



A ritual of Chichicastenango Mayas

## Guatemala

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Guatemala! "Why that Country?.. Where is it on the map, Africa?.. Guantanamo? That famous place...". These are the questions that are often directed towards me and I feel hearing the same from you, esteemed readers. I had the honour of making my Guatemala and Latin American acquaintances when I met a teenager from Guatemala's neighbor Honduras at my university's one-year international exchange program. Since I did not know anything about the young man's country, I sweated during our conversation to try not to bring the matter back to his country, and then I was embarrassed for myself. I never thought about the possibility, that one day I would come across the citizens of these distant countries. I was amazed at this situation, as a teenager who spent all his life in his own country. My only closeness to those distant countries was the Panini football player stickers before the World Cups. I promised myself that I would come back to this continent, learn Spanish and their countries, understand their lands. Three years later, I did that as soon as I graduated from university. My starting country was Guatemala. In this small country in Central America, I spent three months studying Spanish and laid the foundation for my eight-month backpacking journey to Latin America.



Guatemala is one of the countries in the world where Spanish education is the most effective and inexpensive. In language schools that are concentrated around Antigua, Xela city or Lake Atitlan, you can stay for around \$ 600-800 per month, including 4 hours or more private lessons daily from Monday to Friday, homestay accommodation, three meals per day. Even though I went to Guatemala for the language preparation of my journey, I would not want you to perceive this place as an intercity stopover area, which was visited only while passing by. On the contrary, when I am asked about my favorite country on the continent, without blinking my eyes, I would say Guatemala, the land of avocado, coffee and cocoa (or maybe cocaine subject to your quest). Why is it so? Depending on what kind of things you want to see in there, the country can respond to many requests. If you like the Caribbean coast and enjoy the sea and sun, you can treat yourself with seafood <sup>1</sup>. Maybe you want to climb active volcanoes as a nature trip, watch the erupting lava, and warm your candies in hot steam coming out of the ground <sup>2</sup>. Or, to get lost in history, you can see the scenes of the Star Wars

as you climb over the magnificent pyramids and watch the rain forest stretching to the horizon in Tikal, the ancient capital of the Maya <sup>3</sup>. Perhaps for silence and peace, you would stay in bungalows on the banks of the Rio Dulce river covered with forest and listen to the sound of the forest <sup>4</sup>. If you want to stroll through the colonial Spanish buildings, take photos in the old photogenic streets and in front of the fancy doors, sip your Guatemalan coffee in a cafe, then Antigua is for you <sup>5</sup>. It is also possible to experience the whole country lstepwise by hanging around Lake Atitlan. Each village scattered around the lake welcomes tourists, who come to the country with another eye <sup>6</sup>. For example, in one gather yoga-like meditators, or passengers touring the continent with their backpacks, Mayas who do their religious ceremonies, those who enter the lake and read books against the volcano landscape or market places opened by the Mayas. As you leave one of these villages and enter the other, you feel as if you are tasting new dishes by scooping from different plates that are placed in front of you like a gourmet.







### Society and Life

There are 21 different Maya communities in the country that have their own language, which makes up 40% of the society. Thus, Guatemala sounds like the United States of Mayas. They have managed to preserve their historic cultures, languages, structures, beliefs and lifestyles partly. It is not difficult to feel that you have come to a completely different world that you cannot see on TVs, as you want to discover everything more. Moreover, since the tourism sector is more developed than many other Latin countries, you do not have trouble getting to the place you want as a tourist.



**A child working in La Azotea coffee farm**

In Guatemala, society is divided between lower-class Mayas and upper class Maya Spanish mix Mestizos. Mestizos control the country, army and trade. Agriculture constitutes 13% of GDP, half of the workforce and 40% of exports. The most important products are coffee, sugar, banana and avocado. 63% of the GDP is in the service sector. It would not be wrong to call Guatemala, or even most of the Central American countries, the backyard of the USA. The majority of the tourists who come here are from the USA, as well as most of the foreigners who come to work or live their retirement. Electricity sockets are US type, TVs are broadcasting Miami and encouraging American life. Many Guatemalan dreams of being able to go to the USA on vacation, to work there, or to marry someone there.



**In Latin American cities, a cross is erected on the hill overlooking the city to protect the city. The most famous of these is the statue of Jesus with his hands open in Rio de Janeiro. The small city in this photo is Antigua and the back is the extinct Volcano Agua.**

Although civil war is a thing of the past, the country is now struggling with poverty, crime, drug trafficking and low education. However, as long as you are careful, there is no danger of traveling as a tourist. As I mentioned before, the tourism sector in Guatemala is very developed and you will meet many foreign tourists who travel or work for a short time, unless you leave their popular spots. Especially if you come across holidays and festivals, it would be an unforgettable experience in your life.



**Our guide, watching the tip of the Volcan Agua**

On the volcano line stretching across Central America, there are 32 volcanoes in Guatemala. From Antigua, there are two volcanoes that are on the list of tourism agencies to walk up on foot. One is the Volcan Pacaya, the other is the neighbor of it, Volcan Acatenango. Volcan Fuego comes to life gradually every month, starts to vomit lava with the sound similar to a balloon explosion, and then gets silent again. The popping sound closely like this: take a bottle of cola, shake it abundantly, pop it like a bottle of champagne. The contact of the lava with the soil sounds as follows: Listen to the bubbles forming after pouring the cola into a cup. Fuego is like a living thing. It blooms, fades, and a new plant is formed from the seed next month. Meanwhile, watching the lava makes me got lost in thoughts as if watching the waves hitting the beach by the sea.