**Guatemala**

**Climate**

Located within the tropics and with elevations ranging between sea level and more than 13,000 feet (4,000 metres), Guatemala experiences a diversity of climates. Below 3,000 feet (900 metres) in elevation, average monthly temperatures range between 70 and 80 °F (21 and 27 °C) throughout the year; between 3,000 and 5,000 feet (900 and 1,500 metres), temperatures range between 60 and 70 °F (16 and 21 °C); and from 6,000 to 9,000 feet (1,500 to 2,700 metres), they range between 50 and 60 °F (10 and 16 °C). Above 9,000 feet, temperatures are marginal for crops, but the grazing of animals is possible.

Near-desert conditions prevail in the middle section of the Motagua River valley, whereas precipitation in excess of 150 inches (3,800 mm) occurs at higher elevations of the Pacific-facing volcanic row and on the north- and east-facing slopes of the sierras. In general, a dry season prevails between November and April; however, moisture-laden [trade winds](http://www.britannica.com/science/trade-wind) from the Caribbean yield rainfall throughout the year on north- and east-facing slopes. An average of 40 to 80 inches (1,000 to 2,000 mm) of precipitation is received in southern and eastern Guatemala, but this is doubled in areas located nearer the Caribbean shoreline.

Severe tropical storms, especially during the months of September and October, often deluge the country with damaging floods. Strong winds accompanying these storms, as well as winter invasions of cold air, occasionally place crops at risk. Hurricane Mitch, one of the deadliest tropical cyclones ever in the Atlantic Ocean, which brutally struck nearby Honduras and Nicaragua in October 1998, also caused extensive damage in Guatemala, displacing nearly 100,000 people.

## Plant and animal life

In the Petén, a dense [rainforest](http://www.britannica.com/science/tropical-rainforest) is interspersed with patches of savanna grasslands. The sierras are forested with oak and pine. In the volcanic highlands, stands of pine, fir, and oak have been largely destroyed except on the highest slopes. On the Pacific coastal plain, the landscape largely has been cleared of its tropical forest and savanna.

The richest variety of animal life inhabits the lowland forest areas, although some species, such as deer, monkeys, peccaries, tapirs, ocelots, and jaguars, are increasingly rare. Among the reptiles of note are numerous snake species, crocodiles, and iguanas. The birdlife of the rainforests is particularly exuberant and includes the radiantly plumaged [quetzal](http://www.britannica.com/animal/resplendent-quetzal) (Pharomachrus), the national bird, for which a reserve has been set aside in the sierras near [Cobán](http://www.britannica.com/place/Coban).

## *People*

## Ethnic groups

On the basis of cultural traits, the population is divided into two main ethnic groups—[Ladinos](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Ladino) and [Maya](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Maya-people), who make up the vast majority of [Indians](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Central-American-Indian) in Guatemala and form several cultures. The [Ladinos](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Ladino) comprise those of mixed Hispanic-Maya origin and make up between one-half and three-fifths of the total population, whereas the Maya account for some two-fifths of the country’s population. There are much smaller numbers of Spanish-speaking [Xinka](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Xinca) in southern Guatemala and [Garífuna](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Garifuna)(people of mixed African and Caribbean descent; formerly called Black Caribs) in the northeastern port towns of Livingston and [Puerto Barrios](http://www.britannica.com/place/Puerto-Barrios). Their ancestors immigrated to the Central American coast from Caribbean islands in the 18th century. Ladinos, who speak Spanish exclusively, are the more commercially and politically influential group, and they make up most of the urban population.

## Languages

Although all official transactions in Guatemala are conducted in Spanish, many documents—such as those related to the peace agreement of December 1996 that ended more than three decades of civil war in Guatemala—are translated into more than 20 [Mayan languages](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Maya-languages). The largest Maya groups are the Mam, who reside in the western regions of Guatemala; the [K’iche’](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Kiche), who occupy areas to the north and west of [Lake Atitlán](http://www.britannica.com/place/Lake-Atitlan); the [Kaqchikel](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Kaqchikel), who extend from the eastern shores of Lake Atitlán to Guatemala; and the [Q’eqchi’](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Kekchi), who are concentrated in the sierras to the north and west of [Lake Izabal](http://www.britannica.com/place/Lake-Izabal). Although many Maya are bilingual in [Spanish](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Spanish-language), there has been a strong commitment since the late 20th century to assert Maya ethnic identity and to promote the various Maya languages for both daily use and literature.

## Religion

While [Roman Catholicism](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-Catholicism) is the dominant religion of Guatemalans, among the Maya it is often heavily infused with beliefs of pre-Columbian origin. From the mid-20th century, however, there has been a surge of conversions to [Evangelical Protestantism](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Protestantism/Conservative-and-Evangelical-forms-of-Protestantism)(which offers strong encouragement of self-improvement), particularly among the poor. Protestants account for about two-fifths of the population, one of the highest proportions in Latin America. The most important Roman Catholic shrine in Central America is the [Black Christ](http://www.britannica.com/place/Black-Christ) of [Esquipulas](http://www.britannica.com/place/Esquipulas) (1595), located in eastern Guatemala and carved by Quirio Cataño of Antigua Guatemala.

## Demographic trends

Guatemala has a relatively high rate of annual population growth. The birth, death, infant mortality, and fertility rates are among the highest in Central America, and life expectancy is low. Thousands of the rural poor in search of a livelihood migrate seasonally to the Pacific coastal plain to harvest crops or to the major urban centres.

During the civil war, many [refugees](http://www.britannica.com/topic/refugee) fled to sparsely populated areas in the Petén region to the north. In the early 21st century, some 250,000 Guatemalans were still internally displaced. Others fled to Mexico, where more than 100 refugee camps existed in the 1980s, and to the [United States](http://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-United-States) and [Belize](http://www.britannica.com/place/Belize). Many of these refugees returned home with the help of a [United Nations](http://www.britannica.com/topic/United-Nations) refugee commission, which functioned until 2004; however, the number of Guatemalans emigrating continued to rise into the 21st century.

## *Economy*

Guatemala is a less-developed country largely dependent upon traditional commercial crops such as coffee, sugar, and bananas as the basis of its market economy. Vigorous economic growth during the 1960s and ’70s was followed, as in most of Latin America, by national indebtedness and low or negative economic growth rates in the 1980s. While the return of nominal civilian control in the late 1980s helped to improve foreign investment, tourism, and the economy in general, negative trade balances and foreign indebtedness continued to hamper the economy. The government has attempted to revitalize the economy by fostering the diversification and expansion of nontraditional exports such as cut flowers and snow peas, and free trade zones and assembly plants have been established to encourage the expansion and decentralization of manufacturing. By the beginning of the 21st century, more than half of the citizenry lived below the poverty line. Remittances from Guatemalans living abroad accounted for a larger source of foreign income than exports and tourism combined.

## Agriculture, forestry, and fishing

Although agriculture provides employment for about two-fifths of the workforce, it contributes less than one-fourth of the gross national product (GNP). Traditional peasant agriculture, focused upon the production of corn (maize), beans, and squash for domestic consumption, is concentrated on small farms or milpas (temporary forest clearings) in the highlands, but production of these staples has lagged behind population growth. In contrast, commercial plantation agriculture, emphasizing the production of coffee, cotton, sugarcane, bananas, and cattle for foreign markets, is restricted to large estates on the Pacific piedmont and coastal plain and in the lower Motagua valley.

The agricultural resources of Guatemala are rich. Although rugged landscapes prevail in much of the volcanic region, numerous highland basins and the Pacific piedmont and coastal plain provide productive soils for agriculture. Within the sierras, the lower Motagua valley offers excellent soils. The wide range of climates allows for a diversity of crops. The efficient exploitation of soils is primarily limited by the inequitable distribution of land (large landowners not being required to maximize land use) and by the inability to provide the agricultural sector with adequate financial support—i.e., funding of small farms.

Guatemala has developed into a major world supplier of cardamom. Increasingly, peasants who have long produced grains and beans and tended sheep are turning to the production of nontraditional commodities—fruits, vegetables, flowers, and ornamental plants—destined for export and for rapidly growing urban markets within the country. Nontraditional exports have continued to grow in the 21st century, but evidence suggests that this trend may be short-lived. Following the end of the civil war in 1996, many small farmers returning to Guatemala discovered that organic products such as coffee, cacao (the source of cocoa beans), and spices command higher prices as export items than traditional agricultural products.

Both forest and fishing resources have considerable potential. Forest products are derived primarily from the tropical forests of the Petén and the coniferous forests of the highlands. Limited accessibility, however, hinders the exploitation of forest resources. Lumber, primarily pine, is exported in small volume and used domestically in construction and the crafting of furniture. But the most important use of timber is for fuel, with the overwhelming majority of it going to that purpose. Commercial fishing in the Pacific has developed and includes a catch of crustaceans, especially shrimp, and such fish as tuna, snapper, and mackerel; most of the catch is exported.

## *Government and society*

## Constitutional framework

The constitution adopted in 1986 defines the country as a sovereign democratic republic and divides power among three governmental branches: legislative, executive, and judicial. Legislative power is delegated to a unicameral Congress, whose members are elected to five-year terms through direct, popular suffrage. Executive power is vested in the president, who is both the head of government and the head of state, and the vice president, both of whom are also elected to five-year terms by popular vote.

## Local government

Guatemala is divided into departamentos (departments), each headed by a governor appointed by the president. The departments in turn are divided into municipios (municipalities), which are governed by councils presided over by mayors, elected directly by popular ballot.