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Through the Marvelous Highlands
of Guatemala

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THROUGH THE MARVELOUS HIGHLANDS OF GUATEMALA¹

FAR upon the horizon towered the twin volcanoes of Atitlan, their dark flanks wreathed in vast white masses of cloud-like sparkling fields of snow. The cones, thousands of feet above, stood out sharply against the deep blue vault of the tropic skies. For five days we had been riding to them through the enchanted highlands of Guatemala, a marvelous land of fragrant pine forests, flowers, singing birds, broad winding roads, and fertile fields of wheat and corn cultivated by hundreds of thousands of industrious Indians. And many pueblos we had passed, lying on the rolling bosom of the cool table-lands with their schools and temples to Minerva, goddess of wisdom, and their white mission buildings and churches from whose thick-walled towers the pealing bells summoned the devout Indians to prayer. Almost without sensing a change of scene we had plunged into the quiet depths of a giant forest, dark after the brilliance of the tropical sun, where mighty trees rose as the stately pillars of a cathedral, to find upon emerging that a turn of the road brought into view a panorama of 200 miles of magnificent mountain country, forests, plains, the silver glint of lakes and streams, and volcanic cones 2 miles high enshrouded in turbans of fog.

Such is Guatemala, land of majestic contrasts, of unwonted, almost appalling surprises. Here is one of the splendid show places of the world. Far from the beaten path of most tourists its wonders are becoming better known. In grandeur it will compare with Switzerland, the Canadian Rockies, the Grand Canyon of Arizona, and its panorama is laid upon as vast a scale. Yet the tropic highlands have an individuality all their own, of lights, and shades, and fleeting colors, of luxuriant masses of vegetation, of inspiring and prodigious formations of the land.

Below lay cities with their public squares and white churches, fields of yellow grain like golden patches of light in the crystal-clear atmosphere of the highlands, huge dark masses of forest, and beyond, extending their thousands of spurs and flanks, rose the prodigious Cordilleras. To the left the peaks of Atitlan towered to the heavens,

¹ By Hamilton M. Wright, author of A Handbook of the Philippines.

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Photos by Hamilton M. Wright.

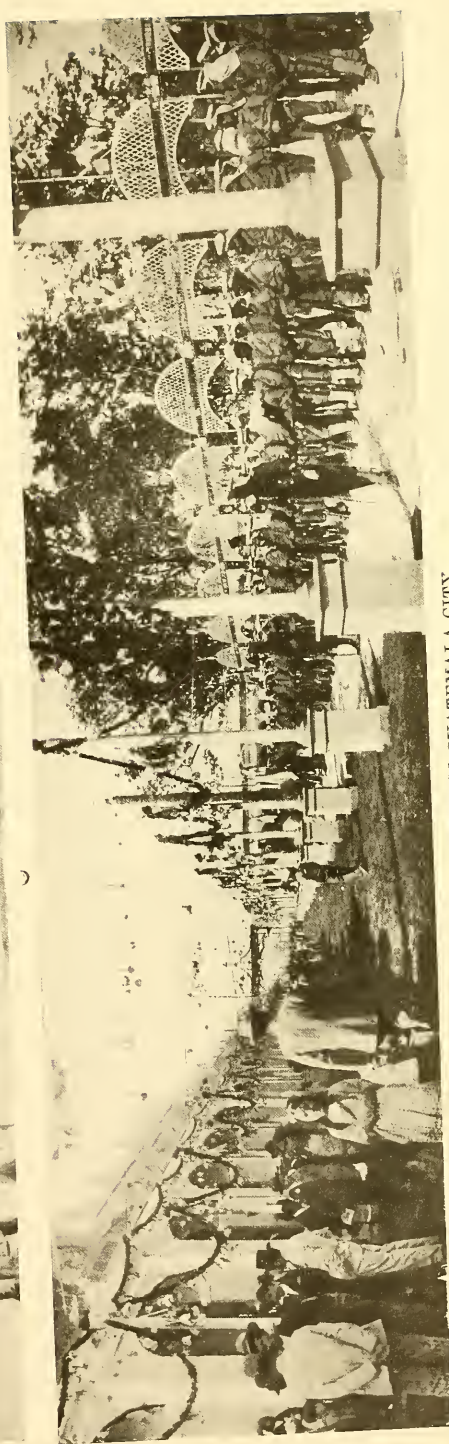
VIEWS OF GAUTEMALA CITY.

Top: A distant view of the city. "It is, itself, a city of the highlands with an altitude of 4,800 feet above sea level, a thoroughly modern city with excellent hotels and clubs and every convenience for the tourist and traveler. The population of the city is about 125,000, and with its well-paved streets, fine shops, attractive churches, public edifices, and educational institutions it affords a thousand pleasant diversions." Middle: Two pigmy Indians of Guatemala standing on El Carmen Hill, with the city in the background. Bottom: Another view of the city looking toward the cathedral in the middle background.

majestic, symmetrical, recalling in their perfect contour the famed Fugiyama of Japan.

It was more than a half day's ride from this point before we came to Godines Crest and beheld, 3,000 feet below us, the deep blue waters of Lake Atitlan, and on its opposite shores, rising sheer a mile to a mile and one-half above the surface of the lake, seven great volcanoes, of which the two known as Atitlan are the most wonderful. Lake Atitlan, itself a vast crater lake 27 miles in greatest length and 12 miles wide, is a remarkable body of water. The Rev. Father Garcia, of Naguala, a graduate of the University of Rome, and one who has given enthusiastic study to the meteorology of the region, informed me that official soundings of this lake gave an extreme depth of more than 1,000 feet. Its surface is 5,000 feet above the level of the sea. Its waters teem with trout with which it has been stocked and, while walking upon its sandy beach near Panajachel, we saw great schools of smaller fish and not a few of the larger. Into its shores plunge the volcanic hills, often in precipitous, forested hogbacks, often in steeply sloping wheat fields, or again ending in mile-high cliffs of bright red sandstone or perpendicular walls marked by the slate grays and purplish hues of volcanic ash. Such are the walls of Lake Atitlan, often called Lake Panajachel, painted by nature in her most glorious, riotous colors, and rivaling even the famed hues of the Grand Canyon of Arizona. From the shores of the lake, as we first looked down upon it, arose great clouds of steam as if the beach were saturated with boiling water. But, in this case, it was merely the afternoon sun beating upon the wet sands, for the waters of Atitlan are cool and crystal clear. Billows of mist, too, arose from the surface of the lake, only to be caught and dissipated by the sudden squalls that come almost vertically from the mountain passes, and always there were rainbows to be seen in the ascending mists. Whether one looked a half mile down upon the mirrored surface of the lake or whether he gazed at the volcanoes towering a mile above and wreathed in their streaming feather bows of shifting vapors, he felt as though great phenomena of nature were being staged for his benefit.

Some splendid roads have been built in the neighborhood of the lake. One of them, broad and sweeping, leads from Panajachel on the southeast shores of Atitlan to the picturesque pueblo of Solala, which is perched on mountain bluffs thousands of feet above. The road is blasted from rocky cliffs and its sides and walls are, literally, of granite. It is a remarkable piece of construction accomplished by one of the generals of President Cabrera's army. So steep is the road that cascades fall at its very edge and their waters are borne beneath it by culverts. As it skirts the gigantic bluffs, the traveler obtains entrancing visions of the lake and of the many villages upon its shores.



SCENES IN GUATEMALA CITY.

Upper: Guatemalan soldiers in the main plaza in Guatemala City. Lower: The plaza decorated for the "Festival of Minerva."

Photos by Hamilton M. Wright.



A CASCADE NEAR LAKE ATITLAN,
GUATEMALA.

"Some splendid roads have been built in the neighborhood of the lake. One of them, broad and sweeping, leads from Panajachel on the southeast shore of Atitlan to the picturesque pueblo of Solala, which is perched on mountain bluffs thousands of feet below. * * * So steep is the road that cascades fall at its very edge, and their waters are borne beneath it by culverts."

We started on this journey, myself and my compadre, a genial old muleteer, from Guatemala City, the capital of the Republic. It is, itself, a city of the highlands with an altitude of 4,800 feet above sea level, a thoroughly modern city with excellent hotels and clubs and every convenience for the tourist and traveler. The population of the city is about 125,000 and with its well-paved streets, fine shops, attractive churches, public edifices, and educational institutions it affords a thousand pleasant diversions. At 7 o'clock of a cool bright morning we clattered over the broad flagstone pavements of the city, the writer on a stout mule and his companion on a wiry little mountain horse. Our objective for the first day was Antigua, the former capital of the Republic, which lies as a modern Pompeii at the brim of the twin volcanoes, Agua and Fuego. The journey, 30 miles, is also made by automobile and diligencia or stage. In fact, the roads in the dry season will permit automobiles to travel about 50 miles farther north, but as we contemplated traversing some very rough country we preferred to cling to our mounts. The ride to Antigua, though a short one, is filled with interest and novelty. In the early morning one passes an almost endless procession of oxcarts and picturesquely dressed Indians coming into market. At Mixco, about 9 miles out, is to be seen the old conduit of flat flagstones built many years ago to supply Guatemala City with water. The conduit was still delivering water, and its method of construction suggested that of the old Roman aqueducts. At Mixco one obtains an excellent view



Photos by Hamilton M. Wright.

VIEWS OF LAKE ATITLAN, GUATEMALA.

“Its surface is 5,000 feet above the level of the sea. Its waters teem with trout, with which it has been stocked, and while walking upon its sandy beach near Panajachel we saw great schools of smaller fish and not a few of the larger. Into its shores plunge the volcanic hills, often in precipitous, forested hogbacks, often in steeply sloping wheat fields, or again, ending in mile-high cliffs of bright, red sandstone or perpendicular walls marked by the slate grays and purplish hues of volcanic ash. Such are the walls of Lake Atitlan, often called Lake Panajachel, painted by nature in her most glorious, riotous colors, and rivaling even the famed hues of the Grand Canyon of Arizona.” (‘Through the Marvelous Highlands of Guatemala,’ by Hamilton M. Wright.)

of Guatemala City, which lies upon an elevated plain on the Atlantic side of the Continental Divide and which has the characteristic dignity and stateliness of the larger Latin American capitals, due, no doubt, to the careful city planning and to the ornate architectural forms employed.

At Mixco we leave the stage road, plunge by a short cut into the hills and by 1 o'clock are in Antigua. It has been said of Antigua that it possesses the most extensive ruins to be found in any one spot in the world. The city was founded by the warrior Alvarado, who was sent south from Mexico about 1541. It was destroyed by an earthquake on July 29, 1773. Although some of its ruined churches have been reconstructed, for the most part the restored city embraces the old ruins which have changed but little in appearance in the last 100 years. The giant arches still remain and the mighty walls give a hint of past glories. At the time of its destruction Antigua was the center of the political, economic, and ecclesiastical administration in Central America. Fifty-eight huge edifices, including the cathedral, the governor general's palace, and many handsome churches and their dependent monasteries were laid waste. To my mind the most beautiful ruin is that of the Church of the Recoleccion, which I was at pains to photograph. Although much of the débris has for generations been covered with trailing vines and picturesque shrubs, these but serve to accentuate the majesty of the great pillars and arches which appear capable of enduring for centuries. Of amazing interest, to the writer at least, was the fact that the pigments used in the decorations of the walls and the inner arches of the church were as bright and fresh as if the colors had been applied but yesterday. Venetian red and cerulean blue appeared in attractive mosaics and designs. These are probably outer decorations which led to murals of religious subjects on the ceilings of the central vaults or naves.

The volcano Agua towers almost directly above the city of Antigua, at least so it seems, for the gradient is very steep, but a high ridge leads down the southern side of the mountain by which the ascent is easily made by muleback in a few hours. It is quite customary to ascend the volcano, which has an elevation of 11,000 feet, to see the sun rise. If the morning is a clear one, Guatemala City, Lake Amatitlan, 15 miles south of Guatemala City, and even the Pacific Ocean may be discerned. Ice forms near the summit of the peak and, as there are many hot springs, one may, as it were, turn the faucet of old Mother Earth for both hot and cold water. There are several good inns and hotels in Antigua, with corrals in connection where one may put up his horses. At the inn at which the writer stopped there were a gentleman and his wife from Valparaiso, a family from Cuba, and two ladies and their brother from Boston. Thus, it may be seen, Antigua is rather cosmopolitan in its appeal.



TWO VIEWS OF LAKE ATITLAN, GUATEMALA.

Lake Atitlan is a vast crater lake 27 miles in greatest length and 12 miles wide. Its surface is 5,000 feet above the level of the sea. "From the shores of the lake, as we first looked down upon it, arose great clouds of steam, as if the beach were saturated with boiling water. But, in this case, it was merely the afternoon sun beating upon the wet sands, for the waters of Atitlan are cool and crystal clear. Billows of mist, too, arose from the surface of the lake, only to be caught and dissipated by the sudden squalls that come almost vertically from the mountain passes, and always there are rainbows to be seen in the ascending mists."

During our brief stay there we had the finest of strawberries for the table, also sweet corn, beets, lettuce, and artichokes. Inquiry revealed that almost every fruit and vegetable known to the temperate zone can be grown in the Guatemalan highlands. We passed some unusually fine peach trees at Totonicipan later in our travels. The flowers, too, were lovely, roses, hollyhocks, and chrysanthemums being cultivated in the public plaza at Antigua.

Leading out of Antigua one passes on broad shady roads, sometimes through narrow ravines, again crossing meadows with running brooks and now mounting upward through forests of pine until the plateaus are reached, great broad table-lands bordered by distant mountain ranges whose lofty volcanic peaks stand out boldly against the sky.

All the highland country is densely populated; at least all that portion which lies between Guatemala City and Quetzaltenango, the second city of the Republic. The mountains are intensively cultivated up to a height of almost 10,000 feet. Fine schools have been built in the pueblos and cities under direction of President Estrada Cabrera. The President, who is a patron of all the arts, has vigorously pushed the manual training and technical schools. They are to be found throughout the settled portions of the Republic. Education is compulsory. Electric lights and pure water piping are installed in all communities of any size. The telegraph system is admirable; I sent 10 words 180 miles for 7 cents (American currency), a much lower rate than prevails in the United States or most other countries. The telegraph, educational, postal, and mining laws were personally formulated by President Cabrera, who is a jurist of extraordinary attainments. The police system is excellent. I have never seen an intoxicated person in the Republic. One can travel in any portion of it unarmed. Concrete has worked wonders. Every community has its public concrete washing place where the women may wash their clothes and to which water is often piped a great distance.

The people of the highlands, except in the larger towns, are mostly Indians, who are believed to be descended partly or wholly from the ancient Mayas. I had read that the faces upon the existing obelisks and monuments often bore a striking resemblance to the countenances of the Indians of to-day. The statement I found verified in the monuments at Quirigua. Of all the prehistoric races of the American hemisphere the Mayas were among the most advanced. They had progressed so far in mechanics that they were able to move rocks weighing 20 tons or more over great distances. They possessed a considerable amount of written lore, and represented sounds in their hieroglyphics. Their carvings of human beings or animals had been developed beyond the profile stage of the Egyptians. We found that many of the Indians we met upon the road had but a limited knowledge of Spanish. Father Garcia, of Naguala, is authority for the statement that there are now 27 different dialects spoken among



Photos by Hamilton M. Wright.

VIEWS OF ANTIGUA, THE ANCIENT CAPITAL OF GUATEMALA.

Upper: The city of Antigua, founded by Alvarado about 1541 and destroyed by Alvarado about 1541 and destroyed by an earthquake on July 29, 1773. "Although some of its ruined churches have been reconstructed, for the most part the restored city embraces the old ruins, which have changed but little in appearance in the 100 years." In the background is the volcano Agua, which towers almost directly above the city and has an elevation of 11,000 feet. Lower: Ruins of the Church of the Recolection. "Although much of the debris has for generations been covered with trailing vines and picturesque shrubs, these but serve to accentuate the majesty of the great pillars and arches which appear capable of enduring for centuries."

these people. The Rev. Father Rossbach, of Totonicipan, has 40,000 Indians in his parish. He did not know, he said, of a more devout or moral race. They are, too, a picturesque people. The men with their loose, open-sleeve jackets, plaid skirts, sturdy bare legs, and flat straw hats of home weave, strangely resemble the natives of northern Japan. The women lend a touch of vivid color to every country side. They wear richly hued guipils, home-woven waists of purple cloth, embellished with red and gold patterns and with sashes extending from the waist to below the knees, wound somewhat tightly yet permitting freedom of the limbs.

The gray dawn each morning found us started on our way, the air was cool and bracing and one could make from 35 to 40 miles a day without discomfort (we made more than this at times) and with several hours to spare in leisure at the roadside or in the villages. Between Pazum and Panajachel we came to a profound barranca or chasm in the earth, where the ground at the roadside fell away in precipitous walls 800 feet in depth. As one looked down from the level surface of the plains the tallest pines at the bottom of the chasm seemed but pigmies. This was the head of a great valley which stretched straight ahead for a score of miles. There are a number of such barrancas in Guatemala, some of which have no visible outlet above the ground. While I was photographing one of these crevasses at its apex a huge piece of ground 40 feet long and several feet wide broke from the opposite side, not more than 100 feet away, and went thundering down to the bottom.

Totonicipan, in the northwest part of the Republic, which we reached from the Peten region, lies at an altitude of 8,300 feet above sea level. Around it on all sides but the west rise the walls of great hills. It is a well-paved city of 18,000 population with attractive shops and fine churches and public buildings. All about are vegetable gardens, grain fields, and numerous orchards. Were it not for the lofty mountains near by, the North American here might fancy himself in the central part of New York State.

From Totonicipan a fine road leads west for 15 miles to Quetzaltenango, the second largest city in Guatemala, distinguished by its imposing public edifices, beautiful plaza, and fine business structures. There are six good hotels in Quetzaltenango and, although the city is 35 miles from the railroad at San Felipe, they enjoy a brisk patronage.

The stage road to San Felipe is one of the scenic highways of the world. In 35 miles it drops more than 1 mile and skirts the flanks of Mount Santa Maria, one of the most picturesque of the Central American volcanoes. More than this: In a few brief hours it plunges from the pine-clad temperate zone into tropical jungles of a luxuriance that baffles description. Here is a foreworld. Prodigious hardwoods with branches rising from clear boles 80 to 100 feet above the



Photograph by Hamilton M. Wright.

"THROUGH THE MARVELOUS HIGHLANDS OF GUATEMALA."

Top: View of a plantation 20 miles from Guatemala City. Note the coffee trees growing in the shade of banana plants and larger trees. Middle: Bridge on the road between Quetzaltenango and Totonicapán, the two cities being connected by a fine public highway. Bottom: One of the beautiful mountain roads of Guatemala.

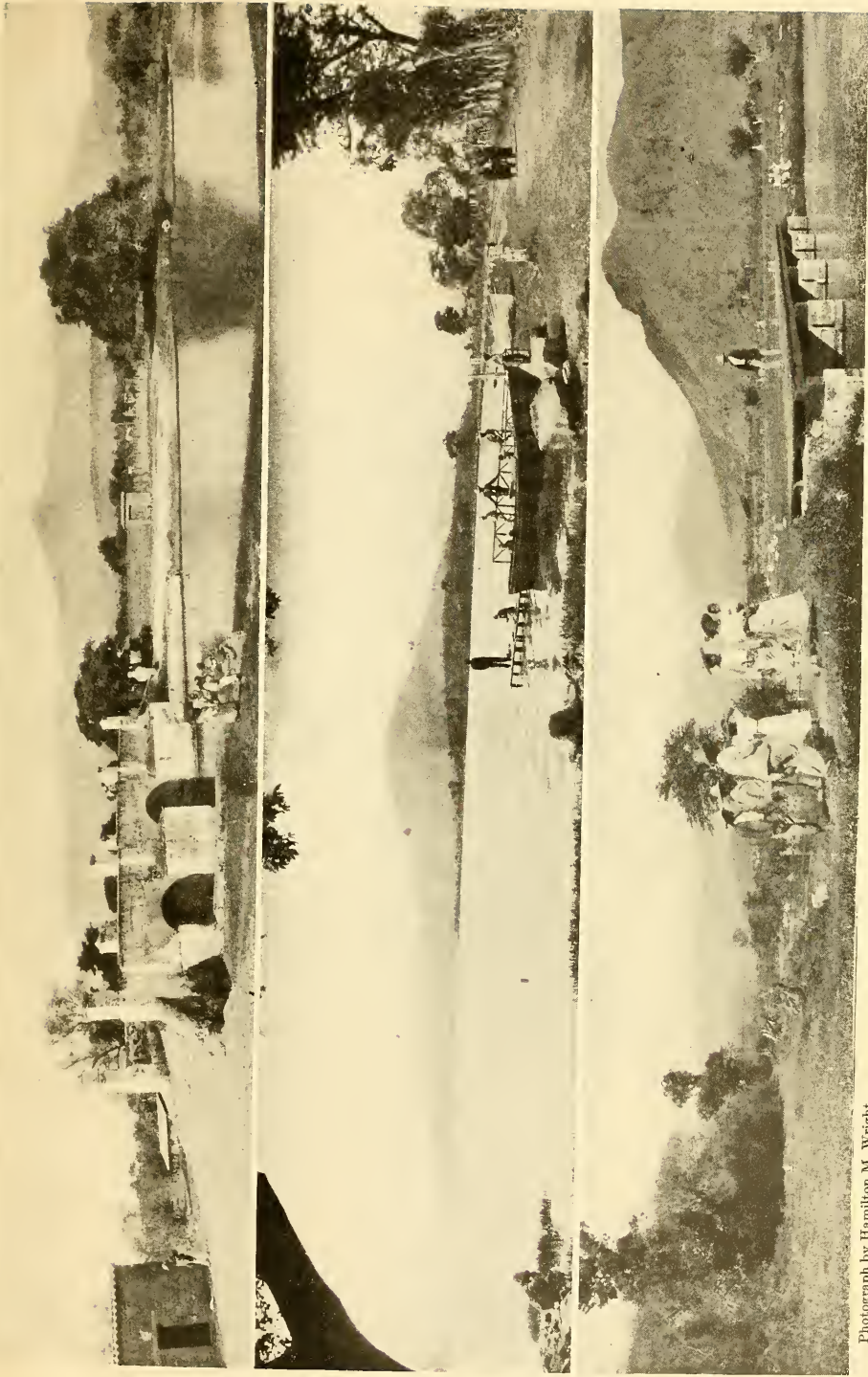
earth are hung with giant creepers like enormous serpents. Clusters of orchids cling to the branches or crevices of trees or hang suspended from trailing vines. Skeins of gray moss beard the trees. Tree ferns, giant palms, and exotic flowers are features of a jungle which, at times, one can only penetrate with a machete. In a few hours by the auto stage the traveler has plunged into a different world.

Santa Maria has been the most formidable of the Central American volcanoes. In 1902 an eruption blew a strip of earth said to exceed a mile in length from its side. The ash dust from the volcano is said to have been perceived as far north as the City of Mexico and as far south as Colombia. Ashes fell in some places at Pacific coast points to a depth of 6 or more inches. Yet despite the intensity of the upheaval the loss of life was not as serious as was reported and was confined principally to Santa Maria, although portions of Quetzaltenango were damaged.

No one who visits Guatemala should miss seeing Lake Amatitlan, which is much more accessible than Atitlan, although the latter can be reached by a 35-mile ride from the railroad if one approaches it from the south. Lake Amatitlan, however, is reached in three-quarters of an hour by train from Guatemala City, the railroad skirting its shores for about 6 miles and, at one point, passing over a narrow escarpment which divides the lake in two parts. Along its shores are many hot springs, and the lake is well stocked with small fish. It is rumored the lake possesses a subterranean outlet which causes a vortex where luckless fishermen have perished. Good roads and trails extend around the north borders of Lake Amatitlan. I recall a charming Sunday spent in traversing some of them and in walking into the fertile back country, where the fine roads are bordered by stately cypress or by eucalyptus trees, and white-walled adobe houses are set off by morning-glories and thickets of bamboo. Lake Amatitlan has long been a popular watering place; centuries ago the Guatemalans visited its hospitable shores in winter to escape the chill winds of the higher plateaus. From Amatitlan good roads run to Escuintla in the first foothills near the Pacific. Also Lake Amatitlan offers a wonderful foreground for the volcano Agua, that colossal pyramidal cone whose exquisite proportions are easily recognized from whatever point of the compass one views it.

Wonderful Guatemala, with its sky-piercing peaks, its purple mists, its vast forests, great lakes, cool uplands, and cities in the fine architecture of the Spanish renaissance, will well repay the tourist from whatever land. It is easily reached by the fine steamers of the United Fruit Co., from either New York or New Orleans and is traversed by 500 miles of modern railway.

At last my trip was over. I parted from my brave compadre of the winding trail in the highlands, said good-by to my new-found friends, and sailed from Puerto Barrios. But I shall go again.



Photograph by Hamilton M. Wright.

THROUGH THE MARVELOUS HIGHLANDS OF GAUTEMALA.

Top: The old bridge built by the Dominican friars over the outlet of Lake Amatitlan, about 17 miles west of Guatemala City, easily reached by a fine automobile road.
Middle: Lake Amatitlan, west of Guatemala City.
Bottom: A group of people in a field, with a large mountain in the background.



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