

The Highlands



Guatemala's most dramatic region – Los Altos – stretches from Antigua to the Mexican border northwest of Huehuetenango. Here the verdant hills sport emerald-green grass, cornfields and towering stands of pine, and every town and village has a story.

The traditional values and customs of Guatemala's indigenous peoples are strongest in the highlands. Maya dialects are the first language, Spanish a distant second. The age-old culture based on maize (from which the Maya believe that humans were created) is still alive; a sturdy cottage in the midst of a thriving *milpa* (maize field) is a common sight. And on every road you'll see men, women and children carrying burdens of *leña* (firewood), to be used for heating and cooking.

Most towns were already populated by the Maya when the Spanish arrived. History turned bloody with the beginning of the civil war in 1960, when the highlands were targeted heavily by guerrillas and the army alike.

The poster child for Guatemala's natural beauty, the volcano-ringed Lago de Atitlán has been attracting tourists for decades. Surrounded by small villages, each possessing a distinctive character, the lake generally deals with its popularity well, though a major bacteria outbreak in late 2009 alerted inhabitants to the perils of rapid growth. West of the lake stands Guatemala's second city, Quetzaltenango, a cultural haven with a significant contingent of foreign volunteers and language students. To the north spread the Cuchumatanes mountains, truly a world apart, where indigenous life follows its own rhythms amid fantastic mountain landscapes. For hikers, this is the promised land.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Soaring over, diving under or relaxing alongside sublime **Lago de Atitlán** (p116)
- Hunting for *huipiles* (long embroidered tunics) at vibrant indigenous markets in **Chichicastenango** (p143) and **San Francisco El Alto** (p173)
- Polishing your Spanish and hiking volcanoes in and around **Quetzaltenango** (p157)
- Taking in the stunning Cuchumatanes scenery and village life of the Ixil Triangle around **Nebaj** (p153)
- Mingling with the Maya in **Todos Santos Cuchumatán** (p180), **San Mateo Ixtatán** (p183) and other remote villages



CLIMATE

Abundant rains fall between May and October. During the rainy season, be prepared for some dreary, chilly, damp days. At high altitudes it gets cold at night at any time of year. But when the sun comes out, this land is stunning to behold.

GETTING AROUND

The meandering Interamericana (Hwy 1), running 345km along the mountain ridges between Guatemala City and the Mexican border at La Mesilla, passes close to all of the region's most important places, and countless buses roar up and down it all day, every day. Two key intersections act as major bus interchanges: Los Encuentros for Panajachel and

Chichicastenango, and Cuatro Caminos for Quetzaltenango. If you can't find a bus going to your destination, simply get one to either of those points. Transfers are usually seamless, with not-too-frustrating waiting times and locals who are ready to help travelers find the right bus.

Travel is easiest in the morning and, for smaller places, on market days. By mid- or late afternoon, buses may be difficult to find; besides, it's not a good idea to be out on the roads after dark. Further off the beaten track you may be relying more on pickups than buses for transportation.

Microbuses – large vans that depart as soon as they fill with passengers – are increasingly becoming the dominant mode of transport along

