

# 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.

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



## 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.

"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



VOLCANOES Guatemalan volcanoes (around 30 according to popular knowledge, ten times that according to scientists) are an undeniable part of the landscape anywhere around the volcanic chain and can be climbed, often with help of a local guide. As you ascend and enjoy varied ecosystems and landscapes you might spot puma, wild boar, or the distinctive horned guanaco—a black and white turkey-like bird in danger of extinction.

## 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).

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 (4,175 meters/13,700 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, meadows, and a variety of recreational activities

## 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 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 *Fernandía 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 *anatto*—a red seed that gives it color. This dish is accompanied by small tamales made from corn wrapped in the leaf of the *q'ues* tree. We serve *estofado* at weddings as well as at ceremonial meals and elaborate parties."

## 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 36°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 a volcano, a green frog, and 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 standby 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.

## Geotraveler Tips

- 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 USAID and Counterpart International, and the Guatemala Geotourism Council. Funded by the Guatemala Tourism Board (INGTAT), the Guatemalan National Office of Tourism (ANACAT), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).
- Text by** Shaphary Davis, author; Marcela Matamoros, Romy Mejía, and Tom Miller, editors; Design editing by Alejandro Vitoja. Map notes by Angella Burford and Marcela Matamoros.
- Data provided by** Shuttle Radar Topography Mission V2, NASA/NGA; Center for International Science Information Network (CISIN), Columbia University; Comisión Centroamericana de Ambiente y Desarrollo (CCAD)-Banco Mundial (BM); Instituto Geográfico Nacional (IGN), Guatemala; UMD Global Land Cover Classification; University of Maryland Global Land Cover Facility.
- Visit** [www.geotraveler.com](http://www.geotraveler.com) to learn more about Guatemala and its spectacular landscape and culture.
- AUTHORIZED FOR DISTRIBUTION:** resolution No. 280-2009, Instituto Geográfico Nacional "Ing Alfonso Obitos Gómez". Valid for this run, December 2009.
- This map was produced using information from** Instituto Geográfico Nacional, Guatemala C.A. 2009.
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## Geotraveler Tips

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- USAID**
- FLORA**
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How This MapGuide Was Made The people of Guatemala helped build this MapGuide by nominating the places and telling the stories of this region. A diverse regional alliance, the Guatemala Geotourism Council, has formed to engage visitors and residents in strategies that sustain and enhance the special qualities of this country.

## Maya Heritage

More than two millennia have passed since tropical forests in Central America housed the rise, splendor, and subsequent fall of the Maya civilization. Decline didn't mean disappearance, though, and today more than four million Maya in Guatemala have inherited this culture, fused with elements from other societies.

The Maya legacy includes cities with magnificent temples, spacious plazas, and memorable stories etched onto many of its stone and walls. Guatemala's territory covers more than 20 major cities built during the three main periods of Maya civilization: Preclassic (ca. 1800 B.C. to A.D. 250), Classic (250-900), and Postclassic (900-1502).

"The importance of the Tikal archaeological site draws on the unique location in the heart of the tropical forest and the singular management of geographic, natural, and human resources."

—Osvaldo Gómez, archeologist, *Plaza de los Seis Templos de Tikal Project*, Tikal

"A Maya spiritual leader rises from a blackened altar. He takes out a notebook and draws a triangle. The first point is spiritual energy, the second, nature and science; the third point represents humans. All three exist in harmony, just like the rainbows [Maya astronomical signs]. Our rainbows reveal our personal virtues and abilities, but also our defects."

—Cristóbal Cojfi García, director, *Center for Maya Cultural and Intercultural Dialogue, Tecpán Guatemala*



TEMPLES OF THE CENTRAL PLAZA, TIKA NATIONAL PARK, PETEN



Garifuna ethnic group. Experience traditional dance, drum music, song, and ceremony of the native Caribbean culture.

## Maya They Still Are

Take a deep breath, enjoy the smell of nature, listen carefully, and indulge in the notes of the marimba—Guatemala's national instrument. Open your eyes to the kaleidoscope of evolving culture. In Guatemala, Ladino, Xinka, Garifuna, and Maya people share their unique qualities.

The Maya represent about 40 percent of Guatemala's total population, gathered in 22 ethnic groups. Each group speaks its own language, performs its own music, and creates its own art, but they share the understanding of the world inherited from their ancestors. In all that they do, they strive for balance with an infusion of respect—for themselves, their beliefs, and the nature that surrounds them. Maya they were, Maya they still are.

The Rabinal Achi, a 24-hour dance-drama that has been in the same family for five generations, takes place during the festival honoring St. Paul. Before it begins, seven ceremonies are celebrated in different holy places so we can worship our ancestors and the Heart of Sky. The Rabinal Achi dance-drama tells the story of two Maya princes, Rabinal Achi and K'iche' Achi. The drama tells the story of the first prince punishing the second for trying to invade the city and for breaking Maya laws.

—Manuel Coloch, director's assistant, Rabinal Achi dance-drama, Rabinal



MAJAS MAYA AT SACRIFICIO, SPECIAL VOLCANO AND LAGOON, QUETZALTENANGO

# 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."

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

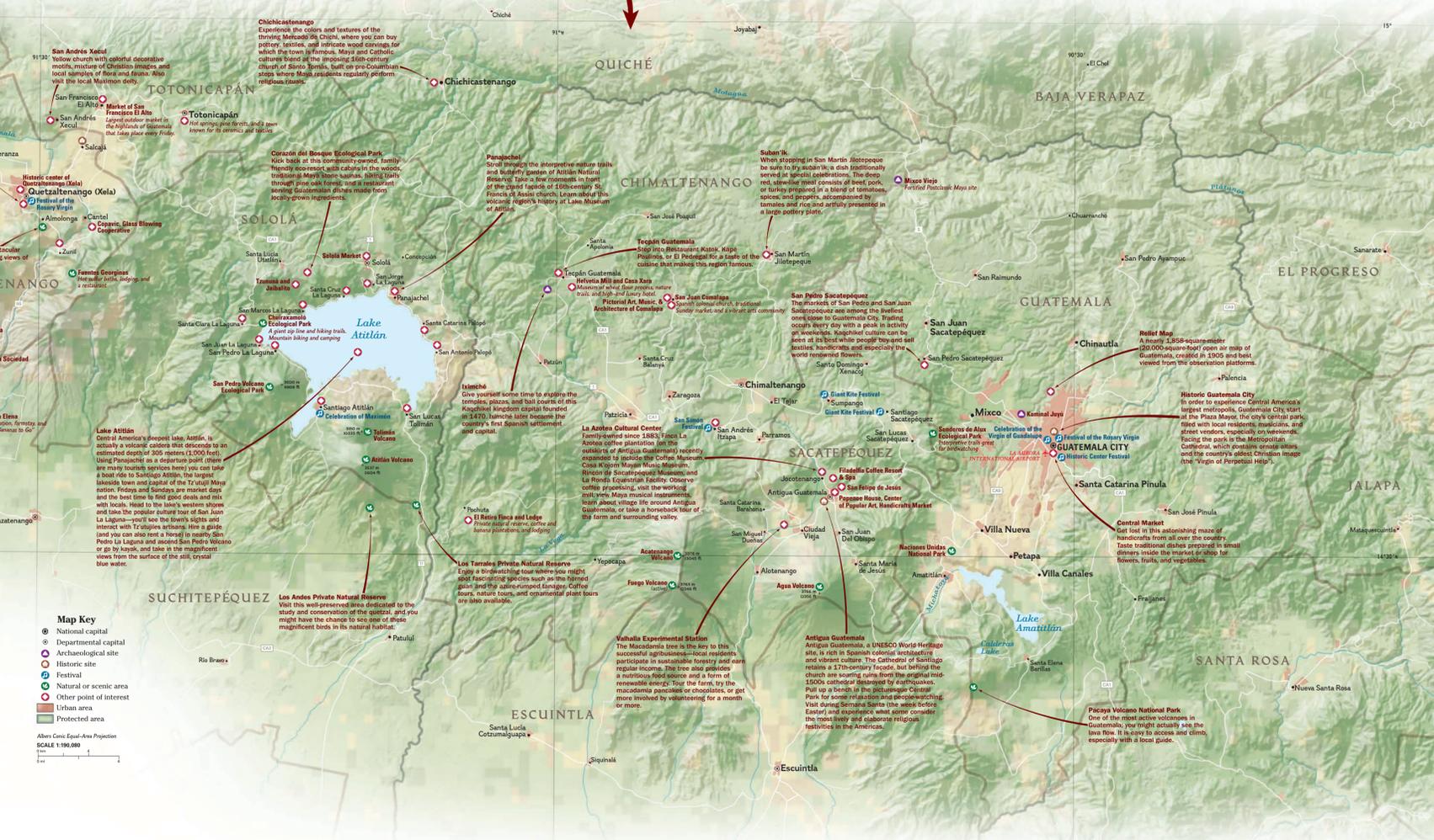


## Learning Experiences

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

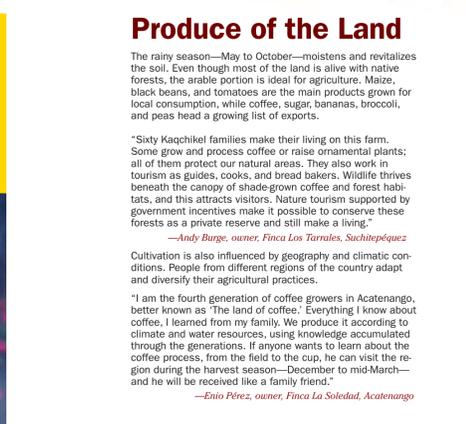
The rainy season—May to October—moistens and revitalizes the soil. Even though most of the land is alive with native forests, the arable portion is ideal for agriculture. Maize, black beans, and tomatoes are the main products grown for local consumption, while coffee, sugar, bananas, broccoli, and peas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



## Festivals & Events

**Celebration of the Black Tradition of Escuintla** (January 25) One of the largest celebrations in Central America is held at the Basilica of the Black Christ of Escuintla with processions, music, and dancing.

**Rainfall Ache' Dance** (January 27) Celebrates the rainy season with music, dance, and offerings to the rain gods.

**Day of the Holy Cross and Assumption Day** in Laguna Chichicastenango (May 2nd and August 15th) Celebrates special dates on the Maya calendar with ceremonies and San Jorge's traditional dance.

**San Simón Festival** in San Simón (October 28th) Celebrates San Simón (a deity representing a mixture between Maya, Catholic, and Magico-betico) with offerings of liquor, tobacco, burning of candles, and magical rituals.

**Independence Day** (September 15th) National holiday celebrating the independence of Guatemala with parades, decorations, and marching bands.

**Day of the Rosary** (October 7th) Celebrates the birth of Christ with music, traditional dances, and the burning of effigies.

**Christmas** (December 24th) Celebrates the birth of Christ with music, traditional dances, and social activities.

**Maya New Year** (December 24th) Celebrates the birth of Christ with music, traditional dances, and social activities.

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## GUATEMALA CITY MUSEUMS

**Casa Milán** (Av. Avenida 14-12, Zone 1) (Monday-Friday 10 a.m.-5 p.m.) Furniture, clothing, and other objects of the 15th and 16th centuries made in a restored 15th-century town house.

**Chimel Museum** (San Carlos 9-10, Zone 1) (Monday-Friday 9 a.m.-12 p.m., 2-4:30 p.m., Saturday-Sunday 9:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m., and 2:30-6 p.m.) A wide variety of exhibits, including a pottery museum, a textile museum, and a glass museum.

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## 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 Guatemalan 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."

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## 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.

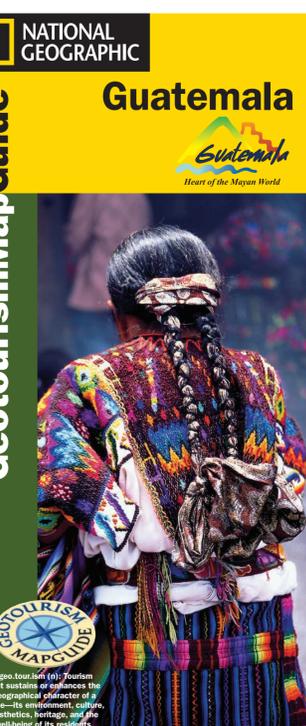
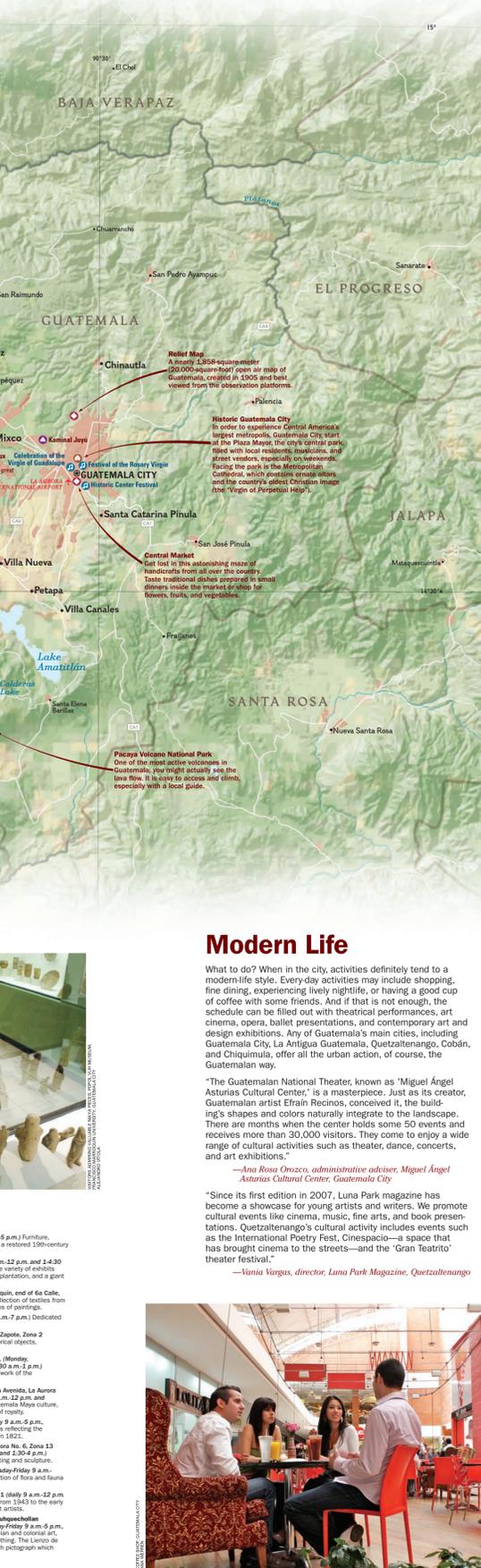
"We are Maya, and nature is truly important to us. We know we must care for our flora and fauna, and we do. Our primary goal is to teach our people the importance of protecting the environment and strengthen services for the Q'eqchi'." By developing local art and sustainable tourism, we can abandon practices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



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