

Chilled out charm

Hollie Stebbings, of travel specialists Imaginative Traveller, takes an amazing trip through Guatemala, Belize and Mexico

WORDS ♦ PHOTOS: Hollie Stebbings

What a beautiful sight Antigua is after the traffic-choked roads of Guatemala City, where the nearest airport is located.

My taxi turned into the cobblestoned streets and we bumped along through the easily navigable grid system of this UNESCO world heritage site, surrounded by volcanoes, lush forests and coffee plantations.

Instantly you can tell that the pace of life is much slower here. The roads simply won't allow any vehicle to travel at speed, and residents and tourists alike amble along in no particular hurry.

The Spanish colonial buildings that line the streets have been lovingly restored, after the 1773 earthquake that devastated the city, and are painted in a

variety of colours, from mustard yellows and deep blues to more subtle pastel shades. The result is a dreamy palette of one and two storey dwellings housing coffee shops, restaurants, artisan markets and chilled out watering holes, many with hidden courtyards adorned with bougainvillea.

This small city lends itself well to exploring on foot. You can delve into some of Antigua's treasures, including the stunning baroque Iglesia de La Merced, Iglesia y Convento de la Capuchinas and its luscious courtyards and garden, and the iconic Santa Catalina Arch with the Volcán de Agua looming in the background.

At the labyrinthine local market, there are stalls bursting with colourful, fresh fruit and



ABOVE: Tropical island paradise Caye Caulker

LEFT: Tikal ruins, one of the finest examples of Mayan civilisation that we can see today.





vegetables, street food vendors with sizzling snacks, and hand-embroidered textiles with the typical multi-coloured designs of Central America.

'I didn't have Guatemala down as a foodie destination but I was soon converted. . .'

Next door, at the bus station the long lines of uniquely designed 'chicken buses' are truly a wonder to behold.

With a local guide you will have an insight into Central

American life and some great recommendations for places to try wonderful local cuisine.

We spent one evening in a secret restaurant behind an unobtrusive doorway being treated to delicious purple corn tacos with toppings of pork and plum sauce, shredded beef, and bacon and shrimp. Everything was cooked from scratch in front of us and the flavours were amazing. I didn't have Guatemala down as a foodie destination but I was soon converted to the fresh and healthy cuisine.

A highlight of the trip was

Just imagine. . .

Hollie Stebbings is a sales consultant for Debenham based adventure travel company Imaginative Traveller which is known for innovative trips that truly inspire the imagination.

She's part of a team of specialists who travel the world, gaining the in-depth experience needed to help people find the perfect holiday that's a little bit out of the ordinary.

Hollie was lucky enough to experience the tour that Imaginative Traveller offers travelling through Guatemala, Belize and Mexico. The 12-day, small-group tour starts in Antigua, travels through blissed-out Belize and along the Yucatan Peninsula, to the beachside delight of Playa del Carmen.

From the stone temples of the jungle canopy in Tikal, the white sands and clear waters of Tulum, and volcano-studded landscapes, to the chilled-out charm of Mexico's coast, the tour delivers a slice of action, a dose of history and culture, and some well-deserved relaxation.

staying on the Rio Dulce, meaning Sweet River. The pace here was slow and relaxed, with everything reached by boat in this lush verdant paradise.

Our hotel was perched on the river and my cabin had a beautiful view of the boats and the copious water birds that inhabit the area.

We arrived before sunset and there was time for some swimming, and relaxing in hammocks before dinner. I went to sleep with the sound of lapping water beneath my cabin.

Casacadas Calientes El Paraíso is a natural spa of hot springs, rock pools to swim in and a beautiful waterfall. We travelled by boat up river where it opens out on to the glorious Lake Izabal. The hot springs are said to be therapeutic and there is clay enriched with minerals that we covered ourselves in for the true spa experience.

The Tikal ruins and pyramids are arguably one of the finest examples of Mayan civilisation that we can see today. The temple complex has been uncovered for around 150 years and there is much more that still lies underground.

We were given a guided tour by a local guy named Boris. We hiked around the national park and were able to climb some pyramids for a spectacular view of the rainforest. As we walked, Boris gave us loads of fascinating insights into the history of the Mayans, describing how they were considerably ahead of the game when it came to astronomy, mathematics and science.

We were also able to see plenty of animals and birds including spider monkeys and coatis, toucans, black vultures and oscillated turkeys.

On the tropical island paradise that is Caye Caulker, we took



‘Snorkelling was like being in an enormous tropical fish tank’

ABOVE: Casacadas Calientes El Paraíso, a natural spa of hot springs and rock pools.

advantage of some of the exciting optional activities available, including the famous Actun Tunichil Muknal caves and cave tubing. This is basically floating downstream through a network of caves, with incredible rock formations and a lot of bats.

Snorkelling here was like being in an enormous tropical fish tank, with a huge variety of fish. I even saw a large sea turtle and some nurse sharks.

The coral reefs in this part of the world have not experienced the bleaching that is happening to a lot of reefs in other places, such as the Indian Ocean, so it was a colourful sight and we enjoyed every minute.

After a smooth border crossing we said “hola” to Mexico and the charming town of Tulum. The Mayan ruins of Tulum which are perched in the edge of a cliff overlooking the beautiful palm fringed beach below are quite incredible. This site was considered sacred as it was the first to see the sunrise in the Mayan world.

Another highlight for me was

the large number of iguanas that live amongst the ruins. It was great to see them up close.

On our last day we visited the Cenotes of Casa Tortuga. Cenotes are sinkholes common on the Yucatan peninsula. They attract snorkelers and divers who come to explore the clear waters and the limestone caves that hide underground networks of rivers and pools, some of them up to 40 feet deep.

Being inside the caves was a serene experience and it was great to see the weird and wonderful rock formations both above and below the water. We also saw bats up close, nesting between the stalactites of the cave roof.

Our final stop was Playa del Carmen. After a delicious meal of Mexican food and cocktails the time had come for our group to go our separate ways.

As with most trips of this kind, spending long days together tends to bond fellow travellers, and friendships for life are made. Needless to say, the farewell was an emotional affair. . . ♦

Want to know more?

Imaginative Traveller's Guatemala to Mexico 12-day tour starts from £926 (not including flights)

Imaginative Traveller & Dragoman
T: 01728 862233
Camp Green, Kenton Road
Debenham IP14 6LA
W: imaginative-traveller.com
W: dragoman.com