



# EXPEDITIONARY CULTURE **FIELD GUIDE**

## Guatemala



# About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.

The guide consists of two parts:

Part 1 “Culture General” provides the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment with a focus on Central America (CENTAM).

Part 2 “Culture Specific” describes unique cultural features of Guatemalan society. It applies culture-general concepts to help increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location.

This section is designed to complement other pre-deployment training.

For further information, visit the Air Force Culture and Language

Center (AFCLC) website at [www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/) or contact the AFCLC Region Team at [AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil](mailto:AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil).

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## PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

### What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.

Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when1 thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing.

For example, the American flag is a physical and visual symbol of a core American value—freedom. At the same time, the story of George



Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic because it represents the premium Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.

### Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones, where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing

constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to focus on developing stable political, social, and economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

### Cultural Domains

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to



perpetuate that culture into the future.

We can organize behaviors and systems into categories – what the Air Force refers to as “cultural domains” – in order to better

understand the primary values and characteristics of a society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains –which include kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems and others (see chart on next page) – as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the way a culture defines family and kinship, a US military member operating overseas can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

### Social Behaviors across Cultures

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival,

although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.

Conversely, industrialized nations have more complex market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in 1 God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.

### Worldview

One of our most basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different based on our cultural standards. As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Usually, we assume that those in the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.

## 12 Domains of Culture



This collective perspective forms our worldview—how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

## Cultural Belief System

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system assigns meaning, sets its universal

standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true — regardless of whether there is evidence to



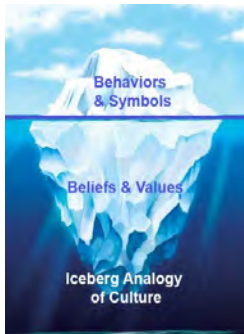
support these ideas. Beliefs are a central aspect of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply-held beliefs we started developing early in life that have helped shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.



## Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We



will use the iceberg model for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).

In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts.

The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.



As you travel through CENTAM, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common across the region. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.



# CULTURAL DOMAINS

## 1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable, or which occurred prior to written language.

CENTAM occupies a narrow isthmus that connects the continents of North and South America and comprises 7 countries: Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. Archaeological finds suggest nomadic hunter-gatherers inhabited the region as early as 9,000 BC.

Eventually, these groups adopted small-scale agriculture, and beginning around 2,500 BC, erected permanent farming settlements.



Around 1,000 BC, the Maya civilization emerged in southern

Mexico and Guatemala, flourishing over subsequent centuries as it spread across Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, and parts of Nicaragua. At their civilization's height from 250-900 AD, the Maya excelled in mathematics, astronomy, agriculture, and art, constructing magnificent cities featuring massive stone pyramids, temples, and palaces. Although Maya society and culture encompassed nearly the entire CENTAM isthmus by the 10th century, the Maya remained politically fragmented. The Maya world was characterized by independent, adversarial city-states competing for power and resources.

In the early 16th century, Spanish explorers arrived on the Panamanian coast, while others entered the CENTAM isthmus



from Mexico. Seeking wealth and enhanced social status, along with an ambition to spread Catholicism, the Spanish swiftly and violently subdued the Maya and other indigenous communities. By 1540, the Spanish had consolidated rule over most of CENTAM as conflict, disease, and famine decimated the region's indigenous population. Uniting all CENTAM territories except Belize and Panama as the Kingdom of Guatemala, the Spanish ruled the region for the next 300 years. Meanwhile, Panama became part of the Spanish-ruled Viceroyalty of Peru, while most Belizean territory came under British control.

In the late 18th century, mounting unrest over colonial tyranny led to nationalist independence movements. All the CENTAM states but Belize and Panama briefly united as the Federal Republic of Central America in 1821. Politically fractured, the union quickly disintegrated, and within 2 decades, most CENTAM territories had become independent nations. Panama was a part of Colombia until it gained independence with the support of the US in 1903. Meanwhile, Belize remained under

British control well into the 20th century.



Following independence, the CENTAM nations grappled with decades of political upheaval, poor governance, and poverty. By the 1960s, right-wing military dictators ruled over much of the region.

Years of profound economic disparities and government-sponsored abuse flamed insurgencies in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, eventually flaring into brutal civil wars. As part of its anti-communist agenda, the US was highly influential, even actively involved, in many of these conflicts. By contrast, Costa Rica and Belize experienced relative peace. Costa Rica even abolished its military amid other progressive political, social, and environmental reforms.

By the mid-1990s, civil conflict across the region had significantly reduced. Since then, most CENTAM governments have supported mostly stable democratic systems, expanded

economic opportunities, and invested in infrastructure, education, and healthcare. Despite these improvements, the CENTAM nations remain in various stages of development. Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama have seen the greatest stability and economic growth. By contrast, residents of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua continue to face high rates of poverty, unemployment, and violence.

## 2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community. All CENTAM states except Belize are presidential republics led by an elected President and legislature. By contrast, Belize is a constitutional monarchy with a democratic parliamentary government led by an elected Prime Minister and legislature. The United Kingdom's hereditary monarch serves as Belize's head-of-state.

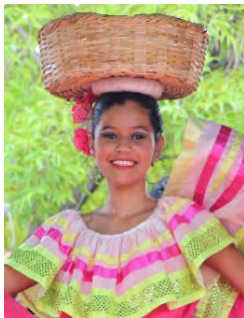


While El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua emerged from years of repressive dictatorial rule and protracted civil war by the 1990s, they and the other CENTAM states continue to face challenges to

the democratic process. Corruption is widespread, contributing to instability and stifling political and economic progress. In some states, corruption engenders public distrust of democratic institutions and public officials and results in frequent and occasionally violent public protests.

Moreover, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (collectively known as the “Northern Triangle”) struggle to curb the illicit drug trafficking industry and high rates of gang violence. In stark contrast to the other states’ internal volatility, Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama enjoy minimal violence within stable democracies marked by peaceful and transparent democratic elections.

While some bilateral tensions exist, notably Guatemala's claim to over 1/2 of Belize's territory, most states cooperate in strong regional alliances focused on economic, security, and governance issues. The Northern Triangle nations, for example, work closely to halt the movement of narcotics across borders and diminish the power and influence of organized crime networks. All CENTAM states actively cultivate relations with



the US and rely on substantial US military and financial assistance to address regional security and economic concerns.

CENTAM is ethnically diverse. **Mestizos** (people of mixed European and indigenous ancestry) comprise about 72% of CENTAM's population, some 20% claim European (white) ancestry, and about 8% are Amerindian or members of indigenous communities. The region is also

home to smaller numbers of people of mixed African descent and other minorities. The ethnic makeup of each CENTAM nation varies. For example, a majority of Guatemalans identifies as indigenous, yet few Salvadorans and Costa Ricans do. White and *mestizo* populations hold most of the wealth, political power, and social prestige. By contrast, Amerindians and those of African ancestry generally lack political representation, suffer disproportionately high rates of poverty and disease, and are subject to discrimination and social stigmatization.

### 3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also create social unity by defining shared identity, offer individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society. The region's early inhabitants followed a variety of indigenous religious traditions, worshipping spirits and deities who inhabited the natural environment. The Maya enjoyed a particularly rich and complex belief system that included ancestor veneration and the worship of over 250 gods.

The Spanish introduced Christianity to CENTAM in the early 16th century, forcefully converting the indigenous population to Catholicism, while suppressing traditional beliefs and practices. As a result, Catholicism spread quickly, and the Catholic Church became entrenched in daily life, fundamentally influencing education, social services, and colonial policy. After independence, Church power fluctuated as various political factions supported or opposed Catholicism's influence in the social and political spheres. Meanwhile, Protestantism grew in popularity in British-controlled Belize. In the 20th century,

Protestant evangelical movements thrived across the region following the arrival of North American missionaries.

In the latter half of the 20th century, ongoing violence prompted clergy to advocate on



behalf of victimized populations and assume influential roles in the resolution of regional conflicts. Across the region today, some religious organizations remain politically involved while others focus on providing important social services. While the Roman Catholic Church still enjoys a privileged status in most countries, all nations but Costa Rica name no official religion and explicitly separate church and state.

The region's population is overwhelmingly Christian: 55% of CENTAM residents identify as Roman Catholic, while 30% are Protestant. Many CENTAM Christians fuse elements of indigenous beliefs with Christian rites and traditions.

Some 9% of regional residents claim no religious affiliation, while some 6% are adherents of traditional beliefs or followers of other faiths, such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Baha'i (a belief system that recognizes the essential worth of all religions and the unity and equality of all people).

#### 4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional

bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called “fictive kin”).

Family life and relationships are valued greatly within CENTAM. While the traditional family unit consists of a husband, wife, and their children, Central Americans also maintain strong connections with extended family members. Accordingly, extended kin are influential in family matters, typically live nearby, and are important sources of physical, emotional, and financial support. Children often live with their parents until they marry, though some choose to stay longer. In poorer families, children contribute to the family income from an early age by performing tasks like washing cars, shining shoes, or selling food and trinkets. By contrast, children of wealthy families have comparatively fewer responsibilities.



Urbanization has resulted in changes to family life. Urban residents tend to marry later and have fewer children, resulting in more diverse urban family structures. In the Northern Triangle and other areas, widespread poverty and social instability have significantly disrupted traditional family life, forcing some members to migrate within the country or leave CENTAM altogether.

While close kin ties mean family members have some influence over children's choice of spouses, men and women generally choose their own partners. Both Spanish traditions and Roman Catholic teachings strongly emphasize the value of marriage as an institution and discourage divorce. Nevertheless, divorce rates have risen in some areas.

## 5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles.

CENTAM's traditional Spanish and indigenous cultures privileged men as providers and leaders, while casting women in subordinate roles. **Machismo** (strong masculine behavior and pride) remains an important element of male identity in the region. While today women and men have equal rights before the law, inequalities between the genders remain.



Women often face discrimination in hiring and promotion, and although they face some barriers to their participation in the political sector, the

number of women serving in public office across the region has steadily increased in recent years. Today, women hold a considerable proportion of national and local government positions, and Nicaragua, Panama, and Costa Rica have had female Presidents. Female participation rates in the national legislatures of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua are higher than the US.

Gender-based violence is widespread in some areas. Women are often reluctant to leave abusive partners or report incidences of gender-based violence, considering the abuse to be a private matter. Among reported cases, the prosecution of perpetrators is rare. Abortion laws across the region are highly restrictive and in recent years have caused significant public debate. Although homosexuality is legal in every CENTAM nation, homosexuals suffer discrimination, stigmatization, and violence.

## 6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally.

As a result of centuries of Spanish colonialism throughout the region, Spanish is an official language in every CENTAM country except English-speaking Belize. Despite the prominence of Spanish, the region is linguistically diverse: 26

languages are spoken in Guatemala, 10 in Honduras, 15 in Panama, 14 in Costa Rica, 11 in Nicaragua, 9 in Belize, and 5 in El Salvador. Though most of these languages are indigenous to the region, a few are so-called creole languages combine vocabulary and grammar from indigenous or African languages with English or Spanish.

Some of the region's most widely spoken indigenous languages are Mayan, notably K'iche', Q'eqchi', and Kaqchikel. The systematic suppression of indigenous communities during the colonial era contributed to the demise of many of the region's indigenous languages. In some regions, government-sanctioned violence against indigenous residents in the 20th century prompted many native speakers to abandon their heritage, notably also their languages, to avoid persecution. Despite recent revitalization efforts, some of the region's native languages remain nearly extinct. English is taught in schools across CENTAM as a 2nd language and is especially popular among the educated elite and in the business community.

While communication patterns vary among ethnic groups, CENTAM residents generally demonstrate courtesy, respect, honesty, and patience in interpersonal relations.

When conversing, Central Americans tend to be warm, friendly, and eager to extend hospitality, particularly when speaking with family and friends. By contrast, some indigenous groups,



such as the Maya, are more reserved in their communication styles, especially with strangers.

## 7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) and culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors,



and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers. Education in early CENTAM societies was primarily an informal transfer of skills, values, and beliefs from parents to their children. Scholars believe the Maya employed a more formal education system in which religious leaders taught medicine, history, math, and science to elite children.

During the colonial era, Roman Catholic religious orders became the primary providers of education. While these institutions eventually established schools and universities throughout the region, educational infrastructure remained limited through the 19th century. Moreover, Catholic orders provided only limited instruction to indigenous inhabitants, largely restricting secular

education in subjects like math, science, and the humanities to a small population of male Spanish elites.

In the early 19th century, CENTAM states began to expand educational offerings to women



and indigenous groups, eventually establishing free and compulsory public-school networks. Today, enrollment rates in primary education are high across CENTAM. Adult literacy rates have risen in recent decades and range from about 83% in Guatemala to 96% in Panama. Challenges to the education systems include uneven access to secondary and post-secondary education, particularly in rural areas, a lack of government funding, and low teacher salaries. In some areas, gang violence and poverty significantly disrupt children's access to education.

## 8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In most Western cultures, people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management,

devoting less effort to relationship-building. By contrast, in most CENTAM societies, establishing and maintaining relationships with others often takes precedence over accomplishing a task. Consequently, business tends to move more slowly in CENTAM than in the US. To build relations with business partners, Central Americans often engage in a **sobremesa**, a period of coffee and conversation at the end of a meeting that may include personal questions about family, relationships, or other light topics.



Concepts of personal space in CENTAM also differ from those in the US. Generally, Central Americans stand closer when conversing than Americans. Moreover, while men shake hands in greeting and parting in a similar style to the US, CENTAM women typically greet both men and women with a kiss on the cheek.

The rhythm of daily life changes during national holidays and local celebrations, when most businesses shorten their operating hours and residents engage in various festivities such as parades, feasts, and religious ceremonies. While the CENTAM states observe a variety of public holidays, popular ones include Christmas, Easter, indigenous celebrations, and independence days.

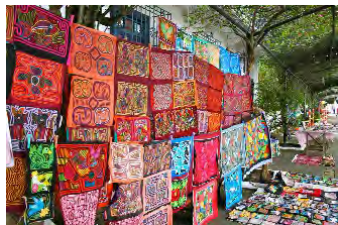
## 9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill and style. Most of CENTAM's forms of artistic expression – including its art, architecture, dance, music, and theater – reflect a rich combination of Spanish, indigenous, and African influences as well as modern global trends.

Salsa, calypso, and Spanish reggae are prominent musical genres across the region, while jazz is especially popular in Panama. Meanwhile, Afro-Caribbean culture influences music and dance along CENTAM's Caribbean coast. In Belize and Honduras, coastal residents enjoy the rhythmic and drum-based

**punta**, a modernized interpretation of the Garifuna ethnic group's songs and dance. By contrast, Panamanians enjoy the **congo**, a dance with African roots whereby performers portray a fight with the devil.

Central Americans are skilled in various traditional handicrafts and folk art such as weaving, woodworking, and ceramics, among many others. Maya artisans are famed for their vibrant,



woven textiles, while members of Panama's Guna ethnic group weave **molas**, intricately cut and sewn panels featuring geometric patterns. In El Salvador, artists mimic indigenous weaving techniques to create baskets, hats, and other

items from palm leaves. Visual arts traditionally reflected indigenous and Christian motifs but today often incorporate brightly colored rural landscapes.

In the 20th century, poetry became the region's most popular and politically influential literary genre. Today, the work of Rubén Darío, Nicaragua's national poet, is celebrated across Latin America. The region also has produced critically acclaimed novelists, who have chronicled the region's tumultuous history while living in exile abroad. Soccer is by far the most popular sport throughout CENTAM. Residents closely follow local, regional, and international teams, and many enjoy playing in amateur settings in their spare time.

## 10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures, and economics. Theories of disease and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

While CENTAM cuisine reflects the region's ethnic and geographic diversity, most dishes tend to be simple and prepared from fresh, seasonal ingredients. Corn is CENTAM's primary staple and prepared in a variety of ways but most

commonly as the **tortilla** (round, flat bread of ground corn). Rice and black beans are also featured at most meals. Chicken, beef, and pork are prevalent forms of protein in interior regions, while an assortment of seafood is more readily available to residents living along CENTAM's coasts. In addition to native vegetables, the region's residents also enjoy numerous fresh fruits year-round, often juicing or blending them into refreshing drinks.



The overall health of the region's population has improved significantly in recent decades, evidenced by decreased infant and maternal mortality rates and longer life expectancies. Nevertheless, non-communicable "lifestyle" diseases such as diabetes, cancer, and cardiovascular and respiratory diseases are on the rise and today account for most deaths in the region.

Moreover, communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria, and hepatitis are prevalent in some rural regions, particularly in areas where residents have limited access to clean water and modern sanitation.

CENTAM nations face several challenges to providing healthcare to their populations. Significant disparities in access to modern healthcare exist between urban and rural areas, where facilities tend to be understaffed, ill-equipped, and limited to basic health services. In some remote rural regions, residents lack access to modern healthcare and instead rely on traditional medicine to treat diseases and ailments.

## 11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. Prior to the arrival of Europeans, the region's larger and wealthier communities produced luxury items such as ceramics, art, and woven textiles for local consumption and regional trade, while also practicing subsistence agriculture.

After their 16th century arrival, Spanish colonists developed an agricultural economy centered on the production of various cash crops for export to Europe, primarily on large estates with forced indigenous or African slave labor. The region's first cash crops included cacao and indigo, yet by the 19th century, tobacco, sugar cane, cotton, and bananas dominated exports.

Following independence, conflict and political instability largely hampered economic growth. In the early 20th century, several states came under the economic control of large, multinational

corporations that reaped large profits but did little to improve the conditions of the working populations.

By contrast, coffee production in Costa Rica allowed the nation to largely avoid economic downturns, while the



1913 construction of the Panama Canal (a shipping route crossing the CENTAM isthmus) amplified Panama's strategic and economic importance. Today, several states have diversified their economies across numerous sectors, including manufacturing, food processing, transportation, and agriculture. Belize, Costa Rica, and Guatemala have also developed robust tourism industries.

The economic outlook in CENTAM is varied. While all the states struggle with substantial unemployment and poverty, their economies differ significantly. For example, Panama's GDP per capita is CENTAM's highest and more than 5 times that of CENTAM's lowest, Nicaragua and Honduras. While some 22% of Panamanians live below the national poverty line, rates in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Honduras are 25%, 26%, and 64%, respectively. Nevertheless, wealth is unequally distributed in all the states. Across the region, residents of indigenous or African heritage are much more likely to live in poverty than white or *mestizo* residents.

## 12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. Since the end of the colonial period, CENTAM states have developed their transportation and communication infrastructure at different rates. As a result, the quality of roads and modern technology varies throughout the region.

Roads form the primary transportation infrastructure across CENTAM, though regularly maintained, paved roadways are generally limited to cities and major highways. Unpaved, poor-quality roads coupled with mountainous terrain and aggressive driving habits make road travel dangerous in some areas. Violent crime and social unrest also threaten some travelers.



While modern information technology is available across CENTAM, Internet usage is highest in Panama, Guatemala, and Costa Rica, where more than 1/2 of the population are regular users. Many CENTAM residents access the Internet primarily through mobile phones.

The region has abundant renewable energy resources. In 2023, renewable sources accounted for almost 98% of electricity production in Costa Rica, 62% in Panama, 74% in Guatemala, and 62% in Honduras compared to just 23% in the US. The US, European Union, and Canada are the region's largest trading partners. Moreover, the US, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica belong to the Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), which liberalizes trade among its members.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize CENTAM society at large, we will focus on specific features of society in Guatemala.

# PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

## 1. HISTORY AND MYTH

### Overview

Central America's (CENTAM's) most populous country, Guatemala has experienced tragedy and oppression since the 16th-century arrival of the Spanish. After its 1841 independence, Guatemala came under the control of a small class of landowners and multinational corporations, while experiencing long periods of authoritarian rule and military regimes. In 1954, a US-backed military coup overthrew a democratically-elected President, eventually leading to a brutal civil war. The 1996 peace accords ending the war resolved few problems, and the decades of conflict left deep scars. Today, the country remains plagued by political and social divisions

and continues to confront significant governance, security, and economic challenges.

### Early History

Archeological records suggest that hunter-gatherers first settled the area around 9,000 BC. Between 4,000-2,500 BC,



hunter-gatherer communities gradually adopted farming, primarily growing corns, beans, and squash. Between 2,500-1,000 BC, inhabitants began building more elaborate settlements and engaging in textile and pottery production.

### The Emergence and Spread of the Maya

Around 1,000 BC, Maya civilization emerged in Guatemala and southern Mexico. Over subsequent centuries, it spread across El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, and Belize.



Between 500 BC-250 AD, sedentary farming communities in the Guatemalan highlands began to flourish. Concurrently, inhabitants of the lowlands of the Petén (a geographical area spanning northern Guatemala and southeastern Mexico) began to construct large-scale stone settlements, notably also the foundations of Tikal, which would become 1 of the region's most significant Maya sites. Meanwhile, the city of Kaminaljuyú arose in the highlands near modern-day Guatemala City. A satellite of the Teotihuacán culture of central Mexico, Kaminaljuyú became an important center of trade between central Mexico and the Maya of CENTAM.



Maya civilization reached its zenith during the Classic Period (250-900 AD), when urban centers featured large stone pyramids, ball courts, and elaborate temple complexes. Besides adopting advanced irrigation and terracing techniques, the Maya were expert mathematicians, astronomers, artists, and architects. They developed an accurate solar calendar and used a complex writing system to record dynastic histories, rituals, and astronomical tables. While Maya culture spread to encompass a vast region between southern Mexico and modern-day Nicaragua, it never developed a unified empire. Instead, individual city-states remained independent, often competing and warring against each other.

Beginning in the 9th century, Maya civilization fell into decline, and eventually, the Maya would abandon many of their great Classic Period cities across the Petén. During the subsequent Postclassic Period (900-1540), Maya cities in Guatemala's southern highlands, Belize, and Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula continued to thrive, though they were smaller than those of the Classic Period.

At the end of the 13th century, invaders from central Mexico founded a series of competing states in the region of modern-

day Guatemala that helped to fragment the Maya population into distinct groups. Some of these groups, notably the K'iché, Q'eqchi', Kaqchikel, and Mam, among others, are still significant today (see *Political and Social Relations*).

### The Spanish Conquest

In the decades following Christopher Columbus' 1492 "discovery" of the Americas, Spain sent various expeditions largely staffed by unemployed soldiers, impoverished nobles, and young men seeking their fortune. Across the Americas, these **conquistadores** (conquerors) subjugated indigenous societies. In 1519, *conquistador* Hernán Cortés conquered Mexico's powerful Aztec Empire and turned his sights south, delegating pacification of southern territories to his lieutenant, Pedro de Alvarado.

Known for both his cruelty and military skill, Alvarado skillfully manipulated local rivalries for his own purposes, recruiting vanquished foes to his ranks by promising to target their own enemies. Alvarado's expedition included some 200 Tlaxcalan warriors from central Mexico besides Spanish soldiers. According to some accounts, these Tlaxcalans called a region of Guatemala **Cuahtēmallān** ("place of many trees") and thus gave the land its current name.



In 1523, Alvarado entered the Guatemalan highlands, where his forces quickly defeated the K'iché. Seeing an opportunity for their own advancement, the Kaqchikel formed an alliance with the Spanish and allowed them to establish a base on their territory.

From there, the Spanish defeated most of the major Maya groups, with the exception of the Achi and Q'eqchi', who sustained guerrilla warfare against the Spanish for more than a decade. Around 1526, the Kaqchikel turned on the Spanish, retreating into the mountains to launch a guerrilla war before eventually capitulating.

With the help of Roman Catholic missionaries (see *Religion and Spirituality*), the Spanish eventually were able to establish control over most of modern-day Guatemala (though the northern area of the Petén would not be conquered until 1697). By 1540, the Spanish conquest of CENTAM was complete, setting a pattern of conflict and military repression that would continue for the next 450 years.

### Spanish Colonization

In 1524, Alvarado became **adelantado** (governor) of the Kingdom of Guatemala, which encompassed modern-day Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and the Mexican state of Chiapas. In 1541, the Spanish established a capital at present-day Antigua. Following Alvarado's death that year, the Spanish crown reorganized its CENTAM territories.



In 1609, this entity became the Captaincy-General of Guatemala with its capital at Antigua. The region would remain a Spanish colony until 1821.

**Colonial Economics:** The Spanish crown moved quickly to assert control over its newly conquered lands. Because Guatemala had little gold or other minerals to exploit, the colonial authorities concentrated their efforts on agricultural development, granting large tracts of lands that came to be called **haciendas** to Spanish settlers and the Catholic Church.

Meanwhile, Guatemala's indigenous population continued to decrease dramatically within decades of the conquest – historians estimate that 3/4 of the population died from conflict, disease, famine, and mistreatment in a labor system known as **encomienda**. Within this system, indigenous people worked on *haciendas* in exchange for food and housing and a small salary that was immediately paid back to the Spanish Crown as a tax.

Widespread abuse of *encomienda* led Spain to replace it in the mid-16th century with **repartimiento**, another system which required male indigenous inhabitants to work 1 of every 4 weeks for landholders, the Catholic Church, or the government. Despite attempts at reform, similar abusive, slave-like forced labor systems continued until the latter half of the 18th century.

In subsequent years, the colony experienced a “boom-bust” economic cycle. Spanish landowners grew cotton, tobacco, cacao, and indigo and later collected **cochineal** (a red dye extracted from an insect used to color textiles). However, with little transportation infrastructure and no Caribbean port, trade was slow to grow. Meanwhile, the death of much of the indigenous workforce compelled some landowners to import some 10,000 African slaves to Guatemala to support plantation agriculture between 1524-1620 (see *Political and Social Relations*).

**Colonial Society:** The Spanish enforced a strict race-based class system that supported very little social mobility. At the top were the **peninsulares**, (people born in Spain), followed by **criollos** (Spanish people born in the New World). In addition to holding all economic and political power, the Spanish also enjoyed the highest social prestige. Next came the **mestizos** (people of mixed Spanish, indigenous, and African descent) and **ladinos** (a looser category of indigenous people who had



adopted Spanish language and culture). At the bottom of the class structure were the **indios** or **indígenas** (the indigenous people), who colonial authorities largely confined to **reducciones** or **pueblos de indios** (indigenous villages) in an attempt to “civilize,” control, and Christianize them (see *Religion and Spirituality*). In response to this forced collectivization, each *pueblo* developed its own distinctive style and pattern of traditional dress (**traje**) to distinguish it from other communities (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*).

In 1773, the Spanish moved the colonial capital to Guatemala City, which thrived as the administrative and religious center of a large region that stretched from Mexico to Panama.

### Struggle for Independence

By the early 19th century, both internal and external events combined to breed unrest. *Criollos* resented the political and economic dominance of the *peninsulares* and began to question colonial trade and taxation policies. Meanwhile, in Europe, French Emperor Napoleon I removed Spanish King Ferdinand VII and appointed his own brother King of Spain in 1808. Since Spanish colonialists in the New World generally refused to recognize the new monarch, discontent spread.

On September 15, 1821 (a holiday today – see *Time and Space*), Guatemalans declared their independence from Spain. In response, the Spanish crown released Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and the Mexican state of Chiapas from Spanish rule. Just weeks before, Mexico had achieved its independence from Spain. Seeking to form an empire, Mexico now incorporated the CENTAM states.



While Guatemala supported the union with Mexico, El Salvador opposed the plan, resulting in military standoffs. The crisis ended when the Mexican Empire dissolved in early 1823.

### Federal Republic of Central America

In mid-1823, Guatemala joined El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica to form the Independent United Provinces of Central America, soon renamed the Federal Republic of Central America. A new Constitution based on US federal principles abolished slavery and granted limited suffrage. Initially united in compromise and cooperation, the Republic soon fractured. Generally, the smaller provinces, such as El Salvador, distrusted Guatemala, which was home to both 40% of the Republic's population and Guatemala City, the

region's traditional seat of power. Soon, petty feuds and regional rivalries dominated politics.

Liberals and conservatives formed the largest divide. Broadly, liberals sought a decentralized, secular government and were open to foreign ideas and investment. By contrast, conservatives advocated for a strong centralized government, protectionist economic policies, and alliance with the Catholic Church (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

In 1830, liberals from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador united under Honduran General Francisco Morazán, who became President of the Republic. During his tenure, Morazán instituted liberal reforms such as freedom of the press, speech, and religion, trial by jury, civil marriage, and educational reform.

Within Guatemala, Maya peasant communities engaged in numerous revolts and rebellions, and in 1837, a devastating cholera epidemic swept the country, creating widespread chaos and breakdown of social order. From the turmoil emerged Rafael Carrera, an illiterate *ladino* who formed a coalition of conservative clergy, *ladinos*, and Maya peasants and captured Guatemala City in 1838. With the support of the Catholic Church, Carrera became *de facto* leader of Guatemala and engaged President Morazán's Republic forces in battles between 1837-40.

### **Independent Guatemala under Rafael Carrera**

Meanwhile, political instability across the Republic continued. In 1840, Carrera withdrew Guatemala from the collapsing Republic then ruled with few interruptions until his 1865 death.

Carrera reversed decades of liberal reforms, while reestablishing the privileges of the Catholic Church (see *Religion and Spirituality*). He also sought to acquire territory from neighboring British Honduras (Belize today), an endeavor that remains controversial (see *Political and Social Relations*). Carrera also



resisted multiple annexation attempts by Mexico and repelled an attempted coup by American adventurers. Carrera appointed some *ladinos* and Maya to political and military positions, giving these groups their first measure of political representation.

**Social Recategorization:** With few *peninsulares* remaining, *criollos* became the dominant class in the 19th century. Eventually, the term indigenous came to be applied only to those Guatemalans who outwardly displayed signs of their heritage, such as dress and language. By contrast, *ladino* came to mean any Guatemalan of indigenous or mixed background, who adopted Spanish language and culture.

These labels would continue to shift – by the 20th century, Guatemalan society recognized just 2 classes, *ladinos* and indigenous peoples (see *Political and Social Relations*).



### The Liberal Reformer: Justo Rufino Barrios

Meanwhile, opposition to decades of conservative rule was growing. In 1871, liberals overthrew Carrera's conservative successor and inaugurated a period of liberal rule under President Justo Rufino Barrios (known as the Reformer) that lasted until 1944.

Barrios' government instituted sweeping reforms, many of which weakened the Catholic Church, such as removing education from Church control (see *Learning and Knowledge*). Barrios also undertook significant economic modernization projects, such as the construction of transportation and communications infrastructure, while embracing foreign investment and the development of coffee as an agricultural export.

As prices and demand for indigo and *cochineal* decreased due to war in Europe and the invention of synthetic dyes, coffee quickly became Guatemala's primary export. With its favorable climate, Guatemala was poised to become a world leader in



coffee production. However, much of the hilly land required for coffee plantations was occupied by Maya peasants, who had been forcibly relocated there during the colonial period.

To support the growing industry, Barrios used the newly-professionalized Army to seize Maya land, killing peasants who resisted and selling the land to German immigrants (see *Economics and Resources*). Anti-vagrancy laws forced peasants to labor on the coffee plantations or state infrastructure projects. With no access to land for subsistence agriculture, living standards for poor Guatemalans deteriorated.

**Attempts at Reunification:** Barrios was also an ardent supporter of CENTAM unity. In 1872, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Costa Rica signed a pact of union, and in 1876, those 4 plus Nicaragua met to discuss reviving the Republic. When diplomacy failed, Barrios attempted to reunify CENTAM by force, dying in 1885 during a failed invasion of El Salvador.

### Guatemala under the Liberals

Following Barrios, the small group of educated *criollos* and *ladinos* who made up the electorate voted in a series of liberal Presidents who maintained an anti-Catholic Church stance and focused on economic development and modernization.

**Manuel Estrada Cabrera:** The longest-serving of these liberal Presidents, Estrada Cabrera, took office in 1898 and held it until he was declared insane by the legislature in 1920. Estrada Cabrera ruled with an iron fist, maintaining the labor system that forced so many of Guatemala's indigenous peoples to work on coffee



plantations for slave-wages. While he improved education and infrastructure, Estrada Cabrera continued to disregard individual rights and suppress the press. He also supported the concentration of property and political power in the hands of an elite group of landowners, known as the oligarchy, while enabling the growth of large multinational corporations, such as the United Fruit Company (see "The Banana Republic" below).

Throughout the 1920s, Estrada Cabrera's successors ruled in much the same manner, undertaking reforms that mostly benefited large landowners and foreign corporations. Almost totally dependent on coffee, Guatemala's economy severely contracted when demand fell and prices dropped by some 54% when the Great Depression began in 1929.

### The Banana Republic

In 1899, several American firms engaged in the production and marketing of bananas from the Caribbean merged to form the United Fruit Company. By 1901, the company had expanded to Guatemala, first buying land then contracting with the government to build a railroad from Guatemala City to Puerto Barrios on the Caribbean coast. By 1912, United Fruit had a monopoly on transportation and controlled the electric and telegraph companies. It even became Guatemala's largest landowner, controlling over 40% of the territory.

By 1930, United Fruit was CENTAM's largest employer. In 1941, it employed some 25,000 Guatemalans on its banana plantations, where harsh working and living conditions had devastating effects on workers. As it grew, United Fruit became closely involved in politics, working with governments to suppress labor uprisings and ensure a favorable business climate. The Latin American press condemned United Fruit's exploitative labor practices and history of influencing and bribing government officials. The press further labeled it *el Pulpo* ("the octopus") for its long reach into all aspects of CENTAM politics, economy, and society. United Fruit's power and influence eventually became greater than that of many CENTAM governments, resulting in the nickname "banana republic." In 1970, United Fruit merged with another corporation to form Chiquita Brands International.

**Jorge Ubico:** Following a 1931 military coup, General Jorge Ubico was elected President. He managed to save the economy from complete collapse during the Great Depression by attracting additional foreign investment at extremely favorable terms. Ubico continued Estrada Cabrera's authoritarian ways, suppressing all political opposition.

He also continued the exploitation of poor Maya peasants by enacting new laws requiring them to work around 150 days a

year without pay on plantations or public works projects. Another decree legalized the murder of noncompliant peasants.

Throughout his 13-year rule, Ubico continued to orient



Guatemala's economy towards North America: by 1940, nearly 90% of Guatemalan exports went to the US. During World War II, Guatemala expelled German coffee growers at the US' request in exchange for preferential tariffs and weaponry.

### The "Ten Years of Spring"

As Ubico's regime grew more repressive, demonstrations increased. In 1944, a group of disenchanted military officers, students, and professionals called the October Revolutionaries forced Ubico to resign. Following a popular uprising that deposed the interim head of government, Juan José Arévalo became President in 1945. Soon after, Guatemala established a new Constitution, which for the first time granted voting privileges to all males and literate females, vastly expanding political representation. Guatemala seemed poised to start a new hopeful chapter in its history.

President Arévalo undertook other significant reforms in an attempt to modernize Guatemala. He rejected the authoritarian tendencies of his predecessors, while supporting freedom of speech and the press. Arévalo also encouraged the indigenous population to form **campesino** (peasant farmer) leagues to defend their interests and converted farms confiscated from

German coffee growers during World War II into cooperatives for their use.

Guatemala's historical holders of power and authority – the large landowners, the Catholic Church, and the political elite – objected to these changes. While some military members supported Arévalo, others rejected him, attempting several coups. Nevertheless, Arévalo successfully completed his term.

**An Attempt at Land Reform:** Jacobo Árbenz became President in 1951. Hoping to maintain Arévalo's progressive path, Árbenz made land reform in favor of landless peasants the focus of his administration. At that time, some 2% of the



population owned 72% of the land, and some of Guatemala's best agricultural land was controlled by multinational corporations like United Fruit. With few employment opportunities and no access to land for subsistence farming, most Guatemalan peasants lived in grinding poverty.

In 1952, the National Congress passed Árbenz's land reform plan despite heavy opposition from landowners. Known as Decree 900, the plan called for

the expropriation of unused holdings over a certain acreage for distribution to the peasants, with landowners receiving compensation for the expropriated land.

### **Operation PBSuccess**

Decree 900 targeted both individual landowners and multinational corporations, namely the United Fruit Company which stood to lose a significant amount of territory. Infuriated by the land reform plan, United Fruit went on the offensive against the Árbenz regime, accusing it of communist ties. Relying on exaggerated estimates of the extent of communist influence in Guatemala, the US government aligned with United Fruit and began efforts to destabilize the Árbenz government.

In 1953, US President Dwight Eisenhower authorized "Operation PBSuccess," a covert CIA-backed invasion of Guatemala with the goal of deposing the democratically-elected President Árbenz and eliminating communist opposition. Led by former Guatemalan Army Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, an invasion force of 480 Guatemalan exiles and mercenaries armed, funded, and trained by the US entered Guatemala from Honduras in June 1954.



While the invasion force was quickly defeated, an extensive psychological warfare campaign combined with bombings of Guatemala City and a naval blockade intimidated the Guatemalan Army, which refused to defend the Árbenz government. Within 10 days, Árbenz resigned and fled the country.

### **Return to Dictatorship**

Guatemala's brief democratic success, its "Ten Years of Spring," was over. Invasion leader Colonel Castillo Armas assumed the Presidency, becoming the first in a series of US-backed authoritarian rulers. Under Castillo Armas, the government quickly reversed the reforms of the Arévalo and Árbenz years, returning all expropriated lands to their former owners. A new Constitution reintroduced literacy requirements for voting, disenfranchising most women and indigenous people. President Castillo Armas introduced several repressive measures before he was assassinated in 1957. For the next 9 years, a series of military officers ruled the country.

### **Civil War Begins**

Angered at Guatemala's support of a CIA-sponsored plan to topple the Castro regime in Cuba, a group of ex-Army officers attempted a coup in 1960. With US support, the government quickly defeated the officers, who soon regrouped in eastern

Guatemala and proceeded to stage guerrilla warfare. They eventually joined with the communist **Partido Guatemalteco de Trabajo** (Guatemalan Worker's Party-PGT) and a student group to form the **Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes** (Rebel Armed Forces-FAR).

In 1963, former President Arévalo returned from exile to stand for reelection. Fearing a landslide victory in Arévalo's favor, right-wing military officers overthrew the government and installed Colonel Enrique Peralta Azurdia as President.

### Descent into Violence

In 1966, a return to moderate rule by civilian President Julio César Méndez Montenegro awakened hopes for peace. Yet the military maintained its power and authority, undermining the President and frustrating his reform efforts.

Meanwhile, Colonel Carlos Arana Osorio led the Guatemalan military in a brutal counterinsurgency campaign. The operation was largely successful in subduing guerrilla resistance in rural areas, though at the cost of some tens of thousands of lives. While the FAR was weakened, many of its fighters took refuge in Guatemala City, where guerrilla and terrorist attacks

increased. One notable attack was the 1968 assassination of the US Ambassador.

In 1970, Colonel Arana Osorio won the Presidency, returning official control of the government to the military. As so-called "death squads" linked to the military and police targeted opposition



leaders, President Arana Osorio focused on the "pacification" of the country, ordering the extermination of both criminals and leftist guerrillas. His scorched earth campaign targeted villages, crops, and livestock as troops killed indigenous people indiscriminately. These brutal tactics encouraged many indigenous people to join guerrilla movements and take up

arms against the government. The US continued to actively support the government's anti-insurgency efforts during this period by financing, equipping, and training the security forces that murdered thousands of civilians.

**Left-Wing Groups:** The government's counterinsurgency campaign of the late 1960s largely crushed the FAR. Reassembling in Mexico City in the early 1970s, several FAR leaders formed the ***Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres*** (Guerrilla Army of the Poor – EGP). Meanwhile, students and intellectuals, notably the son of Guatemala's Nobel laureate (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*), founded the ***Organización Revolucionario del Pueblo en Armas*** (Revolutionary Organization of the People in Arms – ORPA) to pursue armed resistance in the highlands near Guatemala's coffee estates.

**Right-Wing Death Squads:**

Throughout this period, right-wing paramilitary death squads carried out a reign of terror in urban areas with the support of the police and military.

These groups targeted opposition politicians, labor organizers, journalists, and especially the students and professors of Guatemala City's University of San Carlos (see *Learning and Knowledge*).

The most infamous of the groups were ***Mano Blanca*** (White Hand) and ***Ojo por Ojo*** (An Eye for an Eye), both supported by wealthy landowners, the Catholic Church, and the US. Largely comprised of soldiers and policeman, these groups coordinated closely with the military to plan operations. By the 1990s, these groups had tortured and displaced tens of thousands of people.

**The 1974 Election:** Two generals competed for the Presidency in the 1974 election – the progressive Efraín Ríos Montt and Kjell Laugerud García, representing the right-wing parties. When returns revealed Ríos Montt's victory, the government suspended the process, changed the results, and announced that Laugerud García had won. Nevertheless, Ríos Montt





would continue to seek avenues to power (see “The Height of Civil War” below).

As President, Laugerud García continued the ruthless campaign against rural guerrillas. Then, the government exposed its incompetence and corruption through its inadequate relief efforts in response to a devastating 1976 earthquake that killed some 30,000 and left a million homeless. Citing the continuing human rights abuses, the US government under President Jimmy Carter ended military equipment sales to Guatemala. Nevertheless, the 1978 election saw another general assume the Presidency following a fraudulent vote count. As the repression continued, the guerrilla war surged in the countryside. While there were likely only about 6,000 guerrilla fighters, they had some 250,000 supporters.

**Peasant Cooperative Movements:** Several indigenous movements arose with the aim of improving working conditions for the peasantry. Though it enjoyed close ties with the EGP, the **Comité de Unidad Campesina** (Committee for Peasant Unity – CUC) pursued a non-violent agenda.

But when CUC members and university students occupied the Spanish embassy in early 1980 to peacefully protest land seizures and arbitrary killings, police responded by setting the building on fire, killing some 36 protestors, government officials, and embassy employees.



### The Height of Civil War

In 1982, a group of young military officers carried out a coup, removing the newly-elected President and installing General Ríos Montt in his place. An evangelical Christian (see *Religion and Spirituality*), Ríos Montt sought to eliminate government corruption and return law and order to the country. That same year, the country's main guerrilla groups – the EGP, the ORPA, the FAR, and the PGT – joined forces as the **Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca** (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity–URNG).

While Ríos Montt purged some corrupt officials, he also oversaw some of the bloodiest campaigns of the civil war, notably the government's rural pacification program called **frijoles y fusiles** ("beans and guns"). Under this plan, cooperative peasants would receive food aid, while those who resisted would be executed. Counterinsurgency operations targeted both guerrillas and those perceived to be their supporters, primarily Maya, leading to the destruction of some 626 Maya communities. Some 100,000 Guatemalans lost their lives at the hands of the military during this period, while an equal number fled the country for Mexico or the US. As part of its anti-communist Cold War stance, the US under President Ronald Reagan supported President Ríos Montt, funneling aid and assistance through the CIA. Nevertheless, President Ríos Montt never gained widespread political support and was overthrown in a military coup in 1983.

### ***I, Rigoberta Menchú***

A K'iche' Maya activist, Rigoberta Menchú experienced the full brutality of the civil war. The Guatemalan Army tortured and killed her mother and 2 brothers, while her father died in the 1980 burning of the Spanish embassy. Menchú recounts these events in her 1983 testimonial ***I, Rigoberta Menchú***, focusing worldwide attention on the atrocities of government forces during the civil war. Her book became an international bestseller, and in 1992, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. This international recognition inspired Guatemalan leaders to end their country's violence and prompted thousands of refugees to return home. Menchú was a candidate for the Guatemalan Presidency in 2007 and 2011 and continues her social justice work today.

### **Return to Civilian Rule and Peace**

In the 1985 Presidential elections, Marco Vinicio Cerezo won in a landslide, becoming the first civilian President in 2 decades. But like other Presidents before him, Cerezo was unable to

contain the military, and his reforms largely failed. Consequently, the murderous activities of the military and the death squads increased through the late-1980s.

In 1987, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Costa Rica signed the Central American Peace Accords, an initiative intended to end the conflicts that had plagued the region for decades. Although living conditions hardly changed for Guatemala's peasants, the accords signaled that the government was prepared to communicate with insurgents. The 1990 elections marked the first peaceful transition between civilian governments. President Jorge Serrano Elías began negotiations with the URNG in 1991 but was forced out of office when he tried to assume dictatorial powers in 1993.

As human rights abuses continued, international pressure again forced the Guatemalan government to the negotiating table. In 1994, the United Nations (UN) introduced a peace



plan, and negotiations between President Álvaro Arzú Irigoyen and the URNG resulted in a cease-fire in spring 1996. That December, the 2 sides signed a comprehensive peace agreement, formally ending the 36-year civil war that claimed the lives of some 200,000 Guatemalans and displaced a million more.

International observers estimate that the Guatemalan military or government-supported security forces and paramilitaries committed over 90% of war's atrocities, primarily against indigenous Guatemalans.

### Post-War Guatemala

Besides ending the conflict, the peace accords called for military downsizing, the reintegration of combatants into society, improvement in indigenous peoples' and women's rights, the resettlement of refugees, and land reform. Nevertheless, little progress was made, even a decade later.

In 1998, the URNG became a political party. The next year, US President Bill Clinton traveled to Guatemala to express regret for the US role in the civil war. Alfonso Portillo Cabrera took office as President in 2000, promising to uphold the peace accords. However, observers criticized the continued influence of former President Ríos Montt in the government, and Portillo's administration was plagued with scandal, corruption, and crime.

### Contemporary Guatemala

Despite former President Ríos Montt's attempt at a political comeback in 2004, Óscar Berger Perdomo became the next President. To heal Guatemala's wounds, Berger made symbolic gestures, such as moving the Academy of Mayan Languages to the former presidential palace and placing Maya activist Rigoberta Menchú in charge of the implementation of the peace accords. Violence continued throughout the 2000s as drug and gang violence spilled over into Guatemala and corruption remained a significant challenge. In response, the UN established the ***Comisión Internacional Contra la Impunidad en Guatemala*** (International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala – CICIG) in 2006, an international body charged with investigating and prosecuting sensitive and difficult cases, while strengthening the nation's judicial system.

In 2011, Guatemalans returned to military leadership, electing retired General Otto Pérez Molina as President. Pérez



Molina ran on a law-and-order platform promising to unleash the military against drug-traffickers and other criminals. His administration also prosecuted military members for their civil war activities. Former President Ríos Montt was sentenced to 80 years in prison in 2013 for crimes against humanity and genocide against the Maya, although his conviction was quickly overturned. Ríos Montt died in spring 2018 still awaiting his retrial.

In 2015, scandal swept Guatemala when the CICIG revealed a corruption scheme that reached the highest levels of government. As it became clear that Pérez Molina was intimately involved in the scheme, he resigned the Presidency. Charged with racketeering and fraud in 2016, Pérez Molina is still awaiting trial as of mid-2018.

With corruption the focus of the 2015 elections, Guatemalans elected a non-politician as President – television comedian Jimmy Morales, a member of the **Frente de Convergencia Nacional** (National Convergence Front – FCN), a right-wing party dominated by ex-military officers. In 2017, the CICIG launched an investigation into Morales' 2015 campaign finances.

In response, Morales attempted to expel the head of the CICIG from Guatemala, an act that was widely denounced and ultimately blocked (see *Political and Social Relations*). Then in late summer 2018, Morales announced he would revoke the CICIG in 2019, immediately sparking widespread protests and international condemnation. The successful revocation undermined Guatemala's recent fight against corruption and impunity, while impeding democratic progress.

Despite solid recent economic growth, Guatemala remains mired in poverty and subject to widespread violence. Moreover, Guatemala's security forces continue to operate with little oversight,



and corruption remains widespread in politics and business (see *Political and Social Relations*).

### Myth Overview

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record

of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values and often explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths are important because they provide a sense of unique heritage and identity, while some also provide examples of good and moral behavior.

**The Maya creation story:** The *Popol Vuh* ("Book of the People") is the creation narrative and history of the K'iche' Maya people. Originally preserved through Maya oral tradition, the narrative was first written down around 1554. The K'iche'-language text recounts the creation of humans, the activities of the gods, the origin and history of the K'iche' people, and the history of K'iche' kings to 1550. Panels dating to 300 BC (some 500 years before the height of Maya civilization during the Classic Period) found at El Mirador depict scenes from the *Popol Vuh*, attesting to the antiquity of the narrative.

Originally 1 long poem, the work is now divided into 4 separate sections. The 1st section describes the gods' failed attempt to make humans out of wood and their destruction by flood. Main characters in the second and third sections include the celestial "hero twins," **Junajpu'** and **Ixb'alanke**, who defeat the lords of death in the underworld to become the sun and moon. The fourth section covers the creation of humans from maize, the formation of the K'iche' Maya, and their migrations. The narrative ends with an introduction of **Gucumatx**, the feathered serpent lord known as **Kulkulkan** among the Yucatec Maya of Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula and **Quetzalcoatl** among the Aztecs of central Mexico.



**El Sombrerón:** Popular among both Maya and *ladinos*, *El Sombrerón* ("The Big Hat") is a legendary character that appears in numerous Guatemalan books and film. Also known as **Tzipitio** or **Tzizimite**, *El Sombrerón* is a short man with a huge hat who dresses in black and wears boots that jangle when he walks. Legend tells that he wanders Guatemalan neighborhoods with his team of 4 mules, falling in love with young women, who have large eyes and long hair and serenading them with his silver guitar until they are unable to eat or sleep.

## 2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

### Official Name

Republic of Guatemala  
*República de Guatemala*

### Political Borders

Mexico: 595 mi  
Belize: 165 mi  
Honduras: 152 mi  
El Salvador: 124 mi  
Coastline: 249 mi

### Capital

Guatemala City

### Demographics

Guatemala's population of about 18.3 million makes it Central America's (CENTAM's) most populous nation. Its annual population growth rate of 1.49% is the region's highest, primarily due to its high birthrate (see *Sex and Gender*) and large reproductive-age population (over 1/2 of Guatemalans are under age 25). Civil war and political instability, natural disasters (see "Natural Hazards" below), and a lack of economic opportunity have led to recurrent waves of emigration – primarily to the US, Mexico, and elsewhere in CENTAM – since about 1960. Over 53% of the population lives in metropolitan areas, mostly in and around the capital city of Guatemala City and other highland areas.

### Flag

The Guatemalan flag consists of three equal vertical bands of light blue (left and right) and white (middle). The blue bands symbolize the Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Sea, while the white represents peace and purity. Guatemala's national coat of arms is centered in the middle of the flag and features a pair of crossed swords (representing honor); a pair of crossed rifles (symbolizing Guatemala's strength and



willingness to defend itself against foreign threats); a scroll with the words “***Libertad 15 de Septiembre de 1821***” (marking the original date of independence from Spain); a green and red quetzal (Guatemala’s national bird and symbol of liberty); and a green wreath of laurel leaves (denoting victory).

## Geography

Guatemala borders Mexico to the North, Belize to the Northeast, the Gulf of Honduras in the Caribbean Sea to the East, and Honduras and El Salvador to the Southeast. Guatemala’s southwestern coastline runs along the Pacific Ocean. Guatemala’s total land area is about 41,400 sq mi, making it CENTAM’s third largest country behind Nicaragua and Honduras, slightly smaller than Pennsylvania, and about the size of Ireland.

Towering, rugged mountains cover nearly 2/3 of Guatemala and roughly stretch as two parallel ranges from west to east. The northern range originates near the Mexican border and runs toward Guatemala’s Caribbean coast.

Meanwhile, the southern volcanic Sierra Madre stretches from the Mexican border along the Pacific Ocean through Guatemala before continuing onto El Salvador. Many of Guatemala’s some 37 volcanoes rise as steep cones along the Sierra Madre. Here, the nation’s highest peak and CENTAM’s tallest point, the Tajumulco Volcano, reaches 13,845 ft.

Mountains divide Guatemala into three main regions: El Petén’s



vast, northern lowlands characterized by thick, tropical rain forests; rolling, central highlands; and a narrow strip of fertile coastal plain that follows the meandering Pacific shoreline. Numerous lakes dot Guatemala’s interior,

with the nation’s largest lake, Lago de Izabal, lying close to the Caribbean coast. Forests cover about 1/3 of the country, while agricultural land, both arable land and permanent crops and pastures, extends across an additional 41%.



## Climate

Along its Pacific coastline and in lowland regions, Guatemala experiences a hot and humid tropical climate that divides into rainy (May-October) and dry seasons (November-April). Mountainous and central upland regions experience a more temperate climate, with air temperatures varying by elevation. Accordingly, temperatures range from 77°F-86°F throughout the year along the coasts, while Guatemala City and central highlands average 68°F year-round. Mountainous areas are coolest, averaging 59°F and lower. Generally, rainfall is heaviest in the central uplands and along Guatemala's Caribbean coast.

## Natural Hazards

Occurring periodically, numerous natural hazards typically result in hundreds of deaths, leave thousands homeless, and cause millions in economic losses. Guatemala's location at the intersection of three major tectonic plates make it subject to violent earthquakes, the most devastating occurring in 1976, killing over 30,000 people, displacing over 1 million, and destroying much of Guatemala City's infrastructure.

Moreover, the Ring of Fire, a 25,000 mi long geographic region of volcanic mountain chains along the continental margins of the Pacific Ocean, runs through Guatemala, making it particularly susceptible to volcanic activity. Guatemala City lies at the foot of the Pacaya volcanic peak, which last erupted in 2010, spewing heavy ash over the capital city and prompting mass evacuations. In 2012, Volcán de Fuego (Volcano of Fire) erupted near the former capital city of Antigua, requiring the evacuation of more than 33,000 people. Fuego erupted again in June 2018, blanketing a 60 sq mi region in fire, hot ash, and rocks and entirely burying several small towns, killing hundreds. Other active peaks with explosive histories and in close proximity to heavily populated areas include Santa Maria and Acatenango. Guatemala's Caribbean coast is vulnerable to hurricanes and tropical storms, while other regions also experience floods and landslides.



## Environmental Issues

Guatemala's timberlands experience deforestation from illegal logging, slash-and-burn agriculture, the harvesting of wood for cooking, and the activities of drug trafficking organizations (see "Contraband Trafficking" below). Deforestation impedes the natural retention of water and leads to soil erosion, both of which worsen flooding.



While some protective measures exist, lax law enforcement enables large-scale improper disposal of toxic industrial and agricultural waste, raw sewage,

household waste, and other harmful substances. Together these practices contribute to widespread soil and water pollution – by some estimates, about 92% of rural residents have access to basic drinking water. Lastly, air pollution caused by toxic automobile emissions is a significant concern in Guatemala City and other urban areas.

## Government

Guatemala is a presidential republic with a parliamentary government. The country divides into 22 **departamentos** (departments) administered by elected governors and local councils. Departments further subdivide into municipalities headed by mayors. The latest Constitution was adopted in 1985 and separates power among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches while outlining basic rights and freedoms.

## Executive Branch

Executive power is vested in the President, who is both chief-of-state and head-of-government. A council of ministers and Vice President (VP) support the President. Both the President and VP are elected by popular vote to serve a single 4-year term. The current President Bernardo Arévalo, and Vice President Karin Herrera, took office in January 2024.

## Legislative Branch

Guatemala's legislature is a 1-chamber **Congreso de la Republica** (Congress of the Republic or CoR) composed of 160 members serving 4-year terms. Of those, 128 members are elected directly in multi-seat constituencies within each of the 22 departments by a simple majority vote. The remaining 32 members are directly elected in a single nationwide constituency through proportional representation. The CoR controls most legislative powers such as amending the Constitution, appointing officials, and approving declarations of war.

## Judicial Branch

The judiciary includes a Supreme Court of Justice, a Constitutional Court, and numerous Appellate Courts and Courts of First Instance. As the highest court, the Supreme Court is the final court of appeal for both civil and criminal cases and consists of 13 magistrates organized into three chambers. The CoR elects all magistrates from a pool of candidates selected by the Postulation Committee, an independent body of Guatemalan law school deans, representatives of law associations, and members of the Courts of Appeal. The Constitutional Court's five judges are selected by the CoR, Supreme Court, the President, the University of San Carlos, and the Guatemalan bar association. Both magistrates and judges serve renewable 5-year terms.

Years of political instability have left judicial power weak and fragmented, with members vulnerable to intimidation and harassment. The United Nations (UN) has established the



International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) to bolster Guatemala's anticorruption campaign. A joint body of international and Guatemalan prosecutors, the CICIG was created to strengthen Guatemala's judiciary, prosecute high-profile corruption cases, and investigate and dismantle links between criminal organizations and the political elite (see *History and Myth*).

## Political Climate

Guatemala transitioned to a multiparty democracy in the late 1980s and saw its first peaceful transfer of power between civilian leaders in 1990 after decades of military dictatorships and civil war (see *History and Myth*). Since then, widespread corruption, poverty, and rising gang violence have significantly

hindered social and political progress and democratic stability.



Former President Morales – a former comedian – took office after President Pérez Molina was forced to resign in 2015 following a

corruption scandal. Morales' entry into politics offered a welcome alternative to Guatemala's traditionally dominant and oftentimes corrupt ruling class. In its first years, Morales' administration improved fiscal policies, reported a 5% drop on homicide rates, and increased public investment in programs to improve the living conditions of the poor. Despite some initial success, reforms have largely failed to curtail corruption and violence, increase residents' access to public services, and reduce Guatemala's high poverty rates.

Moreover, in 2017 Morales became embroiled in a scandal after attempting to oust the head of the CICIG after it launched an investigation into Morales' 2015 Presidential election campaign (see *History and Myth*). Guatemalan courts immediately blocked the ouster amid national and international condemnation. In a series of increasingly authoritarian steps, in 2018, Morales announced he would revoke the CICIG's mandate – an act that significantly hinders Guatemala's fight against corruption and erodes the stability of its democracy. Meanwhile, over the last decade, CICIG investigations have exposed numerous links between the ruling class and organized crime networks, resulting in the imprisonment of dozens of prominent politicians, drug traffickers, military officials, and justices and the dismissal of some 2,500 corrupt police officers.

The CICIG's current investigations implicate about 1/5 of CoR members and dozens of powerful businesses in high-profile corruption cases. Moreover, according to a recent study, some 65% of Guatemalans have little or no trust in the government and nearly 3/4 distrust the police – findings that reveal the serious fragility of Guatemala's democracy.

## Defense

Guatemala's unified National Armed Forces (NAF) consist of ground, maritime, and air branches, with a joint strength of 18,050 active duty troops and 63,850 reserve personnel. The NAF is charged primarily with defending Guatemalan territory against foreign and domestic threats, and to a lesser extent, supporting disaster relief efforts and participating in international operations. More recently, domestic counter-gang and counter-narcotics efforts have dominated NAF operations.

**Army:** A well-equipped/trained force of 15,550 active-duty troops divided into 3 Special Forces brigades, 9 maneuver brigades (including light, air maneuver, amphibious, and special), and 3 combat support brigades and commands.

**Navy:** Consists of 1,500 active-duty personnel equipped with 11 patrol and coastal combatants, 3 amphibious vessels and landing craft, and 3 logistics and support vessels. The Navy also includes a Marine division comprised of 650 reservists.



**Air Force:** Consists of 1,000 active-duty personnel comprised of 2 air commands divided into 2 fighter/ground attack/intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance squadrons, 2 transport squadrons, a training squadron, and a transport helicopter squadron. The Air Force is equipped with 14 transport and training aircraft and 7 helicopters.

**Paramilitary:** Consists of 25,000 National Civil Police members comprising a Special Forces battalion and a maneuver unit.

# Guatemalan Air Force Rank Insignia



Minister  
of Defense



Chief  
of Staff



General



Major  
General



Brigadier  
General



Colonel



Lieutenant  
Colonel



Major



Captain  
First  
Class



Captain  
Second  
Class



Lieutenant  
First  
Class



Lieutenant  
Second  
Class



Sergeant  
Major



Technician  
Sergeant



Master  
Sergeant



Sergeant



Corporal  
Second  
Class



Private  
First  
Class

## Security Issues

Internal threats related to powerful and rapidly-growing organized crime networks and regional illicit drug trafficking dominate Guatemala's security environment. Tense relations with neighboring Belize also present security challenges.

**Internal Violence:** Criminal organizations spread in Guatemala after a 1996 peace agreement ended decades of civil war (see *History and Myth*). Because the government was unable to improve life for poor, disenfranchised, and marginalized Guatemalans, many became vulnerable to criminal recruitment. Today, urban street gangs and large, transnational organized **maras** (criminal organizations) control large swaths of Guatemalan territory.

The two largest *maras* operating in Guatemala are *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and the 18th Street Gang (M-18 or Barrio 18). Both groups initially formed in the US: MS-13 by Salvadorans who fled the civil war and M-18 by Mexicans living in California. During the mid-1990s, they grew in popularity in CENTAM. Today, they comprise the region's largest and most powerful gangs, having an estimated combined total of 90,000 members across CENTAM.



While the homicide rate has fallen from 46 deaths per 100,000 people in 2008 to 16 in 2024, Guatemala remains 1 of the world's most violent countries. Criminal gangs act at liberty in some regions. This violence, along with extortion and forced gang recruitment, have led to a regional migration crisis as thousands of Guatemalans flee to Mexico, the US, and elsewhere in CENTAM.

**Contraband Trafficking:** Over the last decade, international efforts to curb the drug trade in Colombia, Mexico, and the Caribbean pushed trafficking routes into CENTAM. Consequently, nearly 80% of all illegal drugs flowing into the US

pass through CENTAM. Although Guatemala reported record drug seizures in 2016, it remains a major transit country for narcotics, primarily cocaine and heroin. International drug-trafficking organizations (DTOs) often partner with Guatemalan gangs to distribute and transport narcotics, prompting turf wars and adding to internal violence. DTOs also contribute to Guatemala's deforestation problem by purchasing and clearing forested land for farming, then using the exported farm products to launder illegal drug-related profits.



Others clear land in remote areas of national parks for poppy and opium production and to erect infrastructure to help move US-bound narcotics by aircraft.

**Tensions with Belize:** Guatemala's long-standing territorial claim over a large portion (53%) of Belize (see *History and Myth*) contributes to significant tension between the two nations. Belizean authorities

frequently confront Guatemalans who cross into Belize to perform illegal activities such as logging, poaching, panning for gold, or clearing land for agriculture. In 2016, diplomatic relations worsened considerably after Belizean troops patrolling the 1.2 mi-wide "adjacency zone" along the disputed Guatemala-Belize border killed a 13-year-old Guatemalan boy who had crossed into Belizean territory.

Tensions flared again later that year when Guatemala asserted military control over the Sarstoon River, detaining or questioning Belizean citizens wishing to navigate the river and surrounding region. Despite recent friction, the two countries have agreed to settle the territorial dispute in the International Court of Justice as a result of the public referendums – held in Guatemala in May 2018 and in Belize in May 2019 with 95% and 55% of voters in favor, respectively.

## Foreign Relations

In recent years, Guatemala has prioritized the development of closer military and economic ties with its CENTAM neighbors



and nations in South and North America, Europe, and to a lesser extent, Asia. Today, Guatemala is active in regional and global institutions such as the Organization of American States, Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, Central American Integration System, UN, International Monetary Fund, Inter-American Development Bank (IADP), World Trade Organization, and World Bank.

**Regional Cooperation:** Collectively known as “The Northern Triangle,” Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras seek to foster military, economic, and political cooperation. In 2014, this coalition partnered with the IADP to create the Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity (A4P), a 5-year \$22 billion security and development initiative. From 2016-17, the 3 nations collectively contributed over \$5 billion to the A4P and today continue to cooperate militarily to help limit the cross-border movement of organized criminal groups and narcotics.



**Relations with the US:** The US and Guatemala share historically close but at times controversial

bilateral relations (see *History and Myth*). Contributing over \$1 billion for regional security assistance from 1998-2015, the US has sought to diminish gang-related violence and illegal trafficking in the Northern Triangle nations under the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). The US also funded roughly 1/2 of the CICIG's \$12-\$15 million annual budget and provides military training and equipment to Guatemala's armed forces and police. Other bilateral assistance programs include improving food security and economic growth, bolstering Guatemala's capacity to manage its natural resources, increasing Guatemalans' access to health services, and engaging out-of-school youth through various social initiatives. Along with other CENTAM nations, the US and Guatemala participate in a free trade agreement which allows goods, services, and capital to move freely among the member nations (see *Economics and Resources*).

## Ethnic Groups

Guatemala's population divides into two main groups: **ladinos** and Amerindians (indigenous groups, predominantly Maya).

**Ladinos:** About 56% of the population identifies as *ladino*, a broad category that includes Guatemalans of European descent (predominantly Spanish and German), **mestizos** (mixed European and indigenous ancestry), and indigenous people who have adopted Spanish language and culture (see *History and Myth*). *Ladinos* generally speak Spanish as their first language (see *Language and Communication*).

**Indigenous Groups:** According to the 2018 census, some 42% of Guatemalans are Maya, though some estimates suggest their proportion of the population is as high as 66%, since some indigenous people may identify as *ladino* to avoid societal discrimination. These citizens typically speak a Mayan language as their first language (see *Language and Communication*) and

observe Maya customs and traditions.



The largest of the 21 Maya ethnolinguistic groups are the Q'eqchi (8.3% of the total population), K'iche' (7.8%), Kaqchikel (3%), and Mam (4.4%). They concentrate primarily in the country's western

highlands, although internal migration during the civil war (see *History and Myth*) has resulted in a significant population in Guatemala City. A non-Maya indigenous group called the Xinca makes up 1.8% of the population.

**Other Groups:** Comprising about 0.2% of the population, the Garifuna (or Garinagu in their own language – see *Language and Communication*) are the descendants of African slaves and Carib peoples (the indigenous inhabitants of the Caribbean Lesser Antilles islands), who were exiled to CENTAM by the British in the 18th century. Guatemala is also home to Afro-Guatemalans (descendants of slaves brought by the Spanish – see *History and Myth*), East Asians (primarily Korean and

Chinese), and Arabs. Some of these Guatemalans may identify as *ladino*, depending on their level of adoption of Spanish language and culture.

## Social Relations

Although the colonial race-based class system (see *History and Myth*) no longer exists, Guatemala has a socially stratified society in which ethnic identification largely continues to determine political power, economic opportunity, and place in the social hierarchy. White *ladinos* comprise an elite class that continues to hold nearly all the power, wealth, and social prestige.



While *mestizos* and other non-white *ladinos* are rarely members of the elite, they generally have access to educational and economic opportunities not available to indigenous people and comprise the small but slowly-growing middle class.

Since the peace accords ending the civil war (see *History and Myth*), the government has taken some steps to address Guatemala's dramatic socioeconomic divisions. For example, the 1995 "Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples" addressed widespread discrimination against the Maya, and the 2003 National Language Law granted Mayan languages official status (see *Language and Communication*).

Nevertheless, the living conditions of most indigenous Guatemalans have improved little if at all. Indigenous Maya almost uniformly occupy the country's lower class and primarily survive as subsistence farmers and wage laborers.

Suffering from a poverty rate nearly 3 times that of the rest of Guatemala's population, Maya communities tend to experience notable malnutrition, poor healthcare, inadequate access to education, and a lack of economic opportunity.

### 3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

#### Overview

Guatemala's population is primarily Christian. According to a 2023 survey, some 42% of Guatemalans are Roman Catholic and 46% Protestant. About 11% claim no religious affiliation, while the remaining 1% claim other affiliations, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Maya or Garifuna traditional religions.



Guatemala's Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, allowing Guatemalans to worship and express all faiths and beliefs freely and further prohibits religious discrimination. It also guarantees the right of indigenous groups to practice their traditional religions. The law also mandates the separation of church and state, specifying that religious leaders and members of the clergy cannot occupy senior positions in government or the judiciary. While the Constitution names no official religion, it recognizes the Roman Catholic Church, thereby granting it a privileged legal status. For example, the Catholic Church is exempt from the registration process which all other religious groups must complete before receiving tax exemptions, building places of worship, and establishing schools.

#### Early Spiritual Landscape

Before the 16th-century arrival of the Spanish conquerors, (see *History and Myth*), the region's Maya inhabitants had a rich spiritual life. Scholars believe the Maya recognized several different spirits and gods who constructed the universe, created the earth and humans, and influenced daily life (see *History and Myth*). The Maya worshipped nature gods, including those controlling the sun, moon, rain, and animals, and practiced numerous, intricate rituals based on an elaborate 260-day sacred calendar. Believing in the cyclical nature of creation and

destruction, the Maya meticulously timed religious rituals and ceremonies according to their complex calendrical system to honor both gods and ancestors. An order of priests conducted all religious rites, which included bloodletting, sacrifices, and other rituals.

Today, Guatemala is home to an estimated 2,000 sacred Maya sites. The ruins of these important temples, tombs, and shrines



provide insight into the complexity of Maya religious beliefs and practices. Ancient sites like Tikal and Uaxactún are characterized by large, central plazas surrounded by towering pyramids and other stone

structures and likely served as ceremonial centers. Meanwhile, archeological finds in Guatemala's numerous limestone caves suggest they acted as burial chambers and locations of rituals, ceremonies, and sacrifices associated with specific deities, ancestors, and the transition after death into the underworld.

### **Introduction of Christianity**

Spanish conquerors arriving in the region after 1523 (see *History and Myth*) sought not only wealth and territory for the Spanish Crown but also to convert the indigenous population to Roman Catholicism. Reflecting the religious zeal in Spain at the time, the conquerors viewed traditional indigenous beliefs and practices as manifestations of the devil. Consequently, the Spanish systematically destroyed Maya temples, shrines, and other sacred sites, burned historical and religious texts, and prohibited rituals, dances, and other customs.

Spain's forceful and violent subjugation of the Maya population devastated indigenous culture and religion. Appalled at the brutal policies of the governing Spanish elite, many Catholic missionaries advocated for better treatment of indigenous populations. One notable example is the Dominican priest Bartolomé de las Casas, the region's 1st influential Catholic

activist, who vehemently denounced the colonial authorities' atrocities. Instead, de la Casas and other Spanish missionaries traveled widely across the region to peacefully proselytize, successfully converting some remote, hostile Maya groups and helping the Spanish authorities assume control of the region (see *History and Myth*).

### Religion during the Colonial Period

Over nearly 3 centuries of Spanish colonial rule, the Catholic Church became central to education, politics, and the economy. Catholic orders, including the Dominicans, Franciscans, and Jesuits, among others, opened schools, orphanages, and hospitals that provided important social services. Catholics established Guatemala's first institutions of higher learning, such as Guatemala City's University of San Carlos (see *Learning and Knowledge*).

Meanwhile, the surviving indigenous populations were forcibly grouped into villages administered by members of the Catholic Church – (see *History and Myth*) **reducciones** or **pueblos de indios** (indigenous villages), though some Maya fled to remote areas to escape confinement. Within each *pueblo*, Catholic clergy sought to Christianize the inhabitants by teaching basic literacy and religious education.

While some Catholic missionaries sought to curb the abuses carried out by colonialists, many clergy worked with colonial authorities to exploit the indigenous population, allowing the harsh treatment of Maya to continue through much of the colonial era.



While these colonial policies and practices significantly restructured traditional Guatemalan society, many Maya managed to safeguard some of their indigenous beliefs, practicing their religion in secret or incorporating elements into their Catholic faith. Eventually, their efforts led to the emergence of a syncretic (blended) form of Catholicism still

practiced in Guatemala today (see “Religion Today” below). Church power continued to grow through the 19th century as Catholic priests became increasingly involved in the political arena, with many participating in Guatemala's struggle for independence (see *History and Myth*).

### Religion and Politics in Independent Guatemala

In the years after Guatemala's 1821 independence from Spain (see *History and Myth*), the power wielded by the Catholic Church became a major point of disagreement in domestic politics. Much of the 19th century saw power struggles between conservative and liberal political factions (see *History and Myth*). One group encouraged Church involvement in social

and political spheres, while the other sought to curb its power and influence.

For example, under conservatives, the Church enjoyed broad economic support and growth. By contrast, liberal groups confiscated and sold Church property and implemented anticlerical policies.

As a result, Church influence over such areas as marriage, divorce, and education fluctuated until the mid-20th century, when

a coup orchestrated by the US (see *History and Myth*) ushered in decades of repressive dictatorships, civil war, and significant changes in Guatemala's religious landscape.

### Religion during the Civil War

Guatemala's civil war was marked by brutal government suppression of left-wing political activity and the mass killings of innocent, primarily Maya, civilians (see *History and Myth*). In response to this and other conflicts across Latin America, new religious movements emerged. The most notable was “Liberation Theology” or “Social Christianity,” a Roman Catholic school of thought advocating freedom from oppression, poverty, and injustice through political action.



While Church leadership remained primarily aligned to the ruling, right-wing regimes through the 1980s, the escalating brutality of the war prompted many young priests and nuns to become advocates of this new philosophy. These activist clergy attempted to enact social change by bringing international attention to the war's human rights abuses. They also worked to educate and empower victimized populations against their oppressors. In response, the government murdered or exiled many of the movement's vocal supporters, which included prominent members of the Catholic Church.



Meanwhile, Protestantism was growing in popularity among Guatemalans exposed to Evangelical missionaries, who entered the country in large numbers to provide humanitarian assistance after the devastating 1976 earthquake (see *History and Myth*). In the 1980s, Protestantism expanded further when a devout Evangelical Christian, General Efraín Ríos Montt, rose to power (see *History and Myth*) and began broadcasting sermons on Christianity and morality on radio and television. While the Evangelical faith's tenets appealed to some Maya, others adopted it hoping to avoid Ríos Montt's notoriously brutal persecution of indigenous communities (see *History and Myth*). Within a decade, some 35% of Guatemalans had converted to Evangelicalism as Catholicism's political and social influence waned.

## Religion Today

Although Guatemalan society has experienced some secularization, religion continues to influence most celebrations, rites of passage (see *Family and Kinship*), and day-to-day activities. The widespread belief that life events are a consequence of God's will is demonstrated by the frequent use of the term "**Si Dios quiere**" ("God willing") and, when speaking of the future, "**Solo Dios sabe**" ("Only God knows"). While religious organizations are largely removed from partisan politics, they continue to offer social services to Guatemala's



poor, disaster-stricken, and otherwise vulnerable populations. Guatemala is generally free of religious violence, though some tension exists between Catholics and Protestants. Some non-Catholic groups report that local government authorities discriminate against them when collecting taxes and granting permits to construct or repair places of worship. Although federal law permits Maya communities to conduct religious ceremonies on government-owned



Maya sites, some groups experience limited access limited.

**Other Christian Churches:** In the decades following their 1882 arrival, Protestant churches experienced limited growth, comprising just 3% of the population in 1960. After a growth surge in the last several decades, prominent Protestant and other non-Catholic Christian groups today include Baptists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Episcopalians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Russian Orthodox, Seventh-day Adventists, Full Gospel Church, Central American Church, Prince of Peace Church, and numerous independent evangelical Protestant groups.

### Religion and Indigenous Guatemalans

Although most indigenous Guatemalans today are Christian, many incorporate elements of traditional Maya religious customs in their worship. Others exclusively follow traditional Maya beliefs and practices that are collectively known as **costumbre** ("custom"). Modern-day Maya ceremonies may occur in caves, volcanic shrines, archaeological sites, or in everyday places like a home, cornfield, or town square identified by an **ajq'ij** ("day keeper" or Maya religious specialist). Guatemala has some 10,000 accredited guides of Maya spirituality who regularly lead rituals marking calendrical events, celebrating rites of passage, or requesting good harvests, rain, or protection from illness or misfortune from the gods and spirits.

## 4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

### Overview

Through years of civil unrest and political instability, families served as important sources of financial and personal support. Today, Guatemalans continue to rely on their families, sharing good fortune with their relations and involving them in important life decisions.

### Residence

Guatemala has experienced significant population movements in recent decades. During the civil war (see *History and Myth*), many Guatemalans fled to sparsely populated areas in the North, with others continuing on to Mexico or the US. Today, some 247,000 Guatemalans remain internally displaced, with over 53% of the population living in urban areas. Guatemala also experiences internal migration, with 1000s of the rural poor seeking seasonal employment on farms along the Pacific coast or in urban areas. While just 60% of the population had access to electricity in 1990, that proportion had risen to 99% by 2022. As of 2024, 78% of the population had access to sanitation services and 95% to safe drinking water, up from 59% and 46% respectively in 2000.



**Urban:** Housing in Guatemala's urban

areas demonstrates significant variance by income. Upper-class Guatemalans tend to live in luxurious apartment buildings or single-family dwellings with pools and gardens. By contrast, middle income Guatemalans generally occupy homes built closely together in **colonias** (neighborhoods). Usually constructed of cement or cinderblocks, the homes typically feature tiled floors with corrugated metal roofs. The poorest Guatemalans typically have inadequate shelter, often occupying temporary shacks constructed of plastic, scrap wood, cardboard, palm leaves, or corrugated sheet metal on

urban outskirts. These makeshift dwellings often occupy unstable terrain prone to flooding and landslides.

**Rural:** Rural homes are usually constructed with mudbrick or concrete walls, a corrugated metal or thatched roof, and a tile, cement, or earthen floor. Although often consisting of just 1 room, rural homes typically house several family members. Furniture usually includes beds and a table plus several hammocks hung outside. Windows often lack glass and rely on shutters to repel rain. Yards typically feature fruit trees, chickens, and pigs, and a *pila*, a large water collection and storage receptacle with sinks for laundry and dishes. Many homes have high walls, iron bars, and padlocks for protection, and some families keep grain silos inside the house to protect their harvest.



### Family Structure

In Guatemalan families, the father is traditionally the primary breadwinner and head of the household, while the mother is typically responsible for all domestic tasks and childcare. Many households include extended relatives, and even if they do not share a home, relatives traditionally live in close proximity.

This traditional arrangement has changed over the last several decades. While many Guatemalans have migrated within the country to seek economic opportunities or avoid the effects of natural disasters, others have left the country altogether, fleeing violent conflict caused by the civil war or, more recently, the activities of criminal gangs (see *History and Myth*).

As a result, many Guatemalan families have been separated, and the number of female-headed households has risen. Nevertheless, the extended family remains an integral part of daily life, with relatives frequently spending time together over meals, at religious services, and during holidays and special occasions. Children generally live with their families until marriage and later care for aging parents within their own households.

## Children

Families are typically large, with some couples having up to 10 children (see *Sex and Gender*). A child's life experiences are largely shaped by his socioeconomic status. Children in lower income families are expected to help supplement the family's income from a young age by washing cars, shining shoes, or selling food and trinkets. Other childhood responsibilities include caring for younger siblings and assisting with household or farm chores.

Suffering extreme poverty (see *Economics and Resources*), some parents allow their children under the legal age of 14 to work in agriculture, construction, or as street vendors and domestic servants to earn money for the family.

Child labor is especially common among the rural indigenous population, and young Maya domestic servants are particularly vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse.

Guatemala has made some improvements to reducing child labor issues. Although current reports show 16% of children 10-14 work outside the home, and 33% of children 15 to 17 work in a hazardous environment. It is also suggested that children as young as 5 working outside the home. Persistent gang violence (see *Political and Social Relations*) contributes to elevated school dropout rates and compels some parents to move or even send their unaccompanied children to the US to escape the danger.

**Birth:** A birth is a joyous occasion. While *ladinos* typically share news of a pregnancy enthusiastically and widely, Maya tend to be more guarded, sharing the information with few others. Urban women typically have baby showers with presents and games. About 1/2 of all births take place within the home in the presence of a **comadrona** (midwife) or **ajq'ij** ("day keeper" or Maya religious specialist – see *Religion and Spirituality*). To protect their infants from **mal de ojo**, the "evil



eye” believed to bring misfortune, some mothers tie red ribbons around their babies’ wrists or attach them to their clothing.

### Rites of Passage

Guatemalans typically mark life’s milestones with Christian rites of passage. For example, families usually baptize their children within a few weeks of birth, then celebrate first communion and confirmation around age 8-10 and 14-16, respectively.



### Coming-of-Age:

Guatemalans typically celebrate their daughters’ 15th birthdays and entrance into womanhood with a formal party called a ***Fiesta de Quince*** (Party of 15) or ***quinceañera***. A typical *quinceañera* celebration begins with a special Catholic mass in honor of the girl, who dresses in a ***traje*** (white formal gown) or Maya traditional dress (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*) and receives blessings. Afterwards, some families enjoy an intimate dinner while others celebrate with an extravagant party.

**Dating and Courtship:** Boys and girls typically begin dating in their mid-teens. Socializing rarely involves a couple spending time alone. Instead, a chaperone accompanies the couple, or groups of friends gather in public settings, such as dances, holiday celebrations, movies, and school or church events. When a couple decides to marry, the groom asks for permission from the bride’s father. While most women marry in their early 20s, some rural communities encourage girls to marry in their teens. Overall Guatemalans tend to marry young, and women who wait to marry until their late 20s or older may face social stigma. In contrast, men generally marry after achieving financial stability later in life.

**Weddings:** By law, all couples must have a civil ceremony at ***la municipalidad*** (municipal government office). Following the ceremony, many couples host a small dinner with friends and family. A few days or weeks later, some couples have a religious ceremony, usually held in a church. Afterwards, the entire community traditionally gathers for food, drink, and

dancing that often lasts into the next morning. Indigenous couples rarely seek the legal validation of a civil ceremony, opting instead for just a religious ceremony. Some couples forego all formal ceremonies, choosing instead cohabitation as **unidos** (common-law spouses), which the government officially recognizes after 3 years. Typical reasons for cohabitation without formal marriage include lack of funds for a wedding or differing religious traditions.

## Divorce

At 0.6 per 1,000 people in 2024, Guatemala's divorce rate is significantly lower than the US rate of 2.4. Divorce carries significant social stigma, particularly for women.

## Death

Following a death, the family typically hosts a series of gatherings to honor the deceased. First, mourners pay their respects at an all-night **velorio** (wake) usually held at a **funeraria** (funeral home). The next day, mourners attend a funeral service at the **funeraria**, then accompany pallbearers as they carry or drive the coffin for burial in a cemetery. After burial, mourners gather at the deceased family's home to pray for the departed soul. For the subsequent 9 days, during the



period known as the **novena**, Catholic families say prayers at home or attend special church services.

The family hosts official memorial services again on the 9th and 40th days after

the death. The spouse and children of the deceased traditionally observe a formal mourning period lasting a year. During this time, they may observe certain dietary and activity restrictions. On each anniversary of the death, family members may attend church services to pray for the deceased. On November 2, Catholic Guatemalans commemorate **Día de los Difuntos** (Day of the Deceased or All Souls Day) by gathering at cemeteries to decorate family graves with yellow flowers, candles, and offerings of food.

## 5. SEX AND GENDER

### Overview

Traditionally, Guatemala is a male-dominated society where the ideal of ***machismo***, strong masculine pride, is counterbalanced by female subservience. The Guatemalan social system is patriarchal, meaning that men hold most power and authority. Today, women and men have equal rights before the law, yet traditional attitudes continue to hinder women's full participation in educational, economic, and political spheres.

### Gender Roles and Work

Guatemalan society maintains a distinct division between the genders. Men typically serve as the head of the household and primary breadwinner, while women are responsible for most household chores such as preparing meals, cleaning, and caring for children, even if they work outside the home.

**Labor Force:** In 2024, about 40% of women worked outside the home, lower than rates in neighboring Belize (49%) and El Salvador (47%) and the US (57%). While women concentrate in jobs traditionally considered “female” – like childcare, nursing, teaching, and domestic labor – many women are also entrepreneurs, who run small stores out of their homes or make and sell food and handicrafts.

Within the labor force, jobs tend to divide by ethnic group. *Ladino* (see *Political and Social Relations*) women typically work as nurses, teachers, or secretaries, while Maya women tend to concentrate in agriculture or the sale of traditional arts and crafts (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*). Women across the labor force experience discrimination in hiring and promotion and receive



lower wages than men with comparable education levels and work experience.

### Gender and the Law

Despite legal guarantees to equality, gender discrimination and unequal treatment persist. For example, traditional inheritance customs privilege men over women. Because they rarely inherit and seldom have the means to purchase land or property, women also have difficulties in obtaining credit since they lack collateral. Employers frequently ignore laws forbidding the employment termination of pregnant women and nursing mothers. Although the law establishes joint parental responsibility for childcare, women traditionally bear primary childrearing responsibility, which sometimes leads to financial burdens and barriers to employment.

### Gender and Politics

In August 2024, 20% of national legislators were women, a higher rate than neighboring Belize (16%) but lower than rates in El Salvador (32%) and the US (29%). Literate Guatemalan women received the right to vote in 1945 (all women received the right in 1965), and rates of female participation in the Guatemalan political process are historically low.

While patriarchal attitudes generally discourage women from running for office, high poverty and illiteracy rates among indigenous Guatemalans present other challenges to their political participation.



Nevertheless, female rates of government service have steadily increased over the past decades. For example, Nobel laureate Rigoberta Menchú campaigned for the

Presidency twice (see *History and Myth*), and former First Lady Sandra Torres ran for the Presidency in 2015 as a major party candidate, ultimately losing to President Jimmy Morales (see *History and Myth*).



## Gender Based Violence (GBV)

According to a 2017 governmental report, Guatemala's violent death rate for females is among the world's highest. Further, as of 2023, less than 4% of female murders result in conviction. Meanwhile, sexual and domestic violence are widespread, and female employees – particularly domestic and factory workers – experience high levels of sexual harassment in the workplace.

According to the legal code, domestic violence encompasses not just physical abuse but also sexual, financial, and psychological harm. Nevertheless, lax enforcement due to the minimal police training and lack of investigative capacity limits the law's effectiveness. Despite the creation of special courts and police units focusing on violence against women, few



women report such crimes because of low conviction rates and their fear of retaliation.

GBV is often related to criminal gang activities (see *History and Myth*). Gangs often forcibly recruit girls and young women, coercing them

into illegal activities such as sexual slavery. Should a young woman attempt to resist, she and her family become targets for GBV or even murder. To escape sexual violence, many young women and their families flee to other Central American countries, Mexico, or the US.

Guatemala also is a source, transit point, and destination for sex trafficking and forced labor. Indigenous Guatemalans, notably also children, are particularly vulnerable to forced begging and street vending.

## Sex and Procreation

Guatemalans traditionally view sexual intimacy as a private matter appropriate only within marriage. At 2.3 births per woman, Guatemala's fertility rate is slightly higher than neighbors Belize (2) and El Salvador (1.08) and higher than the US (1.6).

Early marriage or partnership (before age 18) is common in rural areas, even though it has been illegal since a 2015 law eliminated a provision allowing girls at 14 and boys at 16 to marry with parental consent. Early marriage plus widespread sexual abuse of girls contributes to Guatemala's high adolescent fertility rate of 68 births per 1,000 girls aged 15-19, is higher than in neighboring El Salvador (54) and Belize (55) and significantly higher than the US rate (13). Maya women seeking reproductive



care often face discrimination from healthcare professionals and few resources in indigenous languages (see *Language and Communication*). Abortion is legal only to save the life of the mother, and women who obtain illegal abortions may face prison sentences of up to 3 years.

### Homosexuality in Guatemala

The law recognizes neither same-sex marriage nor civil unions. Further, anti-discrimination laws do not apply to homosexual individuals who tend to experience discrimination in healthcare, education, and the workplace.



Consequently, few homosexual individuals self-identify for fear of discrimination and abuse, even from the authorities. Some homosexual individuals

have faced targeted assault from gangs, causing them to flee the country.

At this time, the US State Department has a Status of Forces Agreement in place for Guatemala. Service members will be held accountable to the Uniformed Code of Military Justice.

## 6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

### Overview

Spanish is Guatemala's official language and the primary language of business, government, education, and the media. Since 2003, the government also recognizes 23 indigenous varieties, spoken by many Guatemalans as their first language.

### Spanish

Spanish explorers and conquerors brought their language to Guatemala beginning in the early 16th century (see *History and Myth*). Today, Guatemalans refer to their variety of Spanish as **español guatemalteco** (Guatemalan Spanish).

More than 69% the population speaks Spanish, as a native language, 93% of the population overall speaks Spanish. It is most common along the Pacific coast, in the eastern highlands, and around Guatemala City, with most speakers self-identifying as *ladinos* (see *Political and Social Relations*). Many indigenous people speak Spanish as a second language, though more commonly by men than women.



Spanish uses the same alphabet as English with 3 additional consonants—ch, ll (pronounced like “y” as in yam), and ñ (pronounced like the “ny” in the word canyon). The similar alphabet, consistent spelling patterns, and Latin base make Spanish relatively easy for English speakers to learn.

Guatemalan Spanish is mutually intelligible with other Spanish dialects from around the world, although it differs from some of them, most notably in its use of **vos** in addition to **tú** for the informal “you” and its use of certain unique words and phrases. These colloquialisms and terms borrowed from indigenous languages are known as **chapinismos** or **guatemaltequismos**.

## Indigenous Languages

Several Mayan and other indigenous languages survived the Spanish conquest and subsequent colonization (see *History and Myth*), and some 30% of the population speaks an indigenous language today. Since 2003, Guatemalans are guaranteed the right to access social services and education in their native language, though in practice, this access is usually limited (see *Learning and Knowledge*).

Linguists recognize five branches of Guatemalan Mayan languages: K'iche', Mam, Q'anjob'al, Yucatec, and Chol. The mostly widely-spoken K'iche' languages include Q'eqchi' (1.1 million speakers according to the 2019 census) K'iche' (1 million) Kaqchikel (411,000), Poqomchi' (133,000), Achi (124,000), and Tz'utujil (72,400). Other K'iche' languages include Poqomam, Sakapulteko, Sipakapense, and Uspanteko.

The largest Mam languages include Mam (591,000) and Ixil (115,000). Other Mam languages include Awaketeko and Tektiteko. Q'anjob'al languages include Q'anjob'al (166,000), Akateko (55,300), Jakalteko (32,600), and Chuj (58,600). A few thousand Guatemalans speak the Yucatec Maya languages Mopán and Itza'. The only Chol language, Ch'orti', is spoken by about 16,700 Guatemalans. Like Spanish and English, the Mayan languages use a Latin-based alphabet.



A few Guatemalans speak Xinca, a non-Mayan indigenous language (see *Political and Social Relations*), while a small number of others speak Garifuna, the native language of the Garifuna people (see *Political and Social*

*Relations*). A member of the Arawakan language family, Garifuna is based in the Arawak and Carib languages native to the Greater and Lesser Antilles Islands of the Caribbean and also contains some words from French, English, Spanish, and African languages.

## English

English proficiency varies widely depending on location. In Guatemala City and other tourist areas, such as Antigua and Quetzaltenango, many people speak and understand some English. In most rural areas, knowledge of English is uncommon.

## Communication Overview

Communicating competently in Guatemala requires not only knowledge of Spanish but also the ability to interact effectively using language. This broad notion of competence includes paralanguage (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). When used properly, these forms of communication help to ensure that statements are interpreted as the speaker intends.

## Communication Style

Communication patterns tend to vary with Guatemala's ethnic and cultural diversity, yet they generally reflect a society-wide emphasis on



politeness and respect. Spanish-speakers tend to speak quickly and animatedly, which sometimes results in conversation partners talking over one another. Participants do not consider this conversational style rude. By contrast, speakers of indigenous languages tend to be more reserved, especially around strangers.

As is common throughout Latin America, ***machismo*** attitudes (see *Sex and Gender*) are widespread, with men sometimes making derogatory and suggestive comments about women, particularly foreign nationals, to their male friends or directly to women. Foreign nationals should avoid participating in such commentary.

## Greetings

In informal situations, women often greet friends and relatives with a hug and kiss, while men generally hug with a pat on the back. Indigenous people may be somewhat more reserved, simply shaking hands or extending their right arms in a half-hug. In formal situations, Guatemalans typically shake hands, though close friends may also exchange a hug and kiss.

## Forms of Address

Forms of address depend on age, social status, and relationship but are generally highly formal and courteous. In all but the most informal situations, Guatemalans use titles of respect such as **señor** ("Mr."), **señora** ("Mrs."), and **señorita** (for young/unmarried women).

To demonstrate special deference to elders or those of a higher social class, Guatemalans use the honorifics **Don** (for males) or **Doña** (for females) along with the first name.



Professional titles such as **doctor** (for males) or **doctora** (for females), **profesor/a**, **ingeniero/a**

("engineer") may be used alone, with the last name(s), or with the full name. Similarly,

Guatemalans refer to those who have completed a university degree as **licenciado/a**.

Spanish has different "you" pronouns and verb conjugations depending on the level of formality and respect required. Guatemalans tend to use **"usted"** in formal and business transactions, although some business colleagues prefer the less formal **"tu"** or **"vos"** typically used with friends, family, and younger people. Vos is used only in specific circumstances. For this reason, foreign nationals should never use this form of "you." Instead, they should always use *usted* unless advised *tu* is appropriate.

**Names:** A Guatemalan name typically comprises 1-2 first names and 2 last names. For example, a man with the first names Jesús María may be known by both names or simply Jesús. The 2 last names indicate the person's family heritage. For example, in the full name of President Jimmy Morales Cabrera, Morales is his father's family name, while Cabrera is his mother's. Guatemalans often shorten the full name by omitting the maternal family name, as former President Morales often does.

### Conversational Topics

After initial polite greetings, Guatemalans typically engage in light conversation about work and family. They particularly enjoy discussing their country's rich history and culture. Soccer is another popular topic of conversation. To avoid offense, foreign nationals should avoid discussing Guatemala's civil war (see *History and Myth*), current politics, and religion.



### Gestures

Many Guatemalans use gestures to accentuate or replace spoken words, though their use varies. Spanish-speakers tend to use more gestures, while speakers of indigenous languages use fewer. As in the US, a wag of the index finger means "no." Guatemalans do not beckon with their index fingers but typically wave the hand down and inward.

To point, Guatemalans purse their lips in the indicated direction. Other gestures convey meaning. For example, rubbing the elbow indicates that someone is miserly, while pulling the collar implies that a person has clout or power. Foreign nationals should avoid making a closed fist with the thumb protruding between the fingers and making the "OK" sign, as both are considered obscene.

### Language and Training Sources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at [www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/) and click on "Resources" for access to language training and other resources.

## Useful Words and Phrases

English	Spanish
Hello	Hola
How are you?	¿Cómo está usted?
I am well	Estoy bien
Yes	Sí
No	No
Please	Por favor
Thank you	Gracias
You are welcome	De nada
I'm sorry	Lo siento
I don't understand	No entiendo
What is your name?	¿Cuál es su nombre? / ¿Cómo se llama?
My name is ____	Me llamo ____
Where are you from?	¿De dónde es usted?
I am from the US	Yo soy de los Estados Unidos
Goodbye	Adiós
Good morning/evening	Buenos días / Buenas tardes
What does ____ mean?	¿Qué significa ____?
What is this?	¿Qué es esto?
I would like a ____	Quisiera un/a ____
How do you say ____?	¿Cómo se dice ____?
...in English?	...en inglés?
...in Spanish?	...en español?
What do you want?	¿Qué quiere usted?
What time is it?	¿Qué hora es?
Where is the doctor?	¿Dónde está el médico?
Who?	¿Quién?
When?	¿Cuándo?
Where?	¿Dónde?
Which?	¿Cuál?
Why?	¿Por qué?



## 7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

### Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 84%
- Male: 88%
- Female: 80% (2022 est.)

### Early Education

Before the arrival of the Spanish conquerors (see *History and Myth*), most regional inhabitants informally transmitted values, skills, beliefs, historical knowledge, and a sense of community to younger generations. It is also likely that Maya religious specialists taught math, science, astronomy, medicine, and writing to the children of nobles (see *History and Myth* and *Religion and Spirituality*).

### Formal Education in Colonial Guatemala

Following Spain's conquest and colonization of Guatemala, most education efforts were associated with attempts to convert the indigenous inhabitants to Christianity (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Throughout the 16th-17th centuries, the Roman Catholic Church established missions to instruct indigenous peoples in the Catholic faith.

Over the centuries of colonization, the Spanish viewed the indigenous population largely as a labor pool for agricultural ventures (see *History and Myth*) and consequently saw little reason to expand educational offerings to them beyond basic literacy.



By contrast, Roman Catholic orders opened schools and institutions of higher learning for Spanish and **criollo** (see *History and Myth*) elites, including Guatemala City's Colegio Santo Tomás de Aquino in 1562, renamed the University of San Carlos (USAC) in 1676.

## Education after Independence

The 1824 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Central America (see *History and Myth*) enshrined education as the responsibility of the legislative branch. Some 8 years later, the government passed a law requiring the construction of a school in every town in the Republic. Nevertheless, this edict was largely ignored.

Following the 1841 collapse of the Republic, newly independent Guatemala under the conservative regime of Rafael Carrera (see *History and Myth*) reaffirmed Church control of the education system. Thus, primarily religious-based formal education remained largely confined to the upper classes.

In the 1870s, liberal President Justo Rufino Barrios (see *History and Myth*) instituted significant education reforms. Most notably, he created the Ministry of Education, while ending Church control of schools, removing priests from teaching positions, and secularizing the curriculum.

Successive liberal governments continued Barrios's reforms, implementing free and compulsory basic education, while opening teacher training schools, military academies, an

agricultural school, and a musical conservatory.

## Education in the 20th Century

At the beginning of the 20th century, public education became part of the



government's larger plan to professionalize the army. For example, students learned about weaponry and participated in military parades. For some 15 years in the early 20th century, the government also sponsored week-long large-scale pageants of education and culture called **Minervalías** or "Festivals of Minerva" (goddess of wisdom in Roman mythology).

As export agriculture came to dominate Guatemala's economy and political repression increased (see *History and Myth*), educational development began to stagnate. Nonetheless, there were some advances during this period such as the establishment of preschools, technical and industrial institutes, and the Popular University, a night school which provided education and training for workers and young people lacking access to a conventional university.



The return to democracy during Guatemala's "Ten Years of Spring" (1944-54 – see *History and Myth*) signaled a revival of educational reform.

Under President Arévalo (see *History and Myth*), the government built new schools and launched the country's first literacy campaign. The government also improved teacher training, raised teacher salaries, and reopened the Popular University, which had been forced to close in the 1930s.

After the US-led 1954 coup that ousted the democratically-elected President (see *History and Myth*), a series of military regimes undertook reforms such as reorganizing the educational system into the modern form. As the country descended into civil war in the 1960s, education was severely disrupted, with rural schoolteachers frequently targets of government violence. The USAC was a particular focus of aggression, with right-wing paramilitary "death squads" (see *History and Myth*) kidnapping and murdering students, professors, and administrators.

As part of the 1996 peace accords ending the civil war (see *History and Myth*), the government committed to improving educational outcomes, increasing budgets, improving literacy, and encouraging students to stay in school. Within a decade,

Guatemala exhibited notable advances, with some 73% of children completing primary school in 2006, up from about 39% during the early 1990s. Since then, progress has been slow, with educational outcomes still lacking.



### Modern Education

Today, Guatemala's education system consists of pre-primary, primary, secondary, and post-secondary programs. Government spending

on education as a percentage of total GDP was 3.2% in 2023, the same as El Salvador (3.2%) but less than Costa Rica (6.2%).

Nevertheless, the education system continues to face major challenges. Access to education is highly unequal, with both urban poor neighborhoods and rural areas lacking quality schools. Educational disparities are particularly pronounced among indigenous students, with some communities lacking access to schooling in their native languages (see *Language and Communication*).

Statistics also reflect significant gender disparities, with girls, especially indigenous ones, attending all levels at much lower rates than boys.

While education is free and compulsory from age 6-15, the costs of school supplies, uniforms, and shoes prevent many families from sending their children to school. Others drop out due to personal or other reasons, increasing their vulnerability to gang recruitment (see *Political and Social Relations*). Especially concerning is the decline in attendance rates since



2009, and in 2023, some 18% of children, adolescents, and youth of primary and secondary school age were not attending school.

The government's Strategic Education Plan 2016-2020 contained 5 focus areas: geographic coverage; quality, equality, and inclusion; education delivery; buildings and infrastructure; and management. International donors have committed significant resources to Guatemala's educational infrastructure in recent decades, yet cuts to the education budget have reversed much progress.

**Pre-Primary:** Guatemalan children aged 4-6 are eligible to attend free public or tuition-based private pre-primary programs. In 2023, 51% of students of the appropriate age were enrolled, down from 58% in 2009.

**Primary Education:** Comprising 6 grades starting at age 7, primary education consists of languages (Spanish, indigenous languages, and sometimes a foreign language), mathematics, natural science and technology, social sciences, and civics. Grade repetition and dropout rates are high, with 10% of students repeating primary grades and just 88% graduating from 6th grade. In 2023, about 92% of students of the appropriate age were enrolled in primary education, down from about 96% in 2009.



**Secondary Education:** Secondary education divides into 2 levels: **básico** (basic) comprising 3 grades for children aged 13-15 and **diversificado** (diversified), consisting of 2-4 grades for students aged 16-19. Due to a lack of public institutions, especially in rural areas, private schools provide most secondary education.

The *básico* cycle includes regular and vocational tracks. While the regular track focuses on general knowledge, the vocational track provides instruction in job-specific skills. Successful *básico* graduates may continue to *diversificado* to study for several different degrees, such as **bachiller** (US high school equivalent – 2 years), **perito** (expert – 3-4 years), **secretaria** (secretary – 3 years), **magisterio** (teacher – 4 years), or **auxiliar enfermería** (nursing assistant – 2 years).

In 2023, about 50% of students of the appropriate age were enrolled in secondary school, yet just 30% of poor, rural indigenous girls were enrolled.

**Post-Secondary:** Post-secondary education comprises the public USAC and several private universities, almost all located in Guatemala City. As Guatemala's oldest (see above) and



largest university, USAC became a secular institution in 1944.

The site of significant civil unrest during the civil war (see *History and Myth*), USAC today enrolls over 230,000 students in undergraduate and

graduate programs in business, education, the arts and humanities, medicine, law, agriculture, veterinary science, and other disciplines. Private universities, many associated with religious organizations, typically charge higher fees than USAC.

Post-secondary students may acquire several degrees, such as **técnico** (technician) after 2 years of study and **tecnólogo** (technologist) after 4 years. Teacher training institutes award the title of **profesorado** after 3 years of study. Five years of university study leads to several degrees, such as the **licenciado** (equivalent to a US Bachelor's degree), **arquitecto** (architect), and **ingeniero** (engineer). After another 2 years of study, students may receive their Master's degrees, while Doctorates typically require 3 additional years.

## 8. TIME AND SPACE

### Overview

Guatemalans value politeness and integrity within the workplace. A casual attitude towards time and punctuality prevails alongside a strong work ethic.

### Time and Work

Guatemala's work week typically runs Monday-Friday from 8:00am-5:00pm. While hours vary, many shops open Monday-Saturday from 8:00am-5:00pm with a break for lunch. Many banks are open Monday-Friday from 8:00am-7:00pm, and on Saturday from 8:00am-12:30pm. Post office hours are typically Monday-Friday from 8:00am-5:00pm. Most businesses close on Sundays and for the duration of public holidays.

### Working Conditions:

The normal work week is 45 hours, but the law mandates that employers pay for 48 hours. Labor laws also guarantee 15 days of paid vacation and 12 paid national holidays, though domestic workers are excluded from these benefits. The law also mandates a small monthly bonus for minimum wage workers and biannual bonuses for salaried employees. Despite these and other worker protections, lax enforcement and a large informal sector enable violations like workplace discrimination, child labor, deficient work safety standards, and even forced labor (see *Sex and Gender*).



**Time Zone:** Guatemala adheres to Central Standard Time (CST), which is 6 hours behind Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 1 hour behind Eastern Standard Time (EST). Guatemala does not observe daylight savings time.

**Date Notation:** Like the US, Guatemala uses the Western (Gregorian) calendar. Unlike Americans, Guatemalans often write the day first, followed by the month and year.

### National Holidays

- January 1: New Year's Day
- March / April: Holy Thursday (dates vary)
- March/April: Good Friday (dates vary)
- May 1: Labor Day
- June 30: Army Day
- August 15: Feast of the Assumption
- September 15: Guatemalan Independence Day
- October 20: Revolution Day
- November 1: All Saints Day
- December 24: Christmas Eve (1/2 day)
- December 25: Christmas Day
- December 31: New Year's Eve (1/2 day)

### Time and Business

Successful business dealings typically depend on personal connections. Guatemalans value the trust that comes from personal relationships and prefer that business associates also become friends. Respected managers often take time to inquire about the families of their employees and celebrate birthdays and other holidays within the office.

Hierarchical power structures are common in the workplace whereby leaders make all decisions, give directives to subordinates, and provide regular supervision and direction. Communications are typically formal, with subordinates addressing their superiors using their titles (see *Language and Communication*). Managers mediate disputes yet avoid giving critique in public, preferring to convey negative feedback privately, sometimes through a third party.

Guatemalans typically prefer indirect communication over frank confrontation. Instead of getting directly to the point, they may proceed slowly to the main topic of discussion. Most Guatemalans have a relaxed attitude toward time known as ***la horachapina***, or “the Guatemalan hour.” Consequently, punctuality is often disregarded, and tardiness is not



considered rude. Meetings are often subject to last-minute changes or cancellations.

### Personal Space

As in most societies, personal space in Guatemala depends on the nature of the relationship. Distance between conversational partners tends to diminish with familiarity. Guatemalans maintain some space when meeting strangers, yet friends typically stand much closer when conversing.

**Touch:** Guatemalans often engage in more conversational touching than Americans. For example, Guatemalans frequently use arm or shoulder pats to emphasize points in conversation, and friends of the same gender often hold hands or rub each other's backs to demonstrate the depth of their platonic bond.

**Eye Contact:** While Guatemalans generally consider direct eye contact during conversations as evidence of honesty and engagement, indigenous people generally avoid prolonged eye contact.

### Photographs

Foreign nationals should acquire a Guatemalan's consent before taking his photo. Some Guatemalans may expect compensation in return, while some indigenous inhabitants prefer not to be photographed at all.

### Driving

Poor road conditions and a lack of lighting contribute to perilous driving conditions.

Many drivers ignore lane markings and disregard traffic laws, often speeding, passing on blind corners, and neglecting to use turn signals. In 2021, Guatemala's rate of 13 traffic-related deaths per 100,000 people was lower than neighboring El Salvador (22) and Belize (18) but only slightly lower than the US rate (14).



## 9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

### Overview

Guatemala's dress, recreation, music, and arts reflect the country's indigenous history, colonial influences, and religious traditions. They also reveal Guatemalans' adaptations to civil conflict and political turmoil.

### Dress and Appearance

Guatemalans generally favor a neat, clean, and modest appearance. Many urban residents wear US or European styles, such as collared shirts with slacks for men and skirts/pants with blouses or dresses for women. Such conservative, Western-style clothing is typical in the workplace.

Many Guatemalans of Maya descent (see *Political and Social Relations*) wear **traje** (traditional attire) on a daily basis, especially in rural areas. Designs and patterns often reflect the



wearer's home village, a custom that developed during the colonial period (see *History and Myth*).

**Women:** Traditional Maya womenswear consists of a **huipil** (an embroidered blouse) and a **corte** (an ankle-length, wrap-around skirt). Some women also

wear a **delantal** (embroidered apron), **rebozo** (shawl), or **pañuelo** (headkerchief). Accessories include glass bead necklaces, hoop earrings, and **cintas** (colorful hair ribbons).

**Men:** Traditional menswear consists of baggy, knee- or calf-length pants paired with an embroidered shirt. Other articles of traditional male clothing include a **faja** (brightly colored woven belt), sandals, straw or felt hat, and poncho.

### Recreation

Guatemalans typically spend their leisure time with family and friends. Common activities include sharing meals, listening to music, dancing, and playing pick-up soccer. Most towns have a

central plaza that serves as a popular location for meeting friends, people watching, or enjoying a cup of coffee in a café. Stopping by the homes of friends for impromptu visits is another popular pastime.

**Festivals:** Guatemalans enjoy a variety of festivals and community celebrations which often reflect the country's Catholic roots (see *Religion and Spirituality*). For example, each community celebrates its patron saint every year with religious ceremonies and holy processions as well as parties, carnivals, and feasting.

Easter traditionally consists of a series of observances beginning weeks prior to the official holiday. First, Guatemalans celebrate a week-long Carnival with elaborate parties and traditional parades called **convites** during which children smash confetti-filled egg shells called **cascarones** on each other. Ash Wednesday follows Carnival and marks the beginning of 40 days of solemn reflection and temperance that constitute Lent.

Next comes the Easter holiday itself, which is celebrated over the course of several days called **Semana Santa** (Holy Week), consisting of Palm Sunday, Maundy



Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday. Observances typically involve attending church services and sharing meals. During this period, some towns hire artists to create elaborate designs of colored sand, leaves, and salt in the street called **alfombras** ("rugs") that create a colorful path for religious processions).

The Christmas season traditionally begins with **La Quema del Diablo** (The Burning of the Devil) on December 7, when families symbolically clean their homes and burn images of the devil. In the subsequent weeks, Guatemalans prepare traditional feasts, construct elaborate nativity scenes called

**nacimientos**, and perform dances. On Christmas Eve, families traditionally share a meal of turkey and **tamales** (cornmeal dough stuffed with cheese, meat, or vegetables and steamed in a corn husk or banana leaf – see p. 3 of *Sustenance and Health*) and enjoy fireworks at midnight.

Some holidays feature elements of both Christian and pre-Spanish traditions (see *History and Myth*). For example, during the 3-day **Día de los Muertos** (“Day of the Dead”) festivities

held at the beginning of November, Guatemalans clean the graves of family members, decorate them with flowers and trinkets, and leave food offerings for the deceased. Held in the village of Sumpango near Antigua during the same period, the **Fería de Barrilete Gigante**



(Festival of Giant Kites) involves the release of elaborate, hand-made kites to take messages to the spirits of deceased kin.

**Sports:** **Fútbol** (soccer) is Guatemala’s most popular sport and national pastime. Local recreational leagues and pick-up street matches are popular among adults and children alike. Other popular sports include volleyball and basketball.

**Games:** Guatemalan children enjoy a variety of traditional games such as **chamusca** (an informal variation of soccer), and **matado** (a form of dodgeball often played in alleys and playgrounds). **Arrancacebola** (“pulling onions”) involves a line of children trying to loosen the grip of a child holding a tree trunk.

## Music

Traditional Guatemalan music centers around the **marimba** (large wooden xylophone). Often constructed of native rosewood, large marimbas can accommodate 6 musicians at once. The **marimba** is typically accompanied by flutes, guitars, violins, and various percussion instruments, though musicians sometimes also incorporate pre-Spanish instruments such as

**chinchines** (pebble-filled gourds) and the **tortuga** (an empty turtle shell played with sticks).

The music of the Garifuna (see *Political and Social Relations*) centers around drums traditionally made of animal hides stretched over turtle shells or hollowed cedar or mahogany trunks. Today, Garifuna musicians often play traditional drums alongside contemporary instruments for *Semana Santa* religious processions.

## Dance

Guatemalan dances often reflect both Spanish and Maya traditions. For example, **La Danza del Palo Volador** (The Dance of the Flying Post) features dancers who climb a tall pole, tie their feet to a rope



attached to the pole, then launch themselves into the air, spinning as being lowered to the ground. Other traditional dances use costumes and masks to tell a story. **El Baile de los Moros y Cristianos** (The Dance of the Moors and Christians) portrays the Spanish reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula from the North African Moors as an epic victory of good over evil.

Meanwhile, the **Baile de la Conquista** (Dance of the Conquest) reenacts the Spanish invasion of the Americas. By contrast, **Rabinal Achí** is a pre-conquest drama set to music that tells the tale of 2 feuding Maya cities.

## Cinema and Theater

Traditional Guatemalan theater consists primarily of short religious plays called **pastorelas** or **loas** performed at Christmas. Historically, censorship and a lack of financial resources for the arts hindered Guatemala's development of theater and film. Since the conclusion of the civil war (see *History and Myth*), filmmakers have produced several noteworthy films. For example, Javro Bustamente's 2015 film **Ixcánul** won international acclaim with its primarily Maya cast speaking Kaqchikel (see *Language and Communication*).

## Literature

Before the 16th-century arrival of the Spanish (see *History and Myth*), the Maya used their own written language to record their history, scientific knowledge, and rituals. During the conquest, some Spanish missionaries assembled and transcribed Mayan stories such as those collected in the **Popol Vuh** (see *History and Myth*) and the **Annals of the Cakchiquels**, which describes the history and legends of the Kaqchikel Maya. During the colonial period (see *History and Myth*), several important poets produced works in Spanish, though their work was limited to religious subjects. Literature following independence in 1840 (see *History and Myth*) largely reflected political divisions of the times.

Guatemalan literature began to bloom in the 20th century, even though many writers were forced into exile under Guatemala's successive military dictatorships (see *History and Myth*). After spending a decade in Paris, Miguel Ángel Asturias published **El Señor Presidente** ("The President") which describes life under a ruthless dictator and won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1967. During the civil war (see *History and Myth*), Guatemala's historically marginalized communities found representation in the genre of **testimonios** (testimonials), true-life stories of

oppression. The most well-known example of this genre is **I, Rigoberta Menchú** (see *History and Myth*).

## Folk Arts and Handicrafts

Guatemala has a rich tradition of folk arts and crafts. The Maya

are known for their vibrant and intricately-patterned woven and embroidered clothing, rugs, blankets, wall hangings, hats, and other textiles. Other traditional crafts include ceramics, metalwork, wooden masks, and jade jewelry.



## 10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

### Sustenance Overview

Guatemalans enjoy socializing with friends and family over lengthy meals at home or in urban cafes and restaurants. Guatemalan cuisine is diverse and extensive, characterized by fresh, seasonal ingredients and often accented by bold and aromatic spices.

### Dining Customs

Guatemalans typically supplement 3 daily meals with mid-morning and late-afternoon snacks, though poorer families may eat just 1 daily meal and lightly snack throughout the day. While the midday meal is usually the largest in rural areas, dinner may also be substantial in urban settings. Generally, women prepare all meals, typically purchasing fresh produce, meats, and dairy products daily from markets.



In more remote regions or among the extremely poor, cooks may rely entirely on ingredients grown in the family garden. In rural regions, residents typically prepare food outdoors over wood burning fires.

Guests often drop by unannounced, particularly in rural areas. During such unplanned visits, hosts typically offer light snacks paired with coffee, tea, juice, or other beverages. When invited to a home for a formal meal, guests tend to arrive a few minutes late.

On special occasions or if staying overnight, guests may bring gifts of flowers, pastries, or a small item for the home. Hosts usually serve their guests first. After guests finish their portions, they usually do not request additional servings but wait for the host to offer them. If they do not want more food, guests usually must decline several offers. Diners generally wish each other "**Buen provecho**" ("Bon appetit"), both before and after a meal.

## Diet

Guatemala's cuisine reflects the nation's geographic and ethnic diversity but is influenced heavily by the culinary traditions of region's indigenous Maya population (see *Political and Social Relations*). Considered a sacred crop by the Maya, corn is the nation's primary staple and a part of most meals.

Although corn is served in a variety of ways, 2 of the most common include roasted whole ears (**elotes**) and **tortillas** – round, flat bread made from ground corn. Another staple of the traditional Maya diet, black beans typically are incorporated into thick soups (**caldos**) or served boiled, fried, or stewed, often alongside rice or as a filling.



Popular forms of protein in the central highlands and other mountainous regions include beef, pork, and chicken. Guatemalans living along the coasts enjoy a rich assortment of seafood such as sea bass, flounder, red snapper, tarpon, and shrimp. Cooks sauté fish in coconut milk or delicately accent dishes with garlic, bay leaves, cilantro, and tomatoes.

Guatemala's fertile volcanic soil yields numerous native vegetables such as squash, chili peppers, carrots, beets, onions, avocados, chard (a green leafy vegetable), leeks (related to onions), and potatoes. Available year-round, popular fruits include breadfruit (a round starchy usually seedless fruit resembling bread in color and texture), bananas, mangos, papayas, and **tomatillos** (a small, tart green-purple or yellow fruit).

## Popular Dishes and Meals

Popular breakfast foods include stewed or fried beans, cheese, eggs scrambled with ham or sausage and chopped vegetables, and boiled or fried plantains (member of the banana family), accompanied by bread or **tortillas**. Some Guatemalans enjoy **atol** (a thick and milky corn or rice-based drink served hot or cold) for breakfast.



For both lunch and dinner, poor, rural families tend to serve *tortillas* with beans, cheese, and fresh, home-grown vegetables. By contrast, wealthier, urban Guatemalans



typically enjoy beef, chicken, or fish paired with rice, beans, and *tortillas* or bread or a hearty soup. A common dish in Guatemala City is ***arroz con pollo chapina*** (chicken served with rice seasoned with onion, garlic, capers, carrots, peppers, and tomatoes). Along the coasts, ***tapado*** is a popular seafood stew that combines fish, shrimp, crabs, onions, celery, carrots, black pepper, and coconut milk.

Other common dishes include ***carne asada*** (charbroiled beef filet served with various accompaniments, such as mashed avocados, cheese, black beans, and fried plantains); ***tamales*** (cornmeal dough stuffed with cheese, bits of meat, or vegetables and steamed in a corn husk or banana leaf); ***chiles rellenos*** (fried peppers stuffed with pork, beef, cheese or various vegetables); and ***pepian*** (chicken or beef stew flavored with spicy chili peppers, squash seeds, tomatillos, and tomatoes). Guatemalans enjoy an array of sweet, sugary desserts such as rum cake, sugared figs, ***buñuelos*** (deep fried honey dumplings), and fried plantains served with chocolate, orange, honey, or cinnamon syrups.

### Eating Out

Urban dwellers tend to eat out often. Restaurants range from upscale establishments specializing in international cuisine to inexpensive, casual eateries serving hearty meals. Street stalls and small shops sell snacks like fresh fruit, ***churrascos*** (grilled beef), ***chicharrones*** (fried pork rinds), and ***ceviche*** (raw shellfish, squid, or fish cured in lemon or lime juice and mixed with onion, mint, parsley, hot chili peppers, and tomatoes). Since restaurants generally do not add a surcharge to the bill, servers may expect a 10% tip for good service.

## Beverages

Guatemalans tend to drink tea and coffee in the mornings and late afternoons. They also enjoy freshly squeezed juices from oranges, papaya, pineapples, mangos, and strawberries among other fruits. Popular alcoholic beverages include **chicha** (a fruit wine mixed with rum, sugar, and cinnamon that is fermented for several months), **rompopo** (a mix of rum, egg yolks, and sweetened, condensed milk), and locally-brewed beer.

## Health Overview

While the overall health of Guatemalans has improved since the end of the civil war (see *History and Myth*), they continue to face serious health challenges, as many of the nation's health indicators remaining below regional averages.

Although maternal mortality fell from 170 deaths per 100,000 live births to 94 between 1996-2023, it remains higher than the Latin American and Caribbean averages (77) and substantially greater than the US rate (17).

Meanwhile, infant mortality (the proportion of infants who die before age 1) decreased by about half from 47 to 18 deaths per 1,000 live births between 1996-2023, yet still remains higher than in Belize (11), Mexico (11) and the US (6). Finally, life expectancy at birth increased from about 66 to 73 years since 1996 but remains lower than in Mexico (75), the US (78), and the regional average (76).



Guatemala suffers both high rates of chronic, non-communicable diseases and outbreaks of communicable diseases spread by mosquitos, parasites, and bacteria. Moreover, hospitals and clinics concentrate in urban areas and significantly underserve rural dwellers, who are in turn affected disproportionately by poverty, malnutrition, and infectious diseases.

## Traditional Medicine

Traditional medicine consists of the knowledge, practices, and skills derived from a native population's beliefs, experiences, and theories. Traditional Guatemalan medicine centers on the use of herbal remedies to identify and treat illness and disease.

Traditional therapies are very popular, particularly in some remote, rural communities that lack access to modern medicine and rely entirely on traditional remedies to treat diseases and other ailments.

Meanwhile, urban residents often supplement modern treatments with herbal cures to treat an array of health issues ranging from minor problems like headaches and skin infections to serious and chronic conditions like cancers and digestive diseases. Besides relying on herbal treatments, some members of indigenous communities also consult traditional healers to address specific illnesses or spiritual afflictions, ward off spirits that bring sickness, cleanse the body of curses or spells, and restore general physical and spiritual wholeness.

## Modern Healthcare System

The government offers free healthcare to all Guatemalans through a network of public hospitals and clinics providing primary, maternal, and pediatric care. In recent years, the government has sought to improve access and quality of care



for rural and indigenous populations by improving rural medical infrastructure and developing a network of mobile health clinics to deliver basic services to isolated populations.

Despite recent improvements, numerous challenges continue to plague Guatemala's healthcare system. Although private urban facilities offer first-rate care to Guatemalans who can afford it, some 88% of the urban population relies on public hospitals that are grossly underfunded, ill-equipped, and poorly maintained. Further, these facilities are typically understaffed.

According to recent estimates, Guatemala has only about 13 physicians per 10,000 people, notably lower than both the World Health Organization's recommendation of 23 and rates in neighboring El Salvador (29) and Mexico (24).

Quality of care diminishes further in rural areas, where small clinics offering only basic care reach only about 54% of the rural population. As a result, many rural residents have no access to modern medicine at all. Others are forced to travel long distances on unpaved roads to urban areas for medical services like surgery and long-term care.



### Health Challenges

The leading causes of illness and death are chronic and non-communicable “lifestyle” diseases, such as diabetes, cancer, and cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, which accounted for 54% of all deaths in 2021. Meanwhile, preventable “external causes,” such as suicides, car accidents, and other injuries resulted in about 9% of all deaths – a rate that is elevated by



incidences of internal violence (see “Interpersonal Violence” below) and significantly higher than in the US (7%).

Communicable diseases, such as tuberculosis, hepatitis, bacterial

diarrhea, malaria, and dengue fever caused 24% of all deaths in 2021. Communicable diseases are especially prevalent in rural regions, where only about 66% of residents have access

to modern sanitation facilities and consequently experience a greater risk of infection from parasites and bacteria.

Widespread poverty and a lack of rural maternal and neonatal care results in high rates of child malnutrition. Some 14% of children under 5 are underweight – a substantially higher prevalence than in the US (0.4%) and significantly higher than the Latin American and Caribbean average of 3%.



Frequent and sometimes severe earthquakes, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, and other natural

disasters (see *Political and Social Relations*) occasionally result in shortages of clean water, food, and medicine, which in turn facilitate disease outbreaks. Since 2016, Guatemalans are at risk of contracting the Zika virus, an incurable disease spread by mosquitos that can cause birth defects in unborn children.

**Interpersonal Violence:** Interpersonal violence primarily stemming from ongoing gang-related conflict and the activities of narcotraffickers (see *Political and Social Relations*) contributes to high violent death rates. In 2016, 36% of Guatemalans reported that they or a family member had experienced some form of violent crime, such as murder, maiming, or the sexual exploitation of women and children (see *Sex and Gender*).



## 11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

### Overview

For centuries, inhabitants of Central America (CENTAM) engaged in agriculture and long-distance trade in foodstuffs like corn and cacao, textiles, ceramics, feathers, and precious metals (see *History and Myth*). Following their 16th-century colonization of the region, Spanish authorities oversaw the development of an agricultural economy centered on the production of cacao and indigo (a natural dye) for export to Europe (see *History and Myth*). Later, **cochineal** (a red dye extracted from an insect), also became an important export commodity. Nevertheless, economic growth was hindered throughout the colonial period by the lack of transportation infrastructure and a Caribbean port.

When the market for natural dyes collapsed in the late 19th century, growers switched to coffee, which became the country's most significant export. To boost production, the government privatized **ejidos**, communally-held indigenous lands, and consolidated them into large plantations known as **fincas**. Overall, the government privatized nearly 1 million acres between 1871-73, selling much of the land to newly-arrived European immigrants (see *History and Myth*).



By 1880, coffee accounted for some 90% of Guatemala's exports. To support the growth of export agriculture in the early 20th century, the government built roads, railways, and telegraph lines. It also promoted the expansion of large multinational corporations like the United Fruit Company (see *History and Myth*). Guatemala suffered a severe economic contraction due to a decrease in coffee prices during the Great Depression (see *History and Myth*), yet as banana exports grew,

United Fruit acquired significant economic and political influence (see *History and Myth*). It also worked closely with the government to implement exploitative labor practices that ensured a steady stream of indigenous labor (see *History and Myth*).

During Guatemala's brief democratic period from 1944-54, the government initiated a minimum wage and allowed peasants to organize into labor unions. But the 1952 introduction of land reform incited significant backlash that resulted in the US-

backed removal of democratically-elected President Árbenz (see *History and Myth*).

Succeeding military dictatorships reversed land reform, and by 1979, land distribution had almost returned to pre-reform levels, with



just 2% of the population owning 65% of the land.

The economy experienced growth in the 1960s-70s but began a protracted slide during the height of the civil war in the 1970s-80s as the government incurred significant debt to support its counterinsurgency operations (see *History and Myth*).

While the return of civilian control of the government in the 1980s (see *History and Myth*) brought some economic improvement, negative trade imbalances and foreign indebtedness prevented growth. The 1996 peace accords officially ending the civil war (see *History and Myth*) also included a set of economic and poverty reduction goals meant to alleviate the conditions that had led to the civil war. However, the programs' slow and partial implementation had minimal effect.

In 2006, Guatemala joined the Dominican Republic – Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), a trade bloc comprising the US, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic. CAFTA-DR proved to be a boon for the economy, especially benefitting large

agricultural exporters, yet it also caused hardship to the poor due to the rise of the price of staples.

From 2000-14, Guatemala's growth was a solid but low 3.5%. The government attempted to boost the economy by supporting nontraditional exports and establishing free trade zones for assembly plants. Meanwhile, remittances from Guatemalans living abroad accounted for a larger source of income than exports and tourism combined. The country weathered the 2008 global financial crisis well, avoiding economic contraction.



Today, Guatemala has CENTAM's largest economy yet only its 5th-highest GDP per capita behind Panama, Costa Rica, and El Salvador and Belize. In 2022, the economy grew some 7.5% and in 2024, 3.7%. Despite this growth, Guatemala has been unable to

significantly reduce poverty. Overall, the percentage of Guatemalans living in poverty actually rose to 57% in 2024 from 51% in 2006. Further, distribution of wealth remains highly unequal across society: the indigenous are much more likely to live in poverty than Guatemala's *ladino* population (see Political and Social Relations).

Government spending on social services and programs is constrained by a lack of tax income. While some of this gap is due to widespread tax evasion, some 80% of Guatemalans work in the informal economy, which is untaxed and unregulated. Meanwhile, many Guatemalans remain dependent on remittances from family members abroad, which comprised almost 20% of GDP or \$21.5 billion in 2024.

Guatemala faces several challenges to economic growth. Widespread corruption in both the business and political spheres (see *History and Myth*) weakens the power of the government to address economic issues. The security costs of violence associated with the activities of international gangs and

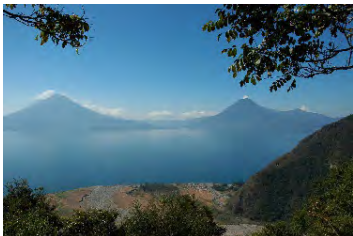


narcotraffickers raises the costs of doing business in Guatemala and discourages investment.

### Services

Accounting for about 61% of GDP and 51% of employment, the services sector comprises primarily financial services, transportation, communications, commerce, and tourism.

**Tourism:** About 2.56 million people visited Guatemala in 2019 and dropped to 594,000 in 2020 due to COVID. In 2024, there were 3 million tourists generating \$1.4 billion. Popular attractions include the colonial cities of Antigua and Quetzaltenango, Maya sites at Tikal and El Mirador, and natural sites such as Lake Atitlán.



### Industry

Comprising 22% of GDP and 22% of employment, the industrial sector is primarily made up of light manufacturing and **maquilas** (export-oriented assembly factories), many of which operate in Guatemala's 10 free-trade zones where companies enjoy tax and duty exemptions.

**Manufacturing:** Manufacturing comprises about 14% of Guatemala's GDP. The subsector is primarily focused on food, beverage, and tobacco processing; publishing; textiles; pharmaceuticals; and the production of cement, tires, and construction materials.

**Mining and Oil:** Mining and quarrying is a small but important subsector, comprising about 1.9% of GDP in 2023, primarily from silver and gold. In 2024, Guatemala produced about 6,000 barrels of oil per day, mostly from fields in the Petén region.

### Agriculture

The agricultural sector consists of farming, livestock, fishing, and forestry. Once the backbone of Guatemala's economy, agriculture accounted for just 10% of GDP and 27% of the labor

force in 2023, yet agricultural goods still make up about half of the country's exports.

**Farming:** About 9% of Guatemalan land is dedicated to permanent cultivation and 18% to pasture. While most agriculture occurs on large-scale plantations, small-scale subsistence farms, mostly concentrated in the western highlands, produce corn, beans, rice, wheat, and other fruits and vegetables. Commercial crops include bananas, sugar, coffee, melons, palm oil, and rubber. Guatemala is the world's top producer and exporter of the spice cardamom.



### Currency

Guatemala's currency is the **quetzal** (Q), issued in 7 banknotes (1, 5, 10, 20, 50, 100,

200) and 1 coin (1). The *quetzal* (named after Guatemala's national bird) subdivides into 100 **centavos** (cents) issued in 5 coins (1, 5, 10, 25, 50), though old banknotes worth Q0.50 are still in circulation. As of mid-2025, \$1 was worth Q7.67

### Foreign Trade

Guatemala's exports, totaling \$14.2 billion in 2023, primarily consisted of bananas, sugar, coffee, apparel, fruits and vegetables, spices, manufactured products, and precious metals sold to the US (32%), El Salvador (13%), Honduras (11%), Nicaragua (7%) and Mexico (5%). In the same year, Guatemala imported some \$30.3 billion in fuels, machinery and transport equipment, construction materials, grain, fertilizers, mineral and chemical products, and plastics from the US (30%), China (19%), Mexico (11%), and El Salvador (3%).

### Foreign Aid

The US is Guatemala's largest donor, provided \$121.4 million in foreign assistance in 2023, 33% of which was earmarked for humanitarian assistance and 66% was dedicated to economic development. The EU also provided an average of \$20.9 million funding during 2021 and 2022.

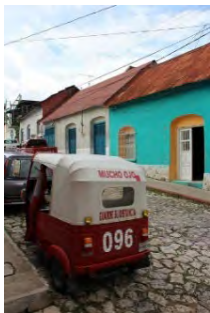
## 12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

### Overview

Guatemalans enjoy a relatively extensive physical infrastructure and access to modern telecommunications. While free speech is constitutionally protected, the government occasionally infringes on that right.

### Transportation

Few Guatemalans have a privately-owned vehicle (POV). Instead, the most common forms of transportation are foot, bicycle, motorcycle, **camionetas** (private buses), **micros** (smaller vans), taxis, and mototaxis. In Guatemala City, a bus rapid transit system supplements private buses and vans. In rural areas, pick-up trucks carry passengers in their truck beds.



Buses provide transport between urban areas, with most routes passing through Guatemala City. Generally, several classes of buses offer service: refurbished American school buses without assigned seating that make frequent stops; "Pullman" or **Especial** (Special), coach-style buses with infrequent stops; and **Primera Clase**

(First Class) air-conditioned luxury models with restrooms, television, and food service.

### Roadways

Of Guatemala's 10,837 mi of roads, some 43% are paved. The main highways include the **Panamericana**, (Pan-American), a major transportation artery through Central America (CENTAM) which passes through Guatemala City; the **Carretera del Pacífico**, (Pacific Highway) runs from Guatemala City to the west coast; and the **Carretera del Atlántico**, (Atlantic Highway) connects Guatemala City to the Caribbean coast.

### Railways

Although Guatemala has about 497 mi of railways, there has been no passenger or freight service since 2007.

## Ports and Waterways

Located on the Caribbean coast, Guatemala's largest and busiest port is Santo Tomás de Castilla, headquarters of the Guatemalan Navy. The largest port on the Pacific side is Puerto Quetzal. Guatemala also has about 615 mi of navigable inland waterways.

## Airways

Guatemala has 58 civilian and military airports. Guatemala City's La Aurora International

Airport is the largest, serving

more than 4.7 million passengers in 2023. The country's main airline, Avianca Guatemala, was previously part of the CENTAM conglomerate TACA until it merged with Colombia's Avianca airlines in 2010.



## Energy

In 2023, Guatemala generated 25% of its electricity from fossil fuels, 42% from hydroelectric plants, and 32% from other renewable sources. Guatemala produces a power surplus, allowing it to export electricity to other CENTAM countries.

## Media

Guatemala's Constitution and laws protect freedoms of speech and press, and observers report that the government generally respects those rights. Nevertheless, some journalists face intimidation and violence, resulting in significant self-censorship. Further, centralization of media outlets in a few hands effectively restricts press freedoms.

Dozens of journalists are attacked and between 5-10 killed each year. Both government officials and criminal gangs (see *Political and Social Relations*) engage in intimidation and violence against journalists and their families, with the goal of influencing media coverage. In a particularly notable case, investigations led by the CICIG (an international body charged with prosecuting sensitive crimes – see *History and Myth and Political and Social Relations*) resulted in the 2018 arrest of a

congressman for ordering the murder of 3 journalists, who were investigating government corruption.

**Print Media:** Guatemala's largest newspapers are *La Prensa Libre*, *El Gráfico*, *La Hora*, and *Siglo Veintiuno*. The government publishes *Diario de Centroamérica*.



**Radio and TV:** Radio is popular in Guatemala. Public, private, and community stations broadcast in Spanish, English, and several

indigenous languages (see *Language and Communication*). Often staffed by volunteers, community stations provide news and information but also strive to keep indigenous cultures and languages alive. Guatemala has no public television, and 1 owner controls its 4 commercial channels, giving him a virtual broadcasting monopoly. Critics frequently accuse television programming of a pro-government bias.

### Telecommunications

Guatemala has a modern telecommunications infrastructure, although penetration rates are significantly lower in rural areas. In 2023, Guatemala had some 11 landlines and 115 mobile phones per 100 inhabitants.

**Internet:** Some 56% of Guatemalans regularly used the Internet in 2021. Increasing numbers of Guatemalans access the Internet through mobile devices: in 2020,



Guatemala counted 21 mobile broadband subscriptions compared to just 5 fixed broadband subscriptions per 100 people. Government authorities neither restrict Internet access nor censor online content.



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