

GUA

WEAVING PAST INTO PRESENT

Ancient traditions are helping Maya women forge a path to empowerment in towns around Lake Atitlán, Guatemala.

BY GINA DECAPRIO VERCESI



An indigenous woman walks along Lake Atitlán carrying a variety of traditional clothing and fabrics.

IN THE LAKESIDE VILLAGE of Santa Catarina Palopó, large golden cornstalks stretch along a turquoise wall while a parade of pastel peacocks embellishes a purple storefront. Giant orange and emerald butterflies hover over the door of Galeria Atitlán, welcoming visitors. Across the way, a woman crosses the Plaza Central balancing a large blue and green cloth bundle on her head. Her vibrant *traje*—traditional dress—complements the brightly painted building façades. Standing in the tiny square, I feel like I’ve stepped into a kaleidoscope.

A dozen or so towns line the shores of Lake Atitlán, a vast cobalt caldera 90 miles west of Guatemala City. Here, Maya women in handwoven skirts and

huipiles (blouses) harvest coffee, flip tortillas and sell chili peppers. Many attend to these tasks with babies on their backs, little heads and toes peeking from slings fashioned out of the same striking fabric as the women’s clothing.

I’ve long been fascinated by handicrafts that tell the story of a place, and after learning about Lake Atitlán’s rich textile history, I was eager to explore this vivid pocket of Central America. The opportunity to do so finally comes in the spring, when I join an artisans’ tour hosted by the boutique hotel Casa Palopó that offers a deep dive into the region’s weaving traditions, past and present.

For centuries, Maya women of the western highlands have used simple backstrap looms to create colorful cloth. Relying on roots, bark, leaves, berries, flowers and insects, they infuse radiant hues into hand-spun cotton thread, which they’ll turn into fabrics with patterns unique to each community. During decades of civil war, when indigenous groups were targeted, traditional garments acted as dangerous identifiers. But now this style conveys pride and unity among the Maya. And as male-dominated economic activities such as agriculture and fishing dwindle in villages throughout the area, ancient textiles are forging pathways to empowerment for many native women.

I start my education in San Juan la Laguna, a village known for its female-owned weaving cooperatives. I stroll past open-air shops bursting with fabrics. Hand-lettered signs announce authenticity. “Natural plant dyes,” one boasts. “Locally made and ecofriendly,” offers another. The bright textiles entice, but I have an appointment at Asociación Ixoq Ajkeem, a co-op owned and operated by Maya women belonging to the town’s predominant ethnic group, the Tz’utujil.

Inside, gorgeous scarves and ponchos, hammocks and tablecloths cover every inch of space. Tags identifying the weaver dangle from each item, ensuring that the proceeds go directly into her pocket. “With the

money we earn, we help support the household and send our children to school,” says Martina Mendez, one of the co-op’s founding members. Kneeling on a straw mat, she whirls wispy puffs of raw cotton on a simple hand spindle, transforming them into fine thread. “We are rescuing the work of our ancestors.”

I choose a delicate, ruby red tunic made from the softest cotton, a beautiful navy and white poncho, a striped polychrome tote bag. The designs are reminiscent of traditional *traje* I’ve seen, but with contemporary flair. Colonialism, isolation and cultural precepts once required colors and patterns to remain static, but as modern weavers draw inspiration from beyond their villages, motifs evolve.

Now those skills are being projected across an entire village. The Pintando Santa Catarina Palopó project is the brainchild of Harris Whitbeck, a Guatemalan journalist who spent his life vacationing by the lake. Inspired by the way color transformed a struggling neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro, Whitbeck reached out to local Maya Kaqchikel community leaders—most of them women—for support. Together, the group aims to turn the façades of Santa Catarina Palopó’s 850 buildings into works of art, using the brilliant hues and traditional patterns of the town’s *huipiles* for inspiration.

Lidia Cumes, Pintando’s administrative coordinator, waits for me outside the project’s headquarters; her bright blue skirt and blouse mirror the building’s exterior. With evident pride, she talks about the impact the initiative has had on Santa Catarina Palopó. “The work has been very gratifying,” Cumes says as we climb through the narrow streets. “It has benefited many people, creating opportunities and empowering the women.”

All around us, lively pops of color representing Lake Atitlán’s Maya culture adorn the city’s walls. They’re a vivid reminder of the past’s reach into the present—as well as a hopeful symbol of the community’s bright future. ▼



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