

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, for instance, has a charming central plaza – while larger coffee-boom towns such as Cobán and Quetzaltenango maintain vestiges of their glory days in their cathedrals, town halls and other public buildings.

The Timeless Maya

Many ask whatever happened to the Maya, but 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 include Tikal, Copán (in Honduras), and Guatemala City's superb selection of museums. Living Maya culture can be witnessed in its 'pure' form in towns such as 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, miles of caves to explore, and what seems like a zip line 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 languidly consider your options. 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 Verapaces are riddled with more caves than a spelunker could explore in a lifetime, and the swimming hole that launched a thousand postcards, Semuc Champey, just has to be seen to be believed.



Why I Love Guatemala

By Lucas Vidgen, Writer

Having lived here for over 10 years, I've found my love for Guatemala change and develop. At first it was purely visual – the dramatic, volcano-studded horizons, the lush forests and cobblestone streets. And then the little cultural jolts – traditionally dressed Maya toting iPhones, pistol-packing cowboys in boots, belt buckle and hat. But what I really came to appreciate was the Guatemalan spirit: that tragedies happen – wars, earthquakes, floods and hurricanes – but the simple things abide. A meal with family, a joke with friends – as crazy as everything else gets, these are the things to treasure.

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Above: A woman in traditional dress, Quetzaltenango (p130)