

A Cosmopolitan Colonial City



Justin Lane for The New York Times

Founded in the 16th century, Antigua was the capital of the Spanish empire until an earthquake struck in 1773. Many of the city's colonial buildings remain.

By LISA KALIS

INTREPID tourists have come to know Guatemala for its ancient Maya cities, Indian markets and lush countryside of lakes and volcanoes — as well as its decades of civil war and unrest. However, the last few years have brought a new government and a more stable political climate, and now the country is becoming known for a more cosmopolitan attraction: the perfectly preserved colonial city of Antigua.

Tourism to Guatemala is rising, and officials have paid special attention to Antigua, a relatively prosperous city of 30,000. A special English-speaking tourist police force roams the streets, and it's safe to walk even at night, when many of the buildings are lighted by candles.

Founded in the 16th century, the city served as the capital of the entire Spanish-controlled region known as the kingdom of Guatemala, which stretched from Mexico City to Peru for over two centuries. It's easy to see why the Spanish chose the spot. Antigua is in a spectacular setting, near three volcanoes, which are visible from nearly any street. (One, the active Fuego, regularly lets out a puff of smoke.) But nature didn't cooperate, and after a huge earthquake struck in 1773, the capital was moved to Guatemala City.

Many of Antigua's monuments, including



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intact original government buildings and churches ruined by the earthquake, haven't changed much since then. The clean cobblestone streets, lined with elegant stucco houses in bright colors, still have a stately, colonial feel. Of course, now those streets also have deluxe hotels, cafes, jade shops and day spas, but at least on the surface, modernity still keeps its distance.

The city itself is easy to navigate. Antigua was one of the first planned cities in the Americas, with a grid pattern of streets inspired by the Italian Renaissance. At the center of town is a European-style plaza, where the fountain of topless women that marks the middle of the plaza is a popular tourist destination. (As the story goes, the

sculptor who built the fountain in the 18th century claimed his sculpture was of mermaids, to fend off any claims of indecency.)

Some 30 monastic orders used to exist in the city, and there are plenty of opportunities to explore their history. The Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de la Merced is famous for its ornate Baroque facade in yellow and white, and a fountain in the ruined convent is one of the largest in Central America.

Visitors can even sleep among the ruins. The Casa Santo Domingo, 3A Calle Oriente No. 28, (502) 7820-1220, or visit www.casasantodomingo.com.gt, is built in the remains of a 17th-century Dominican convent; the rooms wrap around flowering courtyards and ancient pottery and statues of saints dot the halls. The grounds are open to anyone, and they are worth a stop, as are the ruins of a church and three small but interesting museums behind the hotel. The 125 rooms, most with fireplaces and vaulted ceilings, start at \$155.

Antigua is an hour's drive from the country's capital, Guatemala City. (The United States State Department, travel.state.gov, issued a warning on travel in Guatemala in October, citing an increase of highway robberies, including on tour vans and buses.) Antigua is a useful base for day trips to Maya cities, coffee plantations, weaving villages or the colorful but touristy Indian market at Chichicastenango or just to the end of the park. ■