

—Antigua

The historic capital and heart of Guatemala, Antigua has been tested by the forces of volcanic eruptions and earthquakes for centuries. It is known for its ubiquitous Spanish Baroque architecture; it seems like around every corner, one can find a church from a bygone era. Some are restored and given a new purpose, while many are in ruins and overgrown with purple flowers. Restaurants employ chefs from all over the world, which means travelers can find just about anything here, including chocolate makers, French bistros, and coffee shops. Arguably some of the best coffee in the world comes from Antigua and the surrounding regions. It's the perfect place to unwind and plan some nearby excursions.

Sitting in an old plaza, I hunch over a map, figuring out which places to visit. There's a dry fountain in the middle of the square. Pigeons fly overhead and Mayan women in traditional dress sell their handicrafts. A young couple sits against a house making out. It looks like it's his first kiss, but not hers—she's clearly in charge. An old lady rattles down the cobblestone street in the rustiest Toyota pickup I have ever seen, bouquets of flowers bouncing in the bed. A chicken bus—an old school bus, often from the US, which is shipped south, tricked out with loudspeakers and a paint job, and widely used for cheap transportation—rumbles by with the usual riot of color, noise, and fumes. Above it all towers Volcán de Agua, dwarfing the low-slung orange rooftops. There is charm in every detail my eye lands on. It's the delicate charm of age, which cannot be manufactured, but has to organically grow and survive over time.

