



# Guatemala

*Guatemala is a colourful land of volcanoes, colonial cities, archaeology, wildlife and the heart of the Maya world. Most of the indigenous population live in the south of the country, and there are over 2,000 archaeological sites, many of which have yet to be excavated. The Easter celebrations in Antigua are a riot of colour and sound: bright carpets of sawdust and flowers are laid along the processional route.*

*A visit to Guatemala can easily be combined with Belize, Mexico or Honduras, or by air with Costa Rica.*

## Climate and when to go

Dry season is early October to May, but even in the rainy season showers generally fall only in the afternoons, except for September which can be very wet. There is usually a 6 week Indian summer (*canícula*) in mid July. It is coolest in December and January, especially in the highlands. In the Petén March and April are the hottest months and temperatures of 36°C and 85% humidity are not uncommon.



Tikal



Chichicastenango market



Children near Santiago Atitlán





**The Southern Highlands**

Guatemala City, the capital, is a large commercial city with little to detain the visitor. 45 minutes' drive away, Antigua was the capital of Guatemala until an earthquake destroyed it in 1773. Today it is a beautiful city with cobbled streets and colonial houses, a wide range of museums and interesting architecture which is easily explored on foot. There are good shops, excellent restaurants, and many charming boutique hotels. Antigua is overshadowed by several volcanoes: Agua dominates the south of the city, and lava flows on Fuego can often be seen at night. A trip to the top of Volcán Pacaya is very worthwhile if you are reasonably fit.

Lake Atitlán, 2 hours north-west, is over 17 kilometres wide and surrounded by three volcanoes. The villages on the shores of the lake each have their own traditions, clothing and handicrafts. One of these villages, Santiago Atitlán, holds the idol Maximón, a wooden sculpture decked in scarves and smoking a cigar, and a clever amalgamation of Catholic and Maya religious beliefs.



Cathedral, Antigua



Villa Sumaya



La Merced, Antigua



Lake Atitlán

**POSADA DEL ANGEL**



 5 blocks from Antigua's main square, 5 beautifully and individually decorated rooms, each with a fireplace, in an old colonial town house. Reading area, roof terrace and small lap pool.

**MANSIÓN DEL PENSATIVO**



3 blocks from the centre of Antigua, 8 very comfortable rooms, a large pool, lovely gardens and an elegant living room.



### CASA PALOPÓ



On a hill above Lake Atitlán in the village of Santa Catarina Palopó. Beautifully decorated and spacious rooms. Bar, pool and terrace with fabulous views over the lake. Activities include boat trips around the lake, market visits, walking, kayaking.

### UNICORNIO AZUL



At 3,000m on the Cuchumatanes plateau, owned by a charming Guatemalan/French couple. Guests stay either in the main house (plenty of blankets for the cold nights) or a separate guest house (no electricity). Beautifully constructed stables and fine horses, as riding is the main activity here (either day rides or longer treks). Best November-April.

The famous market town of **Chichicastenango** has a large and colourful Sunday and Thursday market. If time allows it is worth arriving the night before to watch the market being set up and visit early the following morning to avoid the crowds.

Travelling west, **Quetzaltenango**, also known as Xela, is a good base for walking. Within reach are Sanguito volcano (Central America's most active), Laguna Chicabal (an extinct volcano with a crater lake venerated by the Maya), or the dormant volcano Cerro Quemado. Further north is the town of Huehuetenango, at the base of the **Cuchumatanes** mountains which extend to the Mexican border. Their 3,000m plateau is densely populated, and most of the rocks are limestone, which have been used to make walls to keep sheep, goats, horses, mules and donkeys in their fields.



Rio Dulce



Garifuna house in Livingston

### The Coasts

The short Pacific coast (with mainly black sand) is best known for deep-sea fishing and bird watching. The Caribbean coast is 300km from Guatemala City, linked by the busy Atlantic Highway. The two principal coastal towns are Puerto Barrios, the main port, and **Livingston**. The latter is home to the *Garifuna* population, descendants of escaped African slaves and Caribs, and is best reached down the beautiful gorge of the Rio Dulce. A boat provides a link to Punta Gorda in Belize.



Antigua



Riding in the Cuchumatanes





**The North: the Verapaces and the Petén**

North-east of Guatemala City are the limestone hills of the **Alta** and **Baja Verapaces**, full of caves, rushing rivers, and the extraordinary **Semuc Champey**, where one smaller river flows on a natural limestone bridge over another larger one. The roads are quite poor but if time allows a visit to this region is very rewarding. If you are lucky you may even see the elusive quetzal, the country's national bird.

The **Petén** is Guatemala's steamy jungle zone. The superb Maya ruins of **Tikal** are the largest in the region, with over 3,000 structures, shrines, temples, ceremonial platforms, terraces, ball-courts and plazas. The site is thought to have been occupied as far back as 300 BC, and is set in lush semi-tropical rainforest over an area of 222 square miles. Varied wildlife includes howler monkeys, toucans, wild turkeys, coatis and many bird species. While Tikal is the best known site there are many others (and new ones are still being discovered), such as Ceibal, Aguateca, Dos Pilas and Yaxhá.

**NIT'UN LODGE**



On the north shore of Lake Petén Itzá. Stone and wood-built cabins all of which have terraces with views over the lake. Open kitchen, dining and bar area. Ideal base from which to visit Tikal and the other Maya sites near Flores. First class archaeologist owner/guide.

**CHIMINOS ISLAND LODGE**



On Petexbatún lagoon, reached by boat from Sayaxché, close to the Aguateca and Dos Pilas sites. Rooms have hot water but erratic electricity. Carefully maintained trails, where toucans, parrots, and migratory species can be observed.



Quiriguá stela



Sachichaj falls



Tikal



Semuc Champey



Yaxhá