

In Guatemala, Bliss by a Blue Lake

By JOYCE MAYNARD

IFIRST laid eyes on Lake Atitlán 30 years ago. I remember thinking that it was the most beautiful place I'd ever seen, but the list of places I'd seen was a short one. (Though my youthful view was shared by a traveler of vast experience, Aldous Huxley, when he visited there, calling it "the most beautiful lake in the world," even more lovely than Lake Como.)

When I arrived in 1973, it was a difficult time for an American in Guatemala. The country was in the midst of a devastating civil war that saw the disappearances and deaths of thousands of its citizens, slaughtered by its own military. In the eight years since the end of that war, the country has yet to shake its image as an unstable place.

But three years ago I returned with my daughter, who was then just about the age I'd been when I first traveled there. The lake seemed no less magical than it had when I was very young. I ended up staying for seven months in one particular village, San Marcos La Laguna. As a traveler who now returns regularly to Central America, that village has become the one place to which I know I will always return. I travel there a few times a year now, and am going this month.

No one embarking on a trip to Guatemala should do so without first considering the question of safety. Although the elections held recently brought into power a new government for which hopes remain high, the State Department continues to urge caution for Americans visiting there.

For myself, I assess my danger at the hands of a Guatemalan bandit as considerably lower than my chances on the highways in my home state of California. Still, Guatemala is a third-world country with inherent risks.

Because the country does not attract what you might call the conventional tourist, the rewards remain, for those willing to put up with its rough edges, particularly sweet, and not simply because a Guatemalan vacation costs a fraction of one in Mexico. The country retains an unspoiled flavor, rare for a place of so much physical beauty, history



Photograph

ABOVE Lake Atitlán, with the San Pedro volcano in the background. BELOW LEFT AND RIGHT Traditional life in the lanes of the village of San Marcos.