

# Los Angeles Times

Sunday, May 20, 2001

## Old World Class in Colonial Antigua: Learning Spanish in a historical setting where "immersion" isn't just in language.

By ROBERT A. DUNTON

ANTIGUA, GUATEMALA—Over dinner one night, a trusted globe-trotting friend dropped the name "Antigua." Visions of coconut-laden palm trees and lapping turquoise waters immediately flashed through my head.

"The Caribbean island, right?" I blurted.

"No," Joe replied.

"Guatemalan Antigua. It has the most amazing colonial architecture and great language schools—inexpensive too. You, *mi amigo*, have got to go."

Though the architectural aspect interested me, the prospect of studying Spanish in such a setting was the clincher. I had, as Joe knew, been planning to dive into the language because of my increasing travel to Latin America and the bilingual nature of San Diego, where I live.

I began researching language schools in guidebooks and on the Internet and chose Centro Lingüístico Maya in Antigua, which puts students up in local homes at reasonable prices.

Eight weeks later, in March, I landed in Guatemala City, in the southern part of the country. The lackluster capital city is the antithesis of colonial charm, but Joe had assured me the jarring welcome would soon be forgotten on the 40-mile bus ride to Antigua. As it turned out, the one-hour trip offered nearly as much authentic flavor as its destination.

When I hopped into a cab and asked to be taken to the buses to Antigua, the cabbie gave a whimsical smirk. "Ah, you take chicken bus."

"No," I countered, "just a regular public bus will do fine."

I had decided to travel like a local to start my immersion in Spanish. I knew an hour in a public bus would kick my learning curve into high gear or magnify my ineptitude to such a level as to crush my will completely.

The \$3 cab ride through the city's diesel-choked haze dropped me at a collection of vehicles that triggered flashbacks. Before me was a row of boxy vintage Blue Bird buses much like the ones I had ridden to school for years. But instead of standard-issue yellow, they had been dipped into a Technicolor bath of streaming red, green, blue and orange that would make Peter Max delirious. Add adornments of chrome, hand-painted lettering, frilly window dressings and a small dashboard shrine, and you had yourself one funky vehicle.



© Robert A. Dunton

My bag was plucked from my hands and tossed to a sturdy-looking man standing on the roof of the bus, where he gingerly placed it among baskets, furniture and, yes, chickens.

I wasn't quite ready to have all my worldly possessions out of sight and reach, but I paid my 4



© Robert A. Dunton

quetzals (about 60 cents) and climbed on. I headed toward the back of the bus, where I could keep a watchful eye on the continued loading and, more important, unloading of items on the roof. Seated around me was an array of citizens—office clerks and farmers, students and businessmen. The racial diversity in this country was immediately apparent, as was the multilingual heritage. Besides Spanish, more than 22 Mayan dialects are spoken in Guatemala.

I broke out my pocket Spanish translator and calculator to begin my self-tutoring. I

might as well have pulled out a 3-D hologram of Michael Jackson. A chorus of oohs and ahhs ensued immediately.

"¿Qué es eso?" (What is that?) the younger passengers asked.

"¿Cuánto cuesta?" (How much?)—fundamental questions I understood with my elementary school Spanish. The learning had begun.

As we climbed out of the capital, the concrete jungle gave way to verdant country and forest, and the bus I thought at capacity continued to take on passengers. Women with enormous sacks of vegetables balanced on their heads ran down from invisible trails in the hillsides and handed their goods to the Roof Man. Others brought squawking chickens with their legs tied together, slabs of raw meat or woven baskets full of grain. The bus became a miniature cosmos of Central America: urbanites, suburbanites, farmers and me, *Señor Turista*.

Pulling off the tree-lined winding highway, we turned onto the narrow, curving streets of Antigua. The air was cleaner and crisper here at 5,000 feet. The sound of the tires went from an asphalt whir to a cobblestone chatter.

I could see elegant architecture painted in vibrant colors, with worn, pitted roof tiles and handcrafted doors. Collapsed Baroque churches were monuments to earthquakes a hundred years past. Graceful arches and clock towers stretched skyward. Street hawkers sold handcrafts I actually wanted to buy.

The stunning Cathedral of Santiago graced the central plaza with its elegant curves and classical symmetry. Sun baked men meandered on horseback. Sedate donkeys pulled carts. Women strolled in brilliant local dress wearing handmade *huipiles*, blouses woven with an overflowing array of bright colors.

Fountains, restaurants, shops, art galleries, hotels of impeccable taste were all tucked into this immaculate, nine-square-mile municipality of more than 40,000 residents.

Most of the Antigua rolling past me was built between the mid-1500s and the late 1700s. Set in a country often called the Land of Eternal Spring, the city so won the hearts of Spanish settlers in the early 16th century that for 200 years Spain based the headquarters of its New World colonies here. The wealth, culture and elegance of that era have left their marks. After the Santa Marta earthquake of 1773 razed the city, Spain moved the capital to the comparatively stable ground of present-day Guatemala City.

Considered by many architecture buffs to be the finest, most intact Spanish colonial city in the Americas and possibly the first planned city in the world, Antigua has quaint blocks

designed at the pinnacle of Spain's colonial period, 1570 to 1770. Residents have painstakingly maintained the ambience of the town. Named a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1979, the city has architectural and height restrictions that are strictly enforced. I saw no buildings taller than two stories except churches and towers. New construction is designed to blend seamlessly with existing structures. Every cobblestone that is removed for a street repair is replaced.

City planners and residents have kept much of the character the winds of time have provided. Collapsed buildings are converted into open-air, avant-garde discotheques. Convents with sprawling interior gardens are restored into five-star hotels. At night, imaginative lighting sets off every arch and column.

Art pervades this place, from the man who turns chicken buses into funky works of art to the impoverished Mayan woman who weaves 132 colors into her skirt. The fact that, in this thriving colony of creativity, 30 hours of private tutoring, room and board cost me less than \$200 a week made my stay in Antigua even more delectable.

It was now time to see whether Antigua's reputation for superlative language schools would wow me as the city had. The first person I asked at the bus depot knew of *Centro Lingüístico Maya* and walked me to the school's front door. I was greeted by director Arturo Miranda, with whom I had corresponded and made my reservation.

I had asked to be placed in a nice colonial home if possible. Arturo drove me out to the periphery of the historical city center—a bit too far, I was thinking, as we turned down one street after another, until he pulled up in front of a handsome two-story mini-mansion. One of the family's children escorted me through the sizable five-bedroom home with an interior fountain, a lush garden and a full-time maid and cook.

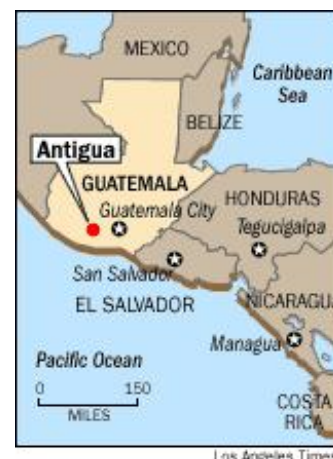
I was shown my private room on the second floor, decorated in period furniture and overlooking a walled garden encased in blooming bougainvillea.

The walk to school turned out to be only 10 or 15 minutes. The school functioned in two old buildings with pleasant gardens and courtyards. The several dozen students met one-on-one with tutors around the grounds or in the corridors.



After initially placing me with an instructor whose by-the-book teaching methods did not work for me, Arturo switched me to Edna Cuyun. It was a linguistic match made in heaven. When it was time to learn the names of foods and products, Edna took me into town to shop. When learning to order food and drink, we went for lunch. She'd have me ask for directions to places as she tutored me around town and then back to the classroom for more verbs, tenses and fundamentals, with jokes sprinkled in.

Between classes and on weekends, I spent hours blissfully wandering back streets, discovering enchanting shops and cafes and dining on delicious Italian, Thai, Mexican and local cuisine. Otherwise, three meals a day were prepared for me at my home stay, each dish made from scratch. Among the standouts: chicken and mint soup, tortas



(sandwiches), lemon cheesecake. After listening to fellow students, I knew I was eating better than most, but everyone I met was thrilled with their accommodations. I dined with the family for breakfast and dinner, prime opportunities to practice my Spanish—and to quickly realize how little I knew.

My course mates came from all over the world and ran the gamut from high school student to retiree. English was the fallback language for everyone. We met and mingled before and after class, which made it easy to socialize and to find the in spots to dine, catch a video, dance or chat the night away. I had found the ultimate immersion classroom.

Guatemala hasn't marketed itself as an eco-adventure destination as Costa Rica and Chile have. But with coasts on the Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Sea, five mountain ranges and 33 volcanoes packed into a 42,042-square-mile country, it should. Trip vendors offered daily exploits of every kind: Climb erupting Volcán Pacaya. Windsurf Lake Atitlán. Take a short flight to the Mayan ruins of Tikal. Spelunk underground rivers.



© Robert A. Dunton

I chose the cheapest and shortest adventure first: six hours of a guided trek for about \$10 to see Pacaya. After a one-hour bus ride northwest of the city, a guide and an armed guard led us up a dirt trail. (I had heard rumors that solo travelers had been attacked here, so I was happy for the protection.) The trek was mild enough for the first mile or so until the smoldering volcano came into view; then the dirt path turned into granulated volcanic rubble.

Sulfurous gases percolated from the earth, making the trail hot and steamy.

The moment the sun vanished, the wind whipped up and the temperature dove. What followed was nature's own laser light show. We huddled behind the windbreak of a small retaining wall and watched as Pacaya tossed lava into the air. We could feel the ground rumble and shimmy beneath us. Subwoofer-worthy booms filled the air as giant burps of lava blew. The land was alive and moving.

### **GUIDEBOOK: Studying Antigua**

**Getting there:** Nonstop flights from LAX to Guatemala City are available on United and LACSA; Mexicana, Continental, American, Delta, TACA and COPA have connecting flights. Restricted round-trip fares begin at \$465. Shuttles from the airport to hotels in Antigua cost \$25 and take about 45 minutes. Or you can ride a "chicken bus" for 60 cents.

**Where to stay:** There are hundreds of funky, chic mini-hotels (20 rooms or less) and B&Bs all over town. Home stays are usually arranged through the language schools. A 20% tourist tax and a 10% service charge at some hotels are added to quoted prices. Many of the low and mid-range budget lodgings do not collect these, and they accept only cash. I found the \$40-a-night range to be as good as most \$125 B&Bs I've seen in the States.

I had just had a lifetime experience for the cost of a movie and a bucket of popcorn. When I got home, Joe asked, "What do you think about Antigua now?" Images of colonial architecture, astonishing adventures, mouthwatering food and the warm, colorful people flooded my mind—with not a palm tree in sight.

### **GUIDEBOOK: Studying Antigua (continued...)**

For the grandest, stay at the Hotel Casa Santo Domingo, a converted convent that takes up a few city blocks and captures the style and feel of Antigua's history and architecture—broken and intact. 3a Calle Oriente No. 28; telephone 011-502-832-0140, fax 011-502-832-0102, Internet <http://www.casasantodomingo.com.gt>. Doubles \$110.

Another good option: Hotel Antigua, 8a Calle Poniente No. 1; tel. 011-502-832-2801, fax 011-502-832-0807, <http://www.hotelantigua.com.gt>. Doubles \$105.

**Where to eat:** This is best discovered by wandering Antigua's streets and by word of mouth. I never had a bad meal, and the crowded places tend to be that way for a reason. My favorite is right on the Parque Central: Café Condesa, 5 Ave. Norte No. 4, Parque Central; local tel. 832-0170, <http://cafecondesa.centroamerica.com>.

The Rainbow Reading Room and Café (7a Avenida Sur), tel. 832-4205, is a good place to meet fellow travelers, catch up on your journal and enjoy delicious vegetarian food.

**Language schools:** They are numerous, and many offer college credit. My Centro Lingüístico Maya experience was terrific. I never heard a negative word from others about their schools. Range of fees: \$100 to \$160 a week for private tutoring, based on four to seven hours per day on weekdays. Optional room and board averages \$60 a week; no meals are provided on weekends. A few of the more established schools include:

Centro Lingüístico Maya, 5a Calle Poniente No. 20; tel. 011-502-832-1342, fax 011-502-832-0656, <http://www.clmmaya.com>.

Academia de Español Guatemala, 7a Calle Oriente No. 15; tel. 011-502-832-5057, fax 011-502-832-5058, <http://www.travellog.com/guatemala/antigua/acadespanol/school.html>.

Christian Spanish Academy, A0047, P.O. Box 669004, Miami Springs, FL 33266; tel. 011-502-832-3922, fax 011-502-832-3760, <http://www.learnrsa.com>.

For more information: Consulate General of Guatemala, 1605 W. Olympic Blvd., Suite 422, Los Angeles, CA 90015; tel.(213) 365-9251, fax (213) 365-9245.

A good site for general information is <http://www.larutamayaonline.com>.

-- R.A.D.

*Rob Dunton is a freelance writer who resides in San Diego.*

*Copyright © 2001 Los Angeles Times*