**EASTER over the top**

**B A R B E R E N C A T C H E P O L E**
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 alfombras 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.

**Big Easy shines on big screen**

**MARIO LOPEZ AND WILFRED WITHMAN**

New Orleans first made its splash on the big screen in the 1947 film "Gilda." The Big Easy’s offerings of food, drink and culture have been showcased many times on the silver screen, from "Easy Rider" and "Cruising" to "The Big Easy." And the Big Easy continues to shine on the big screen as the city’s unique charm and history are celebrated in films.

**View Photos**
See more of the Holy Week pageantry at startribune.com/travel.

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EASTER OVER THE TOP

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

The pomp
Music plays an important role in Semana Santa. Procession leaders light the way, and female bearers are often dressed in white. They carry flowers, candles and water. The Virgin Mary is often depicted with a white rose in her hair, and she is often accompanied by a young Jesus, who carries a cross. These symbols represent the sacrifice of Jesus and his mother’s love.

The processions
Street processions, a tradition believed to have begun in Guatemala in the 1930s, tell the story of Jesus’ procession, crucifixion and resurrection. The floats are decorated with intricate scenes displayed on top of handcrafted, carved wooden stands. The floats are carried by both men and women for 15 hours and cover many miles.

The best amenity, however, is your host. Herrera is a vivacious, bilingual native who spends part of each of the 12 months in Antigua and the rest in Europe. She is a fountain of knowledge, and the cooking is expertly executed by the hotel’s chef, Carlos Gutierrez.

WHERE TO EAT
To enjoy the local cuisine, consider a meal at Panza Verde, one of the first restaurants in Antigua. The menu includes such dishes as thick Guatemalan tortillas and sweet guava. Locals estimate the cheapest meal in town, but it's still worth trying.

WESTERN GUATEMALA AND HONDURAS
FROM APRIL 8 TO APRIL 15, 2012

SEMANA SANTA TIPS
- Carry as little with you as possible.
- Visit Antigua during any time of year.
- Make sure you have a good camera and a reliable flash to shoot the intact visitig Antigua during any story.
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