

Art of discovery takes MICA president to Guatemala

By Stephanie Citron



Who knew that a man renowned for his progressive-minded accomplishments in advancing an educational institution would prefer to spend his leisure exploring underdeveloped lands and ancient civilizations? That, in a nutshell, describes Maryland Institute College of Art President Fred Lazarus IV.

The Harvard graduate, widely acclaimed for launching Baltimore's once-local art college onto the world stage, is recognized as a leader in art and design education for more than three decades. Lazarus is also the brainchild behind Artscape, the free outdoor arts festival considered the largest in the country, and has led the transformation of the neighborhood bordering MICA into the arts and entertainment district called Station North. In his spare time, he founded and/or chaired countless arts education and community development associations.

Juggling a grueling calendar filled with relentless challenges and demands, just where does one go to recharge? For the avant-garde Lazarus, who plans to retire this year, we might guess an exotic beach resort or a glamorous city in Europe. Turns out we weren't even close, so we learned about a largely unvisited gem, and one essential item to always bring along.

Where is your favorite travel destination?

We [including his wife, Jonna] just love traveling in South and Central America. The birding is just incredible. We've been to Guatemala several times, we've been to southern Mexico ... because I love ruins, I love the markets, all those things. We don't stay in one spot, we move around to a number of places.

Do you have a favorite?

Guatemala — I just fell in love with the country, the Mayan people, the markets, the textiles and the history.



When did you discover it?

I was a Peace Corp volunteer — but not stationed there — in 1967. I've been back a number of times since. Most recently, a couple of years ago [we went twice] because we only had eight days each time.

So you've really seen it change.

In some ways, it has changed a lot; in many other ways, it has stayed very much the same. I've always loved the pre-Columbian ruins and the culture. The people are wonderful.

We've found a wonderful birding guide through a travel agency [called] Martsam Travel that is based in Antigua [Guatemala]. He knows every bird by call as well as by identity. In our three trips, he may have found three birds he's never seen before.

What kinds of exotic birds have you seen?

Most of the birds you see in the U.S. migrate to Central America in the winter, but there are also so many tropical birds. The quetzal was a favorite of the Incas. Like a parrot with brightly colored feathers, reds, blues, yellows, purples. [We've seen] the guan, chachalacas, curassows, toucans, trogons, and amazing hummingbirds. It's not unusual to spot 100 different birds in 10 days.

What time of year do you like to go?

The best time is when it's winter here. We go in February. Being so close to the equator, the weather is fairly consistent there.

How do you get there?

From here, you have to fly through somewhere — Miami or Houston. We fly to [La Aurora Airport in] Guatemala City, and from there we like to have a driver.

Where do you stay?

When we arrived [during this past visit], we went to Antigua [the old capital of Guatemala, just 30 miles west of Guatemala City] and then returned there at the end of our trip for a few days. It's a wonderful place and much prettier than Guatemala City. We tend to like small hotels. We stayed at a great inn called Posada del Angel. There are about a dozen rooms; each is different and more beautiful than the next. The breakfast is wonderful, and it is close to the main plaza.

You mentioned that you like to travel around. How long did you stay there?

We flew to Tikal [National Park in northern Guatemala] from Guatemala City the next day and stayed outside the park. We met our guide, Melvin, at the hotel. After a great day and a half of birding and seeing Tikal, we went to a lesser-known ruin called Yaxha.

After Tikal, we flew back the capital and went to the highlands. There we arrived at Panajachel [the main city of the region] on Lake Atitlan, and took an open boat across this beautiful lake, surrounded by volcanoes that are no longer active. On the other side of the lake, we arrived at the village of Santiago Atitlan, where we stayed for a few days at a wonderful inn called Posada de Santiago. The rooms are in small bungalows in a lovely garden behind the main lodge where the meals were served. Surrounding the lake are 13 Mayan villages. Normally we get out on the water and visit the village, but this last time the lake was very rough so we drove. We checked out the markets, did a horseback ride up through the fincas [farms and ranches] and a hike through the coffee fincas. Probably the best coffee anywhere. Higher above the plantations is vegetation [similar to] a tropical rain forest.

Where else did you visit?

On the way back to Antigua, we stopped in Chichicastenango [about 85 miles northwest of Guatemala City] where on Sundays they have one of the great markets in the world. The Mayan Inn, where we stayed, is memorable, especially for the guys who light the fire in your room before you got to bed and in the [morning] before you get up.

What about the beaches?

I've actually not gone to the beaches there. I've been to beaches in Panama but not there. I'd like to sometime.

How's the food?

For the most part, not great. In Antigua there's good international restaurants, but around the rest of the country it's very much beans and rice — very simple food — not fantastic.

What do you like to bring back with you?

[Laughs] We have trunkloads of stuff. My wife loves textiles, and it's impossible to go down there and not buy it. The wool is beautiful. You used to be able to find some pre-Columbian pieces, but they're not allowing it out of the country anymore. Years ago, we found pots and things like that but not anymore.

What's your most memorable moment?

The first time I was in the town of Chichicastenango,



about 45 years ago. You wake up and people are coming down from the hills ... this unbelievable mass of humanity selling their wares. And then there's the incense burning in the churches with the Indian sacrifices. And there's that wonderful traditional hotel [the Mayan Inn] where we've stayed.

How often do you travel?

Well, I'm about to retire in June, so hopefully a lot more. But [up until now] I'd say about one international trip a year, in addition to a place in Colorado that we go to ski and we have a place in Lake Chautauqua [in New York] that we go to in the summertime. We have a cottage [in Chautauqua] that's been in my wife's family for four generations. Hopefully, once I retire, we'll spend more time up there.

What is an item you won't travel without?

A flashlight. If you're in rural areas, like we were at these ruins at Palenque in Ssuthern Mexico, at night it is just pitch black. You just can't believe how dark it is. And [also handy] if the power goes out So a little portable flashlight goes a long way.

What's next on your bucket list?

Now that we've got lots of time coming up, we'd love to spend time in Southeast Asia. Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam are all places I'd love to see. And for that matter, southeastern China. I've never been to that part of the world at all. Also Greece. My wife has never been there.

If you go

Guatemala is arguably Central America's best-kept travel secret, often overlooked by Americans. Less than 2 percent urbanized, it is a cultural natural wonder with verdant mountains, volcanic canyon-shoots, pristine lakes and uninhabited beaches. Culturally, the Mayan people still populate the historic villages, rich with their colorful handicrafts, textiles and traditional dishes, often cooking open-air. Info: visitguatemala.com

Getting there

United, American and Delta airlines all offer flights from BWI-Marshall Airport through Atlanta, Miami or Houston, into Guatemala City, beginning at about \$580 round-trip. Once there, MICA President Fred Lazarus often hires a Guatemala Martsam Travel (martsamtravel.com) in the city of Antigua. If you prefer to be in the driver's seat, it is advisable to rent a 4x4, as many roads are still unpaved.

Lodging

In the scenic city of Antigua, Lazarus lodges at the charming **Posada del Angel** (posadadelangel.com). In Tikal, you'll hear the chattering monkeys in the morning if you stay in a thatched roof bungalow right inside the park at the rustic **Hotel Tikal Inn**, from \$125. (tikalinnsunrise.com). By Lake Atitlan, Lazarus recommends **Posada de Santiago** whose stone-cottages have a private garden and hammock. Also included in the room rate (\$60-85) is use of mountain bikes, canoes, hot tub and pool (posadadesantiago.com)

Don't miss

Tikal National Park. More jungle than park, the wondrous destination is one of the largest archaeological sites of the pre-Columbian Maya civilization, encompassing the largest tropical rain forest in Central America. (tikalpark.com)

Lake Atitlan, the deepest lake in Central America, is surrounded by stunning flora, fauna and authentic Mayan towns and villages. (atitlan.com)

Antigua. The circa 1520s city of Antigua, a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site, served as Guatemala's capital for three centuries. Tucked away between three volcanoes, Antigua's well-preserved cobblestone streets, plazas with fountains and terracotta roofs make for picturesque photo ops. Combine that with warm, welcoming locals and one of Central America's best market-bazaars, and you'll surely want to stay for a week's worth of siestas. (aroundantigua.com)