



Guatemala

Vivid color, nature's dance

Volleys of firecrackers fill the street with a sulfurous cloud as drums beat and horns blare a raucous fanfare. On come the dancers, wheeling and swaying, their costumes emblazoned with embroidery and mirrors, their heads topped with brilliant plumes.

Who is the choreographer? Who is the composer? The answer is no one and everyone. It is time and tradition, and a people with a genius for filling the senses to overflowing.

This is the ancestral land of the Maya, where ancient artists packed figures into their murals until there was no room for more. Where the *hup'it* blouses of Maya women burst with flowers and birds.

This I call Guatemalan Baroque. It is the expression of an exuberant people who cannot abide a blank space, even on a dinner plate. *Fiambré*, one of many traditional dishes, may contain 50 kinds of meats, cheeses, pickles, vegetables, and even flowers, all to be eaten not only by those present, but also by those departed.

The world of the senses fuses with the realm of the spirit and produces a cosmology that is all our own. It binds together our people, not only Maya, but Ladinos, Garifunas, and Kinkas; and not just in the hills of Alta Verapaz, but in nightclubs in Guatemala City's Zona Viva. Guatemala may be a millennial land, but it's not a museum. Our country is a tableau for living.

—Celsa Lara, director, Center for Folklore Studies, University of San Carlos

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Life is Everywhere

Guatemala's 14 life zones are full of natural resources and biodiversity that vary from dry forests to tropical humid forests. Within just a few miles you can witness profound changes in the landscape, climate, flora, and fauna.

—Lorena Calvo, biologist, Quetzaltenango

"Hear that? It's a white-eared ground sparrow, *Melospiza leucotis*, one of some 700 species of birds in Guatemala. When birdwatchers want to see a particular species, I can take them to the tree that produces the fruit that bird eats. Birdwatchers don't care about being wet, cold, or hungry. Let's first look for birds," they say, "and then have breakfast."

—José Odías de León, nature guide, Suchitepéquez



Places less Traveled

Guatemala's extremes allow you to start a journey at sea level and rapidly rise to more than 4,175 meters (13,700 feet). A cold day in the West can trail with temperatures lower than 0°C (32°F), while a common sunny day in the East can reach higher than 36°C (97°F). The result of the country's complex geography, dry scrub, mountain forests, tropical jungles, mangrove forests, and tropical savannas define the panorama, offering a wide variety of places to visit and things to do.

Hiking the country's 34-volcano chain can take you from Guatemala Volcano in Guatemala (4,150 meters/13,615 feet), the lowest volcano in elevation, to the summit of Tajumulco in San Marcos (4,220 meters/13,845 feet), the highest point of the Central American isthmus. In Chiquimula you'll find the renowned Black Christ at the Basilica of Esquipulas. In the colder climes of Huehuetenango, with its Andean environment, you might discover a lost town of wild nature at El Cimarrón—a hole in the ground approximately 470 meters (1,543 feet) deep, with an almost unexplored forest at the bottom.

MONTERRICO MULTIPLE USE AREA
A wide expanse of forest, mangroves, and a variety of recreational activities.

CHIMQUIMULA CANAL
This 140-kilometer (87-mile) long navigable canal is surrounded by lush vegetation, including mangroves and wetlands, ideal for birdwatching. It is also the gateway to some beautiful beaches on the east side of the Pacific coast.



Blend of Flavors

Each dish in Guatemala's cuisine has a blend of elements from a wide range of origins, ranging from native peppers and corn to Spanish olives and African coffee. As you journey through Guatemala, the country's tastes will vary from spicy to sweet, from stewed to roasted.

"When it comes to food, we Guatemalans are very creative. Mixing regional ingredients with traditional practices has successfully brought out delicious cultural expressions. From our country's best, recipes include dried peppers, tomato, sesame seeds, *pepitoria*—ground squash seeds—and pumpkin flowers. But in the east, you'll see dairy products, faro—flower buds from the *Fernandina pandurata* plant—cassava, and coconut."

—Edda Morales, chef, Guatemala City

"We grow food right here. The most popular item on our menu is *estofado*, which consists of seven meats: beef, pork, turkey, chicken, duck, rabbit, and lamb. It usually takes three days to prepare. At the end, we add tomato, condiments and *arnabito*—a red seed that gives it color. This dish is accompanied by small tamales made from corn wrapped in the leaf of the *q'uesad* tree. We serve *estofado* at weddings as well as at ceremonial meals and elaborate parties."

—Ingrid House, owner, El Pedregal restaurant, Tecpán Guatemala



Geotraveler Tips

Dressing up
Pack a three-season wardrobe. In the eternal spring of Antigua Guatemala, a light sweater will do for evening strolls. In Peten, when humidity and temperature both hit 30°C (100°F), wear lightweight, loose-fitting pants and short-sleeved shirts. And don't forget "dead" fortified insect repellent to defend against mosquitoes during the rainy season from June to September. For the Huehuetenango-Quiché-San Marcos highlands triangle, a good fleece jacket is a necessity, particularly if it takes you to a volcano, a green frog, or the flower of sorrows.

Holy Week
Antigua Guatemala undoubtedly hosts the most spectacular Holy Week celebrations, with hundreds of purple-robed men bearing statues through the streets. But other towns offer impressive spectacles, with smaller crowds and less competition for hotel rooms. Hire a local guide when visiting remote areas. Keep your valuables secure and cameras and recorders discreetly out of sight. When in doubt about safety, get advice from your hotel's front desk.

A word of caution
Security is a worldwide problem, and Guatemala shares many of the issues affecting developing countries. Some places are relatively safe, such as the center of Antigua Guatemala and busy areas of Guatemala City. Elsewhere, don't venture off the beaten path alone, particularly at night. Hire a local guide when visiting remote areas. Keep your valuables secure and cameras and recorders discreetly out of sight. When in doubt about safety, get advice from your hotel's front desk.

Time for lunch
A little storefront restaurant crowded with families usually means honest food, very low prices, and speedy service. Make your choice from the hand-lettered menu or sit in front. In and around Antigua Guatemala, a traditional stand-by is chicken in *pojón*, a sauce made from fresh, shellfish, sweet potatoes and plantains, all cooked in coconut milk.

A learning experience
Take your curiosity to the classroom to get a deeper understanding of Guatemalan life and culture. A cooking school in Antigua Guatemala offers classes on preparing dishes from the country's Spanish and Maya heritage. In San Pedro La Laguna, skilled weavers teach the mysteries of the backstrap loom. Quetzaltenango visitors can study Maya languages and traditions. The language, dance, and music of the Garifuna have been recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity site.

Verbs and pronouns
Sign up at one of Guatemala's relaxed and inexpensive Spanish schools, located in the country's prettiest towns. Most offer options to board with a local family for cultural as well as linguistic immersion. The country is famous for its schools, and even moderately priced ones have well-qualified instructors. Check out more information on the internet.



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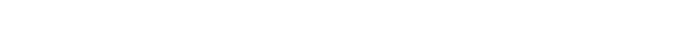
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National Geographic and the people of Guatemala present this Geotraveler MapGuide of Guatemala.

Lead project partners include the National Geographic Center for Sustainable Destinations, National Geographic Maps, and Guatemala Geotourism Council, with regional coordination provided by Alianza para el Turismo Comunitario de Usulután and Cuertupán Intercomunal, and the Guatemala Geotourism Council. Funded by the Guatemala Tourism Board (INGTAT), the Guatemalan National Office of Tourism (ANACATE), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

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Visit www.geotraveler.com to learn more about Guatemala and its spectacular landscape and culture.

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Guatemala's People

Essence of the Country

The girl was just sitting at the park bench. While her mother was talking to an old friend, she was carefully watching people crossing the plaza. To their left, a Lladino man carrying a suitcase ran to catch the bus. To their right, a Garifuna family was celebrating. She couldn't hear them in the distance, but she saw the smiles on their faces and their cheerful dance. Nearby, some Maya leaders were talking and sharing opinions. How different we are; the girl thought, while remembering that, like her, they are all Guatemalan.

In just 108,889 square kilometers (42,000 square miles) 22 Maya languages are spoken, plus Xinka on the Southeast, Garifuna on the Caribbean, and Spanish everywhere. Guatemalan culture is one and twenty-five at a time.

Of course, not all people are the same. To the East, for example, dwellers share a cowboy style because their main economic activities relate to cattle. To the South, however, people are dedicated to fishing or working at sea; their wardrobe, cuisine, and traditions are noticeably different. It is in this diversity that we celebrate our uniqueness.

Guatemalans have found the way to fuse this distinctiveness. This quality, along with the strong relation to nature, is found everywhere, from local art to agricultural techniques and cultural expressions.

This country is a land of finders. Our people find the proclamation of a sunny day in the song of a bird; they find in the simplest detail the main idea of a masterpiece; they extract the extraordinary from the ordinary; and they find in a small seed the hope of tomorrow's life.



Creativity

Clay, paints, leather, wood, and fiber are the raw materials for Guatemalan artisans, whose inspiration comes from their surroundings. Nature can be found in every piece, from a decorated plate showing Lake Atitlán's landscape to a leather cowboy belt with colorful embroidery.

"When I see a bird, I examine the patterns of its feathers and see how it turns its head. When I paint a bird on a cup or a plate, I paint a real bird, but with colors that my own mind chooses."

—José Efraín, potter, San Antonio Palopó

"We want to rescue what our grandmothers knew about natural dyes before it's lost forever. Our colors come from plants and minerals, even charcoal. Most weavers today use chemical dyes, which are strong and harsh. Natural colors are soft, and they are good for the environment. We cultivate the trees and herbs we need for dyes, so we will always have them."

—Rosalinda Tay Mendocza, dyer and weaver, San Juan La Laguna

"Our artwork transmits traditions described by our elders, such as dances, markets, and rural life. One of the scenes I like to paint is a Maya dentist pulling a tooth. All of us use different styles to portray these scenes. My style is over-head views."

—Angélica Quic, painter, Yokoneel Association of Maya Art, San Juan La Laguna



A Green Caribbean

Isabal, one of Guatemala's important land-and-marine life sanctuaries, is comprised of more than 20 protected areas, the country's largest lake, as well as rivers and mountains. This area is considered "the green jewel of the Caribbean," and its preservation is supported by local residents, the national government, and international organizations.

"We are Maya, and nature is truly important to us. We know we must care for our flora and fauna, and we do. Our primary goal is to teach our people the importance of protecting the environment and strengthen services for the Q'eqchi'." By developing local art and sustainable tourism, we can abandon practices that damage nature."

—Guillermo Pérez, general administrator, Ak' Tenamit Association, Río Dulce National Park

Isabal is also the melting pot of a very diverse culture. Garifuna, Lladino, Maya Q'eqchi', and Hindu people have coexisted in this land, enriching local traditions and cultural expressions.

"A Garifuna is spiritual, cheerful, and charismatic. Our background is a source of pride to us and we have preserved our culture for more than two centuries. Our distinctive food, clothes, and traditions have all been maintained. Every November 26, Garifuna Day, we celebrate ourselves and our roots with social and religious activities."

—Diana Martínez Leiva, secretary, Women Association Afroamérica XXI, Livingston

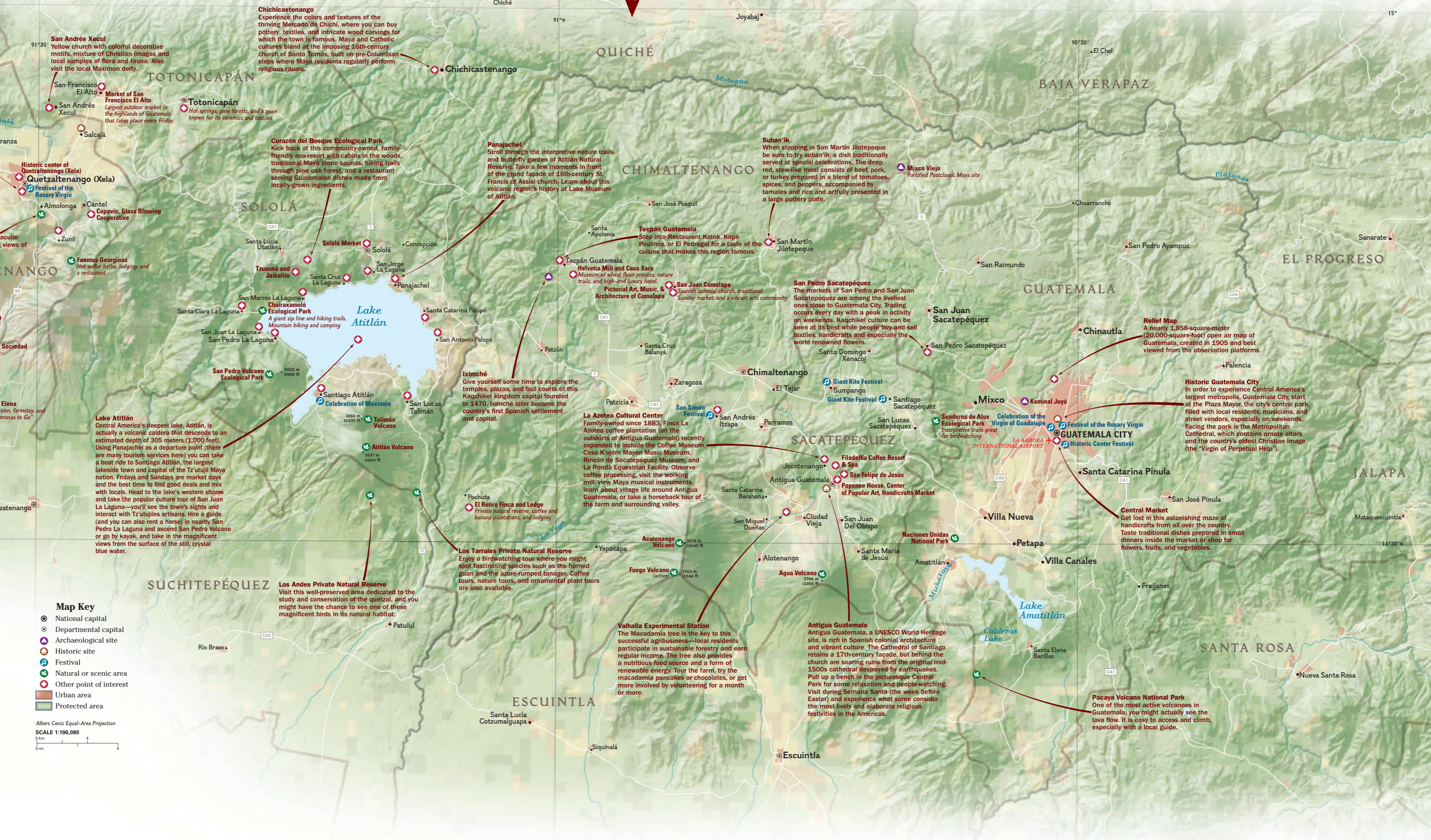


Learning Experiences

The lesson is about to begin. Pairs of students and teachers sit in a courtyard shaded by flowering trees; no classroom is needed. By the time the students leave, they will know far more than just language.

"A visitor who wants to understand our culture must first learn Spanish. Here, students do much more than study four hours a day. They live the language around the clock by talking with families and visiting communities where they talk with potters and weavers. They go to religious sites and meet with spiritual leaders. Students learn to cook Guatemalan style. A Maya woman teaches them how to make tortillas, showing them how to prepare the masa—corn flour mixed with water—and then pat it thin. This is how we teach Spanish, and the results are terrific."

—Nicolás Tichoc Rodríguez, director, Jardín de América Spanish School, Panajachel



Produce of the Land

The rainy season—May to October—moistens and revitalizes the soil. Even though most of the land is alive with native forests, the arable portion is ideal for agriculture. Maize, black beans, and tomatoes are the main products grown for local consumption, while coffee, sugar, bananas, broccoli, and peas head a growing list of exports.

"Sixty Kaqchikel families make their living on this farm. Some grow and process coffee or raise ornamental plants; all of them protect our natural areas. They also work in tourism as guides, cooks, and bread bakers. Wildlife thrives beneath the canopy of shade-grown coffee and forest habitats, and this attracts visitors. Nature tourism supported by government incentives make it possible to conserve these forests as a private reserve and still make a living."

—Andy Burge, owner, Finca Los Tarrales, Suchitepéquez

Cultivation is also influenced by geography and climatic conditions. People from different regions of the country adapt and diversify their agricultural practices.

"I am the fourth generation of coffee growers in Acatenango, better known as 'the land of coffee.' Everything I know about coffee, I learned from my family. We produce it according to climate and water resources, using knowledge accumulated through the generations. If anyone wants to learn about the coffee process, from the field to the cup, he can visit the region during the harvest season—December to mid-March—and he will be received like a family friend."

—Enio Pérez, owner, Finca La Soledad, Acatenango



Modern Life

What to do? When in the city, activities definitely tend to a modern life style. Every-day activities may include shopping, fine dining, experiencing lively nightlife, or having a good cup of coffee with some friends. And if that is not enough, the schedule can be filled out with theatrical performances, art cinema, opera, ballet presentations, and contemporary art and design exhibitions. Any of Guatemala's main cities, including Guatemala City, La Antigua Guatemala, Quetzaltenango, Cobán, and Chiquimula, offer all the urban action, of course, the Guatemalan way.

"The Guatemala National Theater, known as 'Miguel Ángel Asturias Cultural Center' is a masterpiece. Just as its creator, Guatemalan artist Efraín Reinos, conceived it, the building's shapes and colors naturally integrate to the landscape. There are months when the center holds some 50 events and receives more than 30,000 visitors. They come to enjoy a wide range of cultural activities such as theater, dance, concerts, and art exhibitions."

—Ana Rosa Orozco, administrative adviser, Miguel Ángel Asturias Cultural Center, Guatemala City

"Since its first edition in 2007, Luna Park magazine has become a showcase for young artists and writers. We promote cultural events like cinema, music, fine arts, and book presentations. Quetzaltenango's cultural activity includes events and design exhibitions. Any of Guatemala's main cities, including Guatemala City, La Antigua Guatemala, Quetzaltenango, Cobán, and Chiquimula, offer all the urban action, of course, the Guatemalan way."

—Vanía Vargas, director, Luna Park Magazine, Quetzaltenango



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