



Welcome to Guatemala

"I had such an awesome time and made such great friends that time just flew by. By the time that I left I was speaking Spanish like a native, and now I'm confident enough to speak the language to anybody!"

Guatemala is by many accounts the most magnificent of Central America's countries: its volcanoes are the highest and most active, its Mayan ruins are the most impressive, and its history is the most exciting. Indeed, the ruins of Tikal, which tower high above the dense jungle canopy, have inspired countless adventure stories, pilgrims from all over the world have flocked to the tranquil, warm waters of Lake Atitlan, and ancient cities like Antigua have provided the perfect setting for countless holiday romances.

Know your History

From the 3rd Century B.C. to the 12th Century A.D., the lowlands of Petén and Izabal regions were inhabited by several indigenous states of Mayan ethnicity. Many K'iche tribal groups were on the central highlands.

Spanish rule

During the colonial period, Guatemala was a Captaincy General of Spain, but still part of New Spain (Mexico). It extended from Soconusco region – now in southern Mexico (states of Chiapas and Tabasco) – to Costa Rica. This region was not as rich in minerals like gold and silver as Mexico and Peru, and was, therefore, not considered as important. Its main products were sugarcane, cocoa, blue añil dye, red dye from cochineal insects, and precious woods used in artwork for churches and palaces in Spain.

Independence

Frustrated by their inability to trade with countries other than Spain, the Guatemalan elite declared independence on 15th September 1821, although it was still part of the newly independent state of Mexico. In 1823 Guatemala became independent from Mexico as well. The new Guatemalan Republic included part of Soconusco region, and what are now the countries of El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. Its 1.5 million inhabitants were concentrated in urban centres. The Guatemalan provinces formed the United Provinces of Central America, also called the Central American Federation. The capital city remained Guatemala City which is still today the most populous city in Central America.

A politically unstable period followed, aggravated by the collapse of the world market for añil (indigo),

the country's main export to Europe, due to the invention of synthetic dyes. This prompted each province to leave the Federation, and Guatemala became an independent nation.

Civil war

Guatemalan history is marked by the Cold War between the US and the USSR. The CIA with a small group of Guatemalans overthrew the freely elected Guatemalan government of Jacobo Arbenz in 1954 after the government expropriated unused land owned by the United Fruit Company, a US-based banana merchant. The subsequent military rule, beginning with dictator Carlos Castillo Armas led to over 30 years of civil war that, from 1960, led to the death of an estimated 200,000 Guatemalan civilians. According to the UN-sponsored Truth Commission, government forces and paramilitaries were responsible for over 90% of the human rights violations during the war.

During the first 10 years, the victims of the state-sponsored terror were primarily students, workers, professionals, and opposition figures of all political tendencies, but in the last years, they were thousands of mostly rural Mayans farmers and non-combatants. More than 450 Mayan villages were destroyed and over one million people became refugees.

This is considered one of the worst ethnic cleansings in modern Latin America. In certain areas, such as Baja Verapaz, the Truth Commission considered that the Guatemalan state engaged in an intentional policy of genocide against particular ethnic groups.

Guatemala & the US

From the 1950s to the 1990s (with a suspension of military aid between 1977 and 1982), the US government directly supported Guatemala's army with training, weapons and money. The United States Army Special Forces (Green Berets) were sent to Guatemala to transform its army into a "modern counter-insurgency force", and made it the most powerful and sophisticated in Central America. In 1999, then US president Bill Clinton stated that the United States was wrong to have provided support to Guatemalan military forces that took part in the brutal civilian killings.

Guerilla warfare

In 1982, four Marxist groups formed the guerrilla organisation Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG). A bloody 36-year war ended in 1996 with a peace accord between the guerrillas and the government of President Álvaro Arzú, negotiated by the United Nations. Both sides made major concessions. The army controlled urban centres, while URNG maintained a strong presence in the countryside. Due to the military's use of rampant torture, disappearances, "scorched earth" warfare, and many other brutal methods, the country became a pariah state internationally.

In 1992, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Rigoberta Menchú, an indigenous human rights activist, for her efforts to bring international attention to the government-sponsored genocide against the indigenous population. Since the peace accord, Guatemala has enjoyed successive democratic elections, most recently electing Álvaro Colom to presidency in 2008. However, corruption is still rampant at all levels of government.

Money Talks

It is only in recent years that Guatemala's economy has begun to take off. It is one of the most populous of the Central American countries, but with a GDP (Gross Domestic Product) per capita

only about one half that of Argentina's, Brazil's, and Chile's. Guatemala's main exports are coffee, sugar, and bananas, although there are now increasing markets for cut flowers, textiles and apparel, and other non-traditional agricultural produce. The tourism trade has picked up too, though it is the traditional products that still provide the main source of income – with around 29% of the population below the poverty line.

Guatemala's economy is continuously fighting against its situation, using increasing government revenues (negotiating further assistance from international donors), upgrading government and private financial operations, moving to curtail drug trafficking and the high crime-rate, and attempting to narrow the trade deficit.

Over the years, many international organisations – including WWF – have expressed concern over the standard of Guatemala's economy, citing its chronic malnutrition (the 4th highest rate in the world), severe malnutrition of approximately 50% of children under five and approximately 58% of its inhabitants living below the extreme poverty line (defined as the amount needed to purchase a basic basket of food).

In 2009, President Álvaro Colom declared a national emergency because of the lack of food and proper nutrition. A combined set of factors, including severe drought and global warming reducing the domestic food supply and the global financial crisis reducing the imports of food, has pushed Colom to state that the government will immediately be seeking assistance from the international community for emergency food supplies.

Money

Guatemala's currency is the Guatemalan quetzal (GTQ), which is named after the national bird, the resplendent quetzal. The ancient Mayans used the quetzal's tail feathers as currency. When arriving in Guatemala by air, it is best to change money at the banks at the Aurora Airport and ask for change in case you need to use the pay phone. Many local towns and villages won't have ATMs or be able to cash traveller's cheques, so it is best to arrive with enough cash to cover your stay or note the nearest town where ATMs are available.

Get Culture Savvy

Guatemala's culture is a unique product of Native American ways and a strong Spanish colonial heritage. About half of Guatemala's population is mestizo (known in Guatemala as ladino), people of mixed European and indigenous ancestry. Ladino culture is dominant in urban areas, and is heavily influenced by European and North American trends. But unlike many Latin American countries, Guatemala still has a large indigenous population, the Maya, which has retained a distinct identity. Deeply rooted in the rural highlands of Guatemala, any indigenous people speak a Mayan language, follow traditional religious and village customs, and continue a rich tradition in textiles and other crafts. The two cultures have made Guatemala a complex society that is deeply divided between rich and poor. This division has produced much of the tension and violence that have marked Guatemala's history.

Festivals & Holidays

January: On 15th January the day of the Black Christ is celebrated in Esquipulas.

February: Lent processions begin throughout Guatemala.

March/April: Lent and Easter week processions throughout Guatemala. The largest processions

occur in Antigua Guatemala on Good Friday.

May: On 2nd and 3rd May, the Day of the Cross is celebrated with colourful traditions at Lake Amatitlán near Guatemala City. On 9th May, Jueves de Ascención is celebrated with traditional music, flowers and prayers at Lake Chicabal. Please be very respectful of this tradition and do not take photographs.

July: 25th July is the town fair in Antigua Guatemala, with parades, music and other festivities. On 27th July the annual Rabin Ajau beauty pageant is held in Cobán, with traditional dances and music.

August: On 15th August, Guatemala City celebrates the day of Our Lady of the Ascension.

September: 15th September is the national holiday to commemorate Guatemala's independence from Spain in 1821. The largest holiday fair is in Quetzaltenango.

October: On 20th October, Guatemalans celebrate the overthrow of dictator Jorge Ubico in 1944 and the beginning of 10 years of revolutionary government known as the "10 Years of Spring."

November: All Saints Day, celebrated on 1st November, is celebrated with unique traditions throughout Guatemala. Giant kites are flown in the cemeteries of Santiago Sacatepéquez and Sumpango near Antigua Guatemala. Many Guatemalans feast on a traditional food known as fiambre. An unusual horse race is held in Todos Santos Cuchumatán.

December: The town fair in Chichicastenango culminates on 21st December with traditional dances and music. Nativity scenes, hand-made Christmas ornaments and small processions known as "posadas" create a joyful atmosphere during December.

Learn the Lingo

We recommend the Lonely Planet's Latin-American Spanish phrase book to bring along with you to Guatemala. The Spanish spoken in Spain is slightly different from the Spanish spoken in Guatemala. People in Guatemala for example, do not pronounce the letter S at the end of a word. Here are some phrases and words to get you started in Guatemala:

Remember:

The letters **LL** together are pronounced as **Y**

The letter **J** is always pronounced as **H**

The letter **V** is soft, so pronounce it as **B**

ENGLISH	SPANISH	ENGLISH	SPANISH
Greetings		Numbers	
Hi	Hola	1	Uno
Goodbye	Adios	2	Dos
Pleased to meet you!	Mucho gusto!	3	Très
How are you?	Como estas?	4	Cuatro
Good morning	Buenos días	5	Cinco
Good afternoon	Buenas tardes	6	Seis
Good evening/night	Buenas noches	7	Siete
8	Ocho		
About Yourself		9	Nueve

My name is...	Me llamo...	10	Diez
I am from England	Soy de Inglaterra	11	Once
I don't speak Spanish	No hablo Español	12	Doce
I don't understand	No entiendo	13	Trece
What's your name?	¿Cómo se llama usted?	14	Catorce
15	Quince		
In the Shop		16	Dieciséis
I would like.../I want...	Quiero	17	Diecisiete
How much does it cost?	Cuánto vale?	18	Dieciocho
Please	Por favour	19	Diecinueve
Thank you (very much)	(Muchas) gracias	20	Veinte
Yes	Sí	100	Cien
No	No	500	Quinientos
1000	Mil		
In the Restaurant			
Chicken	Pollo		
Vegetables	Vegetales		
Beef	Res		
Meat	Carne		
Cheese	Queso		
Fish	Pescado		
Tomato sauce	Salsa de tomate		
Beer	Cerveza		
I am a vegetarian	Soy vegetariano		

Lay of the Land

Guatemala – pinched between Mexico and Belize to the north and El Salvador and Honduras to the south – is mountainous, except for the south coastal area and the northern vast lowlands of Petén region. Two mountain chains enter Guatemala from west to east, dividing the country into three major regions: the highlands, where the mountains are located; the Pacific coast, south of the mountains; and the Petén region, north of the mountains. These areas vary in climate, elevation, and landscape, providing dramatic contrasts between hot and humid tropical lowlands and highland peaks and valleys.

The southern edge of the western highlands is marked by the Sierra Madre, which stretches from the Mexican border south and east, and continues at lower elevations toward El Salvador. The mountain chain is characterised by steep volcanic cones, including Tajumulco Volcano (4,220 m), the highest point in the country and Central America. All of Guatemala's 37 volcanoes (four of them active; Pacaya, Santiaguito, Fuego and Tacaná), are in this chain, and earthquakes are frequent in the highlands.

The northern chain of mountains begins near the Mexican border with the Cuchumatanes range,

then stretches east through the Chuacús and Chamá sierras, down to the Santa Cruz and Minas sierras, near the Caribbean Sea. The northern and southern mountains are separated by the Motagua valley, where the Motagua River and its tributaries drain from the highlands into the Caribbean being navigable in its lower end, where it forms the boundary with Honduras.

Its climate is hot and humid in the Pacific and Petén Lowlands – more temperate in the highlands, to freezing cold at the high of the Cuchumatanes range, and hot/drier in the eastern most regions.

All major cities are in the highlands and the Pacific lowlands, including the capital, Guatemala City, at 1,506 m. Quetzaltenango in the central highlands stands at 2,011 m, Escuintla in the western highlands at 300 m, alongside Mazatenango (220 m) and Coatepeque (515 m) in the Pacific lowlands. The largest lake, Lago de Izabal (5,896 km²), is close to the Caribbean coast. Volcán Tajumulco, 4,220 m, the highest point in Central America, is located in the western region of San Marcos.

Guatemala's location on the Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean makes it a target for hurricanes, including Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and Hurricane Stan in October 2005, which killed more than 1,500 people in floods. The last major earthquake was on 4th February 1976, killing more than 25,000 in the central highlands.

What's the Weather like?

The climate of Guatemala is tropical, hot and humid in the lowlands and much cooler in the highlands. November to April is the drier season. As it can get quite cool in the evenings, it's always best to take a sweater and long sleeved shirt. Along the coast and in the northeast, temperatures range from 20°C to 37°C.

Biodiversity

With the exception of snow and desert, Guatemala is one of the very few countries in the world that has every ecosystem. These range from mangrove forest (four species) both saltwater and littorals, dry forest and thorn bushes in the eastern highlands, subtropical and tropical rainforest, wetlands, cloud humid forest in the Verapaz, Pacific piedmont, and regions such as mix, quercus and pine forest in the highlands.

This small Central American country, once home to the Mayans, is the homeland of plants such as: corn, squash, many varieties of beans and potatoes, yucca (manioc), avocado, cacao, tomato, zapote, jocote, chicle (chewing gum), amaranth, and chilli (capsicum). It is considered the 5th biodiversity hotspot in the world, making it a vital area for research and development of conservation.

Guatemala has around 1,246 known species of amphibians, birds, mammals and reptiles, of which 6.7% are endemic, and 8.1% are threatened. There at least 8,681 species of vascular plants (13.5% endemic), and around 3,938,000 (36.3%) hectares of forest – out of which, 47% is considered the most biodiverse form of all, primary forest. Add to this, 17 conifer – pine, cypress and abets – species (the most in any tropical region), and Guatemala is one of the most unique and environmentally important places in the world.

Good Books

Guidebooks

- The Lonely Planet Guidebook: Guatemala. Susan Forsyth & John Noble. ISBN 9781741044720 Lonely Planet Publications, 2007
- The Rough Guide: Guatemala. Iain Stewart. ISBN 9781848360174 Rough Guide, 2009
- Latin American Spanish. ISBN 9781740597128 Lonely Planet, 2008

Teaching Guides

- Essential Grammar in Use with Answers: A Self-study Reference and Practice Book for Elementary Students of English 2nd Edition. Raymond Murphy. Cambridge University Press, 2002. ISBN 9780521529327
- Essential Grammar in Use with Answers: A Self-study Reference and Practice Book for Intermediate Students of English 3rd Edition. Raymond Murphy. Cambridge University Press, 2004. ISBN 9780521532891
- Lessons from Nothing: Activities for Language Teaching with Limited Time and Resources (Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers). Bruce Marsland. Cambridge University Press, 1998. ISBN 9780521627658
- Games for Children (Resource Books for Teachers). Gordon Lewis & Gunther Benson. Oxford University Press, 1999. ISBN 9780194372244
- Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching 2nd Edition. Diane Larsen-Freeman. Oxford University Press, 2000. ISBN 9780194355742

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