

The Guatemalan Passion of the Christ

The lent season is a special time in Latin America. The season begins with Carnival. Then the amount of activities decreases only to pick up in the week prior to Easter. There are many pageants, processions, and parades. The climax is during Holy Week (*Semana Santa*) with special days being Palm Sunday, Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter.

Antigua located in the southwest part of Guatemala is a good location to observe such activities. Antigua was the capital of Guatemala from 1543 until 1776 when an earthquake destroyed much of the city. The present capital, Guatemala City, is located less than 30 miles away. However, many people stay in Antigua because it is smaller (population of 30,000), less polluted, safer and more attractive. Central American capitals have unattractive areas and many countries have a smaller, nearby city that is used as a tourist base.

Most of the Semana Santa festivities center around La Merced, the church where the processions commence. The intricate paper mache angels used for the procession floats are completed and stored in La Merced. Locals can find their assignment in the following day's procession from workers inside the church. The locals also make elaborate palms that included roses, carnations, grains and other flowers. These compare favorably to palms in America, which are usually fairly plain. Many people congregate outside La Merced and sell these palms to tourists and locals alike. The anticipation and excitement level is high throughout the city as people prepare for the processions.

The sound of canon fire starts the festivities early on Palm Sunday. Many travel to La Merced to attend Palm Sunday mass. The first of two processions starts in Central

Park shortly after the mass and includes live actors who reenact the life of Jesus. It lasts for over three hours, which is a long time, but a lot happened during the life of Jesus. A



man on a horse leads the procession, blowing his seashell horn, followed by a group of dancing children dressed in white and purple. The actors are next, followed by a donkey, sheep, and finally the residents of Antigua. Even

people that don't know Spanish can understand the play by what miracle Jesus was performing. The stories of Mary Magdalene, Martha, and Lazerus are retold.

The preparation for the second procession starts after the first one finishes.

Guatemalans create carpets (alfombras) on the road where the procession route would pass. The base for the carpet was usually made of pine trees, colored sawdust or flower petals. Then the artists add a design, which usually had a religious theme. The carpets are made out of palms, roses, lettuce, carnations, sunflowers, and even bottle caps. Some of the carpets are over 300 meters long. Unfortunately, all these beautiful carpets would soon be destroyed.



The procession begins and ends at La Merced.

The actors, dressed up as Romans, make sure that the route is cleared of people. Men dressed in purple and white assist them; they would also carry the float later in the day.

Eighty men are needed to carry the sixty-foot float that featured a statue of Jesus carrying the cross, along with John the Baptist, and eight paper machete angels. A float of Mother Mary follows the first float and was carried by forty veiled women. A full band follows both floats and then the people trail behind. The deliberate procession starts at one in the afternoon and ends at one in the morning; twelve hours of walking the cobblestone streets of Antigua.

Taking a break from the festivities, there are other things to see in the city. Iglesia de San Francisco built in the sixteenth century is Antigua's second most important church. Along the exterior wall is engraved the Stations of the Cross. Casa Popenoe, built in 1636, is one of many houses where a royal official's family used to live and can be visited to get a sense of their standard of living. Included in Popenoe is a kitchen, garden where they grew all the necessary spices, and bath, in which hot water was rotated in from the kitchen. Also in the house was a small room where they kept passenger pigeons, which were a means of communication.

Other attractions include Universidad de San Carlos, which houses religious artifacts. Nearby is Central Park, which is a place to shop and people watch. One little



entrepreneur, Maria, was trying to sell me Mayan scarves for two dollars. She told me that it took her three months to make one scarf and placed one in my hands. When I said I didn't want one she would say that I was bad and ran away. She was

trying to force me to buy the scarf by sticking it in my hands and then running away and refusing to take it back. This routine would continue with the other tourists in the park.

A nearby activity is climbing Volcan Pacaya. Most tourist trips stop at a small village near the volcano via a mini-van. A police escort joins tours in Antigua for protection purposes; however, in my case they were too lazy to make the trek. The entrance sign states the rules for the climb, including no starting campfires and no shooting people.

The vegetation is lush at the beginning of the trek but eventually it disintegrates to just shrubs and then just ugly black volcanic rock. At this point, there is a sign indicating that climbers could be exposed to harmful gases and falling rocks. You've been warned. Although an active volcano, there is no lava to be observed but there is plenty of sulfur to be inhaled.

The most enjoyable aspect of climbing volcanoes is skiing down them. The grueling two-hour hike up is worth the ten-minute trip down. The *mas rapido* way down is the same as downhill skiing except shoes are the skis and the volcanic pebbles are the snow. Because the volcanic rock breaks apart so easily, it is a bit slippery. So descending is performed the same way that one skis down a snow-covered hill, without the skis. Just start running down the hill and then pivot my feet back and forth to slow down.

The best time to go to Antigua is during Holy Week due to the extra activities. However, spending time in Antigua any time of the year is enjoyable. Antigua can be used as a base for other nearby cities such Guatemala City, Chichicastenango, Panajachel, and Quetzaltenango.

