

Where Faith Meets Fantasy: Easter Week in Guatemala

Rejoice

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Guatemalans love to celebrate. Religious holidays. National holidays. Birthdays. And Easter Week, or *Semana Santa* in Antigua, is indeed a gathering time and place for celebration. For anyone fascinated by religious, ethnic or cultural observances, it is *the* place to commemorate the passion, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

Cucuruchos and cotton candy

The annual rite begins on Palm Sunday, with the first of Antigua's daily processions. As colorful and dramatic as Antigua's storied past, each successive procession increases in pomp and pageantry. On this Spy Wednesday, the day that

Judas turned betrayer, the children's procession is emerging from the elaborately decorated baroque style La Merced church. Dozens of boys in purple robes carry a platform bearing the revered icon of Christ. They hunch under the weight of the several ton encumbrance. The colors, music and religious piety all combine to create a singular energy that suffuses the town. The boys are followed by scores of girls in white lace chapel veils, carrying an equally immense platform with the icon of Mary on their shoulders, as copal incense wafts the spiritual message up to the beloved gods. *Gods in this monotheistic society?* Yes, gods. Perhaps a bit of background is in order to better appreciate the confluence of Mayan and Christian rites that lend a unique quality to the Easter Week festivities.

Colonized by the Spaniards, Antigua became religiously and politically subordinate in 1523. Well, sort of. The official religion is Roman Catholic, and the tradition of the processions was brought to America by Spanish missionaries in the 16th century. Originally the devout participated solely as a form of penance. Today, participation carries some degree of status, but the main motivation is still a show of devotion. Although the procession is a Christian practice, the Mayan civilization left behind a deep spiritual imprint that endures to this day. Mayan beliefs, rites and traditions have been inextricably woven into the religious ceremonies, and remain sacrosanct.

Roman chariot



The processions are superimposed upon Antigua's cobblestone streets, brightly colored facades, and architectural jewels that evoke the splendor of Spanish colonial times. All harmoniously integrate into this UNESCO Heritage of Humanity site. Situated amid glowering volcanoes, Antigua was at one time the capital of the Guatemalan Kingdom and later of the colonies. But a series of devastating earthquakes in 1773 laid bare, literally and figuratively, the bones of the colony, and left the city mostly abandoned. Behind and beneath the processions lie ruins of churches, convents and monasteries. Dominating whole corners and sometimes blocks, they remain today much as when they fell in 1773.

As I watch the procession, seven year old Guillermo regales me with the name and biblical story of each icon. He attends the processions every year, but this year is special. He is finally tall enough to participate as a *cucurucho* (carrier). He beams with pride as he tells me where I should watch for him along the processional route later in the day. Guillermo's six year old brother Sebastián is not so lucky. Even on tip toes he measures just under the height requirement. He'll have to wait until next year. He is momentarily disappointed, but the letdown is short-lived, as he scurries off in pursuit of the sweets vendor. Nothing that cotton candy won't cure.

The icons that Guillermo described are two of Guatemala's many sacred images. Each varies in form, gesture and style, but all carry the same underlying connotation. They link the faithful to



Guillermo



Procession

something greater than themselves. Something immortal. The wooden icons are not conceived as works of art. Their creation is an act of piety rather than self expression, yet many of them possess great beauty. Perhaps the carvers find their fullest expression through devotion to the creation of a sacred image. This is the veneration of the Guatemalan people. They can take a rigid, inert, wooden mass, carve it, and give it a soul.

I look at the revered icons, then at the solemn faces of the children as they labor under the weight of thousands of pounds. And I think, not about the true meaning of Easter, which is beyond my grasp as a member of the Jewish faith, but about the importance of tradition: understanding it, living it, teaching it to the next generation.

Far from the madding crowds

Holy Thursday is associated with the Last Supper. One can, of course, adhere strictly to the well-worn processional route of Antigua, but the true soul of the people is best discovered by straying off the beaten path. Far from the madding crowds and heavily trafficked processions of Antigua, humble villagers of Santiago Zamora, clad in purple penitential robes, proudly carry their hallowed



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Carmen watches procession

icons through the village. A stream of people carries candles. Some kneel as they murmur their invocations. Many close their eyes. This scene could have been painted hundreds of years ago.

The exquisite woven and embroidered *huipiles* (blouses) of the women give them an air of nobility, and seeing them is worth the trip alone. According to Mayan mythology, spinning and weaving are closely associated with the symbolism of childbirth. As such, they are essential to the reproduction of their mythical universe. A weaver acts as a subordinate deity and a weaving is a cosmography of the mystical world. The composition of a *huipil* can be read like a text,



Revered icon

which varies in form and content according to ethnic group, community and lineage. The colors are full of symbolism. Black represents war, yellow is for corn, red is for blood, blue is for sacrifice, and green is inspired by the royal *quetzal* bird. Infinite combinations of floral, animal and geometric patterns pervade the designs, each one a compelling exponent of Guatemalan artistry.

I smile at a familiar face in the crowd. She tentatively smiles back. A few seconds pass before she recognizes me and grins broadly. Her name is Doña Catarina and we have met here in previous years. She is amazed and delighted that I have made the long journey once again, as tourists never visit Santiago Zamora. We discuss a few details of my trip before she concludes, "It's good to travel while you're still alive, because it's much more difficult after you die." No arguing with that logic. Shortly we are joined by her husband Don Isidro, who comes to greet and welcome me. He explains the importance of perpetuating this ceremony, which has taken place for centuries. "Respect for the past is essential," he says. "In the olden days we could not go to Antigua for the processions because it was too far. Now we have roads and transportation, but we prefer to stay here. This procession in our village is part of our heritage, part of our community's tapestry. You have been here many times. Now you are also part of our tapestry." I am humbled and moved by this gesture of inclusion, and reassured that my presence in this intimate community ritual is not considered an intrusion.



Ruins of La Recoleta

Do my eyes deceive me?

It is barely 5:00 a.m. on Good Friday, the day on which Jesus was crucified. Do my eyes deceive me? The processional routes are blanketed in elaborate, brilliantly colored sawdust carpets that have been meticulously crafted throughout the night. No one in Antigua slept last night, except me. Making sawdust carpets is considered sacrificial because of the painstaking effort and time dedicated to their creation, only to have them destroyed by the passing processions. The carpets' ephemeral presence serves as a gesture of worship to the passing icons.

The vibrant carpets are a striking counterpoint to the otherwise austere atmosphere. The town is draped in black crepe paper. A haunting, ghostlike death march is led by a man bearing the crucifix. Mourners carry black banners and standards engraved with the final words of Christ and the pronouncements of God. Hundreds of chanting *cucuruchos* in black vestments and hoods stoop under the weight of Christ's tomb. Life-like images represent the archangels, the Stations of the Cross, the cavalry and the apostles. Throngs of penitents make their ominous lumber through town, trampling the intricate sawdust carpets, to somber strains of a funeral dirge. The smoke from burning copal incense is stifling, but no one seems to notice. The air carries the heaviness of sorrow. Christ's image is laid to rest at 11:00 P.M.

Something to celebrate

How different it is this Easter morning! It is a time for rejoicing. The somber atmosphere of Good



Procession 3



Mayan textiles

Friday is transformed into joyous celebration. The processions retrace their well-worn routes, in step with the devout multitudes. The treasured icons are returned to the churches to be safeguarded until next year, and the last worshippers depart, marking the end of Easter.

On my regular Easter Week pilgrimages to Guatemala, the best part isn't the pageantry—although it is spectacular—but meeting worshippers of all walks of life who come to witness and participate in the hallowed event. Each of them emphasizes that it is not just about colorful processions. It is about how a culture survives and thrives when its celebrations are passed down from older generations to younger ones eager to embrace them. And one need not be Christian to appreciate this religious observance. It is indisputably a forum of faith that exposes people of all belief systems to the poignancy of maintaining customs that have spanned the centuries. They give the culture its heart and empower its embrace of the history—and *that's* something to celebrate! ■

Photography Tips

- Easter Week is one of the few times that Mayan women don't mind being photographed. Make the most of it.
- Arrive early to stake out the best viewing position as the procession leaves the church. It's well worth the wait!
- It's a challenge to find a location where the sun is to your side or your back. Don't get frustrated. The processions are l-o-n-g, so you have plenty of opportunity.
- Use incense smoke to your advantage. It reflects light and helps to define the shot.
- For the nighttime processions, splurge on a good external flash. If your camera has a noise reduction mode, use it with a higher ISO setting, to eliminate a post-processing step.
- Get up and out by 5:00 a.m. on Good Friday to photograph the sawdust carpet makers adding the finishing touches. It's worth the effort!
- Avoid crowds by venturing off the beaten path to the villages surrounding Antigua.
- For maximum mobility, leave your camera bag behind and work with just one lens and a flash.