

# Welcome to Guatemala

*Mysterious and often challenging,  
Central America's most diverse country  
offers landscapes and experiences that  
have been captivating travelers  
for centuries.*

## Colonial Grandeur

Say what you like about the Spanish in Latin America, you have to agree that they left behind some stunning architecture. From Antigua's crumbling ruins to the stately cathedral in Guatemala City's central plaza, there are plenty of opportunities to get snap-happy. In even the smallest towns you can find picturesque buildings – the small coastal town of Retalhuleu has a charming central plaza, while larger coffee-boom towns like Cobán and Quetzaltenango maintain vestiges of their glory days in their cathedrals, town halls and other public buildings.

## The Timeless Maya

While many ask whatever happened to the Maya, the simple answer is nothing – they're still here, and some traditions continue to thrive. If you're interested in archaeology, the must-see sites are Tikal, Copán (in Honduras), and Guatemala City's superb selection of museums.

Living Maya culture can be witnessed in its 'pure' form in towns like Rabinal and sacred sites such as Laguna Chicabal. And the Maya themselves? Well, they're everywhere. But the most traditional villages are in the highlands – the Ixil Triangle is a good place to start.

## Adventure Awaits

Active souls tend to find their agenda very full once they get to Guatemala. Stunning trekking routes through the jungles and up volcanoes, world class white-water rafting, more miles of caves than you could possibly explore in one vacation, and what seems like a zipline strung between every two trees in the country are just the beginning. Like to take things up a notch? How about paragliding into a volcanic crater at Lago de Atitlán? Or scuba diving in the same place? You might even luck onto some good swell on the Pacific coast. Or you could just find a hammock and think about doing all that. Your call.

## Natural Highs

With not even 2% of its landmass urbanized, it's not surprising that Guatemala offers some superb natural scenery. National parks are few but impressive, particularly in the Petén region and the lush canyons of the Río Dulce make for an unforgettable boat ride. The natural beauty of the volcano-ringed Lago de Atitlán has been captivating travelers for centuries, while the swimming hole that launched a thousand postcards, Semuc Champey, has to be seen to be believed.



## Why I Love Guatemala

By Lucas Vidgen, Author

Having lived here for nearly 10 years, I've found my love for the country change and develop over time. The first, obvious infatuation was visual – the dramatic landscapes of jungles and volcanoes, the little cultural jolts of traditionally dressed Maya women toting the latest model cell phones. But over time what I really came to admire was the Guatemalan spirit, the idea that tragedies happen – wars, earthquakes, floods and hurricanes – but the simple things abide. A meal with the family, a joke with some friends – as crazy as everything else gets, these are the things to treasure.

**For more about our authors, see p328**