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 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. Guatemala’s exotic beauty, however, is tempered by its geologic volatility. The Spanish colonial capital of Antigua, for example, was abandoned in 1776 after a series of devastating earthquakes. 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 Atitlan. 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.

A country of contrasts

STORY AND PHOTOS BY DAVID YONKE, BLADE RELIGION EDITOR

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.

Colors abound in a cemetery near Lake Atitlan.

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

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

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

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

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

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