

## **Santiago Under the Volcano**

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### **Santiago Under the Volcano**

**PEJ News** - C. L. Cook - For the fortunate, there are moments in life that utterly destroy the comfortable precepts of reality we cling to, revealing the naked injustice of life on this planet and laying bare one's heart and soul to the immense tragedy that is the existence many of our fellow humans endure. My moment of awful clarity came as I watched two dogs locked in comical coitus, unable to extricate themselves from their passion.

[www.pej.org](http://www.pej.org)

<http://www.santiagoatitlan.com/lake.jpg>

### **Santiago Under the Volcano C. L. Cook**

PEJ News

October 9, 2005

Last week, Hurricane Stan made landfall in Central America. Not a large hurricane by recent standards; Stan arrived in Guatemala as a measly Category 1, nothing like the Cat. 4 behemoth Katrina, but the devastating effects on life, limb and property in Guatemala is by magnitudes larger than even the terrible destruction wrought by that monster.

Deep in the interior, far from the coast, entire villages have been erased, buried by massive mudslides triggered by Stan's heavy rains. Homes that survived the wind and rain, and the people living in them, had no chance when the volcano shrugged sending down its rocks and mud. [Authorities in the small nation are today reporting more](#) than 1400 villagers, Mayan peasants, killed in just one of the many stricken towns. The storm has [displaced as many as 100,000](#) throughout the country.

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[Santiago Atitlan](#) sits on the shore of [Lake Atitlan](#), one of the planet's most beautiful locations. The deep, blue lake is actually a volcano crater, surrounded by several live volcanoes. Tourists have endured long "Segundo" bus journeys through Guatemala's western mountains to visit the highland lake for decades.

The indigenous Maya live there today much as they have for centuries. Though coffee has replaced corn as the mainstay crop, peasants still eke a hard-scrabbled living from milpas (small gardens), and farms, while the women and children spend most of their time in their small villages weaving intricately designed, beautifully coloured fabrics for sale to tourists in the biggest town on the lake, Panajachel (Gringotanango in local parlance).

Panajachel is a curious place, populated by a cosmopolitan mix of Sixties era hippies, European ex-patriots, and a surprisingly vibrant Hare Krishna community. The streets are clean and contain dozens of restaurants and boutiques, businesses in most cases built by the northern immigrants. It was, in late 1986, a prosperous, if nervous place. (During those years, a particularly ruthless administration, at the bequest of the United States, was conducting a massive murder and disappearing campaign against the majority Maya in the name of fighting communism. Military check points and soldiers, armed and equipped with the latest American gear, were a common and menacing sight throughout Guatemala, but it was in the western highlands along Mexico's border, where a small resistance operated, that the atmosphere was most tense).

Tourists wanting to get a taste of the "real" life of the Mayan peasants would take day trips from tony Panajachel across the impossibly blue Lake to the little villages that provided the town's food, goods, and labour. And so it was your reporter, a largely clueless kid at the time, chanced to shore up in the village of Santiago. 'Santiago Under the Volcano,' as Brian Eno once sang.

There, among the crudely constructed shacks and corrugated shelters clinging improbably to the unpromising earth, the diminutive Maya went about the difficult business of survival on the fringes of a society seemingly intent on their destruction. We white travellers towered over them, wandering clumsily through their village home asking for food and drink.

Sitting on a miserable patio, drinking beer and eating tough chicken sandwiches, we represented a world these people could barely conceive; a world of leisure, where one just snaps a finger to receive whatever desired; no toiling in the fields, climbing steep slopes to tend meagre corn fields; no endless hours straining eyes and fingers over a loom for the pittance it promises; no fear of soldiers in the night, spirited away fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons to be never again seen. We contented sat watching and being watched, a surreal illustration of social dissonance, our expectations and life experience as alien to them as theirs to our own.

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An ancient woman approached.

She held a small basket, filled with little clay whistles formed to resemble the Quetzal, the rarely seen long-tailed bird figuring so large in Mayan myth and magic. While the dogs, comically, inextricably entwined struggled we laughed and drank.

The old woman neither laughed, nor drank, but stood dignified holding forth her little basket of birds. And there, in the little town of Santiago, while the dogs fucked my heart cracked open.

Raw to their despair, unguarded against the hopeless future, naked to the pain of life and the misery it exacts, I took from the basket the least of her treasures, a circular clay talisman, hollowed and adorned with little scratched rings around the edges.

Adios Santiago, under the volcano.

**Chris Cook** is Senior Editor for PEJ News. He also hosts the weekly public affairs program, [G orilla Radio](#), broad/webcast from the University of Victoria, Canada. You can check out the [GR Blog here](#).