



## **Introducing Guatemala**

**Topography:** Guatemala is the third largest country in Central America, 42,000 square miles, about the size of Ireland, Ohio or Tennessee. Mexico is to its north, Belize and the Caribbean Sea to its east, Honduras and El Salvador to its south, and the Pacific Ocean to its southwest.



Because of limited frontage on the Caribbean, Guatemala is subject to less hurricane damage than its neighbors. It does, however, lie at the conjunction of the North American, Cocos, and Caribbean plates, and thirty-some volcanoes dot the country. This combination of seismic and volcanic activity has resulted in largely mountainous terrain. Steep mountains and short rivers isolate the villages from each other so that, historically, villages have developed distinctive languages and customs. This isolation may explain why the tradition of making and flying giant kites is not more widespread throughout Guatemala.

Guatemala's volcanoes also contribute fertile soil: most crops of the western hemisphere can be grown somewhere in Guatemala. And because the country is entirely within the tropics, days are approximately the same length for the entire year. Guatemala has a great diversity of flora and fauna (including the jaguar, the largest feline species in the Americas, worshipped as a god by the Maya). Its Lake Atitlán has been called (by Aldous Huxley) the "most beautiful lake in the world."

**Demography:** Guatemala is the most populous country in Central America, with about 12.5 million residents. Its capital, Guatemala City, sits on a highland plateau, at 5000 feet, and is home to one in five Guatemalans: it is the largest city in Central America. Guatemala is also the most densely populated country in all of Latin America: thus, events happening in just one small area may still affect a large number of people. For example, the 1976 earthquake affected only 8% of Guatemala's territory but left 20% of the population homeless (as well as killing 30,000 persons).

Just more than half of Guatemalans are Maya, making Guatemala the only country where American Indians are the majority population (there is also a very small group of non-Maya Indians, the Xinca). Four of five Maya live in Guatemala; the rest live in Mexico, Honduras, and Belize. "Maya" encompasses a range of peoples (those in Sumpango and Santiago are Kakchikel), who speak twenty-some languages. Speaking an indigenous language rather than Spanish is the primary way people identify themselves as native.

The balance of the population is primarily Ladino, those of mixed Indian and Spanish heritage. There is also a small but politically influential number of Guatemalans (fewer than 10%) who are *criollo*, of Spanish heritage. "Ladino" is a flexible category: someone who speaks Spanish and follows European-inspired rather than Maya life ways will be considered Ladino regardless of heritage. To note: Cristobál Federico Carranza Sosa, one of the kite makers visiting from Guatemala, and the director of Sumpango's kite activities, is Ladino rather than Maya. He is respected by all kite makers for his dedication to the tradition and represents all the community members fairly.



**Distant History:** The “Maya Fluorescence” began at the time Rome was falling and lasted until about 900 CE. But, for undetermined reasons (earthquakes, invasion, disease, or agricultural disaster), this advanced civilization began to decline thereafter. By the time the Spanish arrived in the sixteenth century, the great cities had been emptied for five hundred years.

Spanish conquest was disastrous for the indigenous peoples: war and diseases introduced by Europeans killed three-quarters of Guatemala’s population of two million within thirty years after the invasion. It is estimated that 90% of the Maya died during the sixteenth century, and the remainder, despite fierce resistance (a rebellion at least once a generation), was enslaved.

**Recent History:** The Maya have barely escaped enslavement. Despite having hosted one of the most advanced civilizations of the ancient world, Guatemala now has the lowest standard of living and life expectancy in Central America, with up to 80% of its people living in poverty and illiteracy equally high among the indigenous population. Most Maya are *milperos*, or subsistence farmers. Two percent of land holders own 65% of the land, primarily in large coffee plantations. This dire situation was exacerbated by the longest civil war in the Americas, from 1961 to December 1996.

During its course, 100,000 to 200,000 persons were killed, 440 villages destroyed, and a million persons displaced internally. It is against this background that the messages and slogans on Guatemala’s giant kites should be understood: expressions of pride in their cultural survival that politically, economically, and socially marginalized people might hesitate to broadcast in other settings can be aired openly when contextualized as part of a kite.