

# BELLA GUATEMALA



A La Cañada Flintridge-based entrepreneur is introducing her beautiful native country to travelers, as democratic Guatemala grows its budding luxury tourism industry.

STORY BY IRENE LACHER | PHOTOS BY BRENT WINEBRENNER

ELSIE YIDONOV WAS ONLY 13 WHEN HER FAMILY MOVED TO LOS ANGELES FROM GUATEMALA CITY. AT THE TIME, HER NATIVE COUNTRY WAS WRACKED BY A BLOODY CIVIL WAR REMINISCENT OF SYRIA'S CURRENT TROUBLES. FOR 36 YEARS, GUATEMALA'S DICTATORSHIPS MASSACRED THEIR OWN PEOPLE AND COMMITTED NUMEROUS WAR CRIMES, ACCORDING TO HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH.

In 1995, shortly before peace was finally brokered by the United Nations, YiDonov went back to see whether Guatemala was ready to receive tourists — the longtime La Cañada Flintridge resident wanted to wake up the world to her country's vast cultural and ecological riches, which had been overlooked during the war years. "When I talked to all the other mothers in La Cañada, everybody had been to Costa Rica, but nobody had been to Guatemala except the housekeepers. So I decided I wanted to show the world that Guatemala has the same things that Costa Rica had — the beauty of the land is the same — but we also have the Mayan culture, which makes us more interesting."

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Elsie YiDonoy shopping for brightly hued huipils at the San Juan La Laguna women's collective.



Trekking Pacaya's volcanic moonscape



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Indeed, Guatemala was at the heart of Mayan civilization, and archaeologists have still only scratched the surface of its rich stores of ruins. The country is also wealthy in biodiversity, a naturalist's paradise with 14 ecoregions, from wetlands to mangrove forests, which are home to more than 1,200 animal species and close to 8,700 vascular plant species.

But when YiDonoy returned in 1995, the country still had an unsettling military presence and she concluded that it wasn't ready for its close-up. Guatemala did go on to enjoy economic growth under the new democratically elected government (which recently dealt with a high-level corruption scandal). And as the years went by, stunning upscale hotels and restaurants began dotting the areas that attract tourists, like the charming village of Antigua and the spectacular Lake Atitlán.

By 2004, YiDonoy decided it was time to start her company, Bella Guatemala Travel, and she began scouring the country for safe, luxurious hotels and eco-lodges for her clients. "I didn't want to sell anything until I traveled the country and checked the hotels," says the soft-spoken and warm YiDonoy. Five years later, she met the two exceptional tour guides she still works with: José Antonio González, a research archaeologist with decades of experience leading tours, and Emilio Faillace, a naturalist and environmentalist. Then in 2009, she began selling tours; they now number four a year, catering to seekers of adventure, culture and nature travel. Some trips are pegged to colorful local celebrations, like the Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) and All Saints' Day Kite Festival on Nov. 1, when locals converge on cemeteries around the country to party with their ancestors and fly elaborate kites trailing messages for their loved ones. Next year, she plans to expand her offerings to one a month.

While the U.S. State Department still urges Americans visiting Guatemala to proceed with caution, YiDonoy says she has never encountered danger on her trips. Bella Guatemala steers clear of the Mexican border, a hotspot for drug smuggling and violence, and benefits from insider info on the best and safest places to visit (not to mention from the presence of the two burly guides).

Here are some highlights of Bella Guatemala's tours to UNESCO World Heritage Sites:

## ANTIGUA

Fans of San Miguel de Allende in Mexico (where Americans have flocked since World War II) will be equally enchanted by Antigua, a small cosmopolitan city with Spanish Colonial and baroque architecture, 15 miles from the capital of Guatemala City. Founded in 1543 by conquistadors, Antigua (then known as Santiago de los Caballeros) was the colonial capital of Central America for the next 200 years. With 30 monastic orders, the city built monasteries, convents and churches, but many have been damaged by centuries of seismic activity. Check out the intricate Cathedral de Santiago overlooking the Parque Central and the San Francisco Church on First Street, one of Antigua's oldest churches, which holds the tomb of Central America's first saint, hospital founder Hermano Pedro.

Antigua is surrounded by volcanoes wreathed in clouds, and more adventurous souls will want to visit Pacaya, an active complex volcano near the city, which has erupted 23 times since the Spanish invasion of Guatemala. As its elevation tops 8,000 feet, you'll want to make the steep climb on horseback, before exploring the slippery *inactive* volcanic moonscape below the peak. Also nearby is the Filadelfia Coffee Resort, a vast plantation that offers tours of its coffee-growing and -roasting activities. The more daring can go ziplining a half-hour drive away.

Back in town, the country's most popular tourist destination boasts such comforting amenities as Internet cafes, nightclubs, restaurants, art galleries and Spanish-language



schools. But one thing you won't find back home is the must-see Chocolate Museum, where chocolate-growing and -manufacturing processes are explained and you can take home delicious treats you pour into molds. Not to bury the lead, but some consider Guatemalan chocolate among the world's best; that shouldn't be surprising considering that the sublime substance, worshipped by the ancient Mayans as "the food of the gods," originated in Central America. Guatemalan chocolate is grainier than its European counterparts but has an arguably richer flavor.

One of Elsie's favorite Antigua hotels is the lushly appointed 100-room Camino Real Antigua, which could easily be mistaken for a landmark dating back to colonial days — even though it's only five years old. Don't miss the nearly endless breakfast buffet of indigenous dishes and Western classics.

### LAKE ATITLÁN

This is a stunning, thousand-foot-deep volcanic lake in the Western Highlands, a three-hour drive from Guatemala City. It's ringed by Mayan villages, where you can find excellent handicrafts — textiles, blankets, masks, leather goods, paintings and more. The usual arrival point is the busy village of Panajachel, where you can pick up boats to other villages, such as San Juan La Laguna, a less-visited spot that's home to a women's collective. The women demonstrate dyeing cotton thread using botanicals and weave colorful *huipils* (traditional embroidered tops), pants, placemats, bags and much more.

One of the Lake Atitlán hotels on Elsie's tours is Relais & Châteaux's Casa Palopó, a global art-filled luxury boutique hotel high up in the surrounding hills. With seven rooms and a two-bedroom villa, the hotel describes its décor as "modern rustic," although its brand of rustic style doesn't exclude Frette linens and L'Occitane toiletries.

### TIKAL

To get to the ancient sacred city of Tikal, you take a 50-minute flight from Guatemala City to the lush tropical rainforests of Petén Province in northern Guatemala. Tikal was the steamy capital of one of the Mayas' most powerful kingdoms during the Classic Period (200 to 900 A.D.), ruled by a dynasty of 33 rulers. At its height, some 100,000 people lived among its 3,000 palaces, temples, monuments, homes, Mesoamerican ballgame courts and jail. The Guatemalan government has worked with the University of Pennsylvania to restore the ruins in this national park and there's a lot to see — José Antonio and Emilio really shine here — but most of Tikal is still buried, leaving plenty more for archaeologists to uncover. (The site may look familiar to *Star Wars* fans: Tikal doubled as the rebel base on the jungle moon Yavin 4 in *Episode 4: A New Hope* [1977]; director George Lucas filmed Tikal Plaza from the top of Temple 14.)

Elsie's hotel of choice near Tikal is Las Lagunas Boutique Hotel in a 200-acre wildlife preserve (including the not-to-be-missed Monkey Island), built by a Guatemalan businessman who left behind trophy hunting as he evolved into a strong environmentalist. (You can still see his trophies and Central American antiques at the private museum there.) The hotel has 19 large suites with individual hot tubs in private porches overlooking the Quexil Lagoon. Its Shultun Restaurant, with a 180-degree view of the lagoon, offers fine international and local cuisine made from local ingredients.|||

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Bella Guatemala Travel tours are all-inclusive down to taxes, tips and a donation supporting sustainability in this still-struggling country (although alcoholic beverages are on your dime). Tour packages range in cost from \$2,795 for the 10-day "Practice Spanish Tour" to \$4,995 for 12 days including Easter week. Prices are per person, double occupancy. Call (818) 669-8435 or visit [bellaguatemalatravel.com](http://bellaguatemalatravel.com).



Guatemalan chocolate is among the world's best.



A young woman toting colorful kites at the All Saints' Day Kite Festival