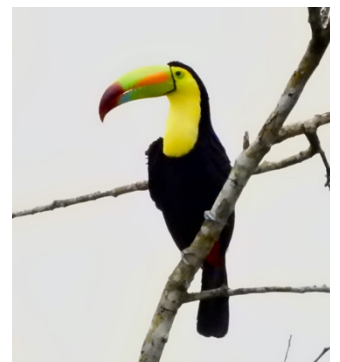


Guatemala Birding & Nature | Trip Report

Jan. 28 – Feb. 9, 2020 | Written by Patricia Briceño



With Guides Keith Hansen, Patricia Briceño, Rowland Rumm, Freddie, and Participants: Gwen, Gary, Barbara, Debbie, Rolandé, Brian, Julie, Paul, and Jane.





Tues., Jan. 28 Arrivals in Guatemala City

Several of our participants, as well as Keith and Patricia arrived in Guatemala City early the previous day. For others, Irene, the owner of Operador Latino, the “on the ground company” in Guatemala, set up an outing around the city for those wanting to see some sights and get a feel for the street vibe and cultural aspects. Led by Adira Castillo, a woman with a wonderful spirit and deep love and knowledge for all aspects of Guatemala and her people who call it home. With her own special and infectious humor, the history, be it political, geological, or cultural was shared with all. Back at the Clarion Hotel, comfortable and centrally located in the downtown, others arrived from their incoming flights, and got settled.

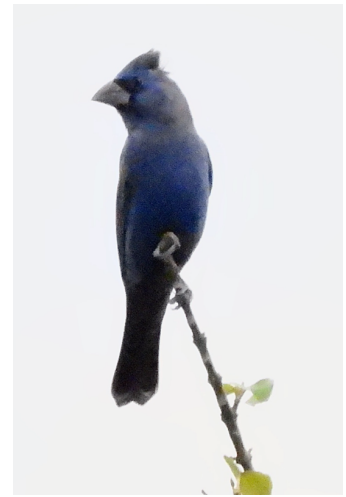
A welcome meet and greet dinner was held in the evening where we all introduced ourselves and went over the planned itinerary, and the basic form of what folks should expect regarding the overall tour, be it safety, the different locations to be visited, or birds to be expected. Tired from travel, but well fed, our Guatemala group got some well-deserved rest.

Wed., Jan. 29 University Marroquin | Crazy Gas Station

After an early breakfast, we loaded the van, driven by our faithful driver Don Francisco. Adira joined us for the morning as we headed out of the center of town toward the University Marroquín for culture and birding. She informed us about numerous aspects of the city and much of its long, rich history, be it inspirational or corrupt, always followed by Adira’s great laugh! She led several on a special visit to the Museo Ixchel specializing in textiles of the indigenous peoples. A feast for the eyes and a testament to the genius of a creative people, the works beheld inspire and astound with a wealth of color and patterns unmatched. Heavily forested, the University grounds hold an astounding array of tree and plant species and so consequently, a wealth of birds as well.

A helpful host from the University informed us about plants and birds, while our leader, Rowland Rumm with his sharp eyes, upbeat demeanor and encyclopedic knowledge for all things Guatemala, kept us connected and involved with what was before us. Living in Honduras with his wife and son, they own a Jungle lodge on an offshore island.

The birds were seemingly everywhere as we were treated to lively gangs of Band-backed Wrens, screeching Pacific Parakeets, and rowdy bands of Bushy-crested Jays. Some birds, perhaps “familiar friends” from back

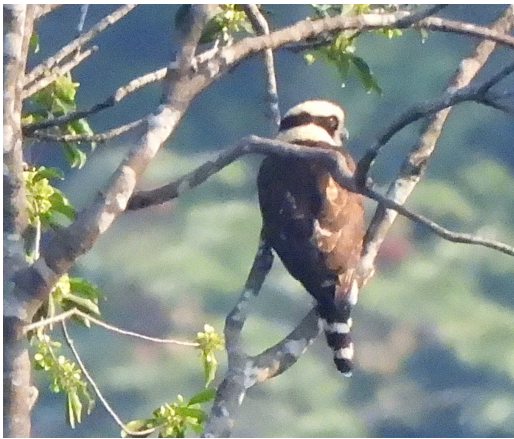


home, added to the splashes of color be they a fire-engine red Summer Tanager, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, and Baltimore Oriole.

In one uniquely productive tree, of course attended to by a Pygmy-Owl, numerous kingbirds, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, vireos, Yellow-winged Tanager and a Peppershrike were enjoyed. Rounding out the morning we were fortunate to see a Lesson's Motmot, the Guatemalan race of Flicker, a fan-dancing Slate-throated Redstart, and the astonishing act of Acorn Woodpeckers inserting acorns into transformed cracks of cement between bricks high on a second story balcony.

Blue skies and puffy white clouds, we drove a short distance and disembarked to walk the central plaza then down and into the subterranean Central Market of Guatemala City. Here we were treated to the cornucopia of produce, the spectrum of colors, and the span of tropical fragrances one finds so frequently in this country and where life happens!

For lunch, we gathered and dined at a nice restaurant arranged by Irene. Bidding Adira well, we then settled in for a comfortable three-hour drive where we saw several handsome Gray Hawks and the well-adorned Magpie-Jays. At our turnoff in Cocales, we just HAD to make a rest stop at the gas station. Not because of any needed rest rooms per se, BUT, because this refuelling spot has now become a well-known birding stop, cheerfully referred to as the "CRAZY" Gas Station... because the birds around this location are crazy abundant! With the comings and goings of a large egret and heron rookery nearby, as well as productive forest edge and weedy thickets, this location produced once again. We saw over 50 species in little more than an hour. Highlights included Blue Grosbeak, Blue-black Grassquit, Morelet's Seedeater, White-fronted Parrots, Crested Caracaras,

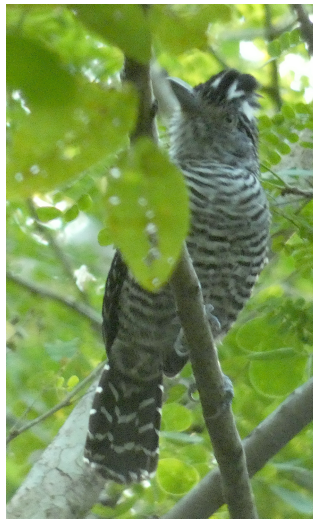


Spot-breasted and Altamira Orioles, and lastly several hundred Cattle Egrets coming to roost. Almost dark, it was off to Los Tarrales Natural Reserve and Eco-Lodge where we checked into our comfortable rooms, had a nice dinner and went over the bird list before bed.

Thurs., Jan. 30 Volcán de Fuego | Forest Birding

Those up before first light found Rowland outside of the dining hall filming the periodic eruption of the Volcán de Fuego, “Fire Volcano”, through the scope. Every ten minutes or so it would blow out molten lava, smoke, and if you listened carefully you could eventually hear its distant rumble. At sunrise, standing at the edge of a large soccer field, the day awoke as the birds, species after species began to vocalize and stir about. Clay-colored Robins and Melodious Blackbirds filled the dim and cool surroundings with song as four noisy Yellow-naped Parrots perched out for all present to enjoy. It wasn’t long before chattering flocks of both Orange-chinned and Orange-fronted Parakeets sparkled down into the crowns of large trees. A White-bellied Chachalaca carried on just above us and Rufous-naped Wrens made their presence known. A surprise to Rowland a Black-vented Oriole perched for all to see as Freddie informed that this bird had been around for a while.

After coffee and a hearty breakfast, everyone piled into three jeeps and we clawed our way up and up through a steep forested mix of coffee plantation and diverse native forest. After crossing a stream or two, we topped-out at a high saddle with a dramatic view. Looking down across the broad, lush valley, or up the sweeping incline of Volcano Atitlan’s towering peak, birds moved from one place to the next as the canyon warmed, and shadows deepened. Comfortable seats invited good viewing as we all became a hawk watching, tanager spotting, hummingbird beholding, and Guan gawking group of birders, content with the parade of beauty before us. Many images come to mind, these are a few of mine. A Gartered Trogon, far below in bright lighting, Tityras weird and white messing around overhead, quick looks at Blue-tailed, Berylline Hummingbird hybrids, Red-legged Honeycreepers stuffing their heads into blossoms, a singing Long-tailed Manakin far below, and morning light glowing red through the wattle of a Crested Guan.



Birds of prey were numerous, diverse, and charismatic. To the excitement of all we had one species after another. After a nice encounter with a Laughing Falcon on the drive up, Rowland somehow spotted a distant bird that turned out to be a juvenile Ornate Hawk-Eagle! Next, several stealthy “dark” Short-tailed Hawks were spotted, along with a distant White-breasted Hawk. Freddie called out “White Hawk”, tracked the bird down, and put it in the scope. Heading down, we spotted a Broad-wing drinking from a stream while the next stop produced crippling views of an adult Great Black Hawk, and a distant Gray-headed Kite. Paul deftly “pulled down” a distant King Vulture, and a final stop in a bamboo thicket produced a sleepy pair of Mottled Owls.

After lunch, some much needed down-time was had as folks rested, birded the grounds, or got caught up on phone communications and enjoyed fresh baked Biscotti’s made by our Tarrales hostess Mary.

An afternoon stroll from the lodge and into the forest produced wonderful sightings of three Collared Aracari, White-throated Magpie-Jay, Ivory-billed Woodcreeper, and male Rose-throated Becard. A singing Barred Antshrike unfortunately never emerged from its dense cover. We had an easy going walk back for dinner, with easy going conversation as friendships formed. A lovely dinner and birding checklist before calling it a night.

Fri., Jan. 31 Fuentes Georginas | Pink-headed Warbler!

After coffee, and at first light, Freddie spotted a distant Bat Falcon perched far across the community. With Freddie and Rowland in the lead, we took a short walk to look for a Long-tailed Manakin we had heard the evening before. We were unsuccessful, but we did see a Rufous-capped Warbler and several species of orioles. A beautiful and hearty breakfast was had, and guests squared any bills as we headed back to the van for our next destination, the Hot Springs of Fuentes Georginas.

We made a gas and ice cream break and continued, sighting a Spotted Sandpiper and Black Phoebe along the way at a highway river crossing. Climbing up and up through well-worked farm fields appearing as a patchwork on steep mountainsides, we ultimately found ourselves in a rather thick and steep cloud forest.

Sulphur steamed from the rock and here was a shroud of mist floating above guests soaking in the famous hot springs as giant tree ferns clung to the steep cliff faces. We sat for lunch but weren’t in our seats long as Rowland suddenly burst forth from his seat and shouted “Pink-headed Warbler”, sprang forward much to the shock and surprise of fellow diners. Few of us saw the warbler as it vanished rather quickly but this triggered a sequence of events that started a cascade of bird sightings.



Lunch was quickly devoured as bird after bird were quickly spotted as a distinctly large number of species suddenly appeared to flow into and on the scene. Forming the nucleus of this flock were several Common Chlorospingus, (formerly Bush-Tanager) where birds like the Gray Silky, a Hutton's Vireo, Crescent-chested, and Blue-winged Warbler made their debut. Closer to the group, a male White-eared and female Wine-throated Hummingbird fed from nearby bushes while a Chestnut-capped Brush Finch, Golden-browed Warbler and the most adorable Rufous-browed Wren were enjoyed. Near their nest at the side of a bank, a pair of very confiding Brown-backed Solitaire put on a show. Suddenly, a very vocal Emerald Toucanet came into the trees as well as a very confiding Unicolored Jay who decided to take a long preen, much to the delight of Barbara.



Two White-nosed Coati sniffed and sauntered through lush grass. A Green-throated Mountain-Gem and a Rivoli's Hummingbird as well as a couple Mountain and Rufous-collared Robins joined the mob. Lastly, a few Band-tailed Pigeons landed in the large bromeliad festooned trees as a bright male Flame-colored Tanager added the final punctuation to the exciting avian event.

Back in the van and a short drive to Guatemala's second largest city Quetzaltenango, more often known as Xela, where we checked into our rooms followed by a rather fancy dinner in the large and stately dining area. The bird list and relaxing before off to bed after a memorable day.



Sat., Feb. 1 Resplendent Quetzal | Touring Xela

Today was a day split between two groups, one group departed very early, 4:00 AM in quest of Guatemala's national bird, the aptly named Resplendent Quetzal and the second group joined Patricia for a cultural tour around Xela.

After tea and coffee, we boarded the van for a two-hour drive through the highlands to the Refugio del Quetzal. Arriving around 6:30 AM, we were greeted by refuge staff and taken on a walk, through lush cloud forest, down into a cool canyon laden with moss, ferns, and a picturesque stream of gurgling rivulets. It wasn't long before Rowland keyed into a subtle movement that materialized into a female Quetzal.

Suddenly the male was spotted and for the next ten minutes, it perched with elongated rump feathers gently blowing in



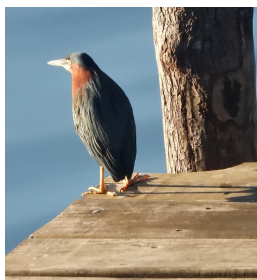
the breeze. Folks got into position to observe and record this incredible creature. Everyone had both smiles and walk away views. We hiked back spotting a Swainson's Thrush feeding on berries as well as a Scaly-throated Foliage Gleaner. After restroom breaks, we bivouacked under a high awning where we had some refreshments and a commanding view of over the broad forest containing the Quetzals and many other species.

While there, we were treated to views of Eastern Bluebirds, Black-capped Swallows, a regional endemic, and a Black Hawk-Eagle circling with a kettle of Black Vultures. A flyby Hooded Grosbeak and foraging Hammond's and Yellowish Flycatchers worked the nearby canopy. Happy but a bit tired, we departed the Quetzal preserve and descended to the town of San Rafael where we dined in a great restaurant with White-collared Swifts blasting overhead, and a giant wasp nest attached to a window. This afforded us an unobstructed view into the private chambers and inner workings of this complex "paper" nest. It was then off, and back to Xela, where we arrived in the afternoon. This gave anyone a nice rest who wished to stay put in their comfortable rooms. Alternatively, it offered the intrepid, just enough time to drive back up to the Hot Springs at Fuentes Georginas to listen for owls and such after sundown and before dinner. Julie, Paul, Debbie, Brian, Rowland, and Keith headed out. We were pleased, to not only have a stunning sunset over Volcán Santa María, but we heard no less than four Fulvous Owls vocalizing along with Mexican Whip-poor-will, a Ring-tailed Cat and one screech emitted from an Unspotted Saw-whet Owl, and all the while, in the company of blinking fireflies. Back to the Hotel Bonifaz where a nice meal and the day list were completed.

The second group consisted of Julie, Roland and Patricia, which met at 7:30 AM for a nice breakfast at the hotel Bonifaz and boarded our van at 8:30 AM. Our first stop was at the Zunil market which happens to be a bustling place where local vendors and shoppers wear their traditional garments engaging in the business of selling and buying local produce. What a feast for the eyes!

The produce section was interesting, the size of the carrots was highly noted! Zunil is famous for its rich soil thanks to constant flow of volcanic ash. Following our local guide, we walked to a local cooperative where we admired beautiful textiles produced by their members. We couldn't let the opportunity go without acquiring some of those beautiful textiles offered for sale. The local church was located just a block from the cooperative, and after spending a few minutes inside taking pictures and admiring the artwork, our van was waiting for us to take us to our next stop. We drove about 20 minutes and stopped near the colorful church of San Andres Xecul.

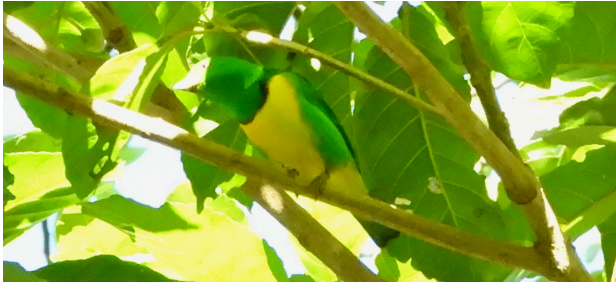
One of the oldest churches in Guatemala, our local guide gave us an interesting explanation of the history of the church and the construction of the building. After spending about an hour walking around the church and the market, we drove back to our hotel for a nice lunch.



Sun., Feb. 2 Market Day!

After a big breakfast, everyone mustered in the lobby with luggage, handed over the room keys, checked out, and climbed aboard the van for an hour and a half drive to one of the oldest and most famous markets in the New World, Chichicastenango. Curving and climbing, we wove our way through the highlands, into the realm of Steller's Jays and up to the continental divide reaching a "saddle-like" rest, topping out at 10,000 feet. The air thin, the temperature was bracing, we stopped for a broad look and quiet contemplation coming face to face with Rufous-collared Robin... and mouse. Onward, through winding highland-pine, small town and village we arrived, to a crowded, vibrant, alive, and bustling swirl of humanity.

This market is a meeting place for merchant, buyer, farmer, craftsman, weaver, child, busy parent, arborist, musician, clergy, traveller, and plain old onlooker staring in disbelief. It means many things, to many people, and has...for a very long time. Most took this opportunity to shop for unique gifts, be them multi-colored weavings, a silver necklace, or a frightening wooden mask. After having our senses fully saturated with the sights, sounds, fragrances, and textures of this expansive market, it was time for some local tasting.



After an enjoyable lunch at The Mayan Inn, we strolled back one last time through the market where Rolandé made some beautiful purchases. We continued out of Chi-Chi, covering ground and making our way down from the highlands to the shores of Lago de Atitlan and the old city of Panajachel, “Pon-uh-ha-chel.” Don Francisco dropped us off at the shores of Lago de Atitlan where we clambered aboard a launch, and after a 20-minute ride of skipping across the sun kissed waters of this large lake, we found ourselves at the serene Bambu Lodge. Participants enjoyed down time by perfecting the art of, ‘Putting their feet up.’ Still, others wandered the bird-laden grounds, enjoying Yellow-breasted Chat, Azure-crowned Hummingbird, Rufous Sabrewing or Yellow-bellied Elaenia. From the restaurant veranda, Tricolored, and Green Heron worked the shallows as Orchard, Baltimore and Spot-breasted Oriole all paraded their saucy beauty. Some simply enjoyed the calming view and golden sunset with a good cocktail or beer. Dinner, list, and laughter, then off to bed.

Mon., Feb. 3 San Juan la Laguna | Birding Extravaganza!

Today was another divided day where Patricia took a group to the craft village of San Juan la Laguna, and the others had a birding extravaganza! We departed on a speedy boat passing numerous Brown Pelicans en route. Idling up to the docks, numerous Common Gallinules, as well as one bright Purple, were seen working the shallows along with several Blue-winged Teal and six male Ruddy Ducks in winter plumage. The group was treated to a guided tour where Patricia translated each and everything the guide was informing us about. We were fortunate to have this link of explanation and understanding, intertwined throughout the entire day. Numerous art studios were visited, a woman’s co-operative with a spinning, dying and weaving demonstration was shared as folks purchased exquisite weavings.

A bee keeping farm with numerous species of tropical (stingless) bees was wonderfully displayed, while they offered numerous types of honey for sale and finally an herbal farm where the women were caring for and propagating numerous plants with healthful and medicinal qualities. We then were invited into a private home of one of the women affiliated with the co-op where we shared a meal with her and her family. It was wonderful to have that simple and true type of human contact over a delicious, humble meal. We headed back to the boat and across the lake to the Hotel Bambu.

Rowland and Freddie’s day was something out of a birders fantasy novel. While, of course I was not there, the stories and recounting of the birds seen were something I could only dream about. Since the quest for the Horned Guan was dramatically scaled back, the birders decided to search the lower regions of the volcano, visiting a location locally known as “Freddie’s favorite by the Lake” was birded, and birded hard. Some of their great sightings included an amazingly close Blue-crowned Chlorophonia that perched close, and long enough to be well filmed. A White-faced Ground-Sparrow was scoped, and a White-faced Quail-Dove was spotted. Birds



with exotic names like the Elegant Euphonia, Yellow-billed Cacique, and Garnet-throated Hummingbird were listed off and others, more familiar like the Lincoln's Sparrow, MacGillivray's and Nashville Warbler were added as well. By the end of the day they had totalled up... some 120 species!

Another fine meal, volcano's silhouetted against glowing horizons, reflecting on water, glasses clinked, and stories shared. The bird list and then finally off to bed.

Tue., Feb. 4 Santa Apolonia | Antigua

A relaxed breakfast and a departure from the Hotel Bambu. After a two-hour drive, we arrived at the next beautiful location, where we freshened up. We ventured through an area, that according to Debbie, was one of the most beautiful walks she had ever taken. Known as Santa Apolonia, this private land affords easy walking past tall pine and oak forest with grassy edge and fields, peppered with trees.

While initially slow for birds, things did begin to pick up when a few dozen Gray Silky-flycatchers filled the trees and two Tufted Flycatchers broke the silence. A Blue-and-white Mockingbird filled the air with song as a Spot-crowned, then Spotted Woodcreeper challenged people's identification skills. A distant Mountain Trogon was detected by Rowland when suddenly, he vanished. It was a minute or three when a male Hermit Warbler was spotted along with a Hutton's Vireo, then BLAM! A stunningly plumaged Olive Warbler dropped into the mix and Paul darn near had to sit down from the sheer beauty of the fine little bird.



Suddenly Rowland emerged from the underbrush excitedly exclaiming, "PINK-HEADED WARBLER! Pandemonium reigned as this bright pink and frosty headed flitter did a pretty good job of avoiding detection, but one by one, everyone got to see and enjoy this very special and wonderful bird. Next, some Bushtits (the black eared kind) a Crescent-chested and a Red-faced Warbler joined the fracas as a Guatemalan Pygmy-Owl called off in the distance. We were thrilled and walked with more spring in our step, than just minutes before...Aaaah, birding!

Again, we boarded the van for a protracted and harrowing odyssey of perhaps 3 ½ minutes only to cross the freeway (the famous Pan-American Highway) for a light lunch at the Rincón Suizo restaurant. Afterward we walked into the nearby forest where the birding was rich and wonderful. In abundance, warblers included Townsend's, Hermit, Wilson's, Black-and white, Crescent-chested, Pink-headed, Red-faced, Golden-browed Warblers, and Slate-throated Redstart. A White-naped Brushfinch made a brief showing followed by an Olive-sided and several more Tufted Flycatchers. Finally, a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker fed in the open for all to see. We then drove to the beautiful and historic city of Antigua, a world



of heritage site. Checking in, the staff handed us a cold refreshment while we were shown to our comfortable rooms. Before long we walked through the town's central plaza and down a few blocks to an exquisite restaurant that Irene arranged for us. With colorful rose petals strewn down the center of the dining table, orchids and tiny lights hanging from the ceiling, this meal was beautiful and delicious. Finishing the list after dinner we then headed back to our room after a long day.

Wed., Feb. 5 Birding or Cultural | Finca el Pilar or Antigua

This morning was one divided into a birding or cultural choice. After breakfast, Rowland and Keith led several participants up and out of town to a location known as Finca el Pilar where we were driven high above the city to a lofty spot high in the cloud forest. While far in the distance, Volcán de Fuego periodically puffed and spouted ash, we walked beneath the canopy and were treated to great numbers of Rufous-collared Robins, singing Slate-throated Redstart and a Red-faced Warbler. Out in the open, Black-headed Siskins and a Black-vented Oriole perched out in the open atop towering pines. Although brief, a Hooded Grosbeak and several Vaux's Swifts passed overhead. The grand finale was a great performance by a flock of Singing Quail that sang loudly and continuously. Sadly, they never emerged from the underbrush, but no one seemed to mind as their duet was close, loud and rollicking! Back to the Hotel and we ran into Patricia with her group on their Antigua outing.



The second group that choose the cultural walk in Antigua, met at 7:30 for a nice breakfast in the beautiful restaurant surrounded by a nice garden. Adira, our cultural guide was already waiting for us, ready to give the group a nice tour around her favorite sites. We left the hotel at about 8:30 and we went to our first spot that was the church of La Merced. She gave us a nice and interesting explanation about the history of the church, and we were able to take a few pictures of the area. We followed her for a few blocks until we arrived



at a church in ruins, named Colegio Compañía de Jesús, which has a museum inside with an interesting collection of mayan art and photographs by contemporary artists.

We then walked towards the zocalo to admire the interesting waterfall in the middle of the plaza and watch locals go about their business. Not too far from there, we visited El Museo del Jade (Jade Museum) where we were given interesting information about how mayan revered Jade more than gold.

Our next stop was a in a traditional candy shop founded in 1872 where they create locally made beautiful artisanal sweets. We were able to taste some of their famous milk candies. I couldn't stop admiring the beautiful decorations in the place. After trying some of the delicious sweets, our next stop was to an old communal washing basin where women have been traditionally washing their clothes until present days. We waited there for our bus to pick us up with the rest of the group to take us to our cooking class.

After that we all climbed into the bus and were driven to a cooking school in downtown Antigua where we were introduced to the owners and cooks that were to guide and teach us a few techniques for creating some wonderful dishes. After a glass of wine was poured, we began the chopping, mincing and peeling along with the fine art of tortilla creation, we were on our way to a truly wonderful meal that we enjoyed high atop the roof of the school. Laughter, great smells and delicious food was all part of the scene as we clinked glasses and reflected on what a truly wonderful tour it had been. Afterward we all climbed back in the bus and continued off to Guatemala City for our final evening as a group. Everyone got settled into their rooms and that night was the final dinner with a great meal had by all. We exchanged addresses, handshakes, and hugs as one by one, each of us said our final good-bye's.

Thurs., Feb. 6 Departures

This morning everyone made their way to their flights home, as Keith and Patricia continued back to Antigua for a few days of play.

Photo Credits:

Birding Marroquin Univ. Paul Roberts (PR); Breaking bread at Fuentes, PR; Olive-throated Parakeet, PR; Temple Ruins, PR; Montezuma Oropendola, Gary Baldwin (GB); Birding group, Patricia Briceño (PB); Ringed Kingfisher, PR; Keel-billed Toucan, PR; Guatemala tour group Marroquin Univ., Keith Hansen (KH); Birding at Crazy Gas Station, PR; White-fronted Parrot, PR; Spot-breasted Oriole, PR; Blue Grosbeak, PR; Band-backed Wren, PR; Volcan Fuego erupting, PR; Laughing Falcon, PR; White-bellied Chachalaca, GB; Red-legged Honeycreeper, PR; Short-tailed Hawk, PR; Mottled Owls, PR; Barred Antshrike, GB; White Hawk, PR; Northern Emerald-Toucanet, PR; Pink-headed Warbler, PR; White-nosed Coati, PR; Resplendent Quetzal, Roland Rumm; Fuentes Georginas Sign, PR; Sunset from Fuentes Georginas, PR; Market photos, PR; Green Heron, PR; Dock at Panajachel, PR; Flower El Bambu, PR; Market photos, KH; Blue-crowned Chlorophonia, PR; Olive Warbler, PR; A place of rest, PR; Black-headed Siskin, PR; Pink-headed Warbler, PR; Tufted Flycatcher, PR; Barbara, Gwen & Jane cooking, PR; Cooking Class, PB; Group birding, KH.