

SAVED BY AN EARTHQUAKE

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It was New Year's Night, and we had strolled down to the central square and without warning found ourselves in the midst of an event of epic proportions – at least for the miniature city of Antigua. Preceded by banners and a tinkling bell, and with an honor guard of acolytes swinging incense and supporting a canopy, a priest was holding high a great monstrance with its rays of gold radiating from the central glass containing the Sacrament. Accompanied by a jostling throng carrying candles, the canopy bobbed and weaved its way around the plaza amid a cacophony of sounds – cheers of the crowd, the staccato crackling of fireworks, the tinkling bell, and the insistent car alarms set off by the booming of the heavier varieties of fireworks. Cutting across the square, we found seats in the Cathedral and waited for the procession to ascend the steps and the crowd to enter the rapidly filling Church. The Cathedral itself was ablaze with candles, and each of the side altars was flanked by a brace of Christmas trees trimmed with tiny lights. We soon found ourselves in a packed Church.

That was a typical experience in what is for me the most romantic city in the Western Hemisphere. I fell in love with Antigua, Guatemala, the first time I saw it some twenty years ago. Of course it is by no means as glamorous as Paris or Rome, and I am sure I would not want to live there on a permanent basis, and yet, arriving there a few weeks ago I felt myself falling under its magic spell yet again. Just walking into the old colonial hotel so typical of the city gave me the same feeling of entering an enchanted world as it had on my first trip. Built by one of the early governors of Guatemala, which at that time stretched from southern Mexico to what is now South America, the building was originally called *La Casa de los Leones* because of the two whimsical dancing lions flanking the massive stone arch leading into the central courtyard. In its heyday visiting dignitaries rode their horses through that great entrance and yielded their steeds to waiting retainers. Now called the Hotel Posada de Don Rodrigo in honor of the original owner, our welcome was almost as effusive as the one received by those visitors of a bygone century. We stepped out of our taxi and gave our luggage into the hands of a waiting porter in a native costume very similar to the ones of those original retainers of Don Rodrigo.

Sitting on the wide verandah surrounding the gracious courtyard and sipping a margarita, I let my surroundings soak into me. Like magic the incessant chattering in my skull - like a volley of rubber bullets in a concrete bunker – had at least slowed, if not stopped completely, and the restless spirit driving me to be doing something was stilled. I luxuriated in the manana spirit that allowed me simply to be, to savor, to enjoy, to be aware of being alive and surrounded by a beauty which had acquired the patina of centuries of graceful living.

That unknown architect of the eighteenth century had created a symphony of texture, color and space - gleaming smooth stucco, rough gray stone and immense mahogany beams. The wide portico framed a gracious courtyard paved with rough cobblestones. Since it was the Christmas season, a panoramic nativity scene, protected by a circular thatched roof sporting two cardboard reindeer outlined with twinkling colored lights surrounded the great central tree shading the courtyard with lacy foliage. The scene was complete with a papier-mâché volcano with a glowing red top, lakes, roads and Mayan villages, animals and shepherds in abundance, wise men and the holy family. A marimba band, accompanied by base viol and percussion were

holding forth in one quadrant. In the opposite corner a village woman in a gorgeous native costume had spread a rainbow display of the products of Mayan women who had woven their vivid textiles for centuries, each village with its own distinctive palette and pattern. Meanwhile guests and tourists wandered around or sat on the verandah drinking and chatting. I detected a polyglot of languages – French, German, Japanese and the ubiquitous English and Spanish. It struck me as strange that I was feeling so peaceful in the midst of such activity. I could have been Don Rodrigo, himself, admiring my creation, while being surrounded by guests and served by faithful retainers in their colorful Mayan costumes.

After this pleasant exercise in shucking off the twentieth century, we made our way to the dining terrace overlooking a lush garden ablaze with all the colors of the rainbow – brilliant magenta bougainvillea, blue plumbago and orange trumpet vines covering the walls, towering, blood red poinsettias, exotic gold and blue birds of paradise, bright yellow shrimp plants so named because of their uncanny resemblance to the sea creatures, and roses of every hue. We were flattered that, Ciriaco, the handsome and apparently ageless Mayan Maitre d', remembered us and embraced us as if we were long lost relatives. I cannot imagine the Posada without Ciriaco, who has been radiating charm to the hotel guests for three decades. We later discovered that the beautiful young woman gracing the front desk is his daughter.

The city itself was a macrocosm of the microcosm of the Posada. Established as the capitol in 1541 after the first capitol was destroyed when the crater of the volcano looming over the valley broke, sending a devastating flood racing through the settlement. The new capitol was given the grandiloquent title of *Santiago de los Caballeros de Guatemala*, a name reflecting the holiest event in the history of Spain, the discovery in the tenth century of the bones of St. James by an illiterate hermit in the wilds of Galicia. That most unlikely and unbelievable happening changed the history of Europe, but, as you may remember, that is another story.

In 1773 a series of earthquakes so cataclysmic that people fled their houses in terror and lived in the open, caused the capital to be moved yet again, this time to the site of what is now Guatemala City. It was named *La Nueva Guatemala de la Asuncion*. The first capital is now called Ciudad Vieja, and Santiago became Antigua. So we have "Old City" and "Antique Guatemala" as reminders that Mother Nature is, indeed, not to be trifled with.

Slowly deteriorating for the past two centuries, in its heyday Antigua boasted the third largest population in the Western Hemisphere after Mexico City and Lima, and the architecture still reflects the pride of those early Spanish colonists. Now the same size as it was in its glory days, the city is about ten blocks in each direction, small enough to walk through from one end to the other in a matter of minutes. Nevertheless, the crumbling stones of the old capital still reveal something that has been extinguished neither by the destructive might of an indifferent nature nor the malice of humankind. A block from the Posada de Don Rodrigo is the main plaza flanked on the East by the cathedral. Once a magnificent structure covering a square block, two thirds are now ruins, carefully preserved with blocks of masonry weighing thousands of pounds decorating the floor of what was the nave. At the other end of the main street from the plaza is the largest standing church building, La Merced, proudly repainted yellow and richly embroidered with white stucco floral patterns. Reputedly, it was repainted with funds donated by a wealthy family who abhorred the first restoration because it was painted Mexican yellow rather than Guatemalan yellow. Between those two imposing churches is a great arch over the street sporting a clock eternally showing half past six. I learned it was a passageway for the nuns pass from convent to

classroom without being exposed to view. Their rules specified that they were allowed to leave their cloistered world only on the occasion of an earthquake.

Next to the government building on the square is perhaps the finest architectural expression in the city - now a colonial museum. With an arrogance that could only be Spanish, the facade boasts a bronze plaque, proudly proclaiming itself to be "The University of San Carlos, founded in 1675, from which radiates culture throughout all of Guatemala." Spared by the earthquake, it is a lovely example of Spanish colonial architecture, with a most inviting courtyard surrounded by an appealing colonnade of great square columns and graceful Moorish arches. And of course there is our favorite church, San Francisco, inside of which there is a beautiful life-size black crucifix made of cornhusks. The natives of the Mayan village of Esquipulas made it for the Franciscans, and legend has it that the creators secreted one of the old Mayan gods inside the figure of Christ. The last time I was in Antigua for the Christmas season, the Church of San Francisco was aglow with a myriad twinkling lights accompanied by a sound track of twittering birds. This year the entire area behind the altar had been turned into a walk-through nativity scene with life-size figures of all the characters in that drama. An unending stream of worshippers waited their turn to pay their homage to the Baby Jesus and his mother.

As someone said, "Magic realism is always threatening to erupt from the cobblestone streets of Antigua, and there is no way to capture the essence of the place without describing the religious processions of Holy Week. Some years ago we were in Antigua for *Semana Santa*, and that city famous for its celebration of the passion of Christ, was in the throes of preparing for the annual event that was both a high festival and a solemn religious observance. Beginning with Palm Sunday every churchyard had been turned into a fairground. Throngs of people milled about, and there were booths selling everything imaginable, food and beverages, clothing and household goods, folk craft and, of course, religious artifacts of straw and ceramics and wood and silver - every material available to the artisans of the surrounding Indian villages.

Inside, the churches were alive with activity - people sprucing up the floats of religious figures from the past year - cleaning, repainting, and adorning the figures with new clothing. There are floats for all the characters in the Passion Week drama - the Holy Family, angels, Mary Magdalene, and of course, Jesus and Mary. All during the week leading up to Good Friday they are paraded around the city, and the populace is swollen by visitors from all over Guatemala and the world.

The Holy Week celebrations in Antigua are second only to those in Seville, and the following year after our experience in Antigua, we went to Spain to witness the forerunner and inspiration for the New World celebrations. The custom dates back to the 16th century, and consists of incredibly ornate floats with the same cast of characters carried through the city on the shoulders of the citizenry. Although the processions in the two cities are similar, we found the difference between the two to be profound. In Seville the plaza facing the marvelous Giralda Cathedral, built after the reconquest on the foundations of a great mosque, was filled on Good Friday with well dressed men and chic young women in short black dresses and long mantillas standing in groups, smoking furiously and chattering away. The Sevillanos must be the most inveterate talkers and dedicated smokers in the world. When a float emerged from the Cathedral, they would stop talking long enough to look, and even applaud, if the float was a particularly spectacular one. Penelope Casas in her excellent book, Discovering Spain, captured the spirit of what we were witnessing, "Sevillanos combine devoutness with irreverence and somehow capture

the best of both.”

In Seville there was no doubt that the Queen of Heaven with her golden tiara, regal in her velvet-canopied float of gold and silver, embellished with rank after rank of blazing candles, held center stage. She was escorted by a seemingly endless procession of *penitentes* in their costumes reminiscent, except for the color, of the hooded klansmen of the American South. A 24 piece marching band playing a lively march followed in her train. Her son, on the other hand, was carried on a simple float with none of the pomp and circumstance accorded his royal mother.

In Antigua the contrast is marked. The principal float was unmistakably that of Jesus, clad in scarlet robes, bowed by the weight of a massive wooden cross. A long double rank of purple clad male acolytes swinging incense cans creating clouds of sweet smelling smoke of copal wood led the parade. There was even one darling little boy in the purple robes and white headgear of his elders. Then came the Archbishop of Guatemala, escorting the float of Jesus, carried on the shoulders of eighty men. Instead of being spectators, as in Seville, the crowd, as silent as if they were at a wake, which of course they were, was made up of pilgrims, many of them in colorful native costumes. The 8000-pound float, so heavy that the bearers were changed every block, made its way about the city from dawn to dusk. Mary's float followed meekly behind, carried by the women of the city, with none of the pomp accorded that of Jesus.

The preparations for Good Friday in Antigua are unique and extensive. All day on Thursday and throughout the night the streets are transformed into sacred spaces with flowers and pine needles arranged in creative patterns. The principal street from the plaza to La Merced became a spectacular sight. Wooden curbs were erected to contain a thick layer of sand covering the cobblestones. Then templates with elaborate designs were laid across the smooth base and sawdust in vivid colors of red and yellow and purple and blue, colors that in any other circumstance would be garish, were sifted through the templates to create a brilliant carpet of sacred design. The great Jesus float, having emerged at dawn from the baroque facade of the Church of La Merced, was paraded all about the city, followed by silent crowds, until late afternoon. The climax of the procession was the journey from the central plaza back to its home in La Merced traversing the sacred space of the elaborate sawdust carpet so painstakingly created the night before, leaving in its wake a ruined jumble of pastel smudges.

After dark a meeting of the centuries occurred, as a float topped with a glass coffin containing the figure of Christ and outlined by tiny white electric lights, proceeded along the same route, followed by a sputtering portable generator propelled by two men in ordinary clothes, as opposed to the purple robes of the bearers of the float. My guess is that they were as invisible to the worshipers lining both sides of the street as the prop corps in a modern play.

We were astonished to discover that Good Friday was the climax of the Holy Week celebrations. On Saturday the crowds that had all week filled the church grounds with a festival spirit had disappeared, and the only activity was the dismantling of the booths. Easter found the city to be deserted, and there was only sparse attendance at any of the churches. Perhaps the Mayan Indians could easily identify with the suffering man on the cross, who so accurately reflected the unremitting tragedy of their own lives. There is a dark side to Guatemala. It is a land of ineffable beauty and of hideous violence.

Spanish Guatemala began when a force of Conquistadors under the command of the vicious Pedro de Alvarado conquered the area. Despite Cortez' directive to "endeavor with the greatest care to bring the people to peace without war and to preach matters concerning our holy

faith”, for three years there ensued a series of massacres without parallel in Latin American history. The exploitation of the indigenous peoples continued throughout Guatemala’s bloody history, and indeed, intensified when the North American taste for coffee made it a lucrative crop for the Mayan highlands. Victor Perera, a distinguished historian and a Guatemalan native, wrote in 1993, “The founding of Antigua in 1541 inaugurated the three hundred-year colonial era, whose rigid hierarchical structures, feudal patterns of land ownership, and ruthless exploitation of Mayan communities persist, in modified form, until the present day.”

At present the decades old civil war in Guatemala, during which tens of thousands of Mayan Indians were killed by both government and rebel forces is officially over. A million internal refugees have been forced to leave their villages and another half million have fled into Mexico. I asked the people I met in Antigua if there now was peace. The answer was invariably, “There is peace, but there is no security.” The end of the conflict only resulted in thousands of soldiers and guerrillas being turned out on the countryside, as bandits instead of combatants, to continue their rapine, as recent newspaper accounts have dramatically demonstrated.

Our experience of the violence of the beautiful country we love so dearly occurred when we drove from Antigua to nearby Lake Atitlan, not realizing that at that time gasoline was not sold on the weekends – a matter of conservation during the petroleum shortage of the early 1980’s. We were desperately afraid we would run out of fuel and be stranded on the highway on our return, and as if that were not enough we were stopped by a group of twenty or thirty heavily armed men in fatigue uniforms. I was so nervously intent on showing our papers to a man who seemed to be in charge that I noticed nothing else. When we resumed our journey I noticed that my wife seemed to be particularly white-knuckled. She asked if I had seen the man with a black hood over his head with slits at eye level pointing an automatic rifle at us.

Minutes later a Guatemalan family in their car saw two foreigners in obvious distress and stopped to ask if they could help. These kind people actually siphoned gas from their car and followed us all the way to our hotel in Antigua. I asked the driver about the menacing figure in the black hood, and he replied, “Oh, its probably just someone who likes to scare people.” Well, it certainly worked! Guatemala is a land of vivid contrasts, and the friendly family who befriended us stood in stark contrast to the sullen teenage soldiers with their deadly weapons and menacing stares. As Perera noted in his book, Unfinished Conquest, the trick of at least some Guatemalenos is to “birth a private universe of manicheistic simplicity in which the horrors and the beauty of Guatemala cohabit naturally, without the least sense of contradiction.”

Antigua was born of violence in 1541 when the crater of the volcano, Agua, gave way and buried the first capitol under a torrent of mud and water. It officially died in another act of violence in the great earthquake of 1773. When much of the populace refused to move to the new capitol, the governor threatened to force their relocation by razing the city. For whatever reason, the city was spared, and his threats were ignored. Paradoxically, the disastrous earthquake that destroyed forty percent of the city was its salvation. The very disaster that caused the people to flee the city in terror has preserved the gemlike quality of Antigua, allowing it to escape the modern accretions that have covered over with glass and steel most of the ancient capitals of Latin America. A creation of the mighty Spanish Empire, Antigua Guatemala remains a tribute to beauty as well as to vainglory, and it remains the crown jewel of Guatemala’s patrimony. A stay in Antigua is a fascinating experience in time travelling, and I recommend it to anyone who has an ounce of romance in his soul.