shore. She filled the horizon, reflecting the cool purple-pinks of dawn on her surface, an uneven patchwork alternating in wide, jagged swaths of flat glass to organized, tidy ripples. At that early hour, the sky was swaddled in a barely visible muslin of cirrus clouds high in the atmosphere. Below, riots of purple and orange bougainvillea and small white flowers popped through thick bushes. I spotted a lone rowboat, tiny from this vantage point,

setting out from our side of the lake. The lush greenery along the hotel's cliffs and curlicues of ivy vines along my terrace framed the scene perfectly. I left the doors open and jumped back into bed, watching the scene unfold as the sun rose.

We set out on the lake with Gabriella, our guide, in a small, blue fiberglass boat with a roof for shade. There are 13 villages along the 50 square miles that encircle the lake comprised of native Kaqchikel and Tz'utujil Mayan people. Each village has its own unique identity, dialect and trademark woven textiles still worn by Mayan women today. There is no road circumnavigating the lake to connect the villages, so they exist largely in isolation from one another, although they can be accessed by boat or through mountain roads. Agriculture, like coffee, avocados and corn are grown widely throughout the region and the rich biodiversity makes for excellent hikes to scenic vistas and ancient sites. There's Panajachel, a short drive from Casa Palopó; with a population of 14,000, it's the largest and most developed village catering to

tourists, especially backpacker and hippie types. San Marcos La Laguna is a spiritual retreat for holistic health, yoga and Reiki with the Las Piramides meditation center offering a month-long personal development course coinciding with the full moon. Santiago Atitlán is home to Maximón, a wild pagan saint who's a blend of Mayan deities, Catholic saints and local lore.

San Juan La Laguna

We were on our way to San Juan La Laguna, a small village with cooperative businesses known as associations run by its women. On the boat ride over, across water smooth as deep green-purple velvet, Gabriella explained just how remarkable this is. "Guatemalan Mayan culture is beyond machismo," she told us, explaining that men often fathered children with multiple women at a very early age, which partly accounts for the high percentage of children under the age of 14 in Guatemala's population (42 percent, which is more than twice that of the United States). Plagued by lack of education and economic freedom,

women have little choice but to submit to this structure. But things in San Juan are different. These enterprising women are preserving their heritage and supporting their livelihood through art, agriculture and handicrafts.

We visited Corazón del Lago, an association of weavers working in the ancient backstrap loom technique, using natural, hand-dyed textiles. Each garment for sale has a tag affixed to it with the name of the woman who created it. We visited Gloria Cholotio's art gallery and studio where her vivid paintings hang depicting scenes from village life—fishing at the lake, farming, visiting the medicine man—in her signature bird's eye point of view. She's something of a superstar in the village, selling her paintings and supporting other young artists in her gallery. The O'omaneel Association, farther up the road, grows plants with medicinal properties used by the villagers and also sold to tourists in the form of shampoos, soaps and tea.

We meandered past the church, library

and public gym when Gabriella pointed out a mural. On one side of the painting were Mayan boys and girls in a dense, dark jungle, their eyes covered in blindfolds. On the other side, was a man holding a diagram of male and female sex organs with children gathered around engaged in his lesson, Lake Atitlán and and its three volcanic peaks in the background on a clear, sunny day. It's effectively the civilization's first sex ed class. "It represents the power of knowledge," Gabriella said. "The previous generations were in the dark." Remarkable, indeed.

Corn, a Gift From the Gods

Back at Casa Palopó we were met by a *tortillera*, a native woman who taught us to make our own corn tortillas by hand on a traditional hot *comal*. Paired with a dark Zacapa rum, neat (distilled in Guatemala), and topped with refried black beans, guacamole, queso fresco and pico de gallo, it may have been the best bite of food of my life. The tortilla was warm and chewy, thicker and more substantial

than any Mexican variety I'd had. It was sweet and simple and made of the earth. Corn, with its four varieties, black, red, white and yellow, is significant to the Mayan people, not only for its abundance and sustenance, but also as a gift from the gods. With panoramic views of Lake Atitlán, our meal of corn tortillas on Casa Palopó's terrace was divine.

On my short visit to Guatemala, I was confronted with a rollercoaster tug of emotions. I found the country both beautiful and heartbreaking. I stayed in one of the most exquisite private properties I'd ever set foot in, and yet outside I witnessed the most abject poverty I'd ever seen. The people we met were warm and lovely, taking great pride and care in preserving their heritage and sharing it with us, yet many of them lived primitively without the creature comforts we take for granted.

Just a month after my visit, I'd hear the first reports of the US border crisis and the glut of an estimated 60,000 unaccompanied minors and women from Guatemala (as well as Honduras and El Salvador) fleeing at twice the rate of the previous year due to violence and extreme poverty. I thought of the boys in the truck bed in Guatemala City, the families walking along the road in Tecpán, the shadowy figures in Santa Catarina and the entrepreneurial spirits in San Juan. My heart broke. I followed the story fervently as it developed over the next few months. If I'd never come to Guatemala, I might not have given these headlines a second thought. It's humbling. Travel has the power to nurture empathy, humanity and harbor an understanding of our global family. One day, I hope to return to Guatemala with my parents on a Habitat for Humanity project and also share with them the beauty of Lake Atitlán and its Mayan people. 🌽