

## TRAVEL

# On a Guatemalan Lake, Luxury Meets Tradition

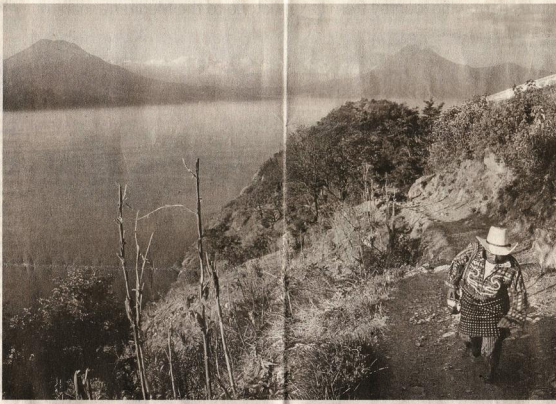
On spectacular Atitlán, boating from fancy hotels to villages that honor ancient gods

By NICHOLAS CASEY

*Santa Catarina, Guatemala*

**T**HE ENGLISH WRITER ALDOUS HUXLEY once called Guatemala's Lake Atitlán, deep in the Mayan highlands and surrounded by three volcanoes, "the most beautiful lake in the world." Then came Guatemala's bloody civil war. Thousands died—many on the lake's shores—and by the war's end 36 years later in 1996, the visitors were nearly gone.

It's taken years for Atitlán to rebuild what once made it the talk of travelers. Now the high-altitude lake is emerging as an offbeat destination for luxury tourists—a quiet oasis in a country known mostly for roughing it with a backpack. It also offers something typical posh destinations don't: the chance to rub elbows with a native culture of the highlands Maya, as much of a draw as the dramatic setting.



Alamy (2); Casa Photo (bottom) (9/2)

## TRIP PLANNER

**How to get there:** Nonstop flights from Chicago, Los Angeles and Houston depart daily to Guatemala City. From the airport, private shuttles run door-to-door service to lake hotels. Many hotels have helpdesks onsite.

**When to go:** August and September, when the rainy season often takes a break, is a good time to enjoy the region without the crowds. High season runs December to March. Book well in advance.

**Where to stay:** The nine-room **Casa Palopó** in Santa Catarina, in a converted villa perched above the lake, offers some of the best accommodations ([www.casapalopo.com](http://www.casapalopo.com); +502 7762-2270; rooms \$140 to \$263).

**Laguna Lodge Eco-Resort** is a luxury hotel set on 60 acres ([www.lagunalodgeatitlan.com](http://www.lagunalodgeatitlan.com); +502 7823-2529; Rooms \$225 to \$250). Long-established **Hotel Atitlán**, on a former coffee plantation, has 60 rooms ([www.hotelatitlan.com](http://www.hotelatitlan.com); +502 7762-1441; Rooms \$120 to \$150).