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Alfombras — elaborate, organic pieces of art — serve as colorful “carpets” on the streets of Antigua, Guatemala, for Semana Santa (Holy Week) processions. Photos by ERIC MOHL • Special to the Star Tribune



The main float, or anda, in each Semana Santa procession carries a tableau featuring Jesus, usually looking down to the right.

One of the world’s most visually stunning Easter celebrations in Antigua, Guatemala, puts mere stuffed bunnies and dyed eggs to shame.

EASTER over the top

By KAREN CATCHPOLE
Special to the Star Tribune

It didn't look promising. Eighty costumed men were trying to maneuver a 5,000-pound carved wooden float adorned with an elaborate scene from the final days of Jesus through the doors of the San Felipe Church in Antigua, Guatemala. The bearers' skill, precise choreography and perhaps a touch of divine intervention finally liberated the massive, lumbering float, called an *anda*, with mere inches to spare. Outside, the sun-splashed cobblestone streets had been decorated with intricate carpets, called *alfombras*, made out of flowers, dyed sawdust and glitter. Thousands of locals and visitors had

gathered to watch the *anda* pass, leaving a trampled *alfombra* in its somber, yet somehow festive, wake.

Even among famously colorful Central American religious celebrations, Semana Santa (Holy Week) in Antigua, Guatemala, is in a class by itself. It attracts more than 200,000 people to this UNESCO World Heritage Site city between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday.

The festivities, with all their age-old ritual, play well in Antigua. The city of some 35,000 was originally established by the Spanish in 1543 as a capital of the entire region, encompassing nearly all of Central America.

Easter continues on G4 ▶



CARA KELLY • Washington Post
The house used in the film "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" is one of the stops along the New Orleans Movie Tour route.

Big Easy shines on big screen

■ New Orleans' first movie tour highlights the city's legacy as the "Hollywood of the South."

By CARA KELLY • Washington Post

The farmers market along an avenue is bustling with shoppers. Suddenly, the crowds look up toward the sky as fireballs start to choke out the sun. A green-masked man flies into the scene to protect the panicked people running for their lives.

The clip ends, and the mini-screens in our 16-passenger van go black. We're still in the middle of the street, just sans ominous clouds and green hero. We've just watched a segment from the 2011 blockbuster "The Green Lantern." It's one of the films highlighted in the New Orleans Movie Tour, a two-hour driving excursion that showcases the locations of some of the most famous scenes filmed in and around the Big Easy.

As we sit in front of the hotel that the villain Parallax had descended over moments ago, Jonathan and Michelle Ray tell us about the movie's economic impact on the city — it was the largest production in Louisiana history, with a \$200 million price tag — and the confusion it created when residents started to think that the farmers market was real, and not an elaborate set put up by Warner Bros.

Self-proclaimed movie buffs, the husband-wife team launched the city's first movie tour company nine months ago. After relocating from Connecticut, they were shocked to learn that no one was providing tours of famous locations from such classics as "A Streetcar Named Desire" or newer TV shows such as HBO's "Treme."

A film professional who has worked on camera crews and even plays a recurring role in USA's upcoming series "Common Law," Jonathan is quick to tell me about New Orleans' emergence as the "Hollywood of the South" and its \$1.3 billion movie industry. "A lot of people come down here and have an idea how many things are filmed here," he said. "It's the third most popular location after Los Angeles and New York."

He rattles off a half-dozen productions either in the works or starting later this year: Will Ferrell has been in town with Zach Galifianakis, filming "Dog Fight" (recently renamed "The Campaign") — and took some time off during Mardi Gras to serve as King Bacchus. And "Now You See Me," a thriller starring Woody from "Toy Story" and Morgan Freeman, recently started production.

After scooping up the other passengers, we take off toward Canal Street. Michelle provides historical background; Jonathan spouts film trivia. Soon, we pull up to the ruins where Vivien Leigh, as Blanche DuBois, famously searched for the streetcar named Desire, (which is still in operation,

New Orleans continues on G5 ▶



Marlon Brando and Vivien Leigh in "A Streetcar Named Desire." The streetcar is still in operation in New Orleans.

VIEW PHOTOS See more of the Holy Week pageantry at startribune.com/travel

EASTER over the top

◀ EASTER FROM G1

Three hulking volcanoes that ring Antigua, along with eruptions and earthquakes, eventually convinced the Spanish to choose a different capital city. But the majesty remains. After the city was razed, rebuilding efforts respected, preserved and re-created the city's original architecture. Even the streets remain cobbled and Antigua's many picturesque ruined churches give it a whiff of ancient Rome.

At an elevation of just over 5,000 feet, Antigua is also said to have one of the best climates in the world.

For all its glory, Semana Santa can be baffling. There are dozens of processions at all hours of the day and night. Costumes and customs are full of ancient symbolism. And what's with all the flower petals? I figured that out when I spent an afternoon last year helping create an alfombra with the owner of my hotel, and I gleaned a few other details along the way.

The processions

Street processions, a tradition believed to have started in Guatemala in 1524, tell the story of Jesus' persecution, crucifixion and resurrection depicted through intricate scenes displayed on top of handcrafted, carved wooden andas. They leave from and return to a home church and can last for 15 hours and cover many miles.

Most Semana Santa processions include two main andas. The first bears a scene from the life of Jesus and is carried by men. Women convey the second, with a tableau depicting the Virgin Mary. Some andas weigh up to 8,000 pounds and are carried by up to 100 men at a time.

Semana Santa processions reach their peak on Good Friday, commemorating the day Jesus was crucified. The action starts at midnight on Thursday with the Peregron de Romanos (parade of Romans). Some processions begin as early as 4 a.m. on Friday; some don't finish until 6 a.m. Saturday.

Saturday's post-crucifixion processions are appropriately somber affairs with just one anda bearing a mourning Virgin Mary. Be prepared for extra-thick clouds of incense during Saturday's processions. Because the Virgin Mary andas are carried exclusively by women, men looking for a role to play pick up incense burners and march along.

Easter Sunday processions have a distinctly party-like atmosphere. Children wave yellow and white flags, people cheer and smile, confetti falls and the resurrected Jesus once again shows up on andas marking the end of Semana Santa.

The people

Men who carry an anda are called *cucuruchos* and female bearers are called *cargadoras*. Each pays about \$4 for the privilege. Children, who shoulder smaller andas in their own processions, pay less. Originally done as penance with the faces of the bearers covered, carrying an anda is now part honor and part duty. Bearers usually carry their anda for one block, then an artful switch is made. Many come back to carry again later in the procession.

For most of Semana Santa, the *cucuruchos* are dressed in a silky purple tunic. Why purple? Because it's the liturgical color of Lent and some believe it symbolizes Jesus' pain and suffering and emulates the color of a robe that covered his body. In the afternoon of Good Friday, everyone changes into black robes and dresses to mourn the passing of Jesus.

Today, tourists are welcome to join the ranks of the *cucuruchos* and *cargadoras*. Just pick up the required costume from any of the tailors in town who make them, choose a church and pay the fee.



Photos by ERIC MOHL • Special to the Star Tribune
Most Semana Santa processions in Antigua, Guatemala, include a float, or anda, depicting a tableau of the Virgin Mary. These floats are carried only by women.



Antigua draws more than 200,000 visitors for its Holy Week processions, which take place at all hours of the day and night. Above, men portraying Roman centurions take a quick lunch break during a procession.



Street processions are a tradition believed to have started in Guatemala in 1524. Above, the youngest Roman leads a procession.

flowers, vibrantly dyed wood shavings and sawdust, fruits and vegetables, tiny Noah's arcs, glitter and more.

Alfombras are typically created by an entire extended family on the cobblestone street in front of their home, but local businesses get into the act, too. When Evelyn Herrera, whose family owns the Hotel San Jorge, invited me to help make the hotel's alfombra, I jumped at the chance.

Evelyn had gone to the market at dawn, where she invested about \$100 in the flowers and other greenery she wanted to include in her design. She also picked up a 4-foot-long, hard, canoe-shaped pod that grows on a particular kind of palm tree. With considerable effort, we split the pod open to get at a large stem and what looked like white rice. The creamy white pieces would be sprinkled into the motif. The hard pod was cut up and used to fashion woven baskets on both ends of the alfombra. Hundreds of stems of flowers were de-petaled, the various colors scattered precisely according to Evelyn's design, which was sketched out on a piece of paper tacked to the hotel's garden gate.

Over the next few hours, we primped and perfected until Evelyn finally proclaimed the alfombra complete. With a mix of satisfaction and dread we stepped back, stretched our sore backs and admired our work.

But not for long. The procession was on its way and in a matter of minutes the feet of the anda bearers had churned our handiwork into a pile of fragrant trash, which a garbage crew expertly swept into an ugly pile and shoveled into a waiting truck as soon as the procession had passed.

Karen Catchpole and her husband, photographer Eric Mohl, have been traveling in the Americas for several years. They last reported on the town of Gracias, Honduras. Follow their journey at www.trans-americas.com.

The pomp

Music plays an important role in Semana Santa processions with funeral marches setting the plodding pace of the processions and cueing the intricate maneuvers needed to get the massive andas around tight corners. Procession bands, including drums, brass and wind instruments, play a repertoire of more than 100 marches, mostly written by Guatemalan composers — though some bands throw in a Chopin tune now and then.

The most iconic trapping of Semana Santa are the alfombras — elaborate, organic pieces of art that create "carpets" on streets where a procession is about to pass. The devout spend as much as they can afford on alfombra ingredients, which include

dish is expertly executed by local chef Mario Godinez (www.bistrotcinq.com).

La Fondita offers more than a dozen different traditional dishes arranged on a large table. A standard plate includes a meat dish, a vegetable dish, thick Guatemalan tortillas and one or two sides. It's not the cheapest meal in town, but it's a delicious way to sample different dishes in one atmospheric spot.

Sobremesa Helados Exóticos, just off the main plaza, sells sublime scoops of ice cream in inventive, gourmet

flavors like jasmine blackberry, apple chipotle and ginger guava. Locals estimate the shop has developed 50 different flavors that rotate on and off the menu.

Freshly grilled chicken, a casual-but-cool patio dining area, live musical performances in an open courtyard, a bar made from parts of an old bus: **La Esquina** has it all. The adjacent boutique also sells some of the most stylish handcrafted leather goods and jewelry in town. Prices are discounted 20 percent if you pay cash.

SEMANA SANTA TIPS

Route maps for the day's processions are usually available at small information booths in the main plaza, fronting the cathedral.

To get the best pictures of the alfombras, study the route map and follow it in reverse, toward the church. This will enable you to shoot the intact alfombras before they get trampled by the procession.

During Semana Santa, usually safe Antigua becomes a magnet for pickpockets. Carry as little with you as possible. Photographer Eric Mohl

caught a man's hand in the leg pocket of his cargo pants during the first procession we covered for this story.

Jesus almost always looks to the right from on top of the anda, so bear that in mind when choosing your vantage point.

If you can't get a reservation during Semana Santa, consider visiting Antigua during any of the five weekends leading up to Easter to see processions that take place for Lent.

KAREN CATCHPOLE

WHERE TO STAY

At the stunning **Meson Panza Verde**, one of the first boutique hotels in Antigua, each of the 12 big, splurge-worthy rooms is arranged around an open courtyard and decorated with rich fabrics, beautiful tile and a pleasing mix of colonial and modern art (www.panzaverde.com).

Hotel San Jorge offers spotless, modestly priced rooms with fireplaces around a pretty garden in a central location. The best amenity, however, is your host. Owner Evelyn Herrera is a vivacious, bilin-

gual fountain of knowledge and assistance. During Semana Santa (reserve at least four months in advance), guests are invited to help create the hotel's alfombra (<http://hotels.anjorgeantigua.com>).

WHERE TO EAT

Chef Robbin Haas, a Florida native who spends part of the year in Antigua, created **Bistrot Cinq** and its welcoming bar that pours 12 types of absinthe. The menu (tuna tartare, duck pot-stickers, burgers, profiteroles) is written on a blackboard and each