

Easter Week in Guatemala

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In the midst of *Semana Santa* (Holy Week) celebrations in Guatemala, Karen Catchpole and Eric Mohl help make an intricate traditional street carpet. Then watch it get trampled under hundreds of pious feet.



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Even among famously colourful Latin American religious celebrations *Semana Santa* (Easter Week or Holy Week) in Antigua, Guatemala is in a class by itself. On a cultural level, religious and theatrical level it's really hard to top the feeling of being close enough to touch 1,000-pound floats (called *andas* in Spanish) bearing melodramatic depictions of scenes from the persecution, crucifixion, entombment and resurrection of Christ, each carried by hundreds of devout Catholics dressed in costumes that seem positively medieval.

One of the most iconic elements of *Semana Santa* is the tradition of creating elaborate "carpets" (called *alfombras* in Spanish) on the streets — over which a procession of *andas* is about to pass. Using little more than flower petals, colored sawdust, glitter and a whole lot of creativity, masterpieces are created. And destroyed.



When Evelyn Herrera, whose family owns the lovely and centrally located [Hotel San Jorge](#), graciously invited us to help make the hotel's *alfombra* we jumped at the chance to be involved in the epic Easter celebrations as something other than spectators.

Evelyn went out to the market at 6 a.m. to buy the flowers and other greenery she wanted to include in her design. She also picked up a four-foot long, canoe-shaped pod that grows on a particular kind of palm tree. We split the pod open (with some considerable effort) to get at a large stem inside that is laden with what looks like white rice. *Corozo* is a *Semana Santa* must-have and almost every *alfombra* includes it in some way or another.

All told, Evelyn spent more than \$100 at the flower market. Others spend many times that amount.

In the afternoon, a group of family members and hotel guests assembled to get to work. First we pulled the sticky *corozo* off the stem so the creamy white bits could 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 flowers were de-petaled and 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 and watched the clock. A procession was scheduled to pass over the street in front of the Hotel San Jorge and we knew we had to be finished before it arrived.



Evelyn finally proclaimed the *alfombra* complete and with a mix of satisfaction and dread we stepped back, stretched our sore backs and admired our work.

But not for long. Though we knew the end was near we still had the urge to divert the procession around our handiwork as the *anda* oh-so-slowly swayed toward our spot in the street. As those carrying the *anda* passed over our *alfombra* their feet churned our careful handiwork into a pile of fragrant trash, which a garbage crew expertly swept into an ugly pile and shoveled into a waiting truck. In minutes the procession, and our *alfombra*, was gone. It was like it never happened.

Photos by Karen Catchpole and Eric Mohl of the [Trans-Americas Journey](#).

KAREN CATCHPOLE AND ERIC MOHL OF THE TRANS-AMERICAS JOURNEY



In April of 2006, journalist Karen Catchpole and photographer Eric Mohl left their jobs and apartment in New York City and embarked on the [Trans-Americas Journey](#), a 200,000-mile working road trip through all 23 countries of Central and South America. After many years on the road they reached their goal of Tierra del Fuego at the tip of South America where the journey literally ends. Until then, their slow and steady overland exploration of the Americas continues.

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