Shopping in Guatemala is a treat, with shops loaded with handcrafted cultural artifacts.

TRAVELOGUE

Surprising Guatemala: A Journey with a Cause

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Photographs by the author except where noted.

This past December, I had the opportunity to travel to Guatemala with members of the Project Heloderma team that included Brad Lock of Zoo Atlanta and John Binns and Desire Wong from the International Reptile Conservation Foundation. The purpose of the trip was simple, team up with our partner Zootropic and consummate a land deal in the Motagua Valley. This land would be used to establish a reserve, breeding facility, and research and education center to help protect the Guatemalan Beaded Lizard (*Heloderma horridum charlesbogerti*), the Guatemalan Black Iguana (*Ctenosaura palearis*), and the unique ecosystem in which they live.

The trip was short, lasting only one week. The primary focus was the land transaction, but we also visited a few of the many Guatemalan tourist sites. Specifically, we flew into Guatemala City and toured for a day. In the evening, we visited our host, Zootropic's headquarter building, and conducted the land transfer ceremony. The next day, we headed into the Motagua Valley, where we visited the land just purchased and got a first-hand look at the rare ecosystem that supports these amazing creatures. We also reviewed the development plans for establishing the breeding, research, and education complex to be established on the property. After that trip, we wound down by

The Guatemalan Black Iguana (*Ctenosaura palearis*) also occurs in and around the Motagua Valley. Both the Beaded Lizard and the Black Iguana will benefit from the newly established reserve.

The Guatemalan Beaded Lizard (*Heloderma horridum charlesbogerti*) makes its home on the steep mountainsides bordering the Motagua Valley.

JOHN BINNS

Aerial view of Guatemala City.

spending a few days in Antigua Guatemala, the country's ancient capital city. Finally, we traveled back to Guatemala City to catch our flights home.

Although this was my first trip to Central America, I have traveled and worked in over 30 countries around the world and pretty much thought I knew what to expect from a developing country, namely, amazing natural beauty under siege from bustling cities living on a decaying infrastructure. So, I set my expectations accordingly…. Boy, was I ever wrong.

First of all, unlike journeying to many expedition destinations, traveling to Guatemala from the United States is quite easy. Instead of having to travel through the International Date Line on a journey of consecutive daylong plane flights, this was a mere five-hour flight from Los Angeles, resulting in a rather pleasant overnight journey. We left LA in the evening and arrived at dawn the following day in Guatemala City. For Brad Lock, the trip was even easier, a three-hour flight within the same time zone. Although we battled long lines at the airport, once inside the plane, all was good — and the flight was short, sweet, and uneventful.

We arrived in Guatemala City and were greeted at the newly renovated airport by members of the Zootropic team who would serve as our hosts during this visit. We checked into the charming Hotel Otelito, which was once a private mansion. It's modern, open, and intimate design could easily have been featured in the pages of *Architectural Digest*. We freshened up and started our tour. In the old town center, we visited one of the largest markets I have seen. During all of my travels, I have learned that the best place to determine how culturally different you are from the country you are visiting is in the markets and the churches. I already had been pleasantly surprised by the easy

One of the many exotic vendor stands in the central market in Guatemala City.

The Palm Pit Viper (*Bothriechis aurifer*) is an attractive but venomous pitviper found in Guatemala and Mexico.

trip and the quality of our hotel, but this market made me drool at what I saw. The colors — no, I should say THE COLORS were out of this world. The labyrinthine corridors of this indoor/outdoor market presented us with a wealth of cultural artifacts including textiles, clothes, and statues along with fruits, vegetables, meat, fish, shoes, and wedding dresses. The people, a mix of Indian and European descent, were happy, warm, and responded to our amazement with laughter — without a doubt a unique and unforgettable sensory experience.

Next, we visited the Zootropic facility where many of the indigenous reptiles used to support the research and educational programs are kept. This was like a private tour through an amazing zoo. A diversity of indigenous snakes, lizards, and arachnids was on display. We were able to take pictures of some of the most beautiful vipers in the world, including *Bothriechis aurifer*, *B. bicolor*, and *B. schlegeli* — and, of course, several of the few captive Guatemalan Beaded Lizards in the world were there too. These rare animals are slated to become genetic founders at the proposed breeding facility. During our visit, we learned from the Zootropic field personnel about the different species and their native habitats.

That evening, we walked the few blocks from our hotel to the Zootropic office. The meeting between the Paiz family who sold the land, Zootropic, Zoo Atlanta, and IRCF personnel was quite interesting. Mr. Paiz talked about the history of the land and the hopes of his family to establish a foothold for conservation in this unique area. We learned how, over time, the area had changed and about the current challenges facing the people and animals that live there. Clearly, life in this region is out-of-balance, with humans rapidly converting all available area into farmland. The meeting was rather emotional, mainly because everyone felt strongly that this transaction was the first major salvo in the battle to protect this critically endangered area and its native species. Everyone shared perspectives over a few glasses of Guatemala's famous Ron Botran, which happens to be produced by the family of Zootropic's president, Rodrigo Botran. After the meeting, we returned to our hotel exhausted, content,

Project Heloderma Team Members from Zootropic, Zoo Atlanta, and the IRCF presenting a check for the land. From left: Daniel Ariano, Zootropic, Brad Lock, Zoo Atlanta, Mr. Paiz, previous landowner, John Binns, IRCF, and Rodrigo Botran, Zootropic.

The Motagua Valley is rapidly being converted into farmland, which reduces the native habitat needed for the survival of many critically endangered indigenous species.

and anxiously awaiting tomorrow's journey into the Motagua Valley, the remarkable area we had been working to protect for the past two years.

The trip from Guatemala City to the Motagua Valley in the department (state) of Zacapa took a few hours by car, and then another hour or so before we reached the property itself. By this time, we were off the paved roads and traveling by car "upstream" in a dry riverbed. You can read all you want about why this area is unique, but being there helped me understand its singular place in our world. Where to begin? First of all, the Motagua Valley is located at the foot of the Sierra de las Minas, which rise to 3,000 m above sea level. These mountains create a natural barrier to the moisture that originates over the Atlantic, resulting in the uniquely xeric region.

The area also is interesting from a geological perspective, since the Motagua Valley sits over the junction of the Caribbean and North American plates, an area rich in earthquakes and volcanoes attributable to the intense geological pressure caused by the two plates grinding against one another. The region also produces some of the best translucent blue jade in the world, which was mined by Mayans at the peak of their reign over Middle America.

The Motagua Valley contains two unique habitat zones, a subtropical thornscrub and a subtropical dry forest. The dry forests are of the greatest interest to Project Heloderma, because that's where the Guatemalan Beaded Lizard resides at elevations of 300–800 m. Not so coincidently, this is exactly the terrain and elevation where the purchased property lies. To find the site, Zootropic had conducted a number of studies to determine the land best suited for this purpose using a method called "Multi-Criteria Evaluation." Simply stated, this process examines the intersection of appropriate vegetation, temperature, slope, and elevations within a region to determine the potential distribution of a given species. The data for this study are generated by the conditions at sites where animals were actually sighted. The team is excited about this property specifically because it is in the center of the largest contiguous geographic area that matches the unique requirements of the Beaded Lizard. This means that the reserve potentially can expand. Already, discussions are

The Motagua River cuts through the Motagua Valley, providing a rare source of moisture.

The Guatemalan Beaded Lizard (*Heloderma horridum charlesbogerti*) is amazingly agile and can easily climb trees in search of food or safety.

The thornscrub terrain of the Motagua Valley.

Removing the mystery and fear surrounding the Beaded Lizard and educating local villagers on the value of conservation of endangered species is a critical component of Project Heloderma.

underway with neighboring landowners who are considering that sale of adjacent lands to Project Heloderma.

For me, the most unique aspect of the land is the admixture of thornscrub and dry forest in a single area. I was used to seeing areas of thornscrub and I was used to seeing dry forests, but never in the same place. The difference is subtle but noticeable. I mean, how often can you find cactus in the middle of a forest?

When we finally arrived at the property, we were greeted by members of the Zootropic field team, who happened to have with them a recently captured juvenile *Ctenosaura palearis* that they were measuring. We also brought with us one of Zootropic's breeding Beaded Lizards, so we could take photographs of the rare species in its natural habitat. After a few hours of hiking and photography, we returned to the property gate to talk about the future plans for the site.

We then headed into El Arenal, one of the major villages in the area. Here we met with Gilberto Salazar, who is Zootropic Biologist Daniel Ariano's field assistant and the village liaison to Project Heloderma. While in the village, we talked to many local

John Binns and Desiree Wong survey the newly acquired land in the Motagua Valley.

Antigua is considered to be one of the best-preserved colonial cities in Spanish America. UNESCO has declared it a World Heritage Site.

The beautiful Spanish colonial city of Antigua is surrounded by three active volcanoes.

people about why we were there, and, since we had a Beaded Lizard with us, conducted some impromptu educational sessions with both the young and old, helping them understand the value and unique qualities of the creature and the land surrounding them. Through these educational sessions, the project seeks to dispel old fears and habits that more often than not, resulted in the killing of any lizard found by residents. Especially by working with the children, the project hopes to create a more conservation-friendly generation. These ongoing educational efforts appear to be working. Recently, a villager happened to catch a Beaded Lizard and was offered a large amount of money to sell it into the illegal exotic pet trade, but he instead offered the animal to Zootropic to help establish the necessary stock required for the breeding facility being constructed on the recently purchased land.

With the business of the trip complete and less than two days before we returned stateside, we headed to Antigua Guatemala (i.e., "Old Guatemala," often just called Antigua), the country's erstwhile colonial capitol. Considered by many to be the best-preserved colonial city in Spanish America, it is a well-kept secret in the international tourist world. Simply put, Antigua is beautiful, and the Spanish influence can be seen everywhere. At an elevation of 1,500 m, it lies in the shadow of three majestic and active volcanoes that provide a unique and unmistakable landscape. Antigua also is a cultural shopper's Mecca well known for its crafts. Store after store present wares ranging from silver and jade jewelry, wooden sculptures, traditional costumes, textiles, and weavings to crafts made from terracotta, ceramics, and/or wrought iron. If you're not interested in shopping, simply stroll down the cobblestone streets and among the pastel buildings. Visit one of the many churches or sit in the town square and watch the people go about their daily routines. A number of great restaurants grace the town, and the hotels fit right into the architectural/historical landscape. A visitor really feels like he's in an old Spanish colony.

Antigua was the last of many pleasant surprises on this trip. After two days of enjoying the slow pace of colonial Guatemala, we returned to Guatemala City and caught our flights home. What a magical week it had been. After all, this was supposed to be a working trip and we were going to a developing country that was bursting at its seams. I couldn't have been more wrong — and the most amazing thing? We hadn't even visited many of the most famous tourist sites that the country has to offer, notably the Mayan ruins at Tikal or Quetzaltenango, beautiful Lake Atitlán, or the tropical rainforests in the northern lowlands. Certainly, I will return to Guatemala to see how the reserve matures and the breeding programs develop, but also to renew friendships made and to see the many wonders of this beautiful country.