

# The Mists of Todos Santos: Photographs of a Guatemalan Village

by Max Page

Guatemala is a land of intense beauty and intense pain. With its sharp, young mountain ranges, volcanoes rising straight out of lakes, mystical Mayan ruins, and rainbow-clothed peoples, it is an almost paradisiacal place. Yet, the continuing poverty of the Indians and the more recent mass murders in the countryside can make a mockery of this sumptuous visual landscape.

Recently I traveled through Guatemala, from the great Mayan city of Tikal in the northwestern province of the Peten, to Lake Atitlan in the highlands and Quetzaltenango, capital of the western provinces. But it was in the quiet village of Todos Santos Cuchumatanes that I spent my most rewarding week.

This village, reached by a windy, heart-stopping three-hour drive up and over the highest mountain range in Central America, is in many ways frozen in time. The Catholic Church made one desperate attempt to spread its teachings there in the 16th century, but only the church building remains. And the Spanish too gave up their attempt to colonize the area, leaving the town in relatively peaceful isolation.

Remarkably, the village has managed the pressures of colonization, integrating its own traditions with those of the Spanish conquerors and settlers. The Todos Santos, like Mayan Indians throughout Guatemala, have created a hybrid religion incorporating elements of traditional Mayan and Catholic or evangelical Protestant rituals. And they have learned Spanish where necessary, but retained their native Mam dialect.

However, over the past fifteen years Todos Santos has been brought into the center of the civil war which has raged in  
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*Max Page is working on his Ph.D. in American History in New York. He also jointly maintains a photography business, Iguana Photo.*



Right and Below Right: Children on hillside, tree planting—Community leaders have begun to address the dire environmental depletion caused by overpopulation and lack of land. Here, school children plant young trees to replenish the supply of wood for fuel. At the same time, children are often sent on day long journeys to get wood. Supported on their heads, they carry bags of wood weighing up to 100 pounds from the remaining forests, several thousand feet above the town. [Iguana Photo]



Right: An evangelical church—In recent years the evangelical missions have made great inroads, converting upwards of 50% in small towns throughout central America. [Iguana Photo]



Above Right: Corn is the staple of the villagers; in the background a burned out bus next to the unnaturally large cemetery with 1982 on far too many grave stones—a sign of the early 1980s. [Iguana Photo]





Above: *The Temple of the Great Jaguar at Tikal, the greatest remains of the Mayan civilization, of which Todos Santos are descendents. [Iguana Photo]*

Guatemala. In 1982, when the government suspected that the Indians were harboring guerrillas, some fifty or more of the villagers were murdered, and many more fled for refuge in Mexico.

The experience of the Todos Santos is similar to those El Salvadorans of El Mozote who were so brutally murdered a decade ago, and whose tragic story has been publicized recently. (The massacre in El Mozote, denied by the Reagan Administration when it was first reported, has now been thoroughly documented by Mark Danner in the *New Yorker*, December 6, 1993.) The villagers of Todos Santos, like those of El Mozote, were caught between the Army and the guerrillas, desperately trying to walk the fine line between offending either side.

Today, all seems quiet and serene. The mists for

which Guatemala is famous still float up the valley and envelop the town. But the many new graves, a burned-out bus, and the local militia (the government requires all men to "volunteer") are daily reminders of the brutality which Todos Santos has experienced. It is a brutality that threatens it still.

Even though the civil war has eased in recent years—the overthrow of President Jorge Serrano Elias and the conciliatory efforts of his successor Ramiro De Leon have made a peaceful conclusion possible—inequalities continue to plague Todos Santos.

Most families subsist on corn and other traditional crops. But, as with approximately 85% of Guatemala, inhabitants of the village are desperately poor. For many, the land they own or rent is simply not sufficient to support their families—especially when the children reach the age to begin their own families and have their own children. As a result, Todos Santos rely increasingly for their survival on sales of their fine woven goods to tourists, and on pilgrimages to the coast for seasonal field work on cotton, coffee, or sugar plantations.

The 1992 Nobel Prize was awarded to writer Rigoberta Menchu, who comes from a town in the Guatemalan highlands not far from Todos Santos. The award has brought attention to a country that was virtually ignored in the 1980s by the media. More people are traveling to Guatemala to experience the rich human and natural rewards of the country. Hopefully, their presence and awareness will make it more difficult for the abuses of the past to occur.

These portraits of Todos Santos—the people, the town, and the land—try to capture the nobility of the people, the eerie serenity of the environment and perhaps also the lingering memory of tragedy. ●

