





## Introduction: The Invitation

**OPPOSITE:** While foreign visitors usually stand out in a crowded Ixil market, my experience suggests that the curiosity is mutual and that Ixil Maya families welcome the chance to show off their culture, produce (even piglets!), and exchange greetings with visitors.

Twenty years ago, in the early 1990s, Maya weavers from the Ixil-speaking region of northwestern Guatemala invited me to visit their homeland. Due to my life's circuitous path, it took me fifteen years to accept this invitation. When I did, I was captivated by the beauty and soul of the Ixil countryside and culture. Now, I would like to pass this invitation on to other travelers.

I initially traveled to Guatemala to learn more about the Maya textile traditions I had admired in books and museums. I was an utter novice, largely ignorant about the causes and course of the civil war that had gripped this country for thirty years, and naively exploring Guatemala's western highlands via crowded "chicken buses." With only meager Spanish, I counted on my former U.S. Peace Corps experience and skill at charades to get by. Looking back, I now admit that these early expeditions were perhaps foolhardy, if not reckless. What I saw and experienced, however, was unforgettable.

In the bustling indigenous market of Chichicastenango, I encountered weavers from Nebaj, Chajul, and Cotzal, the three Ixil-speaking municipalities in northern Department of Quiché that make up this linguistically distinct Maya subculture. I was mesmerized by the Ixil weavers' bold use of forest greens, mountain blues, chili reds, and maize yellows; symbols of sacred mountains and cultural myths crowded the canvases of their masterful handwoven blouses, called *huipiles* (also written as *güipiles*).

These Ixil weavers urged me to journey home

**BELOW:** Chajul, young girl waits for friends outside the traditional adobe brick and clay roof-tiled house.

with them, a rugged day's drive north into the heart of the Cuchumatanes Mountains. At that time, the government and the opposition forces under the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) were negotiating the conditions for peace, and the western highlands remained tense and traumatized. It was not a good time for me to venture further north, I decided. Nonetheless, the memory of this tantalizing invitation returned with me to Boston, like a stowaway, deeply enmeshed in the silky tassels of a weathered Ixil shawl.

In January of 2005, almost a decade after the 1996 signing of the Guatemalan Peace Accords, I was determined to follow up on the invitation to visit the



**RIGHT:** Prepare for the daily deluge and cool nights during the rainy season in the high Cuchumatanes. **FAR RIGHT:** Visitors will enjoy savory Ixil foods and can engage local women for a culinary lesson in preparing a traditional meal. **BELOW RIGHT:** Gathering and transporting firewood for cooking is a daily chore. **BELOW:** Speckled duck eggs for sale or barter.



Ixil region. I spent an amazing—and far too short—week in Nebaj, Chajul, and Cotzal. The journey was eye-opening and ear-popping, as I poked along rutted roads in mist-enshrouded valleys and hiked high mountain paths into remote Ixil villages. The region’s diverse ecology proved endlessly fascinating: tropical cloud forests, cascading waterfalls, delicate orchids, howler monkeys, and iridescent quetzals. In Spanish and through Ixil translators, conversations with Ixil weavers, farmers, professionals, and schoolchildren were heartwarming and thought-provoking. As afternoon shadows deepened in the courtyards of their adobe houses, Ixil mothers bent intently over their backstrap looms and weary men delivered the days’ harvest of chopped wood or field-dried maize.

Children stacked firewood, invented games, and finished homework in the fading light. Within every household, I learned, civil war survivors struggled to rebuild shattered lives. By the end of my first trip to the Ixil region, I was already planning to return.

One visit led to another, and eventually spawned the idea of writing this guidebook. Although increasingly accessible by an improved road system, Nebaj, Chajul, and Cotzal lie far off the beaten track for most foreign tourists and remain unfamiliar to many Guatemalans. As I have discovered, a journey into this ancient Ixil homeland offers wonderful opportunities to explore Ixil culture and countryside on an unusually personal level.

This is not your typical guidebook. While I

suggest specific places of geographic, historical, and cultural interest for visitors, I believe that the real richness of the Ixil region is best appreciated by learning about its history, and through direct experience with the vibrant Ixil culture and local economy. When I embarked on this project, there was almost nothing written for the tourist about the Ixil region. I had to start from scratch. That turned out to be fortuitous. With the help of my Ixil friends and colleagues, I am able to introduce the Ixil region in ways that emphasize what is most important to the Ixil people—to write about their traditions and sacred mountains, their place in ancient and modern history, and their quest to build sustainable livelihoods and preserve the unique Ixil identity.

**T**he first three chapters of this guidebook introduce the visitor to the Ixil region's geography and history, and present the logistics of traveling to the region from La Antigua. The heart of the guidebook is found in the three chapters dedicated to each of the three Ixil-speaking municipalities—Nebaj, Chajul, and Cotzal. These chapters include an overview of each municipality's dominant characteristics and information about local lodging, food, and logistics, followed by a menu of in-depth exploration into the area's history, culture, geography, economy, and rhythms of daily life.

I encourage travelers to visit local schools that are educating the next generation of Ixil leaders; hire a guide to learn about traditional sacred sites; buy a meal in the market; learn to weave; and visit with nonprofit organizations leading the region's economic and social development. The explorations I have profiled in this guidebook afford keen insight into the historical forces that have shaped indigenous communities across Guatemala. The millenia-old civilization of the Maya is evident in the physical and cultural landscape of this region: the crumbling

ancient temples, smoking ceremonial altars, oral histories passed down through generations, and the Maya vision of the universe portrayed in Ixil weaving. The story of the Spanish conquest of Guatemala and of postcolonial incursions into Ixil country are also etched, often discordantly, into the architecture of colonial towns and the patterns of land ownership and development.

Observations and conversations with Ixil men and women, entrepreneurs and schoolchildren reveal much about the prospects for the cultural and economic future of the Ixil community. On the one hand are strong testimonies to resurgent Ixil pride and community development, such as indigenous coffee cooperatives, boisterous bilingual schools, and vibrant community radio. On the other hand are the daunting challenges to Ixil traditional values and livelihoods posed by rapid population growth, deforestation, national unrest, and economic globalization. This is an exciting and defining time for an ancient and resilient culture entering another historic transition.

I believe that cultural, ecological, and volunteer tourism can both honor the Ixil identity and contribute to the sustainable development of this majestic region. The goal of this guidebook is to make the Ixil region and culture more accessible, and to serve as a springboard for travelers to venture beyond the routes and suggestions in these pages. My hope is that visitors will discover opportunities to cultivate their own ties to the Ixil Maya and pass this invitation onward.

*¡Tiichal a xaane'!*

*Have a wonderful journey!*

*¡Buen Viaje!*

**—SUSANNA BADGLEY PLACE**



