



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

▼ CENTRAL AMERICA

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate. Covering 42,043 square miles (108,891 square kilometers), Guatemala is just smaller than Tennessee. About two-thirds of the country is mountainous. There are 32 volcanoes, some of which are active. Rich forests covering 40 percent of Guatemala, particularly in the northwest Petén region, are subject to rapid deforestation due in part to slash-and-burn agriculture and illegal logging. Use of wood for heating and cooking also has contributed to deforestation, which in turn has put archaeological sites and wildlife at risk. Most people live on the slopes of the highlands or in the fertile, well-watered lowlands along the Pacific coast.

The eastern-central portion of the country is hot and dry. In the coastal lowlands, hot, humid weather prevails. In the highlands, days are warm and nights are usually cool. The average annual temperature in the capital, which is located on a plateau 4,800 feet (1,400 meters) above sea level, is 75°F (24°C). Guatemalans often refer to their country as the Land of the Eternal Spring. November through April is the dry season. Rain is abundant from May through October. Guatemala's Caribbean coast is wet year-round.

History. The Mayan Empire flourished in what is now Guatemala for more than one thousand years until it began to decline in the 1100s. As one of the chief centers of the Mayan culture, Guatemala abounds in archaeological ruins, notably the majestic ceremonial city of Tikal in the Petén region. From 1524 to 1821, the Spanish ruled Central America. After winning its independence in 1821, Guatemala was briefly annexed by Mexico and then became a member of the Central American Federation until the federation dissolved in 1838.

Military dictatorships controlled Guatemala until a 1944 revolution. From 1945 to 1982, leaders tried to cure some of

Guatemala's social ills, but full democracy proved elusive. Violence was common and an elected president (Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán) was overthrown by a U.S.-backed military coup in 1954. In 1960, rebels began a civil war that made political stability impossible until 1984, when an elected assembly wrote a new constitution.

In 1986, Guatemala returned to civilian rule under Marco Vinicio Cerezo Arévalo. Cerezo withstood two military coups, but the military had strong ties to the country's principal landowners and wielded more control over some regions than civilian authorities. Because the military was primarily responsible for human-rights abuses, such control presented enormous problems for political and economic progress.

Elections in 1990 brought the first transfer of power from one elected official to another. President Jorge Serrano Elías began peace talks with the rebels in 1991. However, in 1993, Serrano staged a "self-coup" backed by the army. He announced emergency rule, dissolving congress and the Supreme Court and suspending the constitution. As public protests mounted, the military withdrew its support, forcing Serrano to flee to Panama. Military leaders recalled congress, which chose its ombudsman for human rights, Ramiro de León Carpio, to finish Serrano's term.

New negotiations began when President Alvaro Arzú Irigoyen took office in 1996. In December 1996, the government and the rebels signed a series of agreements culminating in a UN-brokered peace accord. The accord ended Latin America's longest civil war—one that lasted 36 years, claimed more than 150,000 lives, and displaced about a million people. The agreements address military downsizing, the reintegration of soldiers and rebels into society, indigenous people's rights,

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women's rights, resettlement of refugees, and socio-economic and agrarian reforms. In 2004, the government began offering payments to people who lost property or loved ones in the war. Guatemala suffers from a high murder rate, with both citizens and political figures falling victim to such crimes.

THE PEOPLE

Population. Guatemala's population of roughly 13 million is growing at a higher than average 2.1 percent annually. While 55 percent is Ladino (people who descend from the Spanish and Maya but relate more to their Spanish heritage), 43 percent is composed of some 28 indigenous groups descended from the Maya. Some of the largest are the Quiché, Cakchiquel, Kekchí, Ixil, and Mam. They live throughout the country, but many reside in western highlands. Collectively, they refer to themselves as *indigenas* (indigenous) or Maya. A small black minority, the Garífuna, is concentrated on Guatemala's Caribbean coast. There is also a small white minority. Guatemalans as a group are known colloquially as *chapines*.

Language. Spanish is Guatemala's official language, but each indigenous group speaks its own language. While most indigenous male Guatemalans speak some Spanish, indigenous women have fewer opportunities to learn Spanish as they do not often attend school and have less contact with Spanish speakers. The Garífuna speak English, creole, and Spanish.

Religion. Roman Catholicism traditionally has dominated Guatemala, although many indigenous members combine it with Mayan beliefs. Some indigenous groups have not accepted Catholicism at all. Freedom of religion is guaranteed. While Catholicism influences most celebrations and habits, regardless of people's religious preference, devotion to the Catholic Church is declining. In the last 20 years, many have converted to Protestant and other Christian churches. About 45 percent of the people are now Protestants, known generally as *evangélicos* (evangelicals). Increased religious devotion is credited with decreasing alcoholism and other social problems. However, tension between Catholics and Protestants, or *evangélicos*, is rising.

General Attitudes. Guatemalans are generous, warm, polite, and humble. They value honesty, family unity, personal honor, work, and education. Optimism is less common than the acceptance of misfortune. People often believe they are unable to change their condition, either for lack of empowerment or because some things are God's will. Personal criticism, taken seriously, should be avoided. Punctuality is admired but not strictly observed; people are considered more important than schedules. This type of keeping time is called *la hora chapina* (the Guatemalan hour). Guatemalans are gracious and strive to make any social interaction comfortable. The phrase *No tenga pena* (Don't worry) is commonly used to set others at ease.

Family status and wealth are important to *ladinos*. Many consider the Maya to be inferior and uncivilized, and they avoid contact with those who do not adopt *ladino* ways. The Maya, who have long been subjected to discrimination and human-rights abuses, desire to be treated as equals. Maya who wear Western clothing and assimilate into *ladino* culture are treated somewhat better.

While the peoples of Guatemala are diverse, they have in common a desire for a tranquil life. Guatemalans are cautiously optimistic that the 1996 accord has brought a true and lasting peace.

Personal Appearance. People usually wear Western-style clothing in cities. Most rural Maya, particularly women, have

retained traditional dress. Each group's clothing has unique qualities, but basic features include a *faja* (woven belt worn by both sexes), a *corte* (wraparound skirt) for women, and knee- or calf-length trousers for men. Women may weave ribbons or fabric through their hair. Men generally wear hats made of straw or blocked felt. Clothing often is colorful. A woman treasures her *huipil* (blouse); its design identifies her social position and hometown. There are about 500 of these designs.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings. When meeting for the first time, people greet with a handshake and *Mucho gusto* (Pleased to meet you). Among acquaintances, the most common greetings are *Buenos días* (Good day), *Buenas tardes* (Good afternoon), and *Buenas noches* (Good evening). After an initial greeting, one might ask *¿Cómo está?* (How are you?). Friends often greet with a casual *Buenas* or *¿Qué tal?* (How's it going?). Shaking hands heartily is common in most areas. Among friends, men usually shake hands and sometimes embrace, and *ladino* women kiss each other on the cheek. A younger woman will kiss a male friend, but older women kiss only male relatives. Some older women greet by grasping the person just below each elbow.

In small groups, it is important to greet each individual. In larger groups, it is acceptable to offer a group greeting or simply greet as many persons as possible. When addressing others, using a title (*Señor, Señora, Señorita, Doctor, etc.*) shows respect. People show special respect for older individuals by using *Don* and *Doña* with the first name. Common parting phrases include *Que le vaya bien* (May you go well), *Nos vemos* (See you later), and *Más tarde* (Later). Guatemalans generally begin all conversations by exchanging pleasantries; failure to do so implies lack of a personal relationship and makes the listener question the speaker's motives.

Gestures. Guatemalans beckon by waving the hand down and inward. A "tssst, tssst" sound gets someone's attention. Pointing with the finger or hand can be misinterpreted because many finger and hand gestures are vulgar. To point, people often purse their lips in the direction of whatever they are indicating. To add emphasis, express surprise, or indicate "hurry," one shakes the hand quickly so that the index and middle fingers slap together and make a snapping sound. "No" can be indicated by wagging the index finger from side to side.

Urban couples tend to be more affectionate in public than rural couples. In rural areas, couples may hold hands but rarely show other forms of affection. Personal space during conversation is relatively close, although touching is not common.

Visiting. Visiting friends and relatives is an important part of Guatemalan culture. Visiting frequently indicates a valuable relationship. People who live close, especially in rural areas, drop by unannounced (or send a child to announce the adults are coming later). A visit at nearly any time of day is acceptable. Socializing also takes place at the market, community meetings, church, or the water well. Still, it is proper to visit the home to show that a person's hospitality is valued. Any guest, expected or unexpected, generally is welcomed, ushered in, and served refreshments: coffee, tea, water, or another drink and sweet bread or other snack. Refusing is impolite.

Frequent visitors usually do not bring gifts to the hosts, but anyone staying more than one day will give flowers, chocolates, or something for the home. The longer the stay, the nicer the gift. Hosts often send dinner guests home with food or something from the garden. When leaving a home, guests graciously thank the hosts and often invite them to visit.

Eating. Most people eat three meals a day. However, poorer families might eat only one meal and then snack on tortillas the rest of the day. A rural breakfast may consist of leftover beans and tortillas. The main meal is eaten at midday; anyone in the family not working away from home eats this meal. A light dinner usually is eaten after 7 p.m. The entire family gathers for the main meal on weekends. In some cases, women serve the meal and eat later. Many people have coffee and sweet breads around 4 p.m., and men working in the fields might have a snack at midmorning. Schoolchildren are served hot cereal at 10 a.m.

Guatemalans generally use utensils but may eat some foods with the hands or use tortillas as a scoop. They keep hands above the table. Upon finishing the meal, each person (even the cook) thanks all others at the table with *Muchas gracias*, to which all reply *Buen provecho* (Good appetite).

Guests usually finish everything on their plates and wait for their host to offer more food. Asking for more might embarrass a host who is out of food, but eating more compliments the cook. When offered additional food, one first politely declines but then always accepts and eats it completely.

LIFESTYLE

Family. The extended family forms the basis of society and exerts significant influence on an individual's life and decisions. The father is the head of the family, but the wife controls the household; she is considered the heart of the family. Rural extended families often share a single home or live next to each other in a family compound. This community includes parents, married sons and their families, unmarried children, and often grandparents.

Urban families generally live in nuclear family settings, although grandparents are often present. Unmarried adults live with their parents unless they must go elsewhere for work. Family members who work away from home usually send money back to help with expenses. Adult children are responsible for the care of their elderly parents.

Ladino women often work as secretaries, teachers, nurses, or in other professions. Mayan women also work, but less often in the formal workplace. They may sell produce at markets, embroider or weave products for sale, or work in community groups. Within the home, women are responsible for the food, household, children, education, and religion. Men may work in professional settings or in physically demanding jobs such as fieldwork. In poorer families, children must work as soon as they can help support the family.

Housing. Homes in Guatemalan cities include, at the extremes, makeshift dwellings of cardboard and lavishly decorated mansions. In between there are *colonias* (neighborhoods), where houses are built very close together. To mark their property and protect it, many Guatemalans build tall surrounding walls. Inside, the typical decorative style might best be described as hodgepodge. As a general rule, if Guatemalans like something, they display it—even if it clashes with something else. Things perceived as valuable—anything from a wall hanging to a couch—are often covered or wrapped in plastic. In small towns, houses are also built very close together. Inside, there is an uncovered area for occupants to hang laundry, plant fruit trees, keep chickens or pigs, and hang the ubiquitous hammock.

In poorer rural areas, homes tend to be very basic. Most are constructed of adobe or bamboo, and many have dirt floors. If there are windows, they are made of wood, and if there are

locks, they are generally cheap padlocks. Furniture is sparse, with shelves often no more than planks of wood suspended by string. In an attempt to deter thieves and scavenging animals, many families keep grain silos inside their homes. Decorations are confined largely to soccer posters and calendars, most of which are out of date. Many rural families have no running water or electricity, though cities are well equipped with both.

Dating and Marriage. Urban young people begin socializing in groups around age 15. They enjoy dining out, going to movies, or just being together. Young people in rural areas take walks, meet after school, visit at church or community events, or meet in town (at the market or water well). A girl's honor is important; a proper couple is "chaperoned" by younger siblings or cousins.

Among *ladinos*, social status is important in choosing a spouse. Traditionally, the man's parents asked for the woman's hand in marriage; now the man asks the woman's father. Women often marry by age 20 (earlier in rural areas) and men by 24. Common-law marriages are accepted and may be necessary if the groom cannot afford his responsibility to pay for the wedding, new clothes for the bride, and any celebrations. An indigenous couple's relationship is cemented through a series of formal meetings between the families. At the final meeting, the woman's parents ceremonially "give" her to her new parents-in-law.

Life Cycle. When a Mayan woman is pregnant, an egg is passed over her stomach in an attempt to ward off evil and ensure a healthy birth. After the baby is born, the umbilical cord is placed on the roof of the house or under a table leg, again in order to protect the child.

For girls, the *quinceaños* (fifteenth birthday) celebrates the emergence as a young woman. Festivities vary from a small dinner for the family to elaborate parties with hundreds of guests.

All Guatemalans commemorate deaths, with the most traditional rituals strongest in rural areas. Traditionally, a person's death is followed by a *velada*, the period between death and burial during which the grieving family is visited by friends and relatives. The guests bring staples like sugar, flour, beans, coffee, and rice that will be served throughout the night. The day after the death, the deceased is carried in a simple pine casket to the cemetery. Friends and acquaintances join in the procession as it passes their homes. Nine days after death, another memorial is held. The spouse and children of the deceased mourn for a year, during which time they must refrain from dancing. Services in the home and at church mark the end of the grieving period.

Diet. Corn tortillas or, in many regions, *tamalitos* (cornmeal dough wrapped in corn husks and steamed) are eaten with every meal. Other foods include black beans, rice, greens, and fried *plátanos* (bananas) with honey, cream, or black beans. Meat (beef, pork, and chicken) usually is stewed, and sauces are important. Often a particular dish is unique to a certain village since key ingredients (such as spices) are found only in that village. Papaya, breadfruit, and other fruits are popular. Coffee often is served with a great deal of milk and sugar. The poorest rural families eat only tortillas (or *tamalitos*) and whatever food they can grow or gather in the forest.

Recreation. The most popular sports in Guatemala are *fútbol* (soccer), basketball, and volleyball. Family outings to a beach or lake are common holiday and festival activities. *Cofradías* (religious fraternities dedicated to a particular saint) offer a variety of recreational and leisure activities. Urban people

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enjoy watching television, but visiting is the most common leisure activity for all Guatemalans.

The Arts. Music permeates society. The *marimba*, which is similar to the xylophone, dominates indigenous Guatemalan music and can be played by up to six people at a time. Its keys are made of rosewood, found indigenously in Guatemala. The *marimba* is often accompanied by flutes, guitars, and various percussion instruments. North American and Mexican music also are popular among young Guatemalans.

Many ancient arts have survived in Guatemala, namely ceramics; silver-, gold-, and ironwork; and wood carving, especially of wooden masks. Rock sculptures and carvings are another ancient Mayan art form and stand in front of temples. Guatemala's textiles are famous for their vibrant colors and intricate patterns. The designs may reveal information about the wearer, such as marital status or place of birth. Black and green jade carvings and jewelry are popular and can be purchased at local markets.

Guatemala claims several internationally known writers, among them Nobel Prize winner Miguel Asturias. Like many Guatemalan authors, Asturias wrote about indigenous peoples, traditions, and individuality. The Mayan *Popol Vuh* is a literary work dating back to the mid-1500s; it recounts a creation story.

Holidays. A popular Guatemalan saying claims there are more celebrations than days in the year. Major celebrations are divided into two periods: Christmas and Easter. The Christmas season begins 7 December, when people clean house and burn their garbage to ceremonially cleanse their homes of evil in preparation to receive Christ. On Christmas Eve (*Noche Buena*), families set off firecrackers at midnight and then eat a large meal of *tamalitos* and hot chocolate. Firecrackers accompany most celebrations, especially New Year's. Easter is celebrated with Holy Week, during which numerous large processions fill the streets. In these, figures representing Christ are carried on special platforms by men wearing purple robes (black robes on Good Friday). On Saturday, effigies of Judas Iscariot are burned.

National holidays include Labor Day (1 May), Army Day (30 June), Independence Day (15 Sept.), Columbus Day, or *Día de la Raza* (Day of the [mestizo] Race, 12 October), Revolution Day (20 Oct.), and All Saints' Day (1 Nov.). The most important holiday in rural towns is often the annual *feria* (fair) honoring the local patron saint.

SOCIETY

Government. Guatemala is a democratic republic. The president, currently Álvaro Colom, is head of government and head of state. The Congress of the Republic has 158 seats; legislators are popularly elected to four-year terms. The Supreme Court and judicial branch of government exist but do not function well; the system has not yet recovered from years of war and dictatorship. The two largest political parties are the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG) and the Party of National Advancement (PAN). A few minority parties also have representation in congress. The voting age is 18.

Economy. Guatemala is a relatively poor country, and three-fourths of the population lives in poverty. Wealth is concentrated among the upper class. Progress has been hindered by decades of civil war, the lack of a diverse manufacturing sector, and the existence of large commercial farms that produce

POPULATION & AREA

Population	13,002,206 (rank=67)
Area, sq. mi.	42,043 (rank=104)
Area, sq. km.	108,890

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	118 of 177 countries
Adjusted for women	103 of 156 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$4,568
Adult literacy rate	75% (male); 63% (female)
Infant mortality rate	32 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	66 (male); 73 (female)

for export but keep rural farmers landless and poor. More than half of the population is employed in agriculture. Coffee accounts for around one-fourth of all export earnings. Other leading products include cotton, cacao, corn, beans, sugarcane, bananas, broccoli, and livestock. Nickel, oil, fish, rubber, and chicle (used in chewing gum) are important natural resources. Tourism and manufacturing are also vital to the economy. The currency is the *quetzal* (GTQ).

Women earn roughly one-fifth of the nation's income, the lowest proportion among Latin American countries.

Transportation and Communications. Buses (many of them colorfully painted old school buses) provide the main form of long-distance travel. Paved roads connect the capital to major cities and neighboring countries, but most other roads are unimproved. Some villages are inaccessible by vehicle. For short distances, most people will walk, ride a bicycle or motorcycle, or take the bus. The wealthy have private cars. Commuter airlines fly domestically.

Telephones are widely used in cities but not in rural areas. Urban newspapers are available, but rural people rely on radio for news and entertainment. Television is popular where electricity is available.

Education. Although there are several thousand primary schools, more than half of primary-age children do not attend. The literacy rate is higher for males and for urban dwellers. However, girls now tend to stay in school longer than boys. Children often leave school because of family needs or inadequacies in the system. In rural areas, many children do not speak Spanish, the language of instruction. Facilities often are crowded, books in short supply, and teachers underpaid. After primary and middle school, students may attend three years of secondary schooling (vocational training). Those desiring to enter one of Guatemala's five universities must attend college preparation, which usually is available only to the wealthy.

Health. Guatemala faces serious health problems. These include malnutrition, lack of potable water in many areas, and disease. Medical resources are concentrated in urban areas, although a national system is structured to provide health posts to outlying areas. However, most rural posts are not properly supplied. Care generally is free or costs a small fee, but medicines must be purchased. Many deaths are caused by preventable gastrointestinal and respiratory diseases.

AT A GLANCE

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