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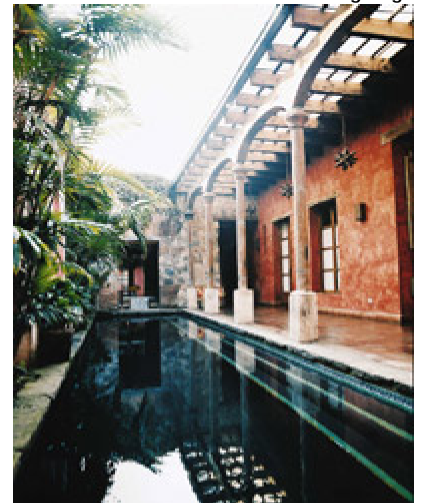

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Under the Volcanoes

Amid the vivid Mayan colors of Guatemala, **Bob Morris** finds an optimistic nation emerging from the shadow of a violent past

By Bob Morris

It was a Friday night in early November in Antigua, Guatemala, and the leafy Parque Central of this former Spanish colonial city was packed with indigenous Mayans, locals of Spanish or mixed descent, and the kind of good-natured young gringos you can find anywhere from New York's Washington Square to the beaches of Phuket. Near me, some kids were kicking around a soccer ball. Two fresh-faced Franciscan friars from the United States, wearing Birkenstocks and brown robes, strolled by after their Spanish class at a nearby language school. Around the central fountain, women were lighting candles to illuminate the handmade weavings they were selling, while across the park a mariachi band played a tune for a group of sporty-looking tourists from El Salvador. *"El mariachi loco quiere bailar!"* sang the band in multi-part harmony over accordions, guitars, and trumpets. The crazy mariachi wants to dance. So did the Salvadorans. They formed a conga line and whooped and yelled as a crowd gathered and applauded.

To look at the scene, you would think this place a very suitable tourist capital for the Land of Eternal Spring, a phrase coined by the travel industry to promote this high-altitude nation's mild climate. It's a phrase that, as such phrases do, poetically bypasses everything that has kept these mountainsides virtually off-limits to outsiders for the past 40 years. In Guatemala, it doesn't take long to see darkness lurking beneath the beauty.

I'd arrived on the eve of the country's second presidential elections since the 1996 peace accords, which marked the end of a 36-year civil war. The United Nations voting monitors were worried that things were a little too quiet. One of the candidates, Efraín Ríos Montt, a retired general, had seized power in a 1982 military coup and then engaged in an 18-month-long "scorched earth campaign" that, according to human rights organizations, resulted in the deaths of thousands of Mayan villagers. His candidacy (a violation, it so happens, of Guatemala's own constitution, which holds that no one involved in a military coup can run for president) had already been the cause of skirmishes in July that left more than two dozen people dead. So the upcoming election had the potential to turn violent.

But here I was in this colonial paradise, where a mariachi tenor with a bell-like voice was singing about the pretty moon. Elections? They seemed remote. And I didn't really want to know that the reason people feel comfortable walking around Antigua at night (as they do not in Guatemala City, less than an hour away) is that the town has its own special tourist police force to keep crime at bay. Cradled by three lovely volcanoes, Antigua is blessed with foreign capital, many Spanish-language schools, and dozens of Internet cafés—all in a city many consider to be the most beautiful in Central America. I walked with well-heeled visitors past well-appointed restaurants offering everything from sushi to tortellini, and then past carefully lit shop windows displaying wood carvings, chic leather bags, and jewelry of native jade. In recent years, Antigua has become so design-conscious that it has been attracting not only foreign craftsmen and the best native weavers but also jet-setters, along with weekenders from Guatemala City.

I passed colonial-era mansions with brass knockers and elaborate cedar wood window grilles, carved hundreds of years ago, when Antigua was still the capital. Between 1543 and 1776 (the year an earthquake largely destroyed the city), more than a dozen churches and convents were built here. In many of them, altars and doors were carved with images of native masks and corn in an effort to lure Mayans, who typically prayed outdoors to a pantheon of harvest-controlling gods, into the new churches. The story these decorative elements tell—of cultural syncretism and hegemony—is not unusual in the Americas. But the tensions between Mayan and Spanish culture they embody are not merely a historical curiosity: they have been at the very heart of Guatemalan life for much of the last century. It is an alchemy that makes for this country's instability as well as its magical, magnetic pull. Less than a four-hour flight from New York is a country still astoundingly rich with indigenous life.

At the edge of town, I stepped into the discreet entrance of my hotel—Casa Santa Domingo, a handsome former 16th-century convent that is now a sprawling five-star luxury property, one of many such places in Antigua. The gardens were lit with candles; the ruins of a former cathedral stood washed in moonlight beyond the magnificent swimming pool. In my room, I started a fire in the fireplace, and then fell into the untroubled sleep of the cosseted tourist far from home.

Even when it was not advisable for visitors to venture into mountain villages, Guatemala continued to attract them. In its decades-long civil war, some 200,000 people were killed and another 50,000 "disappeared," during a conflict that pitted leftist guerrillas and Mayan peasants against government-backed paramilitary death squads. Throughout all this, the tourists still came.

On my second night in Antigua, I asked Tim Weiner, a *New York Times* reporter covering the elections, what he thought was the source of Guatemala's ongoing allure. "The Mayans are some of the strongest and most beautiful people on the planet," he said without hesitation. "This is the living cradle of their civilization." We were having dinner at Mesón Panza Verde, a converted mansion in Antigua, and one of the best restaurants in the country. There was a ban on alcohol because of the elections the following day. But when we asked for coffee, glasses of red wine appeared. And how do the Mayans feel about us? I asked. "They've been treated like human chattel since the Spanish got here," Weiner said. "So you never know what's behind the smile. It could be rage."

Paranoia? Maybe not. "There could be some plan that we don't know about," my local guide had said earlier that day, when I asked him why the United Nations was expressing such concern about the elections and why military forces and countless observers were moving in to oversee voting in every town. The ruling party, the FRG (Guatemalan Republican Front), which had put up the controversial General Montt, might write in the names of citizens whose deaths were never registered in order to tip the election—a practice known as voting the graveyard. Or they might have plans to foment unrest in a display of power as they had in July, when FRG mobs chased journalists through the streets of Guatemala City. "And if Ríos Montt loses, there may be violence again," said my guide, who asked me not to use his name. "In the small towns, people could cause trouble."

But the following day, election Sunday, as the potential for a real power shift hung in the air, things were quiet in a pleasant sort of way. At the thermal baths in the mountains above Antigua, locals were eating tortillas and frozen bananas and splashing in a pool set against impenetrable jungle. My friend Kate Doyle (Tim Weiner's wife, who was accompanying me on my travels) was sitting with me in the water. The baths were dark and dreary, the water was tepid and devoid of any salubrious mineral content. We sloshed around for a while, thoroughly disappointed. But then, after we'd dressed and were enjoying a lunch of tortillas and guacamole while music played on a radio and children shrieked with glee in the background, an attendant told us that in the eighties, guerrillas used to come down from the mountains at night to bathe and make love in this very place. He smiled with something that seemed like pride. And we felt oddly invigorated. Never mind cultural tourism. This tourism was tantalizingly political.

Kate had never experienced Guatemala as a tourist. The last time she'd been in the country, a year or two earlier, bodyguards had whisked her off the airport tarmac. As a senior analyst for the National Security Archive, a private agency based in Washington, D.C., she'd flown in to testify against the military in the murder of Myrna Mack, an anthropologist and advocate for indigenous rights who'd been stabbed outside her office in Guatemala City in 1990. "When my friends heard I was coming back here during the elections for a pleasure trip," Kate said, "they couldn't believe it."

Yet here we were. We drove to a steep hill town above Antigua called Santa María de Jesús, an almost wholly Mayan community with fields of beans, soy, and corn carpeting the slopes. There was a long voting line near the central plaza, where a busy Sunday market offering a spectacular array of produce, weavings, and all kinds of modern goods was in full swing. Besides men in jeans, the line was full of women in handwoven skirts and blouses. Many carried babies in tzuts, woven papoose sacks worn slung over the shoulder. They'd be waiting for hours. But they were smiling. There was a festive air to the proceedings.

In the cemetery, children were flying *barriletes,* handmade octagonal kites, the tails tied with plastic that rattled in the wind. The Mayans fly kites in cemeteries as a way of scaring off evil spirits that might bother the dead. Perhaps they also keep away evil spirits that would want to tamper with an election. Because, despite the UN's concerns and the worries of the international press and the *observadores* monitoring the ballots for illicit activity, and even as keyed-up voters turned out in droves all day Sunday, there was little trouble to report. By Monday, to everyone's relief, Ríos Montt was out of the race." This is a great day for democracy," Roberto Izurieta, a George Washington University professor, was saying on CNN as Kate and I packed to leave our hotel in Antigua. "For a country with so few resources, it all went very well, and I think democracy has been strengthened."

Kate was pleased, but not quite so unabashedly optimistic about Oscar Berger, who became the new president after a runoff vote in December. "For thirty years, all the best political leaders were killed," she said. "So you're left with an impoverished political landscape." If anybody could point out the shadows to me at every pretty place on this trip, it was she. As we drove between Antigua and Panajachel, the main town on Lake Atitlán and our intended destination, Kate ignored the breathtaking views of mountains covered with colorful crops and kites fluttering merrily over the fields and kept her nose pressed into a book, *Silence on the Mountain: Stories of Terror, Betrayal and Forgetting in Guatemala,* by Daniel Wilkinson. It examines the country's history through the prism of a single incident: a fire set at a coffee plantation in 1983. Native workers have long been mistreated in Guatemala, which, with a population that is 60 percent Mayan, has more indigenous people than any other Central American country, even Bolivia. Their struggle to win back any kind of power has been ongoing. In the thirties, the Socialist Party began to organize workers, but then came the Cold War. In 1954, Eisenhower sent in the CIA, a covert operation that helped to depose a democratically elected president. In the eighties, the U.S. supported the Guatemalan government with training and intelligence aimed at defeating leftist guerrillas, who had by then taken refuge among the Mayans in the highlands.

Yet once we got to Lake Atitlán, where less than 20 years before there had been military bombings of rural populations, even Kate couldn't help but be wholly seduced by its loveliness. We stayed up late one night drinking tequila at a thatched-roof restaurant below our hotel in Santa Catarina Palopó, a village outside Panajachel. We rode boats in the sunshine beneath towering volcanoes and greeted children who wanted to sell us pens and key chains

they'd woven and beaded with alacrity. On a hike, Kate and I met a local politician who'd just lost the race for mayor of Santiago Atitlán, where 13 villagers were killed in 1990 for protesting harassment by the military. "I don't understand it," he complained. "I gave people free rice, corn, and beans and they still didn't vote for me!"

What could we do but laugh? At the quite untouristed Tuesday market in Sololá, a few miles north of Lake Atitlán, Kate bought herself a pair of the locally embroidered pants—bright hues on a field of red. We sat in the central plaza watching the great fashion show all around us. In Sololá, even the men dress traditionally. They wear plaid wool skirts over intricately embroidered pants. But it's the women who are resplendent in the clothes they create for themselves. "Fabulous," was all I could say. Kate, who left to go home later that day in a far happier state than she'd been in when she'd arrived, had to agree. I only wish she could have been around the following morning, when, giddy with touristic acquisitiveness, I bought four panels of divinely woven and embroidered fabric—in shades of turquoise, green, and purple—and had a pair of trousers made. The $60 they cost is about the monthly salary of a weaver.

As with everything in Guatemala, there's politics in this too. Would Mayan women be weaving and wearing their huipil blouses and skirts, had they not been economically marginalized for so many centuries? Would having access to money for Levi's and Patagonia jackets have made them less oppressed, but also less well-dressed for my voyeuristic pleasure? In an article two years ago in the *Times Literary Supplement,* Kenneth Anderson observed that the assorted do-gooders and nonprofit organizations now working to help Guatemala have turned the Mayans into "tourist-friendly weavers and artisans." There is more than some truth to that. But the fact remains that in Guatemala women can make far more money selling woven garments than they can picking coffee beans. And without the presence of the tourists from Europe and the States, the country would be in much worse shape than it is today.

Carmen Giuliani, for instance, has a high-end shop in Antigua called the Loom Tree. A native of Modena, Italy, who fell in love with Guatemala 15 years ago, she employs 45 weavers from around the country, who come up with unique designs for refined fabrics that appeal to an international clientele—including, she says, the pope. Her workers do well. One, who makes fringe, has earned enough to build a house, send her children to college, and start her own small business.

"If you're going to be here, you'd better have a good reason," Father Greg Schaffer was saying. He has run a parish in San Lucas Tolimán since 1963 and was around when Father Stanley Rother, branded a Communist by the government, was killed in 1981 by a paramilitary death squad in nearby Santiago. In the last few years, Schaffer has started a business to help locals market the coffee they pick and roast themselves. Thanks to his efforts, San Lucas Tolimán has a health clinic and hospital, and a nondenominational, tuition-free private school. He has also purchased land, built housing on it, and given it to villagers.

"Everything starts with some land and a house," he told me over lunch in his bustling parish hall, where American volunteers were swarming. As for the election, he wasn't happy that the FRG had won in so many small towns. "But I was pleasantly surprised that there was as little violence as there was," he said. "I'm the type of person who will latch onto anything as hopeful."

And why not? Despite all the seemingly insoluble issues, it's hard not to see stirrings of hope in Guatemala today. You can see it in voting booths. You can see it in the traditional pride instilled in the population by fellow Mayan Rigoberta Menchú, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 after writing an autobiography that powerfully (and somewhat inaccurately, it turns out) depicted the atrocities her family faced. Around Quetzaltenango, meanwhile, a western highlands city, Habitat for Humanity just finished building its 15,000th house. In Antigua, El Sitio arts center works to bridge cultural gaps. "The Mayans have their own way of talking," said Ramelle Gonzales, who recently mounted an exhibition there, "and we have to listen."

After a week of travels so darkly tinted by politics (that is, of the past 600 years or so), the towering ruins of Tikal were as soothing as they were inspirational. There, in the flat Petén region in the north, not far from Belize, scarlet macaws fly through the mist and howler monkeys call. In Tikal, which means "place of spirits," the Mayans ruled their land without interference, building pyramids and temples that still rise above a 30-foot-high forest canopy.

The day I arrived, it was raining and the visitors were sparse. They seemed strangely subdued and respectful—mostly Europeans, who, according to my tour guide, have a higher regard for cultural history than Americans do. I was alone and channeling my inner Pollyanna again, the one more attuned to aesthetics than reality, the one who could revel in that bubble of delight as a know-nothing tourist on my first night in Antigua. Here, the latter-day world once more melted away.

It is estimated that 1,500 years ago about 100,000 people inhabited Tikal, a metropolis that spanned nearly 20 square miles. If the presence of architecture, complex irrigation, a writing system, and rudimentary science are the benchmarks of high civilization, then Tikal fits the definition. Its stone buildings rival those of ancient Egypt. The monolithic buildings, rescued from the clutches of the jungle over the course of the last 50 years, quieted my soul.

To be entirely honest, though, I found what I saw the next day in the Palacio Nacional, on the main plaza in Guatemala City, even more compelling. The ornate and monumental government building erected in 1939 is now a museum. It has wooden carvings in the Spanish colonial style. But it also has towering stained-glass windows (restored after a bombing in the nineties) dominated by images of Mayans. It has a wall on which a mural depicting Don Quixote lies next to one depicting a scene from the *Popol Vuh,* the Mayan Bible. It also has a display of posters,

one of many ongoing contemporary exhibitions, from the Myrna Mack Foundation. One poster shows a pencil, with the words WE CANNOT ERASE THE PAST, BUT WE CAN DRAW THE FUTURE written beside it. Nearby, a bronze sculpture of sinewy arms linked together sits modestly in a central courtyard. In the hand at the top of this sculpture is one fresh white rose. It is replaced daily, a tender symbol of hope.

The information in this story was accurate at the time it was published in **March 2004**, but we suggest you confirm all details and prices directly with the service establishments before making travel plans.