



**RAIN FOREST, 36" x 49", 2000. All the fabrics in the graduated background (lime green to navy blue) are hand dyed. Designed, constructed, and quilted by the author.**

this is a wonderful way of representing my country and my people in a positive, beautiful light.

There are many different types and thicknesses of Guatemalan fabrics. The kind that I use in my quilts is relatively difficult to find. I use 100% mercerized cotton of top-quality, light-to-medium thickness. It has a silky texture, great drape-ability, and a nice sheen. It is perfect for the many seams involved in the quilting process, and it's also suitable for lined or unlined garments, home furnishings, and many other uses!

These hand-woven fabrics are labor-intensive to produce. Every step involved in their making is done by hand, from choosing the cotton fibers, knotting and dyeing the threads to produce ikat motifs, to the weaving process itself. Ikat motifs are patterns like flames, zigzags, trees, or human figures, created by a very labor-intensive process of tying portions of cotton thread so tightly that the tied parts do not take on the color when dipped in a dye bath. The warp and weft fibers

will make up the pattern when the cloth is woven.

The fabric is usually 34" to 36" wide due to the size of the ancestral foot looms that men use to weave the cloth. Many of the centuries-old designs, patterns, and colors have been passed on from generation to generation making these textiles heirlooms in their own right!

Guatemalan fabrics have a number of positive qualities that lend character and personality to my designs.

They have a unique beauty – a hand-made, rustic quality, rich texture, and strong colors in stripes and ikat designs.

The fabrics are stable, and hold their shape when ironed. On the other hand, the looser weave makes it very fudge-able! When sewn together with lighter weight fabric (which I do all the time), iron seams

towards the lighter weight fabric. When sewing two Guatemalan fabrics together press seams open to avoid bulkiness. I also recommend the use of steam with these fabrics.

The fabric is reversible, a wonderful feature when working with symmetry, or when you have made a mistake and forgot to turn your template over for cutting reverse pieces!

#### **Prewashing fabric**

Prewashing is a must before sewing Guatemalan textiles into your quilts or garments. Here's how to do it:

- Zigzag or serge raw edges to prevent excessive fraying.
- Separate fabrics by color into darks and lights. Be particularly careful with reds and blues as they tend to bleed.
- Machine wash the fabrics using a gentle cycle with a hot wash temperature and a warm rinse.
- To the wash water, add 1 teaspoon of Retayne™ per yard of fabric. This fixative will ensure that colors don't run and that they stay bright. (Retayne™ can be purchased at any

quilt shop.)

• Don't worry if the water in the machine is tinted dark. This is the excess dye coming out and will not stain your fabrics.

• Take the fabrics out of the washing machine as soon as the complete wash cycle is finished! Leaving them damp and crumpled could stain them.

• Tumble dry the fabrics for half an hour or so on a low temperature. Remove promptly and then hang until completely dry.

• Ironing at this point is optional, but not necessary.

#### **Shrinkage**

Due to its handmade nature, the fabric does shrink an average of 5% to 8% after being washed. Please, take this into account when calculating yardage.

#### **Machine washing**

Guatemalan fabrics are strong and tough and hold up just fine to repeated machine washings. This fabric can last for years and years! I suggest using cold water, a gentle cycle, and a detergent with color guard to protect the colors. Use low-temperature drying.

Guatemalan fabrics are so versatile that they fit into many different styles. You'll find a lot of stripes and ikats, plaids and solids in many color ways, brights, and also subdued darks. Some are more cosmopolitan, others typically Guatemalan with bold colors, Mayan designs, and multicolor schemes. There are many patterns to suit every taste.

Depending on how you incorporate them into your design and composition, they can become contemporary, African, ethnic, naïve, Mayan, and yes, even traditional. Take risks and try using more daring fabric choices! ■



*Priscilla Bianchi, quilt artist and international teacher, lives and operates her textile export business from her hometown in Guatemala City, Guatemala. An experienced teacher, Priscilla travels throughout the United States to lecture and teach. Contact her via the AQS website, [www.AQSquilt.com](http://www.AQSquilt.com) – click on American Quilter magazine, Fall 2002 issue.*