

Guatemala

Guatemala is a magical place. If you're into the Maya, the mountains, the markets or any of a million other things, you're bound to be captivated. People come and they stay. Or they leave and return. There's almost too much going on here, and even the shortest trip down the road takes you to completely different places, with new challenges and surprises. Don't be surprised if you hear yourself saying, 'we'll have to come back and do that, *next time*.'

Want to surf in the morning and learn Spanish in the afternoon? No problem. Descend a volcano, grab a shower and hit the sushi bar for dinner? You can do that. Check out a Maya temple and be swinging in a beachside hammock by sunset? Easy.

Guatemala's got its problems, but they mainly keep to themselves (although if you go looking for trouble, who knows what you'll find). More than 10 years after the official end to the civil war, this isn't the scary place that your mother fears it is. Travel here – once fraught with danger and discomfort – is now characterized by ease; you can do pretty much whatever you want, and your experience will only be limited by your imagination and time.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 108,890 sq km (smaller than the US state of Louisiana; a bit bigger than England)
- **Budget** US\$20 to US\$40 per day
- **Capital** Guatemala City
- **Costs** Budget hotel in Guatemala City US\$15, bottle of beer US\$2, three-hour bus ride US\$3, set lunch US\$3.50
- **Country Code** ☎ 502
- **Languages** Spanish, Maya
- **Money** US\$1 = Q8.2 (quetzals); US dollars readily accepted
- **Population** 15 million
- **Seasons** Dry (October to May), wet (June to September)
- **Time** GMT minus six hours



TRAVEL HINTS

Pack light, and you can put your backpack inside the bus. Everything is negotiable (almost).

OVERLAND ROUTES

From Mexico enter Guatemala at Ciudad Hidalgo–Tecún Umán or Ciudad Cuauhtémoc–La Mesilla. From El Salvador enter via Anguiatú; from Honduras via Agua Caliente; and from Belize via Benque Viejo del Carmen.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Tikal** (p198) Ignore the tour groups – this is the country’s number-one tourist attraction for good reason.
- **Antigua** (p102) Eat, drink and sleep well while studying Spanish and climbing volcanoes near Guatemala’s most cosmopolitan and picturesque city.
- **Livingston** (p184) See another side of Guatemala in this Garifuna enclave on the Caribbean.
- **Semuc Champey** (p171) Find out why people call this the most beautiful spot in the whole country.
- **Best journey** (p188) Take a spectacular boat ride down a jungle-walled canyon of Livingston–Río Dulce.
- **Off the beaten track** (p129) Explore the lovely, traditional lakeside village of San Juan La Laguna.

CURRENT EVENTS

In late 2007, Álvaro Colom of the center-leftist Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza was elected President of Guatemala. Colom followed on from Oscar Berger’s example of steady, minimalist governance and the country’s infrastructure improved significantly, but allegations of back-room deals and political favoritism dogged Colom throughout his term.

The major political scandal of Colom’s term was what came to be known as the Rosenberg Case. In May of 2009, Guatemala City lawyer Rodrigo Rosenberg was shot. Two days later a video surfaced, showing Rosenberg himself stating that if he was murdered it would be because he had evidence incriminating President Colom and his government in a corruption scandal.

The video screened worldwide and opposition parties were quick to act, staging massive demonstrations calling for Colom’s resignation. Then it got really weird. First it was found that Rosenberg’s friends and cousins had masterminded the assassination, and then investigators claimed that Rosenberg himself, depressed and distraught, had ordered the hit. While many seeking to make political mileage out of the event dispute the investigation’s findings, the incident has all but faded into the background.

The major concern for all Guatemalans is security. An estimated 5% of murders in the country are prosecuted and daily newspapers regularly feature body counts of 10 and upwards for Guatemala City alone. The *Prensa Libre* reports the number of kidnappings per year has quintupled in the last decade, while annual murder rates have skyrocketed from

2904 to 6498. The police, understaffed and under-resourced, struggle in the face of rising crime, unaided by the fact that over the same period they’ve had 14 directors, one of whom has been accused of stealing US\$300,000 seized in a cocaine raid.

Violence against women has long been a concern in Guatemala and while Congress passed down tough new penalties for femicide (the assassination of women) in 2008, critics label them useless in a country where so many murders go unsolved.

Contrary to the growing trend of lawlessness, human-rights campaigners have secured victories in bringing civil-war criminals to justice – ex-colonel Marco Antonio Sánchez Samayoa was sentenced to 53 years in prison for his part in the murder of eight farmers in 1981.

At the time of writing it looks like former President Portillo will be brought to justice, too – having evaded prosecution for years, he was finally charged by the USA for laundering money using US banks, and looks set to be extradited and put on trial there.

HISTORY

Earliest estimates put humans in what is now Guatemala as far back as 11,000 BC. The prevailing theory is that they got here by walking across an ice bridge from Siberia. Once their traditional food sources (mammoths, wild nuts and berries) began to dry up, these early inhabitants became farmers, domesticating corn, beans, tomatoes, chilies, turkeys and dogs for the dinner table. The improvement in the stability of the food supply led to population growth, an improvement in agricultural techniques, the development of early art forms