

# MAGUEY JOURNEY

DISCOVERING TEXTILES IN GUATEMALA



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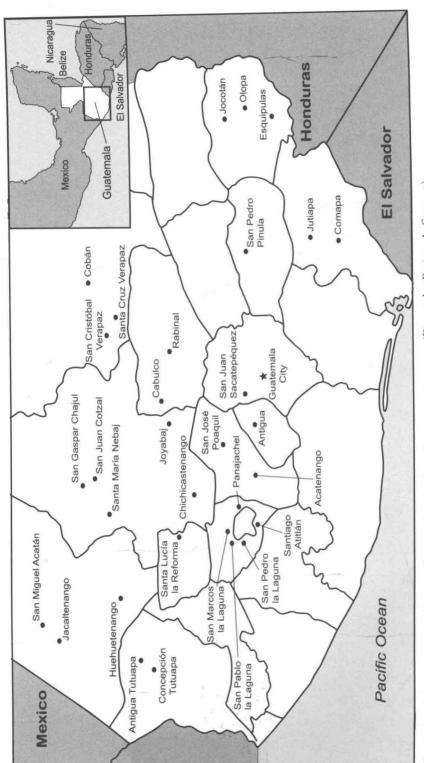
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# MAGUEY JOURNEY



Frontispiece: Primary municipalities in Guatemala visited on the maguey journey. (Drawn by Parisse A. Stewart)

Dedicated to all of the maguey workers who keep the art alive.

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- 1. Leaves are cut from the maguey plant
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### Preface

Maguey began to play a part in my life when I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Guatemala in the late 1980s. This is because, like everyone else living and working in the campo (countryside), I had a morral (net bag) in which I carried my daily necessities. At the time I was unaware of how maguey was used to make net bags and related utilitarian objects and, more important, its place as a historical record and visual language. Like most foreigners I focused on the bright, colorful loom-woven textiles, learning backstrap weaving and familiarizing myself with regional clothing styles.

Fifteen years later, after developing my career as a fiber artist, working with natural materials to make hand-constructed textiles, many done in the same technique as net bags, I discovered that little documentation existed on Guatemalan morrales, and I began to conduct fieldwork, to learn what I could firsthand.

Upon my return to Guatemala in 2001, I instantly noticed that many changes had occurred since I had last spent extensive time in the country. One of the most significant events was the 1996 signing of the Peace Accords, which officially ended the thirty-six year civil war. This opened the door to globalization and brought new products, materials, and ideas into even the most remote communities. Also, because of land shortages and low wages, many people have left their homes to earn money elsewhere, which contributes to the decline of many traditions, including maguey. Fortunately, I found enough people still working with maguey that I was able to learn firsthand their techniques and to observe maguey's place in a cultural context.

Maguey textile production, marketing, and transitions are the focus of this book. The first section recounts my journey and experiences, highlighting maguey worker interactions in many locations, and incorporates historical, actual, and non-maguey facts to describe the workers' environments. The plants' journey—the transformation process of turning a raw

leaf into beautiful and useful textile products—is next, and, finally, maguey economics as well as many of the transitions taking place. My goal is to illustrate the "state of maguey" at this particular time in history, document the processes, and honor those who keep the art alive.

### Acknowledgments

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In addition to my main informants, many others offered advice and information. To give them credit without jeopardizing their privacy I have listed their names, as given to me, in alphabetical order, with no mention of where they live: José Cacho, Rosa Cal, Fransisco Chajil, Margarita Choc Gualim, Fabián Lucas Cor, Domingo (Mingo) Cruz Gómez, Vicente Cuc Caneles, Óscar Fernández, Fidelia Gómez López, Margarita Gómez López, Matilda Gua Lem, Tomás Rámoz Ixtuc, Julia Lassaro, María Margarita Limico Vásquez, Juan López Rodríguez, María Isabelle Macanio Chun, Mariano, Marcos Martiz, Alfonso Morales Girón, Tomasa Morales Raimez, Carmela Morenti, Arminda de Jesús Ohajaca Gonzales, Hipolito Ohajaca Pérez, Gasper Pérez Agular, Alfredo Pérez Galisia, María Pu Castro, Anocleto Ramírez, Santiago Ramírez García, Andrea Rámoz Reynozo, Daniel Rosa, Ángela Sacaria García, Catalina María Sahic, Felicito Sánchez Sánchez, Rejas Sic, Dominga Sicij Sochoj, Diego Us Chic, Juan Us Lux, Gregorio Us Mejía, Eugenio Vacajole, Mariano Vásquez Quisán, Edgar Vásquez Sánsez, and Tino Xinik.

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It should be noted that, throughout the text, I adopted the local custom of shortening names, such as Museo Ixchel for Museo Ixchel del Traje Indígena, Chichi for Chichicastenango, and Cotzal for San Juan Cotzal. The spelling of Mayan languages varies and I used those of Nora C. England (2001, 17). The common names for plants, products, and techniques vary widely, and I did my best to use the most common and current ones.

I quoted prices in quetzales (Q), the national currency, and the exchange rate fluctuated between 7.5GTQ (quetzal Guatemalteco) and 7.8GTQ to 1.00USD (U.S. dollar) during the time of my research. Between 2001 and 2007 the daily wage for workers in rural Guatemala was about Q15. Prices quoted can vary, as bargaining is the accepted practice in Guatemala, especially in the markets.

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The land of maguey encompasses a region where many similar customs, such as the use of maguey, exist. While the most intense maguey culture has been in central Mexico, Guatemala is another place of importance. Distinguished from neighboring Mexico, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador by international borders, the republic is made up of many geographical regions, ranging from sea level to over 14,000 feet in elevation. The Altiplano or Occidente (western highlands, between Chimaltenango and the Mexican border), the central highlands (the area surrounding Guatemala City), the Oriente (eastern highlands located between Guatemala City and Honduras and El Salvador), and the Verapazes (a region north of Guatemala City) are where I spent most of my time. I also crossed briefly into Chiapas, Mexico, northwestern El Salvador, and western Honduras to follow cultural, rather than political, divisions.

Guatemala is made up of twenty-two departments, which are separated into municipalities; most are distinct in language, clothing, and customs. These divisions are further broken down into *aldeas* (villages or hamlets) and again into *cantones* or *barrios* (neighborhoods), *caserios* (cluster of homes), and large farms. Spain's colonial influence, beginning in 1523, shaped large towns, which are laid out around a central park or plaza. Bordered by a Catholic church, government offices, and often a health center, market, and school, the plaza is the place where townspeople gather and community activities such as markets and celebrations take place. The biggest fiesta usually occurs on the day of a community's (Catholic) patron saint. Activities always include fireworks, music, dances, processions, elected queens, and markets, and often horse races and rodeos.

In rural areas, small separate sleeping and cooking structures made from the local materials of adobe, wood, or palm leaves are clustered in extended family groupings and surrounded by milpas (cornfields). Usually a