

# A Trip to Guatemala in Central America

by Irma Kackert

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**NOVEMBER 15, 1991**

I am going alone on a trip to Guatemala, using my free ticket on Pam Am airlines that I received for accumulating miles by going around the world in 1985. Using the night flight from Los Angeles, I left LAX at 11:45 p.m. and arrived in Guatemala City, the capital, at 6:30 next morning. A stroke of luck gave me a first class cabin seat, instead of the economy class. There was a huge crowd of people trying to board this flight, and no one was waiting their turn by boarding when row numbers were called out. Since I disliked the crush of people, I asked a Pan Am agent when I should enter: he looked at my boarding pass, said "are you traveling alone?", I said "yes". He then told me to be seated, went to the ticket counter and soon came back with a boarding pass for seat 3A in first class cabin. He said, "you'll be more comfortable there". I was! There was plenty of room, champagne was served after we were airborne, a bit later a full dinner, with wine, was presented. White cloth napkins and silver service was used, instead of paper, and plastic. After eating I slept.

Upon waking, it was just getting light, and we were over rugged mountains below, I could see Lake Atitlan, a huge lake high in the mountains. This was a beautiful sight. The flight ended o.k., but getting into the country was not easy. I only had my passport, was not told by Pan Am when I got my ticket that I needed a "travel card" to enter. The immigration agents sent me back to a desk, where I had to wait over an hour for a Pan Am person to authorize a travel card and pay the \$5 fee. I paid this, the card was issued, then I was allowed to pass through immigration. The next problem: I could not see my suitcase on the carousel and I complained. Now, it took over ½ hour for someone to get the Pan Am personnel to come from an office, and secure my suitcase from a locked room, for me. He was very apologetic for my delay in the immigration area, put the suitcase up on the table for customs agent, and opened it for me. The customs man cleared it, and I was escorted outside to a taxi. While inside, waiting, I had inquired about a hotel, chose the Pan American, a medium priced one in the downtown area. The taxi fare was \$8, room was \$50, with taxes. It was small, but clean, had a private bath, phone and TV, and was centrally located, important to me because I like to do a lot of walking in the older areas of a city.

I bathed, rested a bit, then went out to see the sights. Before leaving the hotel, I booked a tour for tomorrow, in the city, and a 2 day trip to the Mayan ruins at Tikal. This involves travel by plane. The Pan American is only 2 blocks from the central plaza, and the huge cathedral built in 1780, the government buildings and palace. The plaza is a large open square with gardens, fountain and reflection pool. It was filled with people walking about. I went into the church, a mass was going on, attended by many people, I learned later, that it was a graduation event for students finishing high school. They were all seated in the front pews, dressed in uniforms —later on I met some of them out in the plaza, talked to one who spoke excellent English, learned of their big day, and took their picture. A musical group, including a local type marimba player, was performing peppy music which made a festive air throughout the plaza. There were boys and girls selling trinkets, simple jewelry, balloons and toys – also some were begging for quetzels, the local money here. I gave a quetzal to

a tiny young woman who was carrying her baby wrapped against her chest and abdomen, with a large scarf. The air was pleasant, I was comfortable in a light jacket, but it was hot in the direct sunlight. There were many cars and buses on the streets, giving fumes into the air, but I noted no smog prevalent. There was a book fair going on all day in the plaza, with many booths for this, also other objects were on sale in small stands. Food stands were here and there, so I purchased a meal, ate "pollo" (chicken), with potatoes, rice and cucumbers, then returned to my room.

Later on, I returned to the plaza again and made an acquaintance with 2 high school age girls, sitting near me on a bench, and speaking English. They had fair complexion and blonde hair, unlike the locals who are dark complected. They told me they had been living in New Mexico, U.S, but now were living here as their father is American, is a swim coach employed here, and their mother is from Guatemala. Their grandparents, Guatemalans, were at the book fair nearby, and came over to us a bit later. They invited me to walk with them to the government building across from the plaza, to an exposition "Plazas of Europe". I did so and one of the girls translated the Spanish wording on the plaques, for me. In viewing all these plazas in different nations, it was amazing to me to note how many of them I have visited in person. Even the Syntagma square in Athens, was pictured. It was a very interesting exhibit, I thanked the girls and grandparents for inviting me to see it. Returning to the hotel at dusk, I ordered a beer in the lobby dining area, where a male piano player was entertaining with very nice music. The beer (with local label) was 125 quetzels (Q), about \$2.05.

## **SUNDAY NOVEMBER 17**

This is my daughter Judy's birthday - my first-born. I awoke so early, for I knew I had to be in the lobby at 6:30 to meet the tour guide. She was there when I entered the lobby, her name was Astrid, a lovely young girl from Guatemala, well educated, spoke French, Spanish and English. She had a friend of hers from Belgium, who was visiting and would be on the trip also. The driver of the van was awaiting us outside. We drove away from Guatemala City up into the mountains. There is lush growth on the hills, of deciduous and evergreen type trees, also bushes and some wildflowers by the roadside. The grades were steep, road was twisty and bumpy too. There were huge fields of vegetables and corn. These are planted by the local people in this area, descendents of the Mayan Indians who lived in this area long before the Spanish came and conquered the country. The steep hillsides are cleared and planted, then tended by hand, until harvested, no machines are used here. The Mayan Indians are very small people with brown skin and very black hair. Agriculture is their main occupation, plus weaving the beautiful hand made materials that are made into their blouses and skirts for the women. A "wipil" is a large rectangular scarf, woven, and embroidered by the women. The men wear pants and shirt, and in one area we passed, they wrap a brown and white checked rectangular piece of material around their hips, over the pants. The story of this is, they used to wear only this checked material around their hips, but the Spanish conquerors taught them to wear pants, and now they keep their custom of the checked material, but wrap it over the pants. I took many pictures along the way, and at stops we made. At one place in the road, as we were driven along, we came upon an accident, a large truck had overturned and was lying in the ditch. The police were there, stopping traffic for awhile. The truck was loaded with one hundred

pound sacks of potatoes, and several men were unloading as many as they could, from the overturned truck, to another one that had been brought to the scene.

The Indians have many children, it seemed every woman was carrying a baby on her back, and a couple of little ones were running along behind her. They need the large families so they have help in the fields. Most do not go to school, it is not mandatory for the Mayan descendents and they have a rate of 80% illiteracy. In other parts of Guatemala school is mandatory. There are large forests in this area, of pine and other varieties of trees. Wood cutting is done extensively by hand, and neat stacks of cut pieces are carried out on the men's backs, stacked in frameworks. These are sold in the marketplaces. It is the sole fuel for heat, in the mountain areas, there is no electricity for their little houses set amongst the fields, and water is carried from streams. We stopped a couple of times where people were gathered at the side of the road, small market places where people brought vegetables and hand made items to sell to other local people. I was very excited to be able to see this culture, far away from Guatemala City, which was quite westernized.

We finally reached the large village of Chichicastananga. It is the trading center for this very big area of Mayan Indians, these people own the land and keep their old ways of life, live simply and without modern conveniences. It was crowded with people and stands along streets, where all types of articles were for sale: leather objects, many carved leather belts, small cubes of incense which were wrapped in corn husks, knives, many items of clothing, woven materials, embroidered blouses, stacks of wood, etc. I purchased several items. Our guide led us through the crowds to the church of San Thomas, built in 1535 by the Spanish, over the site of a previous Mayan temple. The stone steps leading up into the church, are the same ones left from the temple, have never been replaced. It is a Catholic church, but the Indians who all attend it still use some of their old customs, combining them with the Catholic rituals. For instance, offerings of ears of corn to the spirits, were placed next to candles inside the church, and on the stone steps in front bonfires were built, and incense placed in them. Many people sat near the bonfires, some placed flowers down also, and sat awhile as smoke billowed up into the air. It was smoky inside the church, as the doors were open. We entered, through a side door, so we would not disturb those sitting on the steps. Inside the long church were slabs of cement, in the middle aisle, and there were placed many offerings to spirits, I saw an orange, some ears of corn, small candles, and flower petals. The paintings on side walls were of different scenes, the crucifixion, Blessed Mary, and several saints. They were dark and discolored, probably from hundreds of years of exposure to smoke.

At the altar rail, knelt a man and wife, she holding a baby and a little boy clung to her skirt. The Shaman (Indian priest) was standing over them. He had a small basket with a red cloth over it, and held it over their heads as he prayed in their language. We watched, from the side. When he finished the couple and little boy went to a pew, then the Shaman took flower petals out of the basket and laid them on the floor, just inside the communion rail. He sprinkled something from a small brown bottle, over the petals. Astrid said quietly to me, that it would be whiskey. Then he put the red cloth over the basket again and went away. How lucky I was to see that ceremony, of the old Mayan rites. In the back of the church, to one side, the Catholic priest was talking (in their language) to a large group of Indians. Seated near him at the altar in the back, were women with babies on one side,

and men on the other side. Astrid said it was a baptism service, for the babies. So, the priest brings them to Christianity, but allows them also to continue performing their “heathen” Indian customs. They are a very spiritual people.

After seeing the church we walked through the market again, and went to another church on the opposite end of the street. It was a smaller one. Here too, there was a small group lighting a bonfire on the steps, and scent of incense was in the air. Men were sitting around with bundles of wood pieces to sell, also at the foot of the steps were several kinds of furniture, made of native woods by the men, and also for sale. These people are very handy, and make many artistic crafts. Now Astrid led us out of the crowded area and the village street, to a path that led through cornfields, where a worker was busy with his hoe taking weeds out of the rows of very tall corn. Then we went up, up, up a very steep and difficult path, to the top of the mountain where there was a stone figure of a god, carved out of the mountain, and on a flat space. A Shaman priest was making a fire on the ground, a chicken had been sacrificed, (feathers were all lying in a pile), then he and two other men knelt single file behind him, they all held a candle and chanted prayers. The Shaman had on pants and shirt, and a blue cloth of rectangular shape, on his head. Next, he arose, took a plastic bag with what looked like cooked cereal in it, and poured it on the ground in a large design. The material was white. The other man opened the corn husks, which held the little black blocks of incense, and the Shaman placed the incense alongside the design on the ground. These would be burned, and as prayers were said, they hopefully would ascend upward to the spirits, or gods, and be heard by them. How wonderful to witness this – it was worth the very difficult climb up and then down again. It is very good that I have strong legs, and good lungs! Our guide was puffing just as hard as I was, when we reached the top.

Walking back to Chichicastanango, I had Astrid talk on the tape I make as I travel. As she was talking a very drunk Indian man approached us, weaving and talking to himself. We moved away, he just went on then, unsteadily. Then along came three Indian women, one had a pig trailing her, a rope tied around one of it’s legs, she had just purchased it at the market. We made a stop at the mask maker’s shop, on the edge of the village. Masks, many made of carved wood, are very important here and are used in ceremonies and dances portraying how the Spanish came here and conquered the Mayan population. Little boys, ten of them, dressed in silvery, sparkly costumes and wearing different masks, did a dance to taped music. They were portraying the Spaniards (dark complected but with light mustaches) and the Indians (very black hair and mustaches), and some had cow masks on. They were telling the story, in dance, of the historical conquest of this area. It was very interesting, and we gave them quetzels when they finished. Now it was time to go back to the lovely hotel, right in the market place, and get into the van to resume our long ride over the bumpy road, to Guatemala City. At dark, we stopped at an overlook, and viewed the sprawling lights of the city below. There was a local food stand there, it had no electric light, a torch made up of rolled newspaper burning, gave the only dim light. The ladies were selling meat tacos and beans, but our guide said it was not to eat at these stands alongside the road. Arriving back at the Pan American hotel, I had a bottle of beer and then took a warm bath, relaxed a bit, and got my suitcase ready for the two day trip I’ll be taking tomorrow. This will be to the old temples at the Mayan ruins of Tikal, will have to fly there from Guatemala City. I can leave one travel bag with the purchases I made today,

here at the hotel. Pickup time tomorrow is 5:30 a.m., here in the lobby. I left a 4:30 wake-up call earlier, when I paid my bill for the two nights, \$102 (669 Q),

I awakened at 3:45 a.m., before the wake-up call. I think I have an internal clock, when I am traveling! Arriving down in the lobby at 5:30 a.m., found a few other people there too, getting ready to leave on tours. The government monitored area of Tikal, is the largest area of Mayan temples in Central America, and people come from all over the world to view it. The tour consists of being met at the hotel, transfer to airport, fly to city of Flores, 400 miles away in the jungle (40 minute flight), being met by a guide to whom I will show my voucher, then transport on bus for an hour, over very bumpy roads, to the Tikal National Park. There 2 guides, one speaking English and one, Spanish, met us and gave us much history of the peoples who lived in this area, and prospered for hundreds of years, building temples, schools, even an observatory to view the heavens. The guides led us through the jungle growth, stopping at sacrificial stones, which were carved with figures of animals and people. The sacrificial victim (a human) would be laid across the large round stone, his ribs crushed, heart pulled out as it was still beating, then it was carried up the many, many steps to the small room at the roof comb and placed on the altar to the gods. There were many altar stones, and stellae, tall rectangular slab which stood behind the altar stone, which had been unearthed, and places around so visitors could study them.

As we walked he told history of temples I, II, IV, and the acropolis area, which had been the center of the governing body, and ceremonial area. These temples had been fully excavated, but V was not all uncovered. These date from about 400 B.C. to around 1500 A.D, there had been a huge Mayan population in this area of Central America. The temples were built of sandstone blocks, cut from nearby geological formations, did not have rooms inside, as the pyramids of Egypt, but were filled with stones and rose 170 feet into the air. Broad steps in front led up to the altar room at the roof. Temple number IV was not excavated fully and no steps were visible, only the upper part of highest steps were visible, plus the altar room and the roof comb. We had to ascend to this temple by crawling up a series of seven ladders, which were laid on the ground and were chained together so they would not slide down. In some parts, the ladders were on slippery stone and we had to cling onto vines to aid us in our ascent. I made it all the way up, puffing a bit when I reached the top, where I could stand on the broad base of the temple stones and gaze out over the tree tops below us. Roof combs of two other temples were visible from up here, sticking up way above the tree tops. It was a wonderful experience! The descent was the same way, but crawling backwards all the way down to the jungle floor. Next we walked to an open pavilion where a lunch was served, bar-b-que steak sliced very thin and tender, cooked beets with onion, rice, and watermelon. This was included in the tour price, but we had to pay for our drink. I chose a lime soft drink. Now we walked again through the jungle and saw many monkeys in the trees, the howler species is dark brown, large, and noisy, the spider monkey is darker, quite small, and swings around on its long tail, appeared to be flying through the trees. As we ate, we saw wild turkeys, with brilliant plumage, strutting about looking for scraps, also saw a few buzzards. It was difficult walking, for though there were paths, the ground was uneven, sometimes up, sometimes stepping down, and roots protruded from the ground everywhere, one had to be careful not to trip on them.

We now came to the acropolis, the central area, where there were two very tall pyramid temples facing each other, temple I and temple II. They were about 500 feet apart. On each side were remains of buildings that had been used for government and residences for high officials. These were in very good condition, considering that they had been covered with ground for many, many years. Digging here by archaeologists began in 1954, all these edifices have been uncovered since then and the feeling is that there are probably hundreds more still in the ground. This was an amazing civilization, destroyed by the Spanish conquerors in the 1500's. I climbed the steps of the temples, up and down, and took pictures, then rested under a tree as our guide gave us historical facts of the area. It rained a little bit, not enough to bother us, the temperature was probably in the 80's, not too hot, but it was humid. I perspired a lot, my safari hat was very damp on the inside. We now walked to the museum, near where we had entered the park, and explored it. There were very many interesting things on display that had been found in tombs: a round flat surface stone, with a "roller" stone, shaped like a rolling pin, used to crush the hard corn kernels, this was found in a tomb. Corn was their main food. I guess they expected the deceased person to continue preparing food forever. Bones with engraving on them were shown, pictures of people and drawings of animals also. There was pottery, dated to 400 B.C., green and grey jade necklaces made of huge beads, and very long strands. One weighed sixteen pounds. There was also a burial scene where you looked down through glass, and saw a skeleton lying there, with jade beads, ceramic pieces, and clam shells next to it. This was very unique and was displayed well.

Now we left Tikal National Park in the bus. It took us toward Flores, and dropped people at different resorts, as specified on their tour. I thought I would see the city of Flores, adjacent to a lake, but we did not enter it. This is a very rural area, with jungle growth. People live in small houses of cement block, or wood construction, and roofs of thatch made of dried long palm leaves, about 6" wide, and fastened together on the roof. Our guide showed us these trees, as we walked in the jungle. Often there were shelters for animals, these were open on one side, we saw pigs, chickens, and sometimes horses or ponies. The Mayan people seen here are taller than the highland Indians of Chichicastanango, and of lighter complexion, probably from intermarriage with the Spanish, through the years. We saw many interesting things in the jungle, huge termite nests as big as washtubs, in trees, on the ground, one about 4 feet across and about 18 inches high, with many entry holes, this was the abode of the leafcutter ants, they carry a leaf a hundred times larger than they are! I had seen a documentary on TV about these amazing ants! Bird noises were constant in the jungle, emanating from the trees high above, they were not always seen because of the density of the growth. There were a few mosquitoes, but were not too bad and I had used insect spray before walking. With our group was a girl from Peru named Manuela, she spoke English, and was very pleasant.

I was dropped off at my hotel, Villa Maya, a quite new, lovely resort right on a lake. It had lovely gardens, grassy slopes, tropical foliage, and a bunch of colorful parrots were squawking loudly up in a tree. There was a large beautiful pool with a waterfall pouring into the deep water area, down below was another pool of shallower water. The restaurant, right at lake edge, has open sides, the beams above are of beautiful dark wood. The trees of Guatemala produce many different kinds of wood, and men carve lovely art pieces from it, sell them by the roadside near the lake, which is called Peten Itza. If I had more time, I

would like to go out and fish, little boats are available, with a youth to take you out, “blanco” are caught here, a delicious fish. There is so much to do here, I should stay for 2 days, but I want to go to Antigua tomorrow, and see that “earthquake city”. A week down here is too short. A big black bird with a white front, bigger than a blue jay, is making a screeching sound from up in the trees. Arriving at the resort, I was hot and tired from all the walking and climbing today, so I quickly changed into a suit and dove into the pool, swam for half an hour. I saw a most beautiful red sunset, as I floated on my back and rested. What a beautiful place this is! A nice shower and shampoo after the swim made me feel so good, I put on the one dress in my suitcase, relaxed, and felt like a fine lady. Usually, I am in shorts, or slacks and a top. I had a glass of beer and peanuts in the open air restaurant, the waiter put a tall coke bottle with two sticks of burning punk under each table to keep the mosquitoes away from your legs. I have no bites there, only one on my neckline, from in the jungle. I do have a swollen left elbow area, I noted it on Monday, it seems like a spider bite. Also I have two scrapes of skin on my right leg: one in the back where someone in line behind me at LAX pushed a trunk against my leg (it bled and I am putting ointment on it) and when I was climbing and crawling up the ladders to get to the temple I scraped my lower shin. I am putting medication there too. Both areas look o.k. and the elbow is not sore, just swollen.

## **TUESDAY November 19**

I slept so well at night. I think I have the prime room in this resort, number 119 is on the lower level, it is a very large room with two double beds, full bath, the toilet room and sink are separate. There is a small private patio, which faces the lake, large sloping lawn, down to the water's edge. The view is beautiful from my door. Each building is a unit with two rooms on the lower, and two on the upper floors. Oh, I just heard a fish flop, on the water, as I sit on the patio and write, also hear bird sounds, and the soft sound of the waterfall plunging into the swim pool., all pleasant sounds. There are screened windows all along one side of the room, that lets in nice air. The temperature is fine. On awakening in the morning about 6:30, I relaxed in bed awhile, said my prayers of thanks for this great trip. When I arose and walked, my left knee told me I had done a lot of strenuous exercise yesterday, but very shortly it was all o.k., there was no pain. I went over to the restaurant and sat at a table facing the lake, with the exotic tropical trees and foliage all in view. What a nice place to enjoy the morning, and the food. This is the first time to have a real breakfast since my arrival here, for I have had to be in the lobby extremely early each day, for tour pickup, and the restaurant was not yet open. I carry wrapped fig bars, for nourishment, when I travel, and never eat a heavy breakfast. I scanned their menu of eggs, omelet, pancakes, etc., and chose tropical fruit plate of pineapple, cantaloupe, watermelon, lemon slices, then cornflakes with banana slices on top, and coffee. It was all delicious, and cost 8.7 Q. After eating I walked the stone path along the lake front, saw tall water birds on the pier waiting to catch their food from the lake. The path led through the real jungle, for a long way, and suddenly about 5 spider monkeys appeared low in the trees near me. Then they swung down, and came to me in the path. One jumped up and clung to me at my waist, another clung onto my leg. They seemed friendly, but being afraid of a possible bite and not wanting them to climb onto my shoulder or head, I loosened the paw on the animal at my waist and swung him off of me. The other one then let go, and scampered down. I waved them away, and walked on. As I neared the hotel, from the

jungle, I noted a sign saying “animals in the jungle are their own, in their habitat – be careful”. I have never had monkeys jump on me before, but all turned out well, it was another adventure. I am writing this on my patio, there are clouds in the sky, temperature is about 83 degrees, I presume, and I am soon going into the pool for a nice swim. I exchanged some money at the restaurant this morning, noted that I received 4.50 Quetzal for \$1.

I had a lovely swim and following it, laid on a lounge for awhile. There are two couples from France staying here, probably in the late 40's, who speak English and have been very friendly with me on this tour. In Guatemala City, after picking me up, the bus driver met them at the luxurious Hotel Camino Real, and they went through the Tikal ruins with our group. They are all physicians, who practice in Paris, and invited me to visit them at their home, when I am in Paris again. One of them had taken my camera, and took my picture as I scrambled up the ladder at temple IV, said I had a lot of courage to be traveling alone, at my age. Today, after the swim, these couples hired a jeep and driver, and sought out other areas nearby to explore. A boy told me he would take me out today to fish for blanco, would only cost me \$3, I would love to do this, but have to leave here today. I bought some cards in the little office, also a necklace with a pendant, grey-green jade, carved in the shape of a mask. Then I took my camera and walked the jungle path again near the lake, the monkeys were on the ground at one spot, and I did snap their picture; they did not jump on me this time. Their arms and legs are so long!!! Hope the slide turns out well, it was kind of dark under the big trees.

Then I packed my suitcase, and the driver took us to the airport in Flores for the 5:30 flight back to Guatemala City. The plane was ½ hour late arriving at the airport, but we took off o.k. It was a short flight, was dark on arrival in the city, but we saw a beautiful red, sunset sky on the way. Our bags were set out on the tarmac, in the dark, we had to identify them, with some help. We did not even go into the airport, I followed the group, one of the French doctors carried my suitcase to the side of the building, where drivers were waiting. Now I was surprised, for Astrid, my previous guide was waiting for me. She had brought her friend from Brussels to the airport, and waited for me, gave me a hug and welcomed me. She showed me to the van and driver for our small tour group and I was driven back to the Pan American hotel. I registered again, and had a room with a balcony, it faced the street, and the hallway in front looked over the restaurant area below, in the lobby. Astrid will come at 9 a.m. tomorrow, we plan to go together, on a local bus, to Antigua. I'll take just the nylon bag and a few clothes, plan to stay one night there, will leave the suitcase here again until I return. I repacked, so everything would be ready. My elbow joint area is less swollen, but swelling has gone above, and below, the olecranon area. I can now feel the little hard spot, where the bite occurred, seems just like a spider bite, but no pain, am sure it will be o.k. .

### **WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 20**

I went to bed early last night and it felt good to relax in bed, slept well, and awoke before 5 a.m. This hotel is old, is right down in the city center and so we hear street noises, but it must have been very elegant when built. There is so much beautiful Guatemalan wood used for trim, there are double doors, with frosted glass, that lead out to the balcony, from



this room. The hotel really has character, and also very friendly service. The waiters in the dining room wear black, calf length, pants, black jacket, red waistband, and a red printed head scarf wound around their heads. This depicts a costume style worn in the Chichicastananga area. The ladies wear a skirt, with small vertical stripes, a white blouse with hand embroidery at neckline and short sleeve edge, they have long, black, braided hair, with red ribbons at the ends of the braids. They look so pretty! The different areas of Guatemala are represented in separate styles and colors, in the clothing they wear. Many have a white half-apron, over their skirt.

After a shower and shampoo I dressed and went down to breakfast where I had papaya slices, oatmeal with brown sugar and warm milk, and coffee. It tasted so good! My body is behaving very well, I eat lightly, don't indulge in real heavy meals. After breakfast I put the last things into my suitcase, placed it on the wheeled carrier, and went down to the lobby on the elevator. I will leave the suitcase here while I am in Antigua, and carry only the small nylon bag. I paid my hotel bill, one night \$51.46, and awaited Astrid's arrival. She arrived at 9 a.m., and surprised me to say that she had her mother's car, was driving to Antigua, and taking along a lady friend who lives there. I gave her 30 Q for gasoline, and appreciated not having to ride the local bus to Antigua. We drove through the bad streets of Guatemala City, full of ruts and bumps, to the Pan American highway, then took another road into Antigua. The city is at high elevation, and two volcanos, Agua and Fuego, rise above it. From 1543, when it was organized, to 1773, it was the capitol city of Guatemala. Had a population of 80,000 people, and contained the first university in "new Spain". There were seven colleges, 32 churches, some convents and monasteries, hospitals, parks, gardens with beautiful fountains, and some of the most beautiful buildings in the New World. The city was mainly destroyed by earthquakes in 1773, was partly rebuilt, but another large quake occurred and in 1776 Guatemala City was named the capitol, as it remains today. The colonial style buildings have metal grilles over windows, the large heavy doors are metal studded, walls are whitewashed and roofs are of red tile. Any new structures must follow this style. No signs jut out across streets, few buildings are more than one story high. The Parque Plaza, in town center, has government buildings along one side and a cathedral on the other side. There is a huge fountain in the center, with statues of 4 females, resembling mermaids, and water spouts from their breasts. It was a planned city, the streets (calles) run east and west, and avenues (avenidas) run north and south from the plaza. Today there are people resting on benches here, under huge trees, visiting, and there are native Indians, in their colorful dress, offering hand crafter items for sale. Some reconstruction goes on, in the earthquake ruined buildings, but much destruction is still seen, and will remain as ruins. Astrid took us through the first university in the New World, ordered to be built in mid 1500's by a Spanish nobleman. The studies then were only for theology and medicine. Many old paintings and carved wooden statues of saints are seen here, also murals on the walls of students receiving their scrolls of graduation, in those early days. This building was not damaged by earthquake. Next we went across the street into the remains of a huge cathedral, very badly damaged, with some restoration being done, slowly. Very near it, was a new cathedral that was built after the quakes, also went down under the ground to an original chapel, that had not been damaged. Many articles were stored there.

Government buildings have been restored and are being used today, mainly as museums. Many guns and other weapons from the past are displayed, also in one part were seen very early printing equipment pieces, which were very interesting. We had a lunch in a small restaurant, the chicken soup and cheese fondue were excellent. Our next stop was through a former convent for cloistered nuns, very badly damaged, and unoccupied. It was a very large building, much remained of the very large kitchens, where a circular shaped ceiling rose up high, to an opening above for smoke dispersal. Food was cooked over fires. The cells for nuns were in a circular area along a hallway, baths were cemented rectangular pits in the floor. The roof was entirely gone, and the second floor rooms, formerly a chapel and large work room, have been used in recent years for drying coffee beans, the sun could shine down on the beans and dry them. There are many coffee plantations around Antigua, Astrid drove to one of them so I could observe the plants. The bushes are not very high, and the beans were still green, no red ones seen yet.

Following this Astrid dropped her lady friend off at her home, then took me to the home of an aunt. We entered and visited with this lady, were served coffee and a biscuit, enjoyed the friendly conversation. This aunt lived in a two story, small house, near the edge of town. She had resided in the U.S. for a time, and spoke excellent English. After this Astrid drove me to the pension she had secured for me, the home of a lady friend of her mother. I will stay here, breakfast is included, the price is \$26 for room and private bath. I am privileged to stay in a local home when I travel, as I get to absorb the culture of the area I am visiting. The Spanish style house consists of rooms around a central plaza, and a veranda bordering the central garden. The rooms open off of this. The ceilings are of solid wood planking, double doors open from my room, onto the veranda, the window has wood panels, that open outward and there are metal ornamental grills on the outside of the windows. In the doors to the room, are separate, small doors in the upper part, which close from the inside for privacy, also have lattice of wood that can be opened, for air flow. This is typical of the Spanish style houses all over this city. I retired early, into the four-poster bed.

#### **THURSDAY NOVEMBER 21**

I slept well, though the mattress was not as good as the ones on beds in the Pan Am hotel. As I laid in bed I could hear cars and trucks rumbling over the cobblestone street outside, it was noisy but traffic slowed by 9:30 p.m. and I did not hear anything during the night. I slept well, and awoke early to the sound of a crowing rooster! I liked that. When I was dressed I went out to the garden, which was in the center of the veranda area. The sun was coming up and I could see the top of a volcano, as I looked over the high garden wall. Melodious sounds came from various birds up in the trees, outside the wall. All around on the veranda are beautifully carved wood benches and also chairs, with cushions on the seats. On one large chair there was a fur throw over the back and seat: I saw many beautiful treasures being kept here. My breakfast was served at a table on the veranda, and the hostess then put a record on, of lovely classical music. How much better this is, than a hotel room! After eating, she showed me the rest of the home: her father was a medical doctor and this was his house, she kept his office rooms just as they were when he was living, also his bedroom, for she treasured the memories. Ferns hung from archways of the veranda roof, and roses bloomed on the wall, near the fountain with running water. There was such a

cacophony of sounds as I sat and enjoyed the scene, the sounds of the rooster, the birds in trees above, water splashing and nice music playing, I felt I was receiving genuine Spanish hospitality. Her husband then told me that as he was employed in Guatemala City, he would take me with him tomorrow morning, and leave me at my hotel. That was very nice of him and I accepted.

I spent the day walking, with my map of Antigua and information booklets, saw interesting places. There have been many earthquakes here, through the years, and ruins of many beautiful buildings were seen. They are being left in that condition, no attempts now to restore them. The Spanish built many very large cathedrals after they occupied the land, most of the population is Catholic, but churches are mainly in ruins. During Holy Week, just before Easter, the entire area participates in processions through the streets, walking over a carpet of designs made from sawdust which has been dyed in various colors. Many men will march, being dressed in purple robes, and the figure of Jesus crucified is carried along. On Easter, the risen Christ is carried in the same way. It is a world known ritual and people come from all over the world to see, or participate. In one area of a ruined church (there was still a partial roof on it), we saw the artifacts used the processions, also in a museum the sawdust carpet designs were made on the floor.

I had lunch at the café of Lilly, the sister of Astrid's grandmother, whom we visited on Monday. I then found the central market, which was a very BIG one, and spent a lot of time there. I did some trading, received a tape of local marimba music for a T shirt I gave, a small shoulder money purse for a pink blouse, and a bag of dried chile peppers for a dark cotton blouse. That was fun! I returned to my room, rested for awhile, and then went out again. I took pictures, finishing the roll of slide film, then bought a roll for print pictures and took a few shots as I sat in the center square for awhile. I had food in a local restaurant, and walked back to my Pension just as it got dark. I showered, then packed my shoulder bag, so it will be ready when I leave in the early morning with Mr. Manuel Barrios Vielman, as he drives to work. I have enjoyed Antigua – I have one more day here in Guatemala, then I fly back to Thousand Oaks, California. When a big heavy truck goes by outside on the cobblestone street, it seems like it is coming right into the room! It is a good thing traffic slows down to almost nothing at night. There is a full moon tonight, I just walked out into the brick area in center of the garden and enjoyed seeing the moon above, and a few fleecy clouds. The air is comfortable, with the temperature of about 78 degrees I presume, very nice.

## **FRIDAY NOVEMBER 22**

I would like to relate here an unusual incident that occurred: On the trip to Tikal Monday and Tuesday, a threesome of people were on our bus, a mother, son, daughter-in-law. They spoke English, we were together as we climbed the pyramid ruins, etc., ate at the same table at the bar-b-q lunch. They were dropped off afterward at the Camino Real resort, I at the Villa Maya. Later, at the Flores airport they were in our group again, waiting to go back to Guatemala City. To my surprise, yesterday afternoon, as I returned to my room to rest, this same threesome, plus a Guatemalan lady, were sitting on the veranda having coffee with my hostess here! They, then recognized me and said the Guatemalan lady was a cousin of my hostess. Last night, when I returned at dark, they were here

visiting again, invited me to sit with them and have a cookie and coffee. They live in Orange county, in California. It is a small world!

The drive from Antigua to Guate City (as the natives call it) with Mr. Vielman took 45 minutes. The early morning traffic moved quite well, though streets were full of cars, trucks and buses. This country does not manufacture any autos, all are imported from Japan, Germany, U.S., Sweden and South America. It's economy is mainly exporting fruits, vegetables and wood products. Wheat, corn and coffee are grown in large amounts. Anything can be grown here, according to Mr. Vielman, who is a 5th generation Guatemalan national. He is age 65 and retired, but doing consulting work now. He left me safely at my hotel, was a very pleasant gentleman.

I planned to take a walking tour of the central market today, and did so, after procuring my room No. 238, it was a very nice one. The market was 2 blocks away, behind the cathedral in Central Plaza, so it was easy to find. It was amazing, consisted of two levels, underground, for a whole square block of land. There were stalls of numerous fruits, vegetables of all kinds, tended by the Indians from farms outside the city, and displayed very artistically. Also there were many areas of beautiful fresh flowers for sale. It was lovely to wander through. The handcraft section showed all the weavings, wall hangings, carvings, textiles that they do, I had seen many of them at Chichicastenanga and Antigua. There was a large section where foods were cooked and served, and I wanted to taste different things. I usually eat "local" foods like this and never became sick, but there has been a lot of cholera here lately, warning signs stated this, so I was careful, and did not eat.

I should mention the peculiar gait of the Mayan Indians, especially the men. Their legs seem to bow outward a little at the knees, not really bow legged, but it makes their steps short and quick, and a really different stride. They must be very strong for they carry huge packs on their backs as they come in from fields and forest, packs of vegetables, racks of wood, etc. We saw many of them along roads, and they walk for miles and miles. They are very sturdy people, hard working, own the land they live on, and proud to work it by hand. The fields are beautiful. The waiters in the Pan American hotel restaurant are Mayan Indians, wear the black pants, short ones, cut up sides at knee area, and embroidered with designs. There is fringe at the bottom of their jackets, and they wear the traditional black headpiece, they have the peculiar gait, and are always courteous and smiling. The luggage carriers at the hotel are also Mayan.

It has been a very interesting trip, but found it difficult to find English speaking people. The hotel didn't even seem to be able to procure a taxi driver for me, who could speak English, as I would have liked to be driven around the city and see more of it. There was no afternoon tour available today. It reminded me of when I was on the island of Martinique in the Caribbean, a few years ago, I found no one who spoke English, only French. I couldn't take the little van to the end of the island, to see a village there, for fear I would not procure the right van to return to the city again.

## **SATURDAY NOVEMBER 23**

This is the morning I leave. My internal alarm clock awakened me every hour, after 3 a.m., as it always does when I know I have to be up early. I should mention here the delicious fish called "snook", that I had for dinner last night at the hotel. It is such white, tasty fish, have never seen it offered in a restaurant before. I eat it sometimes at my friends home in Florida, Web and Jessie, they catch it there, it cannot be sold in stores, and this is the first time I've seen it offered in a restaurant. I really enjoyed it. The taxi came at 8:15, for transport to the airport, then I fly back to LAX in Los Angeles. I came with one suitcase, but had the flat, nylon, Australia bag packed inside, to carry purchases. Now I have those things I bought, inside it, a dress which is hand embroidered, scarves, beads, wall hanging, etc. I use these artifacts when I present slide lectures, also wear the dress when I speak. I saw some very interesting sights here, and hope all my slides are good. The volcano sticking up behind city streets of Antigua was an unusual sight, also three volcanoes around Lake Atitlan.

Yesterday afternoon about 4:30 p.m., I was sitting in my room, sorting purchases, when I felt an earthquake, not very sharp, but a definite movement. At dinner I asked the Maitre'd if it was so, and he said, yes. I wonder if that huge chandelier in the lobby swung a bit? They have a history of many earthquakes here, and there are about 25 volcanoes in the area. At lunch time in the Pan American hotel, they have two musicians playing the marimba, making lovely music. They are on the balcony over the restaurant, just around the corner from my room. Yesterday I was here at lunch time (the only day I've been here at that time) and I opened my tape recorder, and taped the music. That is nice.

So this was about the end of my stay in Guatemala. I secured another episode of my lecture series "Whizzing Around The World With Irma". I enjoyed learning about the Mayan history, their huge temples at Tikal, and seeing the present day people of that race, and their handwork. At the airport in Guate City, a Pan Am helper ushered me to the line for flight 416, had some waiting, but it was quite an easy departure. In the airport shops I could not find any Guatemala "patch" for my hat, there were only local handicraft items for sale. That was too bad, I have many hats from my travels, with patches on them from various countries. I checked my suitcase to LAX, carried the nylon bag, did not have to change planes as it was a direct flight. The dinner served consisted of chicken with a creamy sauce over it, vegetables, salad and wine. The flight was 5 hours, we were ½ hour late in landing at LAX. Going through immigration was easy, I had nothing to declare and was ushered right through, did not have to open my suitcase. I had to wait 40 minutes for the Great American Stage Line bus, to take me to Thousand Oaks, so sat on a bench in front of the terminal until it came. The weather was perfect, sunny and mild. On arrival at the Howard Johnson hotel in Thousand Oaks, I called my daughter Mary, she picked me up, as she always does, and I am now safely back in my home Cinder, my cat, who came to live with me 18 years ago, was fed well by Mary, Steve and family while I was gone, and looked well. I guess she is glad to see me return, for I brush her coat in mornings, as she jumps up on the bench outside, as I sit there. She is remarkable, is still moving well, for such an aged cat.

So ends my free trip on Pan Am airline, to Guatemala. I've had the award ticket for 3 years, but was always going on other trips during that time and didn't have time to use it. The expiration date was to be at the end of this year, so had to make the trip. Now, I am very glad I did.

**A FEW DAYS LATER;**

The great airline Pan Am, which has been in business for many years, just announced it is out of business!!!!!! It went bankrupt. There were people traveling in South America who were stranded, as planes stopped flying abruptly, and they were left at an airport for a whole day or more, before some other airline would honor their Pan Am ticket. I am lucky I used up my award, made the trip, and got back home safely. On my second trip, alone, around the world in 1985/1986, I was on Pan Am and Singapore airlines, and earned miles. That ticket cost \$2000 plus my extension to Indonesia and fare to Bali, from Jakarta. That is a great bargain, and it was a wonderful trip.