



Introducing the Giant Kites of Guatemala



What: Giant kites (*los barriletes gigantes*) are designed, constructed, displayed, and flown in two highland villages—Sumpango and Santiago—as part of observances for Day of the Dead (*Día de los Muertos* or *Día de los Difuntos*). The kites range from 3 to 16 meters in diameter (about 10 to about 52 feet): those up to 6 meters in diameter can be flown if the wind allows; larger kites are for display only. Kite makers compete for small trophies (honor, not money), in categories organized by size and design, with a separate category for youth kites. Children also make or purchase small, simple kites to fly at this time of year.

The giant kites combine detailed geometric patterns with figurative images that depict Mayan culture (kites from Santiago are more likely to be wholly geometric in design). Some images illustrate an overtly political message, which is spelled out as part of the design. Even a comparatively small kite requires a prodigious amount of material: making a kite only 6 meters in diameter uses two gallons of white glue, 3500 sheets of 20-by-30-inch tissue paper in thirty colors, and bond paper for backing, plus lengths of cane or bamboo for the frame, wire or cord for binding, and additional cord and fabric for the tail.

Just when and how the tradition of making and flying elaborate giant kites developed is uncertain. As early as the sixteenth century CE, Franciscan priests recorded the flying of small kites during October and November in several places throughout Latin America and incorporated this indigenous practice into observances of Catholic holy days. It may also be that new types of paper introduced by Asians immigrating to Guatemala at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries influenced how kites were made and flown. Specific mention of giant kites appears in the region's oral histories by 1899. By 1992, as the 500th anniversary of the arrival of the Spanish approached, indigenous peoples throughout the Americas were also looking for ways to affirm and fortify their own identities instead of celebrating their conquest. Strengthening the "culture of the kite" has contributed to that impetus.

Where: The two Mayan villages, Sumpango and Santiago, are in Guatemala's south-central highlands, just north of Antigua. They are both in the *departamento* of Sacatapéquez, Santiago about ten miles southeast of Sumpango. Sumpango is slightly larger, with approximately 3200 residents, and holds its *feria* (festival) in a large *campo* (field) adjacent to the cemetery. The smaller Santiago (about 2700 residents) displays and flies giant kites in the cemetery, despite its cramped, steep setting. Santiago receives considerable financial support from the central government for its event; Sumpango's festival, which began in 1980, finally was recognized by the government in 1998. The Drachen Foundation's connections are with kite makers in Sumpango.





When: Preparations (design and construction) start in mid-September, six weeks before Day of the Dead (November 1st), with teams working about three hours each weekday evening, all day on Saturday, and often long into the nights as the deadline nears. In Sumpango young men dig holes for the display poles during the night of October 31st; kite frames are assembled and the kites raised for display in just a few hours on the morning of November 1st. In Santiago, flying is extended for two days, through November 2nd, All Souls Day.

Who: Village residents work in teams to construct the giant kites. In Sumpango twenty teams produced kites in 2000. Teams may be fairly small (six to eight members) or large (for example, twenty-four members), and may mix sexes and ages. Some established teams include members who joined when they were just children: one team, the Happy

Boys, evolved from a basketball squad and has members from three generations. The team works collaboratively to develop the theme for the kite, but the complete design is usually drawn by one person, often the team leader. Team leaders are commonly young men from ages twenty-five to thirty, who may have special expertise as artists, graphic designers, or art/architecture students, combined with many years of experience in making kites. Some teams share the expenses; on other teams the leader pays all costs.

Team members take pride in the Mayan identity that the kites express, and value the comradeship and democratic exchange of ideas that making a kite together engenders. One team leader, Rudy Sulá, has said, "It's the only thing I can think of that permits me to revisit my Indian culture—combining my mind and my soul and my skills."

Why: The giant kites play a part in the ritual welcoming of the ancestors' spirits. These spirits are free, for twenty-four hours, to revisit their earthly homes. They are welcomed with flowers, their favorite foods, and family members, who devote the day to freshening their graves and visiting with them. Anthropologist Celso A. Lara Figueroa says that the kites "represent the 'dream state' or floating of the spirits of the deceased"; in some representations, the kites appear to be lifting the souls of the dead into the heavens. Others characterize the kite as a kind of "telegram" to the spirit world. One story says that the kites, fitted with a *zumbador* or hummer, frighten away disruptive spirits and assure a peaceful reception for the ancestors. In whatever variant, the kites suggest a continuing connection between the physical and spiritual realms, a channel for communication between them.

In recent years the "culture of the kite" in these villages has also become an important way for young Mayans to connect with their traditions, express their creativity, and reinforce cultural and political solidarity.

None of the messages incorporated into the kites is commercial, nor is the kite festival sponsored by vendors seeking to display their logos or advertise their wares. The event is organized almost entirely by volunteers. Sales of food and drink (some donated) raise money to pay for a sound system and marimba band.