



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Covering 42,042 square miles (108,889 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. In September 2012, the Volcán de Fuego (Volcano of Fire), located southwest of the city of Antigua, erupted, necessitating the evacuation of more than 33,000 people. As a result of the country's volcanic activity, minor earthquakes are common and hot springs (*aguas calientes*) can be found throughout the country. 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 cooking has also contributed to deforestation, which in turn has put archaeological sites and wildlife at risk. Most people live in the fertile, well-watered southwestern lowlands located 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 center of the country experiences rainy weather (called *chipi-chipi*) for most of the year. 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, backed by the army, staged a "self-coup" by announcing 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, women's rights, resettlement of refugees, and socioeconomic and agrarian reforms. In 2004, the government began offering payments to people who lost property or loved ones in the war. A 2008 commission (the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala) began efforts to reduce corruption, improve law enforcement, and strengthen government institutions. In November 2011, in the face of deteriorating security, Otto Pérez Molina became the first military official to be elected president since 1986. April 2012 saw the arrest of one of Guatemala's top drug traffickers. Molina has advocated the use of soldiers in policing roles to help fight violent crime; however, some have raised concerns over the suitability of the military in this role. Such concerns were highlighted in October 2012, when eight soldiers and an army colonel were allegedly involved in (and later arrested for) the unlawful killing of six indigenous demonstrators who were protesting over electricity prices.

On 7 November 2012, Guatemala was struck by an earthquake of 7.2 magnitude—the strongest to hit the country in 36 years. It was followed by dozens of aftershocks. More than 50 people were killed and at least 200 were injured.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Guatemala's population of roughly 14.1 million is growing at a higher than average rate of 1.99 percent annually. While nearly 60 percent is *Ladino* (people who descend from the Spanish and Maya but relate more to their Spanish heritage) or has European heritage, about 40 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 *indígenas* (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. Learning a second (or third) language is common, with the most popular being English, French, and German.

Guatemalan Spanish includes a variety words and expressions that are uniquely Guatemalan, called *Guatemaltequismos*. To confirm something or to answer in the affirmative, Guatemalans often say *Va* (a shortened form of *verdad*, meaning "true"). To say that something is false, they may use the expression *Que paja* (literally, "What a straw").

Religion

Roman Catholicism traditionally has dominated Guatemala and was introduced by the Spanish during colonial times. Some indigenous groups practice their own beliefs exclusively. These beliefs are based on nature and include a variety of deities. Mayan beliefs are often combined with Catholicism. 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. Increased religious devotion is credited with decreasing alcoholism and other social problems. However, tension between Catholics and Protestants, or *evangélicos*, is rising.

Guatemalans of all religions often make reference to God's will in everyday conversation. When speaking of plans or hopes, people often add *Si Dios quiere* (If God wills it). Guatemalans also add *Solo Dios sabe* (Only God knows) when speaking of future outcomes.

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 approach to time is referred to as *la hora chapina* (the Guatemalan hour). Guatemalans are gracious, love to make jokes of almost any situation, and strive to make any social interaction comfortable. The phrase *No tenga pena* (Don't worry) is commonly used to set others at ease.

Guatemalans place a high premium on quality. They generally prefer to have an older item that is made to last rather than something new but of lesser quality. 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 peace.

Personal Appearance

In urban areas, most people follow American and European fashions. In rural areas, men generally dress for work outside, wearing boots, jeans, wide-brimmed hats, and large belt buckles. Most rural Mayan women have retained traditional dress. Mayan men more often choose to wear Western-style clothing. Each indigenous 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. A woman treasures her *huipil* (blouse); its design identifies her social position and hometown. There are about 500 of these designs.

Clothing often is colorful. Secondhand clothing from the United States is popular. Regardless of a person's means, it is important for clothing to be clean and pressed. Many farmers reserve one set of clothes to be worn only for trips to the market.

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*, *¿Qué onda?* (What are you doing?), 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 people as possible. When addressing others, using a title (*Señor/a*, *Señorita*, *Doctor/a*, 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 "ch-ch" sound gets someone's attention. However, a "tssst-tssst" sound is used by men to get a woman's attention, similar to a catcall. Pointing with the finger or hand can be misinterpreted because many 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. To hail a taxi or passing car for a ride, one points to the ground with the index finger and moves the hand in a pendulum motion, swinging from the wrist.

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. Young people of the same gender often place a hand on another's shoulder during conversation, and women may walk arm in arm.

Visiting

Visiting friends and relatives is an important part of Guatemalan culture. 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.

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 in public schools are served hot cereal or another snack 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.

Extended families spend a lot of time together socializing. Cousins are often as close as siblings and may be referred to as *primos hermanos* (cousin siblings). If an unmarried family member moves to an area where they have extended family, it is generally expected that the person will live with the family. Family members who work away from home usually send money back to help with the expenses of the extended family.

The father is generally the head of the family. The wife typically controls the household and is considered the heart of the family. For many Mayan women, good housekeeping skills are considered necessary in order to marry. Many families today are headed by women who are widowed, divorced, or have never been married.

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. Adult children are responsible for the care of their elderly parents.

Most of a woman's social status is based upon her marriage. Her education, family, and reputation are also important. For men, status is based largely upon education, economic prosperity, and (to a lesser degree) marriage.

The role of women in Guatemalan society has changed drastically in recent years. Women now have more opportunities for education and employment. However, these gains are reflected more in the position of urban women than in that of rural women. 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, work in the fields, or work in community groups. Educational opportunities for Ladino women far outpace those for Mayan women, and many Mayan families place little value on educating their daughters. Within the home, women are responsible for the food, household, children, and religion. These responsibilities remain in place regardless of the other demands on a woman's time, such as a full-time job outside the home.

In poorer families, children must work as soon as they can help support the family, often at the expense of their education. Most children are responsible for chores around the home.

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. A typical urban home is square in shape and constructed of cinderblocks and cement. Roofs are usually flat and may be corrugated metal or shingled, depending on what the family can afford. Floors are generally tiled; carpeting is rare. Apartments are increasing in popularity and are usually occupied by the wealthy.

In rural areas, homes tend to be basic and are built very close together. Most are constructed of adobe, bamboo, or cinderblock. Homes are square with flat, tiled roofs. Floors

may be tile, cement, or dirt. Furniture is sparse. In an attempt to deter thieves and scavenging animals, many families keep grain silos inside their homes. Homes usually have a backyard, where occupants hang laundry, plant fruit trees, keep chickens or pigs, and hang a hammock. Many rural families have no running water or electricity, though cities are well equipped with both. While the majority of rural areas have access to running water, outages are frequent. Most homes have a *pila* (a large concrete receptacle for storing and collecting water). Most *pilas* have three compartments. The middle compartment is filled with water, while the side compartments are used when washing dishes and doing laundry.

To protect and mark their property, many Guatemalans build tall surrounding walls. Windows and doors are usually protected with iron bars to deter break-ins. Security for the poorest families may consist of wooden window covers and cheap padlocks.

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. Walls are decorated with posters, traditional Mayan art, and special awards or certificates. Nearly every Catholic home has a painting of the Last Supper. Family photos (especially baby photos) are displayed proudly.

Home ownership is an important goal for many Guatemalans but remains out of reach for most. The cost of a home compared to the average income is often prohibitively high. In urban areas, home ownership is limited mainly to the upper-middle class and the wealthy. In rural areas, homes are usually passed down from generation to generation.

Dating and Marriage

Urban young people begin dating in groups around age 15. In rural areas, people begin dating at a younger age, and young women are often considered ready for marriage by their mid-teens. Young people may date a variety of different people before starting a serious, exclusive relationship. They enjoy dining out, going to movies, or just spending time 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). Young women and their families are careful to maintain the girl's reputation, which can affect her prospects for marriage. Therefore, a proper couple is "chaperoned" by younger siblings or cousins. Families generally supervise their daughters more closely than their sons. In more traditional families, the young man is expected to ask a girl's parents' permission before taking her out.

Among Ladinos, social status is important in choosing a spouse. Traditionally, the man's parents asked for the woman's hand in marriage. In some indigenous communities, this is still the case. For the rest of society, the man usually asks the woman's father for permission to propose to her. After the couple gets engaged, the two families meet to get acquainted and discuss plans for the wedding. Women usually marry by age 20 (earlier in rural areas) and men by 24. Some

stigma or pity may be associated with women who do not marry by their mid-twenties. Men generally marry later because they are expected to support the family and may prefer to establish themselves financially before marrying.

Traditionally, weddings were paid for by the bride's family. Today, both families and the couple themselves usually contribute. Weddings vary based on the families' means and range from simple to elaborate. Most marriages are religious and take place in churches. However, in order to be considered legal, a marriage must also include a civil ceremony at *la municipalidad* (the government registry office). This ceremony usually takes place a few days before the main, religious ceremony. After the civil marriage, most couples hold a dinner for their close friends and family. Indigenous couples in remote areas generally do not have a civil ceremony, considering the cultural and religious elements of a wedding more important than the civil aspect.

The religious ceremony takes place in a church and is performed by a priest. It is held a few days after the civil ceremony. As part of the ceremony, couples exchange rings and a kiss. After the ceremony, a reception is held at one of the families' home or at a reception center. Receptions might also be held outdoors, in the street in front of a family home, where people set up a rented sound system and include the entire neighborhood in the party. Most receptions include a meal, toasts, and the couple's first dance. The wedding cake is an important part of the celebration and is often one of the most expensive elements of a wedding. The different layers of the cake are displayed side by side rather than stacked on top of one another. As a way of determining which of the guests will marry next, the groom throws the bride's garter to the single men in attendance and the bride throws her bouquet to the single women. Guests bring gifts for the couple, usually household items; money is rarely given as a wedding gift.

Common-law marriages are accepted and are common among couples who cannot afford a wedding, come from different religions, or wish to live together without marrying. Once a couple has lived together for three years, the relationship is legally considered a common-law marriage. Partners in such a marriage are considered *unidos* (united)—but not *casados* (married)—and have most of the rights associated with marriage.

Divorce is rare in Guatemala; the divorce rate hovers well below 1 percent. Considerable social stigma is associated with divorce, particularly for women, who find it much harder to remarry than men do, especially if they have children. Those who have been married in a Catholic church previously cannot remarry according to the church and generally choose civil marriages.

Life Cycle

Couples usually begin having children soon after they marry. Most women expect to be finished having children by the age of thirty. 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. In some rural areas, a pregnant woman's oldest female relative visits to pray for the health of the baby and trace a cross on the pregnant woman's stomach with ash. Urban women often have a baby shower before the baby is

born. The woman's friends gather to celebrate, eat, play games, and give the woman gifts. In some indigenous communities, after the baby is born, the umbilical cord is placed on the roof of the house or under a table leg in order to protect the child. Catholic children may wear a cross pinned to their clothing or on a bracelet to protect them from harm.

Guatemalans carefully consider meaning when selecting a name for their child. Children may be named for the Catholic saint associated with the day on which they were born. For example, a boy born on 31 January may be named Tarsicio, while a girl born 29 August may be named Veronica. It is also common to name a child in honor of a family member.

For girls, the *quinceaños* (fifteenth birthday) celebrates her emergence as a young woman. Festivities vary from a small dinner for the family to elaborate parties with hundreds of guests. The young woman usually wears a specially chosen white dress that may be as elaborate as a wedding gown. The *quinceaños* is not as celebrated in rural areas, where a girl is considered a woman when she marries. While Guatemalans are generally considered adults at age 18, some rural people take on adult responsibilities at a younger age and are considered adults earlier.

Attitudes and customs related to death are tied closely to religion. A person's death is typically followed by a *velorio* (a wake), the period between death and burial during which guests visit the grieving family. *Velorios* are held at *funerarias* (similar to funeral homes). If the family cannot afford a *funeraria*, the *velorio* is held at the family home. If the *velorio* is held in the home, the guests bring food to be served throughout the night. Close family members usually stay with the dead throughout the night. The day after the death, a funeral is held, usually at the *funeraria* or in a town hall. After the funeral, the deceased is taken to the cemetery. In small towns, the coffin is usually carried to the cemetery. In urban areas, the distance to the cemetery is usually much longer, so the coffin is taken in a hearse followed by a procession of cars honking their horns. After the funeral, the family and acquaintances of the deceased gather at the grieving family's home to pray. The ritual is repeated each night for nine days. On the ninth day, a memorial is held at the home of the deceased. Another memorial ceremony takes place 40 days after the death. Some indigenous tribes also commemorate a death with a ceremony during which the village priest prays for the safe passage of the deceased spirit from the earth to the afterlife. 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 the 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. Beans are the most common form of protein in the Guatemalan diet. A single pot of beans can last days. Other foods include rice, greens, and fried *plátanos* (bananas) with honey, cream, or black beans. Meat (beef, pork, and chicken) usually is stewed, and sauces are important. Broth-based soups with meat and vegetables are an important part of many meals. Many popular foods are prepared on a grill, such as

ilotes (corn on the cob) and *churrascos* (beef). 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 from the forest. Chinese food is popular, and most cities have several Chinese restaurants. Many families prepare versions of popular Chinese dishes at home.

Recreation

The most popular sports in Guatemala are *fútbol* (soccer), basketball, and volleyball. Most boys play soccer every day after school. The version of soccer played on the street is called *chamusca* and is usually played with inexpensive plastic or rubber balls. Guatemalans of all ages enjoy watching professional and local soccer matches, and Sunday afternoons are often devoted to watching soccer. Girls usually prefer basketball to soccer and also enjoy playing with dolls. Kids play a variety of informal games. *Arranca cebollas* (pulling onions) is a group game in which players form a line, each holding the waist of the child in front of him or her. The child in the front of the line holds on to a tree. The child on the end pulls on the line of players, trying to get the child holding the tree to let go. *Matado* is a variation of dodge ball that is often played on the playground at school.

Small circuses travel throughout the country, and Guatemalans of all ages enjoy their performances, particularly in rural areas. Urban people enjoy going to movie theatres, zoos, restaurants, and malls. *Bailes* (dances), *jaripeos* (rodeos), and *palenques* (cockfights) are also popular. Men enjoy playing billiards, and even the smallest towns usually have a billiards hall. Groups of young men often pile into cars to *dar un vuelta* (take a turn), slowly driving the streets, listening to music. Women enjoy socializing together, whether while they work or after the day's work is finished.

Cofradías (religious fraternities dedicated to a particular saint) offer a variety of recreational and leisure activities for their members and also hold religious processions. Many people enjoy watching television. Visiting with friends and relatives is a common leisure activity for all Guatemalans. Traditionally, most people had Sundays off, and extended families would get together. In recent years, Sundays have become more like any other day, with people working, studying, or spending time with friends.

Guatemalans tend to travel or visit family during holidays. It is less common for someone to take time off to travel at other times. Family outings to a beach, lake, amusement park, or tourist site are common holiday activities. Trips outside of Guatemala are rare for all but the wealthy.

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 Guatemala's indigenous rosewood. 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. The ancient Mayans are also known for their rock sculptures and carvings, which 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 winners Miguel Asturias and Rigoberta Menchú. Like many Guatemalan authors, Asturias wrote about indigenous peoples, traditions, and individuality. Menchú also explored indigenous peoples, emphasizing social reform and justice. The Mayan *Popol Vuh* is a 16th-century literary work that recounts a creation story.

Holidays

The popular Guatemalan saying *Hay mas celebraciones que días del año* claims that "There are more celebrations than days in the year." National holidays include Labor Day (1 May), Army Day (30 June), Independence Day (15 Sept.), *Día de la Raza* (Day of the Race, 12 October), Revolution Day (20 Oct.), and All Saints' Day (1 Nov.). People also celebrate unofficial holidays such as Secretary's Day, Bank Worker's Day, Father's Day, Mother's Day, and Children's Day.

The two biggest celebrations are Christmas and Easter. In Guatemala, Christmas is celebrated only by Catholics. The Christmas season begins 7 December, when people clean their homes and burn garbage outside 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 *ponche* (a spiced fruit punch). In small towns, people may go from house to house after midnight, giving well-wishes and embraces. Firecrackers accompany most celebrations, especially New Year's.

Carnaval falls 47 days before Easter and is considered the beginning of the Easter season. It is celebrated with parades called *convites*, with people dancing through the streets dressed as community figures or famous people. Children celebrate with *cascarones* (eggshells filled with confetti), breaking them over the heads of friends and classmates. The day after *Carnaval* is Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent (a period of 40 days during which those who wish to do so participate in fasting and giving up something as a sacrifice, such as a bad habit, as an indication of their Christian faith). Children celebrate Ash Wednesday by *jugando harina* (literally, "playing flour")—throwing flour on one another. The week leading up to Easter is called Holy Week. Most people have this week off and, regardless of religion, participate in Holy Week celebrations to some extent. Numerous large *procesiones* (processions) fill the streets, and figures representing Christ are carried on special platforms by men wearing purple robes (black robes on Good Friday). The processions pass over intricate street designs (called *alfombras*) made of colored sawdust and flower petals. On

Saturday, effigies of Judas Iscariot are burned. That night, people gather to sing and pray until midnight, when the last *procesión* leaves one church, makes a lap around the town or neighborhood, and then stops at another church, where it is received with firecrackers and cheers.

The most important holiday in rural towns is often the annual *feria* (fair) honoring the local patron saint. Festivities often include kite building, rodeos, games, and food. Guatemala City celebrates its patron saint, La Virgen de la Asunción (the Virgin of the Assumption), on 15 August, with concerts, carnival rides, and cultural activities.

The *Rabin Ajaw* (Daughter of the King) competition is held each 1–6 August and is the most important celebration in indigenous communities. Each year a *Rabin Ajaw* is crowned as the representative of the indigenous Maya. People gather in Cobán for the competition, traditional storytelling, dances, and vendors.

Independence Day is celebrated with a parade and concerts in Guatemala City. Revolution Day celebrates the 1944 revolution that ended the dictatorship of General Jorge Ubico. For many, this event is seen as a turning point for Guatemalan society. The day is commemorated in the spirit of social change, with protests, speeches, and rallies aimed at addressing the country's current social problems.

On 1 November, Guatemalans celebrate *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead, or All Saints' Day). It is believed that the spirits of the dead are allowed to visit the living on this night. Celebrations combine traditional beliefs with Catholic traditions. Families cook special meals, visit cemeteries, clean family members' graves, and decorate the graves with flowers. In Santiago, people build and fly large kites with messages for the dead written on both the kites themselves and on the tails.

SOCIETY

Government

Guatemala is a democratic republic, divided into 22 *departamentos*, each headed by a governor. *Departamentos* are further divided into municipalities, each headed by a mayor. The president (Otto Pérez Molina) 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 National Unity of Hope (UNE). A few minority parties also have representation in Congress. The voting age is 18. Active members of the military are not allowed to vote in elections.

Economy

Guatemala is a relatively poor country, and more than half of the population lives in poverty. Poverty is more common among the indigenous population, where the poverty rate reaches 76 percent. 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 goods for export but keep rural farmers landless and poor. More than half of the population is employed in agriculture. Coffee accounts for the largest portion of 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).

The global economic crisis damaged the economy in 2009, slowing exports and raising unemployment rates. Recovery began in 2010, and the economy is expected to return to previous levels within a few years.

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 walk, ride a bicycle or motorcycle, or take the bus. Wealthy and middle-class Guatemalans have private cars. Commuter airlines fly domestically.

Cell phones are widely used in cities and increasingly so in rural areas. Guatemala's mountainous terrain affects cell phone reception in some areas. Urban newspapers are available, but rural people rely on radio and television (where electricity is available) for news and entertainment. Internet access is spreading quickly. Internet cafés are popular throughout the country, and even the smallest towns have one, as long as electricity and a landline are available.

Education

Guatemala's constitution specifies that education is free and compulsory from ages 3 to 15. However, the current education system is underfunded and ill-equipped to handle the number of students eligible to attend. Access to schools in rural areas is often limited, with students required to travel long distances to attend school. Private schools are available and have higher standards of education, but the average family cannot afford the tuition.

While most children start primary school, only about 60 percent finish. Enrollment drops sharply in secondary school, with about 40 percent of children attending. More boys attend school than girls, and the literacy rate is higher for males and for urban dwellers. Children often leave school because of family needs or inadequacies in the system. Facilities often are crowded, books in short supply, and teachers underpaid. In rural areas, many children do not speak Spanish, the language of instruction, making it difficult for them to keep up.

Education consists of two years of preschool (the first year is called *parvulos*; the second is called *preparatoria*), five years of primary school (*primaria*), and five to six years of secondary school (*educación media*). Secondary school is divided into two levels: *basicos* and *diversificado*. *Basicos* lasts three years and is required in order to enter technical colleges. *Diversificado* lasts two to three years, depending on

the course of study, and is required in order to attend a university. Students must pay tuition to attend *diversificado*, making it inaccessible for many.

Technical colleges are available for students who wish to study a trade, such as hotel management, tourism, financial sciences, call center work, or marketing. Public universities are available and tuition is low. However, there are far more applicants than seats available, making acceptance very competitive. Private universities are generally easier to get into, but the cost is prohibitively high for much of the population.

Health

Guatemala faces serious health problems, including malnutrition, lack of potable water in many areas, and disease. Malaria and tuberculosis levels are high. Medical resources are concentrated in urban areas, and although a national system is structured to provide health posts to outlying areas, most rural posts are not properly supplied. Rural women often give birth with the assistance of a midwife rather than a doctor. 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

Contact Information

Embassy of Guatemala, 2220 R Street NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 745-4952.

POPULATION & AREA

Population	14,099,032 (rank=69)
Area, sq. mi.	42,042 (rank=107)
Area, sq. km.	108,889

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	131 of 187 countries
Gender inequality rank	109 of 146 countries
Adult literacy rate	75% (male); 63% (female)
Life expectancy	67 (male); 74 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2012 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).