

LIFESTYLE

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From NYC Crime Fighting to a Tourist Business in Guatemala

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Lifestyle



Founded in the 16th century, Antigua is famous for its Spanish colonial buildings.

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After decades in the trenches, working for the New York State Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement, officer Valerie Russell realized that her chosen career path just wasn't cutting it for her anymore. She needed a change—a big one.

"I asked myself, 'If I died next year what's the biggest regret I'd have?'" she says. "And the answer was retiring in New York state without venturing abroad again." (Valerie studied at a university in London, England and did some extensive traveling after college.)

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Valerie began researching various destinations. She subscribed to *International Living* and found herself inspired. "I saw people offering relocation services in places like Panama, Costa Rica, and Ecuador," says Valerie. "I wanted to feel comfortable enough somewhere to help others adapt to life outside the U.S., as well."

She started researching countries in Central America where she'd be relatively close to home, in the same time zone.

Guatemala kept popping up as a potential location. The country's growth in tourism was an impressive 17% per year, expat interest was growing, and the cost of living was low. Plus it was just a two-hour flight from her parents in Florida.

The smell of freedom convinced Valerie to end her law enforcement career early. In doing so, she sacrificed a lucrative pension. "I chose happiness over money," she says proudly. "And I don't think I'll ever regret that."

When she first landed in Guatemala, Valerie traveled around the country for six months, spending time in areas such as Tikal and Lanquin with [Workaway](#), a company that matches volunteers with home-stay opportunities that provide cultural immersion with welcoming locals. Participants complete chores in exchange for free room and board.

Valerie eventually chose to settle in Antigua, a charming city with breathtaking views of Guatemala's central highlands. Here, *tuk-tuks* (tiny, three-wheeled vehicles) rumble and bounce down webs of cobblestone streets, passing Spanish colonial churches and candy-colored buildings... while their passengers marvel at the imposing volcanoes towering in every direction. (For just a couple of bucks, *tuk tuks* will take you from one end of the city to the other.)

Central Park is ground zero for festivities. Local women in multicolored dresses, babies strapped to their backs, effortlessly balance straw baskets filled with mangoes, avocados, and tomatoes on their heads. Their equally skilled male counterparts hawk cowboy hats stacked eight feet high.

It's a vibrant city of open-air markets, farm-to-table restaurants, art galleries, and cafés. School buses, long retired from their routes in North America, are colorfully painted in dazzling themes and eye-popping caricatures.

Valerie jumped into the local tourism scene by scoring a job managing a local bar and hostel. "I found the locals here so warm and friendly," she says. Valerie later launched her own travel agency. [Due South Travels](#) books tours to volcanoes, lake villages, and local markets. It also offers cooking classes and books taxi and shuttle services to anywhere in Guatemala.

“I chose happiness over money... no regrets.

"It started slowly, thanks in part to Covid," she says. "But now tourism's back with a bang." Valerie has recently hired two employees and maintains a brigade of independently contracted drivers and tour operators.

Valerie works from her apartment in a beautiful 1700s-era building, just four blocks from the Central Park. The two-bedroom, two-bathroom unit, with a large center courtyard and a garage, costs only \$800 per month. "That's considered a little expensive by Guatemalan standards," Valerie confesses, adding that many one-bedroom units, with kitchens and bathrooms suited to North American standards, rent for about \$500 per month.

Utilities are extra, but nominal compared to prices back home. "I pay about \$55 per month for electricity, and I have a washer, dryer, and a massive water heater." Her internet service runs about \$40 per month and includes cable TV, telephone, and high-speed connectivity.

Water runs her about \$3 per month. Valerie's met a network of friends around Antigua, so she never feels lonely or unsafe. "I also love Guatemala City and the towns around Lake Atitlan, but the city's size can be a bit imposing, and the small lake towns can feel a little isolated at night, especially for single people. That's why I love Antigua."

Valerie also launched [Girlfriends in Antigua](#), a Facebook group that provides a sense of community to local and expat women... many of whom, like her, are single and without kids. It's grown to over 5,400 members.

"When I talk to my friends back home, they complain about their big mortgages, the cost of living, and their family problems," Valerie says. "But when I call up one of the girls down here, it's a completely different conversation: Wanna climb a volcano this weekend? Wanna

"I absolutely love my life here. The weather's amazing, the cost of living is incredibly affordable, I feel completely safe, and I have a great group of friends" Valerie says. "And I owe a lot to *International Living* for inspiring me."