



LAKE ATITLÁN

ALTIPLANO ADVENTURES

Altiplano Adventures

Guatemala's western highlands, known as the Altiplano, contain some of the country's most striking scenery including the spectacular Lake Atitlán, renowned worldwide for its beauty. Located at 1,500 meters (4,900 feet) above sea level, the lake is ringed by three volcanoes (Atitlán, Tolimán, and San Pedro La Laguna—The Three Giants), extends over 130 km² (50 mi²), and is 341 meters (1,118 feet) deep, making it the deepest in Central America. Transportation is by small motor boats that constantly crisscross the water or a handful of double-decker ferries available for rentals to groups. The typical cayucos, or rustic dugout canoes, are also plentiful but used mostly by local fishermen.

This stunning landscape is home to 12 Mayan villages with different indigenous languages, signature clothing, and ancient traditions that are vibrantly alive and well in the 21st century. Accommodations in this area tend towards the boutique-with-a-view and are all very eco-conscious. The main attraction for groups, however, is Mother Nature, followed by the colorful village marketplaces.

Exceptional Accommodations

While incentive travel is top of the list in Lake Atitlán, the eco-friendly Porta Hotel del Lago also offers planners meeting space in their 7,050-square-meter (75,886-square-foot) Los Volcanes Convention Center, outfitted with the latest technology. The Los Volcanes room, largest of four, has 439 m² (4,725 ft²) of space that can be extended into the three adjoining rooms for up to 500 attendees—one of these, the Cerro de Oro, has the best view overlooking the lake and the volcano. Outdoors, the 176 m² (1,894 ft²) of deck area by the pool is the perfect spot for a coffee break, meal or even a presentation served with a side of views. The hotel also owns a yacht available for private events.

Porta's location steps from the center of Panajachel—the area's major tourism center—is ideal for groups, and at 100 rooms it can easily be part of a buy-out for an incentive group. Among its amenities, the hotel offers a solar-panel-heated pool, free Wi-Fi, concierge service, and more. Note: Porta guests have access to the Mayan steam bath (temazcal) and natural hot springs hot tubs in the nearby Regis Hotel & Spa, owned by the same company.

The modern Jardines del Lago Hotel and Convention Center has 34 rooms decorated with colorful local textiles and views of the gardens overlooking the



lake. Its five flexible meeting rooms have a/v, Wi-Fi, and drop-dead gorgeous views for events of up to 300, but it's the outdoor space that will catch the planner's attention: in addition to its manicured gardens, it has a lovely dock with a platform that can host unforgettable sunset events, such as award ceremonies.

Built lakeside in what can easily be described as a magic garden, the Hotel Atitlán has been welcoming guests for over 40 years. Each of its 61 rooms and suites has private balconies overlooking the lake or the lush botanical gardens overflowing with fragrant flowers. Authentic artwork and hand-woven fabrics in the colonial-style design bring Guatemalan traditions to life, and high-end amenities make it an excellent choice for deluxe incentive groups. Private meetings and events can be held in the conference room with a lakeside view and modern technology.

The award-winning Casa Palopó takes lakeside luxury to another level. Initially, a private home outside the village of Santa Catarina Palopó and the first Relais & Chateaux property in Guatemala, this 15-room boutique hotel has a rustic chic décor, an eclectic art and artifact collection, and an excellent restaurant, among other delights. Note for elite planners: There is a separate three-bedroom villa available for VIPs. Intimate dinners, cocktails, and events can be held on the property's helipad and deck or in the main hotel area. (Casa Palopó has its six-passenger helicopter for guests.) The hotel is also involved in the Pintando Santa Catarina (www.pintandoelcambio.com) project begun in 2017, a voluntourism opportunity for groups where they can help paint the town's homes in bright colors.

Villas B'alam Ya takes its cue from sister property Mesón Panza Verde in La Antigua for its luxury offer with a clear Guatemalan sense of place, making it a must for distinctive executive incentive get-aways. The complex, located between Panajachel and Santa Catarina Palopó, is comprised of three villas and one cottage built on a hillside above the lake. The hotel offers complimentary kayaks, canoes, and sculling shells, there are swimming and snorkeling areas, plenty of hammocks for naps, private yoga classes, and more.

Extraordinary Experiences

A stroll down Panajachel's (or Pana's) main street, Calle Santander, is a must for every visitor to Lake Atitlán: it's lined with bars and restaurants, handicraft stalls, and tour agencies, punctuated with the rumble of circling tuk-tuks. Pana is also the gateway to the wonders of the lake, where groups will board the private shuttle boats or ferries to get to the towns that dot the circumference of the lake. There they can take Mayan cooking classes in Santa Cruz, get their chakras balanced in the hippie town of San Marcos, or go for a leisurely horseback ride around San Pedro.

Each of these traditional Mayan villages has a unique experience. In San Juan La Laguna, for example, a walk up the hill from the busy dock takes

visitors past small galleries and stalls brimming with a multi-colored array of hand-loomed textiles fashioned into traditional huipiles and just about any article of clothing imaginable. Groups will enjoy a visit to one of the many weaving cooperatives owned and operated by local women, where they take them step-by-step through the incredibly intricate process of backstrap weaving, starting from the basic spinning of cotton fibers to produce the yarn.

In Santiago Atitlán, the largest of the lake communities, groups can travel by tuk-tuk through the narrow streets to see the parish church of Santiago Apóstol, where they can witness the syncretism of Maya Catholicism in the carvings of the colonial-era altarpieces. For a closer look at this unique aspect of religious life, they can visit Maximón, a life-sized effigy of the Mayan folk saint revered by indigenous locals and attended day and night by a dedicated brotherhood, or *cofradía*. Afterward, a traditional barbecue lunch in the gardens of La Posada de Santiago's lakeside grill—just across the street from its all-day restaurant and bar—is a must.

Of course, there are plenty of active adventures for groups in this natural paradise. For example, they can scuba dive in the lake and see aban-



doned buildings and sunken trees or kayak in the calmer areas of the lake to see the villages from the shoreline. On land, guided volcano hikes can include an unforgettable night of camping under the stars, and paragliding over the lake gives adrenaline-lovers a bird's eye view of it all. Another can't miss: a visit to the Atitlán Nature Reserve that not only features hanging bridges, zip lines, and a private beach, but also a Butterfly Preserve, with 50 of the more than 900 species native to Guatemala.

