A customized tour along the back roads of Guatemala leads the author to authentic villages, old Maya rituals, and a magical "moment of curiosity."

GOING DEEP

BY CARL HOFFMAN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER McBRIDE

At festival time, Ferris wheels enliven San Andrés Xecúl, a village known for its bright yellow church in a country known for its still-thriving Maya culture.

IT'S NIGHT,

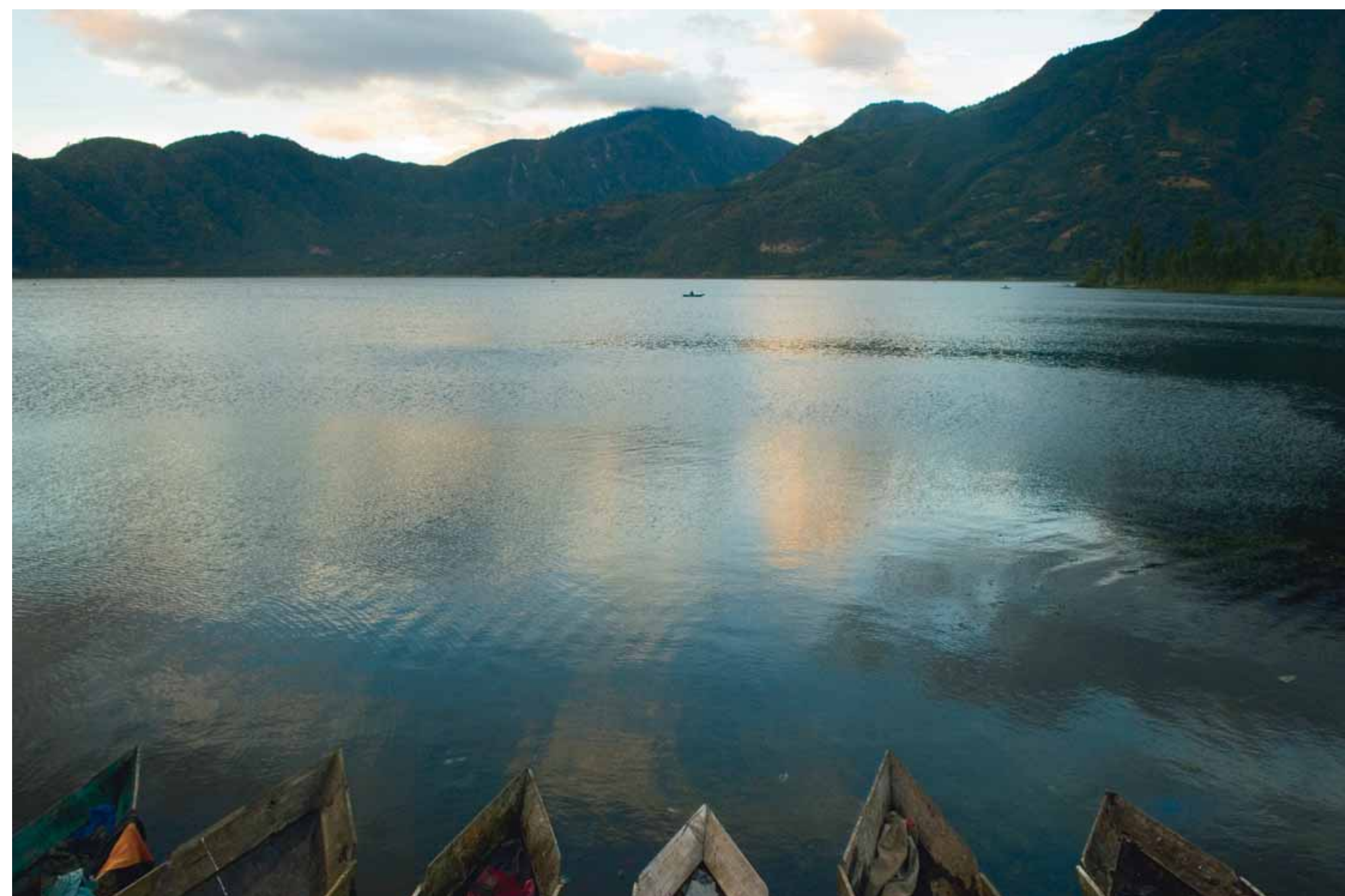
and I'm navigating a warren of smoky concrete passageways lit by a single low-watt lightbulb. This is the Cofradía Santa Cruz, a local home turned makeshift cult temple in Santiago Atitlán. The village, inhabited mostly by Maya, sits in the highlands of southern Guatemala on the shores of Atitlán, a flooded caldera that is regarded as one of the world's most beautiful lakes.

I enter a cinderblock room where a statue of Jesus Christ, life-size and swaddled in wool blankets, lies in a glass coffin strung with Christmas lights. He looks real.

Nearby is an even more popular deity: Maximón, a part-Christian, part-Maya idol standing four feet tall. Maximón is a dandy, sporting two cowboy hats, a garish tie, and dozens of silk scarves hanging low, from which the toes of his silver-studded boots peek out. As the ceremony begins, candles burn on the floor before him. The presiding shaman hands me an incense burner, and I bathe my body in thick, sweet smoke.

Next to me, smiling, is my guide, John Heaton, adventurer, hotelier, purveyor of "bespoke journeys." To get here, he has led me well off the tourist trail. Born in Paris, schooled in England, France, and Switzerland, Heaton has traveled widely and slept on half the beaches in Mexico. Yet it's the magic and mystery of Guatemala that captivate him most of all. Like the other colorful expats and globe-trotters you find here, Heaton is as swept away by his adopted home as I am. He doesn't just show me around the place. He immerses me in the world he loves.

Clockwise from left: **In Antigua, the Arch of Saint Catalina frames the Agua volcano. Musicians take five in San Andrés Itzapa. Pirogues line the shore of Lake Atitlán—one of the country's star attractions—below the village of Santiago Atitlán, home to the deity called Maximón.**



MANY NEVER VENTURE FAR FROM ANTIGUA, BUT WE'RE GOING "THROUGH THE KEYHOLE" TO THE HIDDEN GUATEMALA.

I first meet Heaton in Guatemala's colonial capital, Antigua, a kind of gringo gateway to Central America's most populous country. This city, founded by the Spanish in 1543, was ordered abandoned in the 18th century after a series of earthquakes. But not everyone left, and Antigua became a time capsule of colonial architecture worthy of UNESCO World Heritage site status. Now it's home to 42,000.

Antigua is ringed by three majestic volcanoes. It's a haven of cobblestone streets and Spanish language schools, of open-air cafés, and gardens and atriums hidden behind the heavy wooden doors of restored Spanish mansions. I spend hours one afternoon sitting in the central square next to a trickling fountain, just people-watching, and see a young bride in a lace dress arrive at the church across the street in a horse-drawn carriage.

Unfortunately, many travelers never venture far from the delights of Antigua. And if they do, they stick to the well-worn path. They'll take the bus tour to Chichicastenango, famous for its open-air market, or to Panajachel, the main tourist town on Lake Atitlán; or they'll fly to the Maya ruins at Tikal in the northern region called El Petén.

But Heaton prefers a different path. Although he's a lover of beauty, a guy who would feel at home in Paris or St. Barts, he prefers to sleep in a jungle, reveling in mud and damp and adventure.

"I want a life with stories," he says over wine, while outlining our itinerary. We're sitting in his Antigua hotel and home, Quinta Maconda (*www.quintamaconda.com*), a rambling, centuries-old house rich with antiques and oddities collected over the past 22 years. Ours will be no off-the-shelf tour. "During the next five days," Heaton says, "we will travel through the keyhole," on a winding, four-wheel-drive journey that he has cooked up especially for me, after I requested a customized journey into the "hidden" Guatemala. And if we're lucky, we may happen upon "the sacred, magical moment of curiosity," as Heaton puts it.

We leave Antigua the next morning, and, an hour out, hit the town of San Andrés Itzapa, crowded with Sunday fiesta-goers. "That's a good omen," Heaton says, as we swerve past campesinos on horseback wearing cowboy hats and carrying machetes.

Guatemala is that rare place where some of the locals still dress in traditional clothing, the women more so than men. Their brightly patterned skirts and intricately handwoven smocks, known as *huipils,* make them as colorful as tropical fish around a reef. But sadly, in San Andrés Itzapa, as in many Guatemalan towns, traditional adobe homes are being replaced by modern concrete structures. We drive straight through the mostly charmless village to reach a rutted dirt track out of town, over which we'll slog, bump, and jolt for the next six hours.

Clockwise, from above: **On a sidewalk in Xecúl, a weaver uses a backstrap loom. Workers from a finca haul bags of coffee beans to the village of Pochuta. A well-appointed room in a private home reflects the Spanish colonial charm of Antigua, "a walker's paradise," Hoffman says.**

Heaton is unrepentant about the quality of the road. "Coming here is like going back a hundred years," he says as we thump along ridges shrouded in cool mist and dotted with blooming poinsettia, passing tiny villages where we see just a few houses, maybe a horseman and some chickens, working our way ever higher into countryside covered with coffee bushes. Only since peace accords were signed in 1996, ending 36 years of civil war in Guatemala, have paved roads even started piercing remote villages like these.

We pass coffee plantations, known as fincas, and pause at one on a high, foggy ridge. Soon we're surrounded by itinerant pickers and their children. Only one man speaks Spanish. "We're here for the harvest," he says, "and we earn 35 quetzales a day," about $4.50. Then he adds, "Have you heard of Starbucks? The finca is talking to them. If they buy our coffee, we will make more."

It's getting late, so we move on. As night falls, we pull into a 3,100-acre finca called Los Tarrales. It's owned by Andy Burge, who was raised here on land purchased by his grandfather in 1941. Burge grows coffee and ornamental flowers, supplementing his income by taking in guests at the old manor house.

The next morning, during a breakfast of strong coffee, refried beans, pancakes, and fruit, I admire the old black-and-white photos of Burge's grandfather and father on the wall. Their garb includes pith helmets, khaki jodhpurs, and knee-high laced leather boots. The boy at their feet has grown into the man who is our host.

Burge, a compact former wrestler, suggests we take a hike. The morning is sunny, and Los Tarrales is buzzing, a riotous jungle in the lee of 11,000-foot-high volcanoes. There are cedars, eight-foot-high coffee plants, Macarthur palms, banana trees, and colorful impatiens growing willy-nilly on the ground. All this was planted by generations of Burges, or rather, by the resident

IN SANTIAGO ATITLÁN, THE TZUTUJIL BUILT A MASSIVE CHURCH, UNDER DURESS, USING STONES TAKEN FROM MAYA TEMPLES.

campesinos, currently numbering 64, who work the land.

Toucans flit between branches. We spot Mexican squirrel cuckoos and blue-throated sapphire hummingbirds. "Look!" says Burge. We glance up in time to see the great volcano Fuego cough up puffs of smoke.

After lunch we rendezvous with a friend of Heaton's named Vinnie Stanzione, a Maya scholar. Then we hit the road together, turning off the highway at a town called Chicacao and heading down a cobblestone lane. We're on our way to Santiago Atitlán, where we hope to participate in local Maya rituals. The route is filled with donkeys and horsemen and walkers carrying cut wood with tumplines across their foreheads.

"This is the old Camino Real," Stanzione says, built by conquistadors over Indian footpaths to link Mexico City with outer territories. "The Maya have used it forever."

It's dusk when we roll over steep mountains into Santiago Atitlán, home to the Tzutujil Indians. Santiago has been a place of recurring unrest for centuries. After surrendering to the Spanish conquistadors, the Tzutujil joined their conquerers in subduing another Maya tribe. During the recent civil war, the local Catholic church gave sanctuary, and that's where we head. The Tzutujil built the massive edifice in 1547, under duress, using stones taken from Maya temples and palaces.

Santiago is Stanzione's adopted home. This Colorado native, now graying, first came here during his college years. Ever since, he has submersed himself in Tzutujil culture, becoming one of the few outsiders to speak the language.

Today, the city is anything but touristy. It's startlingly barren yet somehow compelling—a dynamic, frenetic jumble of square buildings and narrow streets crowded with women in huipils and men in traditional handwoven striped pants and jackets, all set against the lake surrounded by perfect volcanic cones.

Our visit takes on a dreamlike quality, as though we've passed through a portal into a world mixing the here and now with the ancient past, a perception intensified by Stanzione's habit of speaking of long-ago events in the present tense.

"The friars translate the scriptures into Quiché for the Maya," Stanzione says, giving us a thumbnail history as we sit on the church steps. "And they connect the Catholic saints to the Maya gods. But then the Franciscans leave the area, and the Maya reinterpret Christianity with their own metaphors and analogies, retaining their culture and magic."

Clockwise from above: **Along the road to the hidden Guatemala: Tortillas cook over an open fire; and pilgrims worship San Simón, a local deity similar to Maximón. At journey's end: A fountain casts reflections of Chajul, a traditional village not yet overtaken by modernity.**

The next day, we hire a boat to ferry us along the shore of Atitlán. It drops us off at a steep and lonely hillside. We climb up to overlook the lake and the wooden fishing pirogues 150 feet below. "The Tzutujil warriors and nobles hold out up here but then surrender," Stanzione says. "They don't want to be destroyed." We climb higher, scrambling through underbrush, and step into a tangled garden. Stanzione picks little yellow fruits—*jacote*—which we pop into our mouths. They're sweet and bitter at the same time. He leads us into a grove of coffee plants, through 12-foot high corn, past orange and avocado trees. We top out on a flat, fragrant plateau. It's a beautiful, quiet place. Crumbling old walls and 15-foot-high mounds rise from the grass.

The lake and Santiago and distant volcanoes fill the horizon. "These mounds are temples," Stanzione says, lifting a carved stone from the ground. "These are the very stones the Franciscans use to build the church in Santiago. At the vernal equinox," he says, pointing to the west, "the sun sets on the top of that volcano, the center of the world, the belly button of their kingdom."

The temple is gone now, nothing but an overgrown ruin. Yet it seems alive as Stanzione continues intertwining history and myth as we walk through Santiago at dusk. The backstreets are tight, dusty passageways crowded with women and children and feral dogs running between crooked houses that emanate voices and music. The villagers know Stanzione; he laughs and greets them in Tzutujil.

It's dark when we reach our destination, the cofradía of Maximón. Inside a small cinderblock room are seven men, besides us, here to make offerings to the wooden effigy. The shaman pours glasses of Quetzalteca cane liquor. One by one, each of us takes a glass, says *maltiox, tata* ("thank you, father"), first to the homeowner who has agreed to host Maximón for a year, and then to everyone else. Then we gulp the rum. My throat burns; my stomach lurches. One, two, three rounds, full glasses each time. I'm quickly plastered.

The shaman kneels before Maximón, feeds him Quetzalteca, places a lit cigarette

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in his mouth, makes us smoke, and talks and talks. I hear our names; the shaman is telling Maximón about us. The night dissolves into a phantasm of voices, alcohol, and nicotine, and we are swept away. We laugh. We joke. We tumble against each other on the benches. Stanzione translates when he can. The shaman, on his knees, implores Maximón: "I put you together. I cleaned you. I am your slave."

The shaman hands me another glass and a lit cigarette, and Stanzione says, "It's your turn. Now you can ask Maximón for a favor, something you really want."

I'm not religious, but I'm in the moment, and somehow it all makes sense. I kneel on the concrete, the heat of the candles on my face. In my altered state in this hot, dim room, I feel the power of faith, even if it's not my own. Maximón's eyes bore into me. I sprinkle an offering of a few drops of Quetzalteca before him and murmur my request.

I look up at Heaton, lost in reverie, and realize that this is what he meant by the magical moment of curiosity—when the traveler is subsumed within the absolutely foreign and mysterious. We are indeed off the map and out of this world by half a millennium. I comprehend almost none of it, but I heed what Heaton said back in Antigua: "It's art. You don't have to understand it."

As the ceremony winds down, I ask the shaman who is more important, Jesus Christ or Maximón. "Maximón is just a lawyer, a child of Jesus," the shaman replies. "Christ is the judge." The ceremony concludes, and locals gently carry Maximón up a ladder to bed. We tumble out into the darkness.

In the morning, surprisingly lucid, we bid farewell to Vinnie Stanzione and Santiago, bound for Chajul, "the end of the road," Heaton says. After a long drive, we arrive in late afternoon. A new paved two-laner has only just connected the isolated village to the outside world, meaning that Chajul has so far escaped the usual onslaught of concrete and cinderblock. The pavement ends just before town in a stretch of road slippery with mud and puddles.

Chajul sits on a series of ridgetops, a cocoon of winding dirt streets and beautiful adobe houses, wood smoke pouring through their tile roofs. Donkeys amble through the streets. There are few cars; as the sun sets, women wash their long black hair in cisterns. Heaton pulls me into an old house. Three-hundred-year-old frescoes of men in black suits and women in ball gowns adorn the walls.

In Santiago Atitlán, the wooden statue of Maximón sports two cowboy hats, colorful scarves, and a cigar. He is both saint and devil, a mixture of Christianity and old Maya traditions.

Outside another house, Heaton talks to a middle-age couple in rapid-fire Spanish. They invite us inside. The adobe house has a single room with a packed earth floor and an open fire smoldering in the corner. The woman climbs a ladder into the rafters and returns with pre-Columbian bowls and large shards of Maya funerary urns decorated with the faces of jaguars. "We find them in the fields," she says, shrugging her shoulders, as if thousand-year-old artifacts were as common as old Coke bottles.

Truthfully, it is all a bit dizzying. Guatemala is just a three-hour flight from Houston, yet here, tucked under our noses, is deep, old village life. It is raw and inscrutable. "We are lucky," Heaton says, as we dig into refried beans and hot tortillas in a tiny restaurant, fog rolling into the village outside. "We're a generation that can still see traditional life. In a few generations, it will be gone."

Indeed, smoky, muddy Chajul and the drunken passion of Maximón are still dancing in my head when we return to Antigua. Walking along the street, I hear music and duck through the open door of an inn, or posada. The courtyard is lovely, filled with calla lilies and men playing a wooden xylophone. The music is fast and resonant, and two couples—sophisticated urbanites from Guatemala City—start dancing arm in arm while their friends clap and shout "*¡Olé!*"

But over the red tile roof I can see a volcano, and all this seems veneer. Thanks to Heaton and Stanzione, I've gone deep; out there, I know, are all those twisting back roads, men drinking to Maximón, and industrious women weaving textiles in dusky, dirt-floored houses in Chajul. Heaton was right: "Travel is always about taking a risk," he said. "It's about curiosity leading you to places you don't know, just to have that knowledge of what lies beyond, a knowledge you keep for the rest of your life."

Carl Hoffman *floated the Amazon for our May/June 2007 issue. Photographer* **Peter McBride's** *late grandfather was born in Guatemala and managed a coffee finca there.*