

Antigua



Antigua remains far more than a tourist attraction – it's Guatemala's showpiece. A place of rare beauty, major historical significance and vibrant culture, it's a must-visit destination.

A former capital – the seat of government was relocated to Guatemala City following several major earthquakes during the colonial period – Antigua boasts an astonishing catalogue of colonial relics in a magnificent setting. Its streetscapes of pastel facades under terracotta roofs unfold amid three volcanoes: Agua (3766m), Fuego (3763m) and Acatenango (3976m). Designated a Unesco World Heritage Site and with an ideal climate, it's a splendid place for walking (though it can get chilly after sunset). While many old ecclesiastical and civic structures are beautifully renovated, others retain tumbledown charm, with fragments strewn about parklike grounds and sprays of bougainvillea sprouting from the crumbling ruins.

Thanks to the dozens of Spanish language schools that operate here, Antigua has become a global hot spot as well, but the foreign presence by no means dominates the atmosphere. Antigua remains a vibrant Guatemalan town, its churches, plazas and markets throbbing with activity.

Perhaps the real miracle of Antigua is its resilience. Despite the destructive forces that have conspired against it – earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and floods, followed by virtual abandonment and centuries of neglect – it's reemerged with a vengeance, buoyed by the pride of its inhabitants.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Peering down into the crater of active **Volcán Pacaya** (p96)
- Resurrecting your high-school Spanish at one of the highly regarded language schools, such as the **Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín** (p99)
- Dining fine at **Caffé Mediterráneo** (p107), just one among the wide variety of international restaurants found in Guatemala
- Getting historical in Antigua's museums, monasteries, mansions, churches and convents, starting with the spectacular **Iglesia y Convento de Santo Domingo** (p95)
- Admiring and acquiring traditional textiles at **Nim Po't** (p109), a cavalcade of Maya crafts



■ Population: 58,150

■ Elevation: 1530m

HISTORY

Antigua wasn't the Spaniards' first choice for a capital city. That honor goes to Iximché, settled in 1524 in order to keep an eye on the Kaqchiquel, with whom they had an uneasy truce. Things got uneasy when the Kaqchiquel rebelled, so the city was moved in 1527 to present-day Ciudad Vieja (p111) on the flanks of Volcán Agua. That didn't work out, either – the town practically disappeared under a mudslide in 1541 and everybody packed up and moved again. And so it was that on March 10, 1543, La muy Noble y muy Leal Ciudad de Santiago de los Caballeros de Goathemala, the Spanish colonial capital of Guatemala, was founded. The long-winded title attests to the founders' reverence for Saint James, to whom their early military victories were attributed.

Antigua was once the epicenter of power throughout Central America, and during the 17th and 18th centuries little expense was spared on the city's architecture, despite the regular ominous rumbles from the ground below. Indigenous labor was marshaled to erect schools, hospitals, churches and monasteries, their grandeur only rivaled by the houses of the upper clergy and the politically connected.

At its peak Antigua had no fewer than 38 churches, as well as a university, printing presses, a newspaper and a lively cultural and political scene. Those rumblings never stopped, though, and for a year the city was shaken by earthquakes and tremors until the devastating earthquake of July 29, 1773. A year later, the capital was transferred again, this time to Guatemala City. Antigua was evacuated and plundered for building materials but, despite official mandates that its inhabitants relocate and that the city be systematically dismantled, it was never completely abandoned. Fueled by a coffee boom early in the next century, the town, by then known as La Antigua Guatemala (Old Guatemala), began to grow again. Ongoing renovation of battered buildings helped maintain the city's colonial character despite an official lack of interest. During the 20th century, modernization dealt further blows but lobbying by Antigua's citizens led to President Ubico's declaration of the city as a national monument, and restoration ensued in earnest. But just as serious efforts were being made to return the city to its former splendor, disaster struck again with another major quake in February 1976,

leaving thousands dead and undoing much of the restoration work.

Unesco's designation of Antigua as a World Heritage Site in 1979 added new impetus to the restoration campaign. Within this new climate, Spanish-language schools began popping up, pulling in droves of foreign students and leading to a genuine cultural renaissance.

ORIENTATION

Antigua's focal point is the broad Parque Central; few places in town are more than 15 minutes' walk from here. Compass points are added to the numbered Calles and Aves, indicating whether an address is *Norte* (north), *Sur* (south), *Poniente* (west) or *Oriente* (east) of the Parque Central, though signage is frustratingly sparse.

Three volcanoes provide easy reference points: Volcán Agua is south of the city and visible from most points within it; Volcán Fuego and Volcán Acatenango rise to the southwest (Acatenango is the more northerly of the two).

Another useful Antigua landmark is the Arco de Santa Catalina, an arch spanning 5a Av Norte, 2½ blocks north of the Parque Central, on the way to La Merced church.

Buses arrive at and depart from the streets around the large open-air market, about 400m west of the Parque Central.

INFORMATION

Bookstores

Dyslexia Books (1a Av Sur 11) Mostly used books, mainly in English.

El Cofre (6a Calle Poniente 26) Used books, including some regional travel guides.

Hamlin y White (☎ 7832-7075; 4a Calle Oriente 12A) English and Spanish titles, with several shelves of Lonely Planet guides.

Librería La Casa del Conde (Portal del Comercio 4) Excellent selection of Central American history and politics and nature guides in English, literature in Spanish, and Lonely Planet guides.

Rainbow Reading Room (7a Av Sur 8) Thousands of used books in English and Spanish for sale, rent or trade. Also one of the best notice boards in town.

Emergency

Asistir (☎ 5978-3586; asisturantiguaguatemala@gmail.com; 6a Calle Poniente Final; ☎ 24hr). The helpful tourism assistance agency has its headquarters on the west side of town, three blocks south of the market. If you're the victim of a crime, they'll accompany you to the national police and