

Guatemala



La Merced Church, with its striking yellow-and-white stucco facade, sits high atop the city of Antigua, with Agua Volcano looming in the background.

A country of contrasts

STORY AND PHOTOS BY DAVID YONKE, BLADE RELIGION EDITOR



In June, I traveled to Guatemala to report on the efforts of International Samaritan, a nonprofit ministry founded at Toledo's St. John's Jesuit High School to help people who work in garbage dumps.

The depth of poverty among the dump workers is beyond comprehension for most Americans, but away from the city's notorious dump neighborhood, Guatemala's rich history and exotic landscapes create a country of contrasts.

For thousands of years Guatemala was the land of the mighty Mayan warriors, whose art and architecture permeate the culture. The country is also home to myriad Amerindian tribes, with 23 languages officially recognized by the government.

Bordered by Mexico, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador, Guatemala has coasts on both the Caribbean and Pacific and its elevation is high enough to make the climate mild year-round.

The country's exotic beauty, however, is tempered by its geologic volatility. Guatemala sits on three seismic faults, and its history is marked by major earthquakes.

The Spanish colonial capital of Antigua, for example, was abandoned in 1776 after a series of devastating quakes. The city's cobblestone streets and picturesque shops and restaurants have been restored in recent decades, turning it into a must-see tourist destination.

For a country slightly smaller in area than Tennessee, Guatemala's landscape is dotted with 33 volcanoes. One place to see them up close is Lake Atitlán. Situated 8,200 feet above sea level, the lake is encircled by three active volcanoes whose caps are often shrouded by a mix of clouds and volcanic steam.

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Colors abound in a cemetery near Lake Atitlán.



A woman carries her day's haul in the Guatemala city dump.



Even in the ghetto, some people take pride in their homes.



A young boy crouches by an open sewer in a dump workers' ghetto.



Wooden statues adorned with colorful outfits in a Santiago, Atitlán, church.



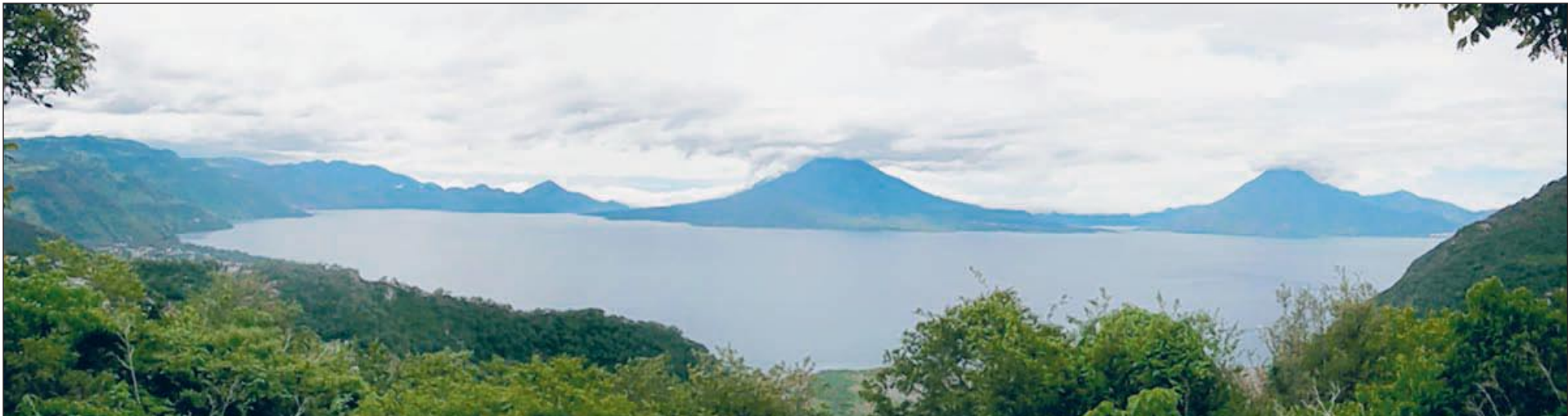
The upward view as one enters La Merced Church in Antigua.



Dump workers sort through materials in Guatemala City's Zone 3.



Colorful handmade crafts for sale in Santiago, Atitlán.



Lake Atitlán, a crater lake, is guarded by three volcanos. Guatemala, slightly smaller than Tennessee, has 33 active volcanoes.