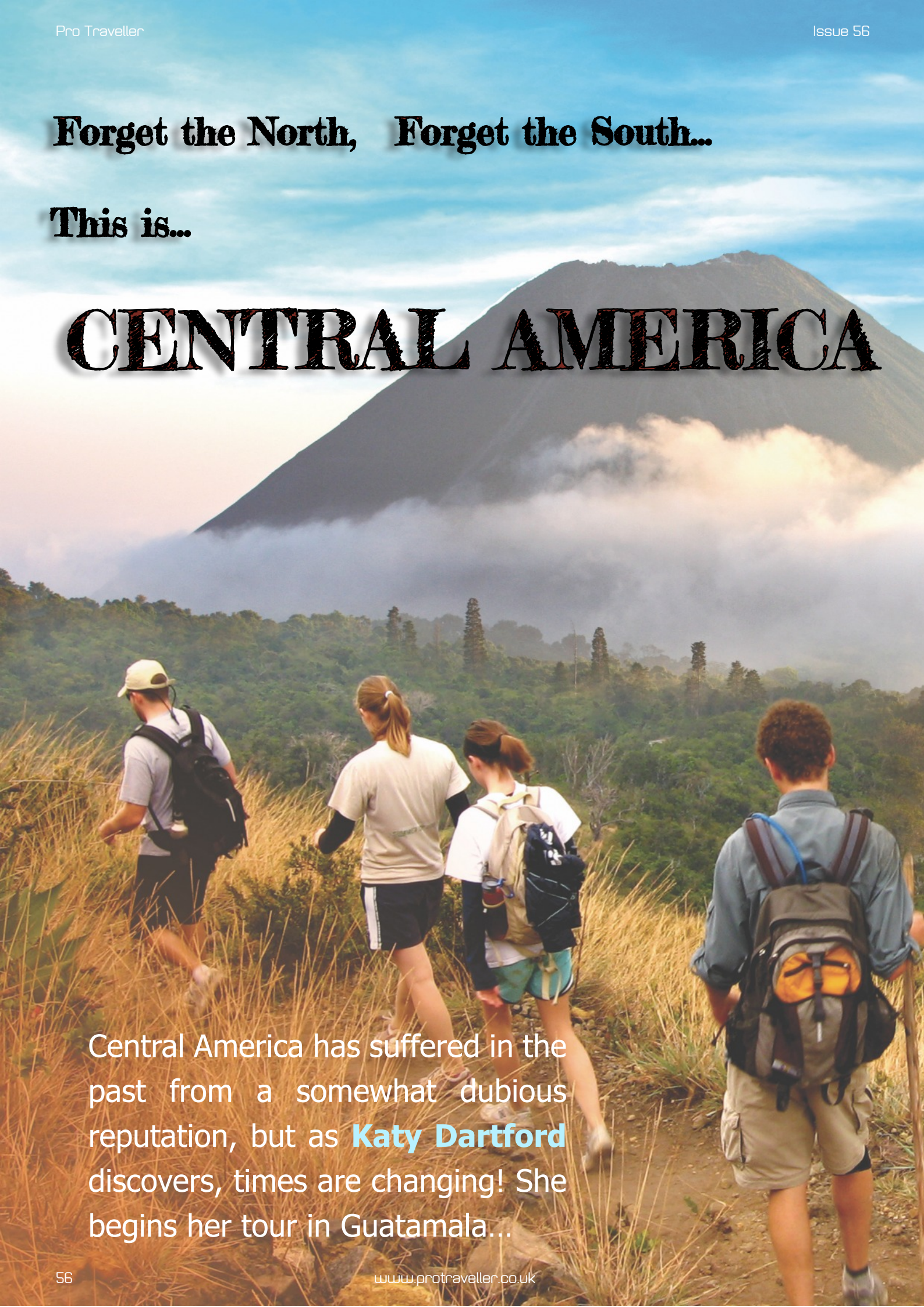
Forget the North, Forget the South...

This is...

CENTRAL AMERICA



Central America has suffered in the past from a somewhat dubious reputation, but as **Katy Dartford** discovers, times are changing! She begins her tour in Guatamala...

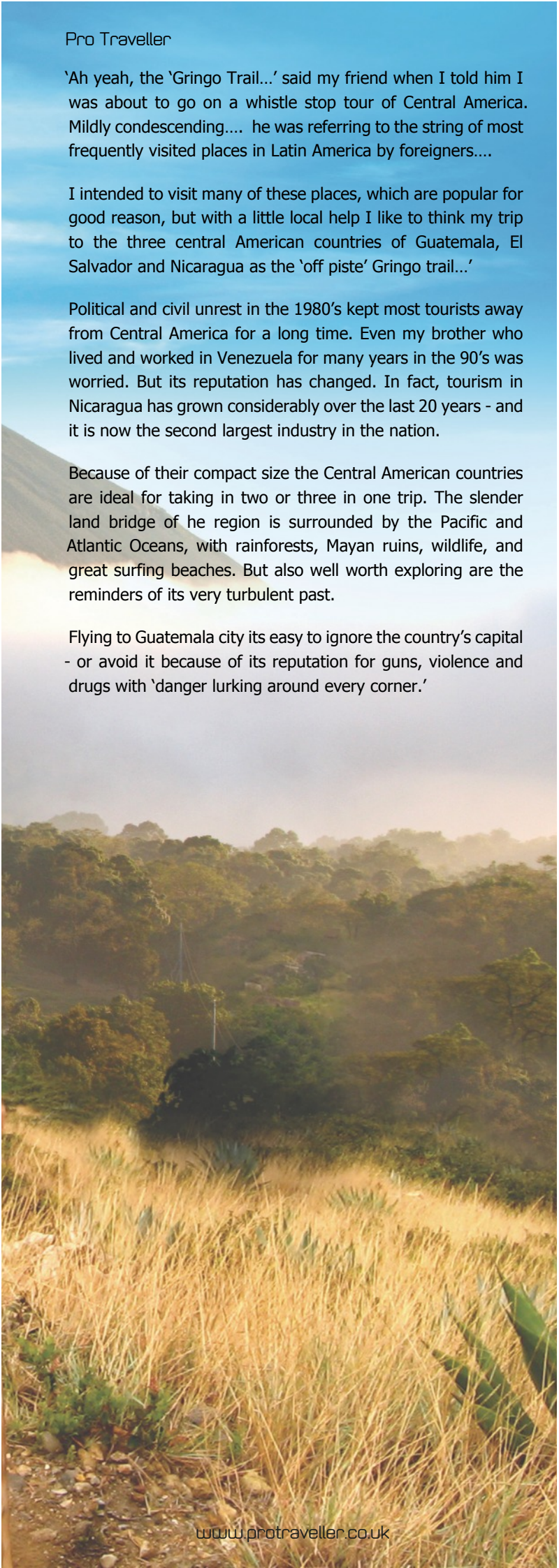
'Ah yeah, the 'Gringo Trail…' said my friend when I told him I was about to go on a whistle stop tour of Central America. Mildly condescending…. he was referring to the string of most frequently visited places in Latin America by foreigners….

I intended to visit many of these places, which are popular for good reason, but with a little local help I like to think my trip to the three central American countries of Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua as the 'off piste' Gringo trail…'

Political and civil unrest in the 1980's kept most tourists away from Central America for a long time. Even my brother who lived and worked in Venezuela for many years in the 90's was worried. But its reputation has changed. In fact, tourism in Nicaragua has grown considerably over the last 20 years - and it is now the second largest industry in the nation.

Because of their compact size the Central American countries are ideal for taking in two or three in one trip. The slender land bridge of he region is surrounded by the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, with rainforests, Mayan ruins, wildlife, and great surfing beaches. But also well worth exploring are the reminders of its very turbulent past.

Flying to Guatemala city its easy to ignore the country's capital - or avoid it because of its reputation for guns, violence and drugs with 'danger lurking around every corner.'



But instead head straight off for the colonial city of Antigua, Lake Atitlan or the ruins of Tikal. Its worth taking some time to explore this often overlooked city which, according to local guide, Eli Orozco, only gets around 200 tourists a year in its downtown area - and that's despite it being the place where it all began for revolutionary Che Guevara, being the culmination of his South American road trip.

The streets of downtown Guatemala city are alive with colourful lifelike Pinatas; the papier-mâché figures filled with small toys or sweets. They may have been invented in Mexico, but the Guatemalans do them so well. Around every corner are cultural projects, street food vendors and many stunning graffiti pieces, from artists such as Pulido or Dopezilla - a character born in the capital - so worth taking a picture with if you see the 'drugged lizard.' You may also spot examples of goat graffiti in the city - a reminder of the lost tradition of the goat milk sellers.

The Mound of the Snake

Under the streets of Guatemala's bustling capital lies another, much older city: the Mayan metropolis of Kaminaljuyú. Kaminaljuyú had a lagoon, but when it dried up the Mayans built an aqueduct to bring water to the town from a spring. The three-mile earthen mound that snakes today through Guatemala City, known as 'the great Montículo de la Culebra' is considered to be the largest pre-Hispanic architectural work in Mesoamerica.

It is believed that the mound was also built for ceremonial purposes, since the figure worshiped by almost all of the pre-Hispanic cultures was the serpent. After the Spaniards arrived in the 1500's, they constructed their own aqueduct on top of the original 2000 year old Mayan one in around 1700. The Pinula Aqueduct is one of the first hydraulic architecture works made after the transfer to the new capital of Guatemala.

The growth of the city caused the partial destruction of the aqueduct in 1861. Then the earthquakes of 1917 and 1918 also destroyed some sections of the arcs.

All that remains of the ancient Maya structure today is a grassy incline. The ancient city's mounds and plazas can only be seen in the overgrown hillocks of the "Kaminaljuyú



archaeological park" on Guatemala City's north side. The two structures were declared historical monuments in 1966; being associated with the Valley of Guatemala from the pre-Hispanic and colonial times.

Park of the Cerrito del Carmen

One of the only green places in the the Historic Centre, Eli says the Park of the Cerrito del Carmen used to be place for drug addicts and prostitutes, but in 2009 the government cleaned it up and now its a place where people come to relax and look at views across the city.

In colonial times it was just a grass land and a transition point. But the chapel itself, the Hermita del Carmen, with its sombre baroque elements, was built in 1620 and is older than the city, built in 1776. The history of the Cerrito del Carmen is closely linked to that of the founding of the Guatemalan capital. It was the starting point of when the capital was moved from the Panchoy Valley to the Ermita Valley. After the earthquakes of 1917 and 1976 the chapel was rebuilt, hence its lack of consistent style.

Che Guevera's home

Che Guevera lived in the historic centre and at the Pension Meza. Now there is a small display there and you can even book to sleep in his room. Guevara's Latin American road trip culminated in Guatemala city. By this point he had seen so many injustices and in 1954 he joined the Guatemala army.



It was the year when a CIA-orchestrated coup ousted the Guatemalan government of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman, a former army colonel whose policies attempted to narrow the chasm between the country's tiny elite and its impoverished peasants, quashing a 10-year effort to build a democratic state.

Under a succession of military rulers who took power after the coup, Guatemala descended into three decades of a brutal civil war in which as many as 200,000 people died. Many of those were Maya and peasants killed by security forces, before the government and guerrilla forces signed a peace accord in 1996.

The Guatemalan government's brutal repression campaign was one of many that were carried out in the name of fighting communism in Latin America during the Cold War, often with implicit or explicit approval from the US government.



The Metropolitan Cathedral

Cross over the central plaza in the historic centre and there are twelve stone pillars framing the entrance to the imposing Metropolitan Cathedral. Following a project by the Catholic Church they have the names of victims of the civil war engraved in gilded letters on them. For now, the pillars are the only testament to those who died or disappeared.

Efforts to bring about justice for the human rights violations during the war have increased in recent years, but a culture of impunity for military and political elites continues. In 2013, former dictator Efrain Rios Montt was convicted of genocide, but the ruling was overturned just days later. The retrial has been suspended. Meanwhile, the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation continue to study bones discovered in mass graves dating from the time of the country's civil war.

Antigua

The lady in her confectionary store flicks on her chocolate fountain machine and dips an array of frozen fruits into it, letting the sauce solidify, then hands me a chocolate dunked banana. It's delicious. Much better than a standard ice lolly. And much needed as I stroll around the streets of Antigua, with its iconic statues of deities, lions and mermaids dotted around.

The colonial city in the central highlands of Guatemala is located in a valley surrounded by three volcanoes, of which only Fuego is now active. The Spanish Baroque-influenced buildings come in nine different colours, due to its UNESCO World Heritage status which was granted for its history, beauty and ruins of colonial churches.

When I arrived it was Constitution Day (May 31) and some sort of ' non smoking' day. School children were playing in marching bands - not just traditional tunes, but the likes of Daft Punks, 'Get Lucky' as they paraded majestically through the Arco de Santo Catalina, a covered walkway which originally linked the convents on either side of the street.

In the central park in Antigua Guatemala's main square, I spot a plaque, shedding some light on the origins of the nickname of 'Antigüeños.' So the myth goes, they are known as Panzas Verdes (green bellies) because of all the avocados they ate. The plaque was placed there by the California Avocado Society to recognise the contribution of Antigua Guatemala to the development of the avocado industry in California, thanking them for giving them the advocate seed.

A hike up the 337 steps of El Calvario is a great way to take in views of the town toward Volcán Agua, and to admire the impressive Cerro de la Cruz, one of the city's three volcanoes. Just make sure you pick cloud free day!

Nearby, a small fruit stall sells us salted mango, which I suck on as I look out from the prominent cross at the head of the lookout point, devoted to the city's patron saint, Santiago.



Chichicastenango

I travel north west to Chicchicastenango, 'the city of nettles,' approximately 140 kilometres north-west of Guatemala City. Its known for its traditional K'iche' Maya culture. At an altitude of 1965 meters, it's flanked by vast, sloping valleys and huge mountain peaks.

We stop first at Church of Santo Tomás, where the Maya religious book, the Popol Vuh, was found. This narrates the origin of mankind. A Mayan ceremony is taking place, incense fills the air, but the offerings are a combination of Catholic and Mayan, with K'iche' Maya priests on occasion, burning a chicken for the gods.

The 400-year-old church is built atop a Pre-Columbian temple platform, and the 18 steps originally leading to a Mayan temple stand for one month of the Maya calendar year.

Next to the church is the colourful market of Chichicastenango, strung out along a myriad of tiny streets. Well known for its famous market days, held each Thursday and Sunday, where vendors sell handicrafts, food, flowers, pottery, wooden boxes, condiments, medicinal plants, pom and copal (traditional incense), cal (lime stones for preparing tortillas), grindstones, pigs and chickens, machetes, and other tools. Vivid textiles bedecked the stalls and the local Mayan women wore rich embroidered dresses, carrying their wares on their heads.

The town also boasts one of the most beautiful and colourful cemeteries in the world, with with vibrant, richly painted

gravestones, painted in the favourite colour of the deceased. I watch in silence as many Masheños (citizens of Chichicastenango) who choose to celebrate life and death the same ways that their Mayan ancestors did, burn fires and incense and offer prayers to the gods

Lake Atitlan

Not far from Chichicastenango is Lake Atitlan, a volcanic crater in Guatemala's southwestern highlands. The largest lake in the country at 130km2 and 340m deep, its framed by three volcanoes. Eli tells me there is a weird phenomenon when at 4pm - every day - no boats will take to its waters as the current suddenly becomes very strong.

Set on a natural balcony overlooking Lake Atitlan, is a market - not intended for tourists - called Solola. Held on Tuesday's and Friday's it draws crowds of traditionally dressed Mayans from all over the highlands to trade in fruits, vegetables, fish, flowers, handicrafts, textiles, and live animals.

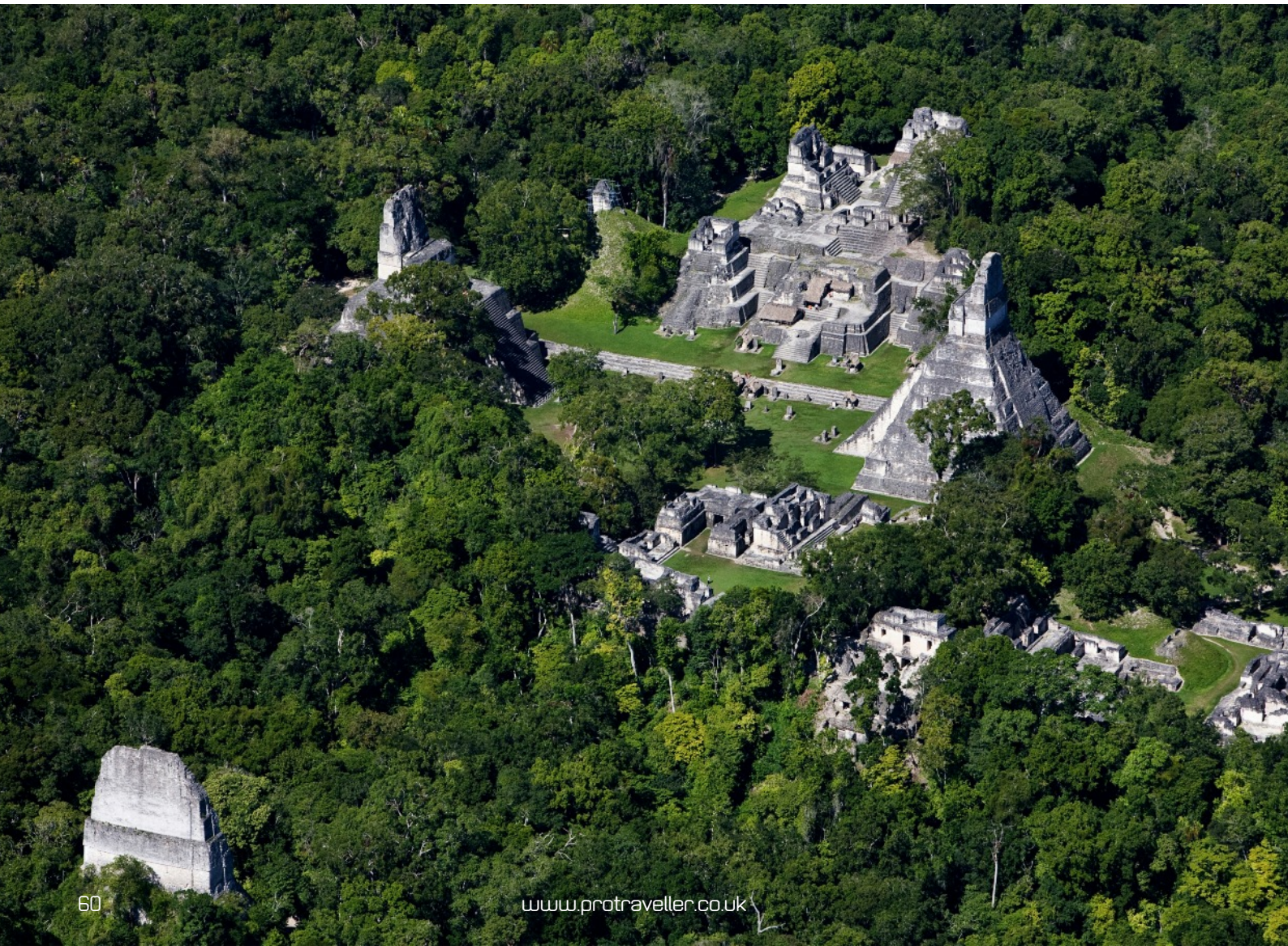
TIKAL

If you're short on time, the easiest way to reach Tikal, the UNESCO site of Mayan temples, and the largest excavated archaeological site in the Americas, is by taking an early flight from Guatemala City.

Landing 400 km away in Flores, on the country's third largest lake, Petenitza, in the northern lowland Petén region, it is the gateway to Tikal. After breakfast by the lake, I spent the day exploring the once flourishing royal city of 90,000 inhabitants - abandoned in the 11th century and quickly reclaimed by the jungle.

Archaeological excavations which began in the 1950s unearthed several pyramids and royal palaces. From the visitors' centre we hike along a track leading into the forest, and the animals are quick to make an appearance.





A russet coloured coatimundi, a tropical raccoon, crosses our path sniffing the ground for insects and fallen fruit. Shortly afterwards our guide points to the treetops where a family of black howler monkeys are slowly swinging through the canopy. Later on as the magnificent pyramids come into view, he stops at a tree root and points out a nesting tarantula. The area is also famous for chicleros trees. We see scars in trees where the chicle gum is extracted, and used to make chewing gum.



As well as the many towering temples we explore, there are hundreds of mounds everywhere, pyramids left to become overgrown with grass and trees, and waiting for their turn to be investigated. As I reach the North Acropolis, my guide Julio Tot tells me to start clapping, the sound pings around me echoing off the multitude of steps like firing bullets.

Back at the visitor centre, a model shows how the site would have once looked. Only the elite lived in the palaces. The farmers lived in thatched houses on the outskirts of the city, and eventually they moved away and lived simpler lives, more akin to the Maya we see now.



Do's and Don'ts in Guatamala

Eating:

Kak'ik - a turkey soup-stew with spices such as achiote, coriander, and a number of chilies stand out.

Tamale - a dumpling made of usually corn-based dough which is steamed in a corn husk or banana leaf. Tamales can be filled with meats, cheeses, fruits, vegetables and chilies.

Rellenitos - little dumplings of mashed plantain stuffed with sweetened black beans.

A Guatemala mole - a dessert sauce made from chocolate, dried chillis, tomatoes and pumpkin seeds, often poured over fried plantains and served with sesame seeds on top. Legend has it that a group of Mexican nuns invented it - upon hearing that the archbishop was going to visit, the convent nuns went into a panic because they were poor and had almost nothing to prepare. The nuns prayed and brought together the little bits of what they did have, including chili peppers, spices, day-old bread, nuts, and a little chocolate. They killed an old turkey, cooked it and put the sauce on top; the archbishop loved it. When one of the nuns was asked the name of the dish, she replied, "I made a mole." Mole was the ancient word for mix; now this word mostly refers to the dish.

Drinking:

Gallo beer, made in downtown Guatamala city. It's the oldest beer in the country since 1896. At 5% its a good strength pale lager and since its Guatemala's longest continually brewed beer it has become their most famous. Its now part of everyday life and has become part of folklore. The brewery was founded in 1886 by two brothers Mariano Castillo Cordo-va and Rafael Castillo Cordova.

Buying:

Coffee, textiles, native paintings- crafts and boots with textiles. The best shops for jade are in Antigua.

Don'ts:

Avoid the fire water.

Don't drink liquids from streets food vendors.

Don't eat raw meats like cervices too soon, and avoid salads and uncooked fish and meat as the stomach needs to get used to it.

Further Information

Guatemala Tourism Office:

https://visitguatemala.com