

Guatemala City



Guatemala's capital city, the largest urban agglomeration in Central America, spreads across a flattened mountain range run through by deep ravines.

Depending on who you talk to, Guate (as it's known) is either big, dirty, dangerous and utterly forgettable or big, dirty, dangerous and fascinating. Either way, there's no doubt that there's an energy here unlike that found in the rest of Guatemala.

It's a place where dilapidated buses belch fumes next to Beamers and Hummers, where skyscrapers drop shadows on shantytowns and immigrants from the countryside and the rest of Central America eke out a meager existence, barely noticed by the country's elite.

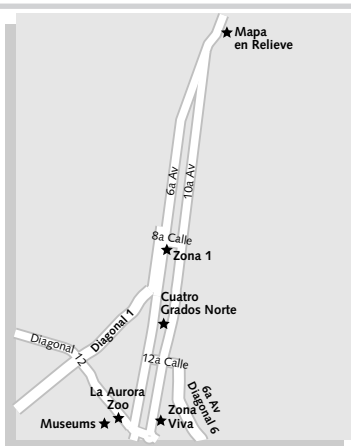
This is the real cultural capital of Guatemala – the writers, the thinkers, the artists mostly live and work here. All the best museum pieces go to the capital, and while nearly every city dweller dreams of getting away to Antigua or Monterrico for the weekend, this is where they spend most of their time, a fact reflected in the growing sophistication of the restaurant and bar scene.

Guate is busy reinventing itself as a people-friendly city. Public transport is being overhauled, plazas and parks constructed and family-oriented events are offered on weekends. It's got a long way to go, but it's headed in the right direction.

Many travelers skip the city altogether, preferring to make Antigua their base. Still, you may want, or need, to get acquainted with the capital because this is the hub of the country, where all transportation lines meet and all services are available.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Visiting the country's best **museums** (p72) and **zoo** (p72)
- Hitting the bars in Zona 10's **Zona Viva** (p79)
- Getting in the thick of it in busy **Zona 1** (p69)
- Gazing at Guatemala from above at the **Mapa en Relieve** (p70)
- Soaking up some culture in Zona 4's **Cuatro Grados Norte** (p80)



■ Population: 1.1 million

■ Elevation: 1500m

HISTORY

Kaminaljuyú, one of the first important cities in the Maya region, flourished two millennia ago in what's now the western part of Guatemala City. By the time Spanish conquistadors arrived in the 16th century, only overgrown mounds were left. The site remained insignificant until the earthquake of July 29, 1773, razed much of the then Spanish colonial capital, Antigua. The authorities decided to move their headquarters to La Ermita valley, hoping to escape further destruction, and on September 27, 1775, King Carlos III of Spain signed a royal charter for the founding of La Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción. Guatemala City was officially born.

Unfortunately, the colonial powers didn't quite move the capital far enough, for earthquakes in 1917, 1918 and 1976 rocked the capital and beyond, reducing buildings to rubble. The 1976 quake killed nearly 23,000, injured another 75,000 and left an estimated one million homeless.

ORIENTATION

The formal and ceremonial center of Guatemala City is the Parque Central at the heart of Zona 1, which is home to most of the city's better budget and midrange hotels, many of its bus stations and a lot of commerce. South down 6a or 7a Av from Zona 1 is Zona 4. Straddling the border of the two zones is the Centro Cívico (Civic Center), with several large, modern government and institutional buildings, including the main tourist information office. Zona 4 is a chaotic area where the city's local market district and the

biggest 2nd-class bus station, the Terminal de Autobuses, fuse into one overcrowded mess.

South from the southeast corner of Zona 4 runs Av La Reforma, a broad boulevard forming the boundary between Zonas 9 and 10. These zones are among the city's poshest residential and office areas, especially Zona 10 with its Zona Viva (Lively Zone) where deluxe hotels, fancy restaurants and nightclubs, and glitzy malls are all congregated.

The city's airport, Aeropuerto La Aurora, is in Zona 13, just south of Zona 9 and a 6km drive or bus ride from the heart of Zona 1. Zona 13 has several museums and the parklike La Aurora Zoo.

Maps

Intelimapas' *Mapa Turístico Guatemala*, Inguat's *Mapa Vial Turístico* and International Travel Maps' *Guatemala* all contain useful maps of Guatemala City (see p319). **Sophos** (below) is one of the most reliable places to get maps. The **Instituto Geográfico Nacional** (IGN; ☎ 2248-8100; www.ign.gob.gt; Av Las Américas 5-76, Zona 13; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) sells 1:50,000 and 1:250,000 topographical sheets of all parts of Guatemala, costing Q60 each.

INFORMATION

Bookstores

Sophos (☎ 2419-7070; Plaza Fontabella, 4a Av 12-59, Zona 10) Relaxed place to read while in the Zona Viva, with a good selection of books in English on Guatemala and the Maya, including Lonely Planet guides, and maps.

Vista Hermosa Book Shop (☎ 2369-1003; 2a Calle 18-50, Zona 15) Good range of books in English, but rather far from the center of things.

KNOWING EXACTLY WHERE YOU ARE

Guatemala City, like (almost) all Guatemalan towns, is laid out on a logical street grid. Avenidas run north-south; calles run east-west. Each avenida and calle has a number, with the numbers usually rising as you move from west to east and north to south. Addresses enable you to pinpoint exactly which block a building is in, and which side of the street it's on. The address 9a Av 15-24 means building No 24 on 9a Av in the block after 15a Calle; 9a Av 16-19 refers to building No 19 on 9a Av in the block after 16a Calle; 4a Calle 7-3 is building No 3 on 4a Calle in the block after 7a Av. Odd-numbered buildings are on the left-hand side as you move in the rising-numbers direction; even numbers are on the right.

In addition, most cities and towns are divided into a number of zonas – 21 in Guatemala City, fewer in other places. You need to know the zona as well as the street address, for in some places the numbers of avenidas and calles are repeated in more than one zona. Beware, too, a couple of other minor wrinkles in the system. Short streets may be suffixed 'A,' as in 14a Calle A, which will be found between 14a Calle and 15a Calle. In some smaller towns and villages no one uses street names, even when they're posted on signs.