

The Best of Guatemala

Guatemala's charms are as varied as the riotous colors woven into its famed fabrics. From the Maya ruins of Tikal and the colonial splendor of Antigua—both exquisitely preserved through the centuries—to the breathtaking natural beauty of Lake Atitlán and Semuc Champey, there are a range of destinations and attractions here to please just about any type of traveler. I've been visiting Guatemala for more than 20 years, and I continue to discover new places and have new experiences that add to my own personal "best of" list. On my most recent trip, I visited the Kan' Ba cave, one of the newest attractions in Guatemala. I had to wade in the river to get to the cave, and when the water got too deep, I put my candle (my only source of light) in my mouth and swam. Not every "best of" place or experience on this list is quite as adventurous, but if you're looking for the best hotels or restaurants to suit a certain style, taste, or budget, or trying to figure out the "must-see" destinations for your trip, the lists below should help you narrow down your choices and fine-tune your itinerary.

1 The Best Purely Guatemalan Experiences

- **Enjoying the Holy Week Festivities in Antigua:** Semana Santa, or Holy Week, is celebrated with both fervor and style in Antigua. In fact, the Holy Week celebrations are arguably the most beautiful and elaborate in all of the Americas, and rival even the most famous ones in Europe. Massive processions weave slowly through the cobblestone streets over painstakingly gorgeous *alfombras*, or carpets, made of fine colored sawdust and flower petals. The air is thick with incense smoke, and the small city is a spectacle for a solid week. See chapter 5.
- **Touring the Towns & Villages around Lake Atitlán:** While Lake Atitlán is exceedingly beautiful in and of itself, the true charm of the lake is its ability to let you visit a half-dozen or more lakeshore towns via local water-taxi services. The water taxis run regular routes throughout the day, stopping at the villages of Santiago de Atitlán, San Pedro de la Laguna, San Marco, San Antonio Palopó, and more. You can hop on and off the taxis at your whim, and stay as long as you like before heading on to the next place or back home to your hotel. See chapter 6.
- **Paying Your Respects to Maximón:** A syncretic saint worshiped by Guatemala's Maya and Catholic alike, Maximón is the bad boy of the religious pantheon. Maximón apparently responds well to gifts, and has very specific tastes, so be sure to bring some rum or a cigar as an offering. Many towns across Guatemala have a carved idol of Maximón, or San Simon, although only a few really keep the practice of his daily worship alive. The towns with the most elaborate Maximón rituals and traditions include

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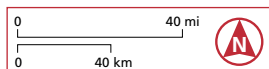
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Santiago de Atitlán and Zunil. See chapters 6 and 7, respectively.

- **Shopping at the Chichicastenango Market:** Guatemala's Maya people are world-famous for their incredible arts and crafts, which they sell predominantly at local and regional open-air markets. These markets are held in the central plazas of the country's towns and cities. The twice-weekly market in Chichicastenango is the largest and most famous of these open-air markets, with hundreds of stands selling everything from handicrafts and flowers to household goods and furniture. See p. 173.
- **Studying Spanish & Staying with a Local Family:** Studying Spanish in a foreign country is all the rage, and Guatemala is the perfect place to do it. In addition to the wonderful surroundings and bargain prices, the Guatemalan accent is one of the cleanest and easiest to master. All of Guatemala's major tourist destinations have Spanish schools, each of which offers the option of living with a local family while you study. See the

various destination chapters, as well as chapter 2, for more information.

- **Watching the Sunrise from the Top of a Pyramid in Tikal:** A visit to Tikal is a remarkable experience on its own, but my favorite way to start a visit here is by catching the sunrise from the top of one of the pyramids. In addition to the ruins and sunrise, the surrounding jungle comes to life with the cries of howler monkeys and the frenzied activity and calls of awakening birds. See chapter 8.
- **Cheering On Riders in the "Drunken Horse Race":** The tiny highland Maya town of Todos Santos Chuchumatán holds one of the equestrian world's oddest races every November 1. The town's "Drunken Horse Race" is a daylong event that involves equal parts drinking and racing. The last rider (who's highly intoxicated) left on his horse is declared the winner. Riders fall, and numerous riders and spectators end up lying in an unconscious stupor along the streets and walkways of the small town. It's hilarious, nerve-racking, and sad all at the same time. See chapter 7.

2 The Best of Natural Guatemala

- **Lake Atitlán (Western Highlands):** Whether or not you agree with Aldous Huxley that Atitlán is the "most beautiful lake in the world," you would be hard pressed to not be at least slightly impressed. Formed thousands of years ago in the crater of a massive volcano and surrounded today by several other towering volcanoes, Lake Atitlán is stunning. The road that circumnavigates much of the lake actually follows the rim of the extinct crater, and the views on high end, and those from the lakeshore and the many boats plying its waters, are fabulous. See chapter 6.
- **Semuc Champey (Alta Verapaz):** Semuc Champey is a series of stepped waterfalls and pools that actually sit on top of a raging underground river in a narrow forested canyon. It's often described as the most beautiful spot in all of Guatemala, and in addition to swimming in the pools, there's great hiking here. The spots where the Cahabón River enters and then exits its underground tunnel are jaw-dropping in their power and fury. The surrounding area is also full of caves that are worth exploring. See p. 228.
- **Parque Nacional Laguna de Lachúa (Alta Verapaz):** The deep turquoise

of Lake Lachuá may have you wondering if you're staring at the Caribbean Sea. All around the lake, lush rainforests are home to an amazing array of tropical flora and fauna. See p. 228.

- **Volcán Santa María (outside Quetzaltenango):** Not only is Volcán Santa María an imposing sight and exhilarating climb, the view from the summit peers down into the crater of its very active sister volcano, Santiaguito. It's about a 3- to 4-hour hike to the summit. Camping is allowed, and many enjoy spending the night up here, although it can get cold and windy. See chapter 7.
- **Nebaj & the Ixil Triangle (Northern Quiché Province):** This remote area was once ground zero in the government's oppressive civil war campaign against indigenous populations suspected of supporting leftist rebels. Today, it's the best place to go deep into the Guatemalan highlands for a glimpse into the country's timeless rural life and landscape. Numerous towns can be visited by hiking centuries-old dirt paths and trails. See chapter 7.
- **El Petén (Northeastern Guatemala):** The Petén province is a massive region comprised primarily of virgin tropical rainforest, and is home to many of the country's major archaeological sites and Maya ruins. The bird-watching is top-notch, and you can see a host of other species of tropical flora and fauna on a guided hike

through one of the natural parks or nature reserves. See chapter 8.

- **Río Dulce (Lago Izabal Region):** The Río Dulce, or Sweet River, runs from a narrow opening at one end of Lago Izabal all the way down to the Caribbean Sea. Along the way it passes through lush tropical lowland rainforest, as well as one gorgeous narrow canyon. In addition, hot springs bubble from underground, creating hot pools where you can stop and soak. Boat trips between the villages of Fronteras and Livingston are popular. See chapter 10.
- **Los Siete Altares (Livingston):** The name of this place translates as "The Seven Altars." Each of these altars is, in fact, a beautiful jungle waterfall. The falls are set in a steady progression in a narrow forest canyon and fed by a gentle river. The final waterfall is the largest, with a deep pool for swimming. This spot was chosen as a location for the filming of an early "Tarzan" movie. See p. 249.
- **Tortuguero Monterrico (Monterrico):** This turtle protection project is a great place to learn about the life cycle of giant sea turtles. If you're lucky enough to be here when the turtle eggs are hatching, you can take part in their weekly raffle, wherein participants are assigned a hatchling, and the quickest hatchling to the sea wins its sponsor a prize. If the turtle hatchlings aren't in season, you can still see iguanas and caimans and hike the nature trail. See p. 267.

3 The Best Maya Archaeological Sites

- **Tikal (El Petén):** In my opinion, Tikal is the most impressive of all the ancient Maya ceremonial cities. Not only is the site massive and meticulously excavated and restored, it's set in the midst of a lush and lively tropical jungle. The peaks of several temples

poke through the dense rainforest canopy, toucans and parrots fly about, and the loudest noise you'll hear is the guttural call of howler monkeys. In its heyday, the city probably covered as many as 65 sq. km (25 sq. miles) and

supported a population of more than 100,000. See “Tikal” in chapter 8.

- **Yaxhá (El Petén):** This Classic-period Maya city was recently put on the map when CBS chose it as a site for its reality show *Survivor*. While little has been excavated, this remains the third-largest Maya ceremonial city in Guatemala, behind Tikal and El Mirador. See chapter 8.
- **Copán (Honduras):** It's not technically in Guatemala, but Copán is just a few quick miles over the Honduran border. A big and beautifully restored Maya city, Copán is renowned for its impressive quantity and variety of stone carvings, which can be seen on stelae, individual sculptures, architectural adornments, and one massive stairway of a major pyramid. The new Museum of Maya Sculpture contains probably the best collection of original Maya ceremonial stone art in all of Mesoamerica. Back at the archaeological site, you can walk through some

newly dug tunnels that reveal the Maya technique of building new temples over existing ones. See chapter 9.

- **Quiriguá (En Route to Puerto Barrios):** While overall this archaeological site is pretty small, it's home to an impressive collection of large, carved stelae and stones. The tallest stela here is 10m (35 ft.) tall and weighs more than 65 tons. It's the tallest Maya stela yet discovered. Almost as interesting are the massive stones with complex hieroglyphic carvings. See p. 261.
- **Takalik Abaj (Northwest of Retalhuleu):** This little-known ruin is a hidden gem. Dating from the pre-Classic period, it's one of the oldest ceremonial and trade cities to be excavated in Guatemala. Perhaps its greatest claim to fame, however, is the fact that there's a lovely lodge located on the grounds of the archaeological site, combining ecotourism and archaeological preservation in an interesting symbiosis. See p. 274.

4 The Best Churches, Convents & Monasteries

- **Catedral Metropolitana (Guatemala City):** It took a long time to build this church, some 86 years, but the elegant main cathedral of Guatemala City has stood the test of time and weathered the effects of some major earthquakes. Today, the most impressive aspect of this church is its facade, which is both big and bold. However, the interior holds a treasure-trove of religious art and icons. Fronting the Plaza Mayor, this is a great place to start any tour of downtown Guatemala City. See p. 108.
- **Iglesia San Francisco (Guatemala City):** This church isn't quite as old as other more famous Catholic churches in the country, but it has arguably the most impressive main altar—a massive work of carved wood that's almost 92m (300 ft.) tall. See p. 108.
- **Convento de las Capuchinas (Antigua):** Life was pretty difficult and austere for the nuns at this Capuchin convent, but today the grounds and buildings are some of the most pastoral and picturesque in all of Antigua. The large and sprawling complex was abandoned in the wake of the 1776 earthquake, but the damage was relatively minor. The view from the rooftop is not to be missed. See p. 128.
- **Iglesia La Merced (Antigua):** In a city awash in Catholic churches, convents, and monasteries, Iglesia La Merced reigns supreme. It's no small coincidence—nor small honor—that the principal procession of the Holy Week celebrations leaves from this church. The ornate baroque facade is painted bright yellow and white, and

the interior is full of art and sculptures. The ruins of the attached convent are also worth a visit. See p. 129.

- **Iglesia de Santo Tomás (Chichicastenango):** Dating back to 1540, this modest church serves simultaneously as a place for Catholic worship and ancient Maya rituals. The exterior steps, which possess a privileged perch over the town of Chichicastenango, are believed to represent the 18 months of the Maya calendar. Today, these steps are constantly in use as an altar for Maya prayer and offerings. It was in the attached convent that the oldest known version of the Popol Vuh was discovered. See p. 174.
- **Iglesia de San Andrés Xecul (outside of Quetzaltenango):** The brilliantly

painted ornate facade of this church, located in a small town in the Western Highlands, is easily the most psychedelic in the entire country. The facade features the prominent figures of jaguars mixed with religious iconography. Be sure to come in the afternoon, when the sun directly hits the church's front. See p. 185.

- **La Basílica (Esquipulas):** This is the most famous religious site in Guatemala, and the only church in the country to earn the honor of being named a Basílica. More than one million pilgrims from around the world come to the 1758 church to pay their respects to the famous statue of the "Black Christ." See p. 235.

5 The Best Outdoor Adventures

- **Mountain Biking the Rural Back Roads:** The back roads and dirt paths of rural Guatemala are perfect for fat tire explorations. Whether you choose to take a ridge ride between small villages or a more technically challenging ascent or descent of a volcano, there is something for all ability levels. **Old Town Outfitters** (☎ 502/5399-0440; www.bikeguatemala.com) is my favorite operator, and has excellent guides and equipment, and a wide range of tours and trips. See chapter 5.
- **Climbing an Active Volcano:** Guatemala's mountainous terrain is predominantly volcanic, and many of these volcanoes are still active. There's nothing as primal as climbing the flanks of an active volcano or peering down into an erupting crater. Both of these experiences are possible on a climb to the summit of **Pacaya** volcano. Many tours take you close enough to actually feel the heat of fresh lava. Once Pacaya's whetted your appetite, there are numerous

other volcanoes here to scale, including **Santa María**, **Tajumulco**, **Agua**, and **Acatenango**. See chapters 5 and 7, respectively.

- **Swinging through the Treetops on a Canopy Tour:** Zip-trekking is becoming all the rage, and offers a different way to experience the rich wonders of the tropical rainforest. If you visit Tikal, don't miss the opportunity to take a trip with the **Canopy Tour Tikal** (☎ 502/7926-4270; www.canopytikal.com). See chapter 8.
- **Exploring the Underworld:** Many of Guatemala's volcanic mountains are riddled with caves. The ancient Maya considered caves holy sites that served as passageways to the next world. The caves of **Lanquin** and **Candelaria** are popular tourist destinations, but my favorite cave adventure is a tour into the depths of **Kan' Ba**. This cave has a small river running through it, and the spelunking here is a mix of hiking, wading, and swimming. The entrance to the cave is a large opening where the river exits

and forms a gentle jungle waterfall. See chapter 9.

- **Rafting on the Cahabón River:** The Alta Verapaz region is rapidly becoming the center of Guatemala's growing adventure tourism industry, and the raging rapids of the Cahabón River are part of the reason. After it exits the natural marvel of Semuc Champey, the Cahabón has both class III and class IV sections that are perfect for white-water rafting. Single-day adventures and multiday tours are available. Contact **Aventuras Turísticas** (☎ 502/7951-4213; www.aventuraturisticas.com), or see chapter 9 for more details.

- **Landing a Marlin or Sailfish:** Although a relative newcomer to the world of international offshore game-fishing, Guatemala is fast creating quite a buzz. The waters off Guatemala's Pacific coast are excellent for sportfishing year-round, and big game fish are being hauled in at a record pace. If you want to reel 'em in, contact **The Great Sailfishing Company** (☎ 877/763-0851 in the U.S. and Canada, or 502/7832-1991; www.greatsailfishing.com), or **Parlama Sport Fishing** (☎ 502/5704-4254 or 502/7832-2578; www.parlama.com). See chapter 11.

6 The Best Shopping & Markets

- **Ron Zacapa Centenario:** While I spend a lot of time waxing poetic over the beauty and quality of Guatemala's arts and crafts, it's worth emphasizing how special this 23-year-old dark rum is. Whether you think you like rum or not, any aficionado of fine spirits should pick up a bottle of this amazingly smooth brew. See p. 116.
- **In Nola** (Guatemala City; ☎ 502/2367-2424): This is the place in Guatemala City for textiles and just about any other arts-and-crafts item. The large store is beautifully laid out, service is excellent, and the prices are fair. You won't find the bargains you might be able to negotiate at the informal markets, but you won't be taken to the cleaners either. See p. 115.
- **Carlos Woods Arte Antiguo y Contemporáneo** (Guatemala City; ☎ 502/2366-6883): This is the finest art gallery in Guatemala City, with an excellent variety of modern and historical works. The rooms here are well-lit and beautifully designed, making a visit a pure pleasure whether or not you're looking to buy. See p. 114.
- **Nim Po't** (Antigua; ☎ 502/7832-2681; www.nimpot.com): A massive indoor space with a soaring ceiling houses this local craft and textile cooperative warehouse. Textiles, wood-carvings, and ceramic wares from across the country are available here. The quality varies greatly, but if you know what to look for, you can find some fine works without having to venture into the farther reaches of rural Guatemala. See p. 141.
- **Joyería del Angel** (Antigua; ☎ 502/7832-3189): Antigua has a glut of high-end jewelry stores selling locally produced wares. However, this shop has the most interesting and unique pieces that you'll ever see in one place in this town. It's worth checking their clearance rack, as they periodically try to update their stock. See p. 140.
- **Wer** (Antigua; ☎ 502/7832-7161): Give yourself some time to wander through the many rooms of art in this contemporary gallery, set up in the rambling space of a converted colonial-era home. More than 100 Guatemalan artists are represented here. See p. 139.

- **Chichicastenango's Market** (Chichicastenango; no phone): There's a reason this twice-weekly open-air market is so famous. The abundance and variety of wares for sale and the somewhat controlled frenzy of the entire operation are not to be missed. You may find better bargains and products around the country, but you'll never see so much in one place at one time. See p. 173.
- **San Francisco El Alto Market** (San Francisco El Alto; no phone): Local cognoscenti swear that the Friday market in San Francisco El Alto is

even better than the one in Chichi. It's certainly a great market, and if you know what you're looking for, and how to bargain, you might even do better here than in Chichi. See p. 186.

- **Q'eqchi' Women's Craft Cooperative** (on the Río Dulce; no phone): The Caribbean lowlands are a particularly barren zone for die-hard shoppers. This small shop is the exception to the rule. You can only get to this humble cooperative by boat, but all of the tour operations in Livingston and Río Dulce stop here. See p. 252.

7 The Best High-End Hotels

- **Real InterContinental** (Zona 10, Guatemala City; ☎ 502/2379-4446; www.interconti.com): There's a host of high-end business class hotels in Guatemala City, but this one tops them all in terms of rooms, amenities, facilities, location, and service. The InterContinental sits on a very busy corner of the Zona Viva, with shops, restaurants, bars, and more just steps away in every direction. See p. 95.
- **Casa Santo Domingo** (Antigua; ☎ 502/7820-1220; www.casasantodomingo.com.gt): You can sometimes get lost on the extensive grounds of this fabulous hotel. In addition to the fine rooms, excellent service, and colonial-era ambience, this place features museum-quality collections of art and artifacts, as well as a large amphitheater. The whole complex sits on, and is integrated into, the ruins of an old convent. See p. 131.
- **Posada del Angel** (Antigua; ☎ 502/7832-5303; www.posadadelangel.com): With just five beautiful rooms, this place gives you intimacy with your luxury, and is consistently

considered one of the top hotels in the entire country. I like the second-floor suite, with its own private rooftop terrace. See p. 133.

- **Mesón Panza Verde** (Antigua; ☎ 502/7832-1745; www.panzaverde.com): This elegant and artistic Antigua hotel is actually listed in the "moderate" price category in this book, thanks to the inclusion of several excellent midrange rooms. However, the large suites and superb service easily make this one of Guatemala's top luxury options. The old building is loaded with artwork and interesting architectural details, and there's a wonderful, mazelike rooftop terrace with panoramic views. The restaurant (below) is one of the best in the country. See p. 132.
- **Hotel Atitlán** (Finca San Buenaventura, Panajachel; ☎ 502/7762-1441; www.hotelatitlan.com): This fabulous hotel is set on the shores of Lake Atitlán, with a stunning view of the lake and its surrounding volcanoes. Beautiful rooms, lush gardens, ample amenities, impeccable service, and a great restaurant make this a complete package. See p. 153.

- **Casa Palopó** (Carretera a San Antonio Palopó, Lake Atitlán; ☎ 502/7762-2270; www.casapalopo.com): Artwork and interesting design touches abound in this boutique hotel, which is perched high on a hillside overlooking Lake Atitlán. The vibe here is hip, intimate, refined, and romantic, and the place is perfect for couples. (Honeymooners should seriously consider it.) The restaurant is excellent. See p. 167.
- **La Lancha Resort** (Lago Petén Itzá, Petén; ☎ 800/746-3743 in the U.S., or ☎/fax 502/7928-8331 in Guatemala; www.lalanchavillage.com): Set on a steep hillside overlooking the lake, this is the plushiest hotel near Tikal. The rooms at this Francis Ford Coppola regional resort (he has two

others in Belize) are decorated with style, featuring furniture and artwork from around the world. The food is also excellent, taking local cuisine as its inspiration and adding creative touches and refined twists. See p. 220.

- **Hotel Villa Caribe** (Livingston; ☎ 502/2334-1818 or 502/7947-0072; www.villasdeguatemala.com): My favorite rooms here are the individual bungalows, which are what earns this hotel a spot in this exclusive group. These rooms have air-conditioning, cable television, and minibars, which the other rooms lack. However, every room here has a private balcony with a commanding view of the Río Dulce river mouth and the Caribbean Sea. See p. 252.

8 The Best Midrange Hotels

- **Otelito Casa Santa Clara** (Zona 10, Guatemala City; ☎/fax 502/2339-1811; www.otelito.com): With only 12 rooms, this exceedingly hip hotel stands out from all the large, high-rise, business-class monsters that dominate this downtown neighborhood. Each room is slightly different, but a sense of refined, minimalist design is felt in the decor throughout. In addition to the intimate setting and trendy vibe, they also have an excellent in-house fusion restaurant. See p. 98.
- **Casa Azul** (Antigua; ☎ 502/7832-0961; www.casazul.guate.com): While most of the boutique hotels in Antigua seek to mimic the city's colonial splendor in their design and decor, Casa Azul has gone for a more modern and eclectic style. The hotel is just a half-block from the Plaza Mayor, making it one of the best located hotels in the city. See p. 134.
- **Hotel Dos Mundos** (Panajachel; ☎ 502/7762-2078; www.hoteldosmundos.com): The spacious rooms here are one of my top choices in Panajachel. Although the hotel is located right in the center of Calle Santander, the rooms are set back from the street in a quiet garden area, giving you easy access to all the action and peace and quiet at the same time. See p. 154.
- **Bambú Hotel & Restaurant** (Santiago de Atitlán; ☎ 502/7721-7332; www.ecobambu.com): The two private lakefront bungalows are the best rooms in the house, and probably the best rooms in all of Santiago de Atitlán, so be sure to try and book one of these. Better still is that they're the same price as those in the larger building, which are set back from the water's edge. Even if you don't get one of the private bungalows, you'll be

plenty happy at this excellent hotel. See p. 165.

- **Villa Sumaya** (San Marcos La Laguna, Lake Atitlán; ☎ 502/5617-1209; www.villasumaya.com): This lake-front boutique hotel is also a yoga and meditation retreat center. The individual cabins are wonderful, and the grounds and gardens are beautiful. If you want an isolated getaway on Lake Atitlán, whether to seek spiritual or physical enlightenment, this is a great choice. See p. 169.
- **Casa Mañen** (Quetzaltenango; ☎ 502/7765-0786; www.comeseeit.com): This is my favorite hotel in Quetzaltenango. The rooms are all decorated with a range of local arts and craft works, the service is excellent, and the owners are very knowledgeable about the various local tour options. The large rooftop terrace offers wonderful panoramic views of the city. See p. 187.
- **Las Cumbres** (Zunil; ☎ 502/5399-0029): This hotel is built on top of steam vents fed by underground sulfur hot springs, and some of the rooms come with their own private natural steam bath. All of the rooms have a natural hot-spring-fed Jacuzzi, and there are common steam baths and saunas for all to enjoy. Other amenities include a squash court and small gym. See p. 188.
- **Portal de la Fe** (Esquipulas; ☎ 502/7943-4124; www.portaldelafehotel.com): This should be the top choice for anyone coming to Esquipulas to pay their respects to the “Black Christ.” This new hotel offers free Wi-Fi throughout, and is a definite step up from the other options around town in the same price range. See p. 236.
- **Hacienda San Lucas** (south of Copán Ruinas, Honduras; ☎/fax 504/651-4495; www.haciendasanlucas.com): This converted farm and ranch offers a sense of refinement and creative flare you won’t find anywhere else in the Copán area. The hotel is set on a hillside across from and overlooking the Copán archaeological site. In addition, there’s a secondary Maya site, Los Sapos, right on the grounds, as well as excellent hiking and horseback-riding trails. As if all this weren’t enough, the restaurant is one of the best in Copán. See p. 244.
- **Catamaran Island Hotel** (Fronteras, Río Dulce; ☎ 502/5902-0831; www.catamaranisland.com): Whenever I come to the Río Dulce area, I book one of this hotel’s private bungalows built out over the water. I love sitting on my private balcony with a book, listening to the river lap against the support posts below me. At night, you’ll usually be mingling with hotel guests and some itinerant cruising sailors who tie up at the hotel’s dock or anchor just offshore. See p. 257.
- **Amatique Bay Resort and Marina** (4km/2½ miles east of Puerto Barrios, on the Bahía de Amatique; ☎ 502/7948-1800; www.amatiquebay.net): This gets my vote as the best beach resort in the country. The rooms are large, and the grounds and facilities trump any other beach hotel in Guatemala. See p. 260.
- **Hotel Utz Tzaba** (west of Monterrico, on the road to Itzapa; ☎ 502/5318-9452; www.utz-tzaba.com): There are tons of good hotels set right on the beach along Guatemala’s Pacific coast, and this is one of the few worth seeking out. The rooms are relatively simple, but they’re modern and clean, and the beach is just steps away. See p. 268.

9 The Best Budget Hotels

- **Posada Belén** (Zona 1, Guatemala City; ☎ **866/864-8283** in the U.S. and Canada, or 502/2253-4530 in Guatemala; www.posadabelen.com): You'll feel at home in this long-standing family-run hotel. The rooms are charming and beautifully done, and the converted home is filled with a wealth of art and Maya artifacts. Although it's near the heart of the city's colonial center, it's on a quiet street, away from the hustle and bustle. These folks have an excellent in-house tour operation. See p. 102.
- **Posada Asejemenou** (Antigua; ☎ **502/7820-2670**; asjemenou1@yahoo.com): The entrance to this pretty budget hotel is practically underneath the iconic Santa Catalina arch in Antigua. Rooms are kept immaculately clean, and there's a convivial hostel-like vibe to the whole operation. The antique tile floors and worn wood furniture remind you that you really are in the colonial heart of town. The attached restaurant specializes in thin-crust pizzas and other Italian fare. See p. 135.
- **Hotel Posada La Merced** (Antigua; ☎ **502/7832-3197** or 502/7832-3301; www.merced-landivar.com): As the name implies, this popular hotel is just around the corner from beautiful La Merced church. The friendly and welcoming staff is a real plus. Those looking for longer stays can book the fully equipped apartments. Interior courtyard areas and communal kitchen lend themselves to a friendly vibe. See p. 135.
- **Hotel Primavera** (Panajachel; ☎ **502/7762-2052**; www.primaveratitlan.com): I enjoy the neatly varnished wood and slightly European feel to this place. Some of the rooms feature large, bay windows overlooking Calle Santander. If you land room no. 9, you're in for a real budget treat, as it comes with its own private stairway, entrance, and balcony. See p. 155.
- **Hotelito El Amanecer Sak'cari** (San Pedro La Laguna; ☎ **502/7721-8096**; www.hotelsakcari.com): The rooms here lack something in the way of style and personality, but for less than Q150 (\$20/£11) for a double, you can enjoy the sunrise from a hammock stretched out on the veranda of one of the second-floor units. See p. 161.
- **La Casa del Mundo** (Jaibalito, Lake Atitlán; ☎ **502/5218-5332**; www.la-casadelmundo.com): Set atop an isolated rocky outcropping jutting into Lake Atitlán, this hotel offers a few rooms with shared bathrooms that are a real steal (even the private bathrooms are a bargain), with stupendous views of the lake. A lakeside fire-heated Jacuzzi and several open-air terraces make this place really special. See p. 168.
- **Casa Doña Mercedes** (Quetzaltenango; ☎ **502/5569-1630**; www.geocities.com/guest_house_mercedes): In a town with a glut of budget lodgings, this one stands out for its friendly service, immaculate rooms, and central location. See p. 187.
- **Hotel Santana** (Flores, Petén; ☎/fax **502/7926-0262** or 502/7926-0491; www.santanapeten.com): This lakefront hotel is the best budget choice on the island of Flores. In fact, it might just be the best hotel on the island itself, regardless of price. All of the rooms come with private balconies with wonderful views. See p. 216.
- **Casa Alcazar Victoria** (Cobán; ☎ **502/7952-1388**; <http://hoteles.aventuras-turisticas.com>): I love the rustic yet refined feel of the rooms in this beautiful colonial home. All of the rooms

are different. Those on the second floor are my favorite, with high ceilings featuring exposed wood beams. Throughout the hotel there are eye-catching artistic touches. The owners have a couple other hotels in town, as well as the best adventure tour operation in the region. See p. 231.

- **La Casa de Café** (Copán Ruinas, Honduras; ☎ 504/651-4620; www.casadecafecopan.com): Although a few blocks outside of the “downtown” area, this is my favorite budget option in Copán Ruinas. The personable hosts make you feel right at home. Each day starts off with a delicious

breakfast and coffee in the lush garden. See p. 245.

- **La Casa Rosada** (Livingston; ☎ 502/7947-0303; www.hotelcasarosada.com): Set on the waterfront in Livingston, the individual bungalows feature cheerful design touches, with brightly painted furniture, architectural accents, and sea shell decorations. You’ll have to use one of several communal bathrooms and showers, but these are just steps away and kept spotless. Moreover, the restaurant and in-house tour operation are great. See p. 253.

10 The Best Restaurants

- **Tamarindos** (Zona 10, Guatemala City; ☎ 502/2360-2815): The chef at this trendy Zona Viva restaurant is wowing Guatemala City with her eclectic fusion cooking. It’s easy to overdo or miscalculate when combining ingredients and techniques from various world cuisines, but Tamarindos hits all the right notes. The menu is very long, and touches many bases, with culinary influences from Asia, Italy, and many places in between. Be sure to ask about daily specials, as this is where the chef really shines. See p. 104.
- **Kacao** (Zona 10, Guatemala City; ☎ 502/2237-4188 or 502/2377-4189): This popular restaurant takes Guatemalan cuisine and polishes it up a bit. The cooking is fairly traditional, with signature dishes from around the country, but the service, ambience, and presentation are far more refined than you’ll find at almost any other place specializing in Chapin cuisine. Although they do a brisk lunch business, I prefer to come for dinner, when the thatch roof is illuminated by candles and other strategically placed lighting. See p. 104.
- **Ambia** (Zona 14, Guatemala City; ☎ 502/2322-3232): It’s worth the effort to find this slightly out-of-the-way restaurant. The fusion cuisine is heavily influenced by a range of Asian styles, but you can also get hearty steaks and some delicious lamb. See p. 107.
- **Mesón Panza Verde** (Antigua; ☎ 502/7832-1745; www.panzaverde.com): Don’t come to Antigua without having a meal at Mesón Panza Verde. The Swiss chef ventures somewhat from his Continental roots, incorporating local ingredients into many of his dishes. The results are always superb. Tables are spread around various rooms, hallways, and open-air spaces in this elegant boutique hotel, and several nights a week there’s live jazz to accompany your meal. See p. 136.
- **Welten** (Antigua; ☎ 502/7832-0630 or 502/7832-6967; www.weltenrestaurant.com): I like to grab a pool-side table in the back courtyard of this long-standing Antiguan restaurant. The Continental cuisine isn’t as creative or adventurous as many of the restaurants listed in this section, but it is consistently well-prepared.

The service is top-notch and the ambience delightful. See p. 136.

- **Hotel Atitlán** (Panajachel; ☎ 502/7762-1441): With a burning fireplace, wood furniture, and ornate table settings and decor, this is easily the most elegant and refined restaurant in or around Panajachel. When the weather is nice, you can grab one of the outdoor tables, which have a good view of the lake and volcanoes. Luckily, the cuisine and service here live up to the ambience and surroundings. The Sunday brunch is quite renowned. See p. 156.
- **Royal Paris** (Quetzaltenango; ☎ 502/7761-1942): While this is certainly the best restaurant in Quetzaltenango, the name is slightly misleading. Sure there are some French dishes on the menu, but there are also curries, vegetarian options, and simple sandwiches on home-baked whole wheat bread. There are also regular movie nights during the week, and live music most weekends. See p. 189.
- **La Luna** (Flores; ☎ 502/7926-3346): If you find yourself in Flores, be sure to find your way to this restaurant. The eclectic decor varies from room to room, but like the food, it's consistently creative and tasteful. See p. 217.
- **Casa D'Acuña** (Cobán; ☎ 502/7951-0482): The beautiful garden

courtyard setting is enough to earn it a place on this list, but the excellent chefs do their part as well. The long menu includes pizzas, pastas, and typical Mexican cuisine. Your best bet is to get a nice steak or fresh grilled fish. See p. 232.

- **Hacienda San Lucas** (south of Copán Ruinas on the road to Los Sapos ruins; ☎/fax 504/651-4495): The house specialty is a fire-roasted chicken smothered in a spicy *adobo* sauce, which the owners claim is based on ancient Maya recipes. I can't imagine the Maya ate this well, but you certainly should. The open-air setting by lamplight is very romantic. See p. 245.
- **La Casa Rosada** (Livingston; ☎ 502/7947-0303): On any given night, the regularly changing menu at this cozy restaurant might feature a Thai-influenced stir-fry or shrimp gumbo. However, I often end up ordering the local *tapado*, a seafood stew cooked in coconut milk, which is as good as any in the area. See p. 254.
- **Taberna El Pelicano** (Monterrico; ☎ 502/5584-2400): The fresh grilled fish is always dependable at this beach restaurant, but they also have a large menu with some unexpected twists, including excellent pastas thanks to their Italian chef, and a rich goulash thanks to the European owner. See p. 269.

11 The Best of Guatemalan Nightlife

- **La Bodeguita del Centro** (Guatemala City; ☎ 502/2221-4904): This bohemian downtown bar has almost nightly programming that includes poetry readings, improvised theater pieces, and concerts of folk, jazz, and even hard-core punk. See p. 117.
- **Trovajazz** (Guatemala City; ☎ 502/2334-1241): The compact pedestrian mall area of Cuatro Grados Norte is

chock-full of clubs, bars, and discos, and this is consistently my favorite. There's live music most nights, and the ambience is relaxed and convivial. See p. 118.

- **Tequila Bar** (Antigua; ☎ 502/5501-2680): You'd better like tequila and mescal if you stop in here, and if you do, you're in luck. Little more than a hole in the wall, this place stocks little

else than a wide range of high-end and hard-to-find tequilas and mescals. You even have to do a quick shot of house tequila just to get in the door. See p. 143.

- **Circus Bar** (Panajachel; ☎ 502/7762-2056): This place is an institution in Panajachel, and for good reason. A “circus” theme dominates the decor, live music takes the stage most nights, and a friendly mix of locals, expatriates, and tourists populate the bar. See p. 157.
- **Salón Tecún** (Quetzaltenango; ☎ 502/7761-2832): While there are always plenty of people in the crowded interior of this popular Xela bar, the most happening scene is usually at the large picnic-style tables out front. In a university and language school town with lots of clubs and bars, this is consistently the place to see and be seen. See p. 189.

- **Moonlight at Tikal** (Tikal; no phone): Standing atop of Temple IV under the full moon with nothing but the sound of crickets and howler monkeys remains one of my favorite after-dark memories of Guatemala. While this isn’t officially open to the public, if you’re staying at one of the hotels right outside the archaeological site at Tikal, you can sometimes receive permission to visit the site after dark. Be sure to ask your hotel if this is possible, and check on the current security situation. See p. 207.
- **Ubafu** (Livingston; no phone): The Garífuna people of Livingston are direct descendants of escaped African slaves, and this local bar swings nightly to the beat of ancient rhythms mixed with the modern forms of *punta* rock and reggae. Local bands beat out the rhythms on hand-made drums and hollowed-out turtle shells. See p. 255.

12 The Best of Guatemala Online

- **<http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/ca/guatemala>:** Hosted by the University of Texas Latin American Studies Department, this site houses a vast collection of information about Guatemala.
- **www.visitguatemala.com:** This is the official site of the Guatemala Tourism Commission (INGUAT).
- **www.revuemag.com:** This is an excellent English-language monthly magazine geared toward tourists and

expatriates. The entire magazine, as well as past issues, is available online.

- **www.xelawho.com:** A slightly irreverent English-language magazine produced in Quetzaltenango and directed at the town’s large population of foreign-language students, this site has honest reviews and a wealth of useful information.