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SPRING AWAKENING


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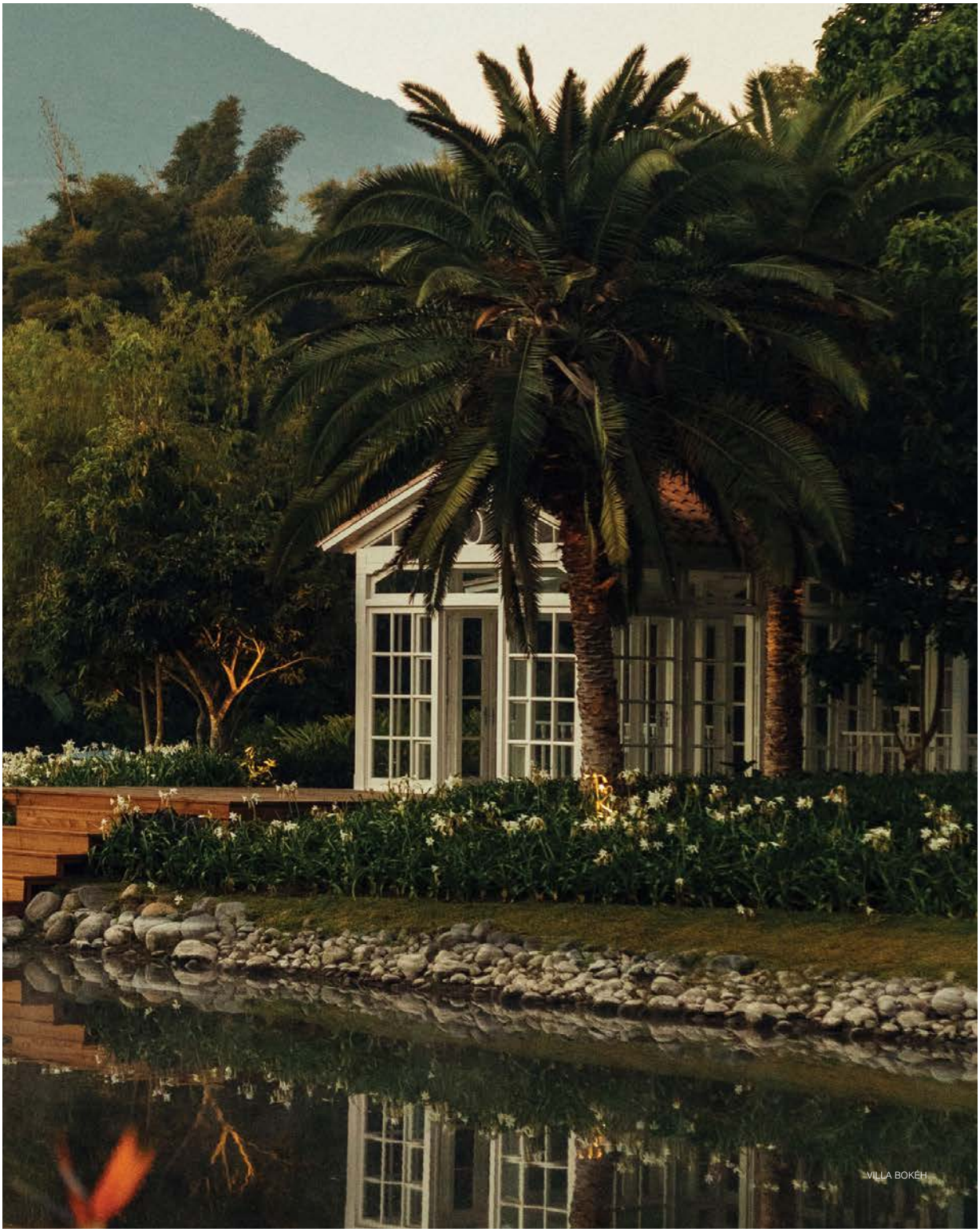


VILLA BOKÉH

WITH VOLCANIC LAKES, HISTORICAL RUINS, AND COLORFUL VILLAGES, GUATEMALA WILL DAZZLE YOU FROM THE MOMENT YOU ARRIVE

BY ***Maddy Sims***

True childlike wonder. That's what I felt in Guatemala. I found myself staring at my surroundings in complete and utter awe, overcome with how grand and beautiful the country is. Here, everything feels connected. The forests and volcanoes tell a story of the past. The people hold a deep appreciation for the land. The food sings back to ancient Mayan civilization. Standing in Guatemalaót aking in the nature, the culture, the historyóI 'm reminded of how rare all of this really is.

Guatemala means place of many trees, but it's also a place of many volcanoes. They rise up to meet you as you fly into Guatemala City, the doorway to the country's many destinations. The roads are flooded by traffic, with motorcyclists weaving through cars and chicken buses (old school buses repainted with colorful patterns). I hardly mind. It gives me more time to look out into the expansive forests. As we venture west toward Lake Atitlán, the storefronts transform into farmland. This is a trip for the adventurous: it's about a four-hour drive on winding roads. But the journey is more than worth the destination.

We arrive at Casa Palopó (one of the two Relais & Châteaux properties in Guate) late at night, though you can still see the vast lake in the background. I descend into the colorful, eclectic lobby, greeted with a refreshing welcome drink. The space feels cozy and ultra-luxe all at once. The rooms are filled with Guatemalan artwork, a dazzling combination of bright saturated hues, intricate patterns, and various textures that all somehow blend harmoniously. Our bags are taken to our rooms, we're handed wooden boat-shaped keys, and we step down to 6.8ót he hotel's lakefront restaurant.

Dinner is a divine, masterful mixture of local produce, fresh seafood, and pillow-soft bread. Here, the food tells a story of Guatemala. Local cheeses, fish, and produce pay homage to the surrounding nature as well as Mayan culture. We're presented with handcrafted cocktails that are equally inspired: An espresso martini (nodding to Guatemala's iconic coffee), a mezcal mixture (accompanied by a mini chicken bus), and a tropical rum drink (to showcase the local fruit). For dessert, we share a few scrumptious dishes. The star of the show is the grilled pineapple. It's covered in a sweet glaze and is so tender, my fork glides through it like butter. I end the night sipping herbal tea in my plush bed.

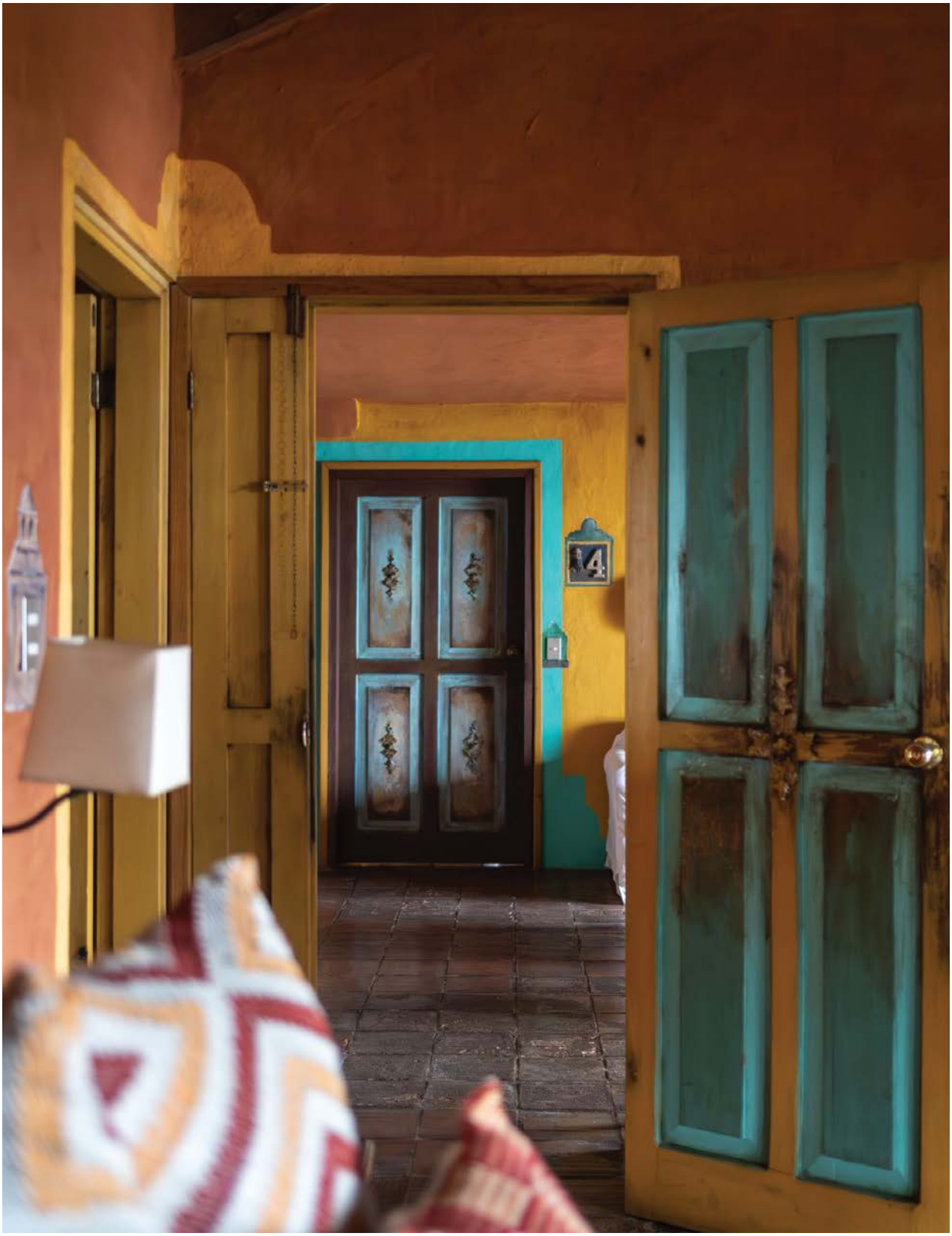
Despite the long travel day, I'm awake at sunrise. It's cloudy and overcast, but the view is still breathtaking. From my private balcony, I look out onto Lake Atitlán and take in the massive volcanoes scattered around it. As there are just 15 villas on the property, it's near-silent. I'm tempted to break out my in-room painting kit but instead am greeted with my morning ritual: A warm, silky-smooth cacao shot. (Guests can choose from celery juice, hot water with lemon, and other options to start their day.)

They say that nature is healing. As a resident of Santa Barbara, I know this to be true. A trip to the beach or a hike in the mountains provides a near-instant spike of feel-good chemicals. But to be completely immersed, as you are at Casa Palopó, is another experience entirely. It feels like a reawakening.

I head downstairs to 6.8, taking in the panoramic view of the lake and volcanoes. Breakfast is shakshuka with eggs from the on-site chicken coop and creamy queso alongside more fresh-baked bread and hot coffee. After, we head down to the property's funicular and descend to the lake for a tour of a nearby Mayan village (one of the many experiences the hotel offers). We climb aboard a little blue boat and take off.

We're speeding along Lake Atitlán, a vast body of water situated in a volcanic crater in Guatemala. The fog and clouds encircle the top of the surrounding volcanoes, making them seem even more massive than they already do. The glassy water reflects the sky, obscuring reality for just a second. It's like we're floating in the clouds as we head towards San Juan La Laguna. In a matter of minutes, it feels like we've traveled back centuries. That's the magic of Guatemalaói t offers portals to transport visitors into the past.


VILLA BOKÉH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CASA PALOPÓ

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KINNIK

We embark on our walking tour, taking in the inspired street art and the colorful umbrellas above. We visit a women's clothing collective first, and a masterful craftsperson shows us how the fabric is made and woven. She makes it look effortless, smoothly guiding strands into place. Everything is dyed naturally, either by fruits, vegetables, or plants, and sealed with banana peel. The store supports these women, and every purchase helps them directly. I pick up two tote bags and wish I had more space for one of the gorgeous table runners or blankets. For those planning to visit, this stop is an absolute must.

We continue walking up the stone street, dodging bright red tuk tuks and sipping creamy lattes. We stop in a chocolate shop and a honey shop, learning about the manufacturing process (again, done by hand), and try all kinds of samples. What strikes me most is the locals' connection to and deep respect for nature. Every part of the cacao plant is used: The seed for chocolate and the shells for an antioxidant-rich tea. Honey is used for eating, but it's also used in skincare and haircare products. Propolis from bees is used in a throat spray. In a world of fast fashion and processed items, being here renews my gratitude for nature and reminds me of the work it takes to create something.

We head back across the lake, the sun peeking out behind scattered clouds. Lunch is at Kinnik, Casa Palop's new lakeside open-fire restaurant. The sunny yellow decor, upbeat music, and delicious food give me a much-needed boost of energy before heading out to Pintando Santa Catarina Palop. This is a community initiative behind Santa Catarina's colorful transformation. It celebrates art (using naturally-colored paints to beautify buildings), centers education (giving children and mothers more access to school), and increases tourism (allowing residents to sell their crafts for profit). Visitors can tour the town, adopt a family, donate to the project, and even volunteer time to help paint buildings.

Dinner is a tortilla bar, yet another experience you can book at Casa Palop. I learn how to form masa into a round tortilla, placing it on the sizzling stovetop and watching it cook right before my eyes. Jorge Peralta, the executive chef, joins us and even makes me my own little quesadilla, filling one of my tortillas with queso. It's the kind of service you can expect at Casa Palop: attentive and warm. On each side of the walkway there are bowls of toppings: guacamole, queso, beans, meat, salsa, and pico de gallo that's so finely chopped I can hardly believe my eyes. I build my tacos and enjoy them alongside the hotel's wine pairings. The colorful candles hanging above my head are lit up, illuminating the space with a warm glow.

I pack up and get ready for our voyage from Atitlán to Antigua. We follow the winding roads back up from the lake and head from the western highlands to the east. We venture through stretches of forests and farms, passing through colorful towns on the way. Finally, we arrive at Villa Bokéh. Despite being five minutes outside of urban downtown Antigua, the entrance

to the property feels like a portal to a tropical oasis. I walk through the open-air lobby and am greeted with a refreshing lemonade. I head to my room and am absorbed by the charm of the hotel.

Casa Palopo feels like an exclusive, eclectic lakehouse, while Villa Bokéh feels more like a friend's modern Colonial homeób ut set in the tropics. There's an open patio covered with greenery and bright orange flowers overlooking the property's expansive six-acre manicured garden. A water fountain in the pond fills the space with soothing sounds. Between the arched bridge, the small rowboat, and the little glass house, the space feels straight out of a romance novel. (They even have a "Notebook Experience," where guests can enjoy a private picnic and boat ride). It's no wonder why they're already booked for weddings through 2025.

I follow the path around the tranquil pond to Casa Cristal, one of the hotel's restaurants. With its glass panels, tall vaulted ceiling, and hanging greenery, it's reminiscent of a greenhouse. Similarly to Casa Palopo, everything about the food is meaningful. The menu includes a fusion of traditional Guatemalan dishes with contemporary touches. Executive chef Marcos Sáenz and sous-chef Javier Foncea greet us personally as we enjoy house-made bread (ridiculously good), fresh produce, local cheeses, and slow-cooked meats. They make me my very own cauliflower tacos since I'm vegetarian, and I can't believe how flavorful and filling they are.

The sun peeks out from behind the clouds just as we head out for our walking tour of Antigua, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. We start in the town plaza, at a water fountain featuring mermaidsóo ne of the many motifs found throughout this colonial town. Our guide leads us around several buildings, all covered with intricate carvings. Many have been or are being restored, as the active volcanoes nearby have caused devastating earthquakes over the years. One such earthquake all but destroyed the Catedral de San Jose, leaving haunting ruins behind. Arches stretch over your head to the open sky while small stairs lead down to the burial area.

We walk along the cobblestone streets, taking in the colorful buildings, trying unique Guatemalan ice cream flavors, and posing in front of the iconic clock tower. So much of this town has been preserved, despite the natural disasters it faced. I climb up to the roof of Iglesia de la Merced and take in the city from a birds-eye view. Up here, I'm struck by the beauty of the cityób y the bright colors and the artistic architecture. In the distance, a volcano emits smoke into the golden sky. Again, I'm transported back in time. And again, I'm overcome with that childlike wonder.

Despite being a historical landmark, Antigua is also an up-and-coming nightlife hotspot. Our next stop is ULEW Cocktail Bar. The entrance is a red phone booth, and behind it is a cave-like, speasy-style pub. There's no menu here, just friendly bartenders who take note of your favorite spirit, fruit, flower, spice, and other flavors to create a custom drink. Mine is a perfectly-spiced, ultra-citrusy margarita.

For our farewell dinner, we enjoy more fresh bread (can you tell how much I love it?), grilled watermelon salad, pumpkin soup, and decadent cheese ravioli. Given the mastery and intention behind the food here, Villa Bokéh is a culinary destination on its own. It's an extraordinary way to experience Guatemala, to understand the culture and get a deeper appreciation of all it has to offer. Before we leave, Foncea brings out his talented team and gives them much-deserved recognition. You can see the pride he takesót he pride the entire team takesó in crafting memorable meals.

In the morning, I stop by the hotel's gift shop, curated by the owners to showcase local artists. I pick up coasters filled with Guatemalan worry dolls (they're supposed to take away your worries), handwoven dish towels, and famous Guatemalan coffee. Then, I head to the chicken coop to collect eggs for this morning's breakfast. I snack on flakey croissants, sweet jams, and fresh coffee before getting my meal: soft scrambled eggs and avocado toast topped with fresh veggies. As a parting gift, Foncea brings out one of his favorite items on the menu: thin, fluffy pancakes rolled with fresh fruit and nuts and topped with powdered sugar. A sweet ending to an even sweeter trip.

I find it's quite rare for luxury hotels to capture such a high level of culture immersion, but both Casa Palopo and Villa Bokéh do just that. They're two very different Guatemala experiences. Casa Palopo is a remote escape, celebrating Guatemalan nature, history, and art. Villa Bokéh is a luxurious historical destination, paying homage to Guatemala's past in an intentional and beautiful way. Both celebrate the culture and the land in a way that makes you feel deeply connected to it.

I felt a part of myself come back during my time in Guatemala. It's unfortunately all too easy to lose sight of just how incredible it is to be alive, right now, or to forget how extraordinary the world really is. But visiting Guatemala, walking through Mayan villages and ancient ruins in Antigua, beholding mighty volcanoes, tasting local foodói t was humbling and grounding and awe-inspiring all at once. May we never lose our childlike sense of wonder. And if we do, may we travel to Guatemala to find it again.*

CASA PALOPÓ