Guatemala

Location and Geography

The country of Guatemala is located in Central America. It is bordered by Mexico and Belize to the north and El Salvador and Honduras to the south with the Gulf of Honduras, Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean in between. Guatemala is located in both the northern and western hemispheres. As an average sized country, Guatemala sits on over 42,000 square miles of land and is said to be just slightly smaller than the state of Tennessee.

Climate

Since Guatemala is a tropical country, it usually has warm weather reaching 80º Fahrenheit in the lowlands and 40º Fahrenheit in upper elevations. Although they normally have beautiful, sunny weather they also have well defined wet and dry seasons. May through part of December is known as their rainy season and they get 125 inches or more of rainfall per year.

History

Before Guatemala won its independence in 1821, the nation was flourishing with the Mayan civilization. During the second half of the 20th century, Guatemala faced many problems with military and civilian governments and even had a guerrilla warfare for 36 years. Finally in 1996, the government signed a peace agreement that formally ended
the war and conflict, but unfortunately before problems were resolved more than 100,000 people died.

**Important Dates**

Important dates on Guatemala’s calendar include: January 1\(^{st}\), New Years Day; Semana Santa, which is Holy Week that takes place (at least in Antigua, Guatemala) the ten days prior to Easter Sunday. Antigua, Guatemala is said to have the most beautiful religious celebration in Central America. Other important dates include: May 1\(^{st}\), International Work Day; August 15\(^{th}\), Assumption Day which is celebrated in Guatemala City only; September 15\(^{th}\), Independence Day; November 1\(^{st}\), All Saints Day; December 24\(^{th}\), Christmas Eve; December 25\(^{th}\), Christmas Day and December 31\(^{st}\), New Years Eve.

**Population**

Guatemala has the largest population of any Central American country, with a population of over 13 million people in 2008. More than half the population in Guatemala are Ladinos, also known as Mestizo or people of mixed European and indigenous ancestry. In 2008, there were 311 people per square mile with 53 percent of people living in rural areas but a growing trends of people moving to more urban areas. In 2000, 3.2 million people lived in Guatemala’s largest metropolitan area of Guatemala City. Forty percent of the population are under the age of 15, which makes for a very young population. Guatemala has the highest infant mortality rate, 29 deaths for every 1,000 born but has improved substantially since 1960 when the infant mortality rate was
125 deaths for every 1,000 born. Average life expectancy is 70 years and is considered to be one of the lowest in the region.

Currency

The official currency of Guatemala is quetzal, which is distributed in increments of 1, 5, 10, 20, 50 and 100 in the form of bills. Coins are issued in centavo 1, 5, 10, 25, 50 and quetzal 1. The current exchange rate is $1.00= Q 8.0115.

Education

Elementary education is free and in urban areas compulsory for children between the ages of 7-14, since it is free, almost 2 million students attended primary school in 2000. As the grade levels go higher, enrollment drops especially in rural areas where school only goes up to the third grade. Much of the education budget for their nation is sent to the capitol city, Guatemala City. As well as having public schools, there are also over 12,000 private and church schools. Guatemala has the one of the lowest literacy rates in Central America, topping at 72 percent of the population who are over the age of 15.

Those who chose to attend college have several opportunities. The first university in Guatemala, The University of San Carlos of Guatemala, was founded in 1676 and tuition is free. However because of the countries political conflicts and lack of resources, it has suffered greatly. All the turmoil has lead to new doors opening though most of them are private institutions located in Guatemala City, but some have branches located in other cities throughout Guatemala.
Language

The official language of Guatemala is Spanish which makes up more than 60 percent of the population and there are more than 20 other Mayan languages and village languages. English is also understood among the upper class and business people.

Religion

Since the Spanish conquest in the 16th century, Roman Catholic has been the major religion in Guatemala. They are a free nation and can chose their own religion and even had Pentecostal Evangelical sects grow rapidly throughout Guatemala since the 1960s due to Protestant missionaries.

Agriculture

For more than a century, Guatemala’s most important export has been coffee and in 2006 they produced over 311,000 tons. Bananas have always been an important export, but has recently declined. They provide bananas for many well known companies such as Chiquita, Dole and Del Monte and are in the perfect region for growing bananas due to their tropical lowlands. Since the 1970s Guatemala has been the leading exporter of a popular spice found in Arab countries called cardamom although its importance has, in recent years, diminished. Other important crops grown are fresh fruits, oil seeds and vegetables. Since Guatemala is a large exporter, much of their land that is suitable for farming is limited for their food production. What land they can use is used principally for corn but also for rice, beans, sorghum, potatoes,
soybeans, fruits and vegetables. They also raise cattle, pigs, sheep, goats and poultry for food.

Trade

Exportation has been very important throughout Guatemala and represents a large portion of their nations income. Since the 1900s the exportation of coffee and bananas has been extremely important to the Guatemalan economy. As well as coffee, they export large quantities of sugar, bananas and cardamom. In 2003, exports totaled $2.6 billion with the United States receiving one third of their exports. Other products that add to their profits include: fresh fruits, vegetables, flowers, processed foods, textiles, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, plastics, cosmetics, rubber and paper products, beef and petroleum. They also rely on importation from El Salvador, Costa Rica, Japan, Mexico and the United States. Most of their imports are automobiles, petroleum, food, raw materials and machinery.

Food

Corn has been and always will be a stable food for Guatemalans. They use corn to make many different food products, but is most often used to make tortillas, which are normally eaten with beans in some form; mashed, whole or refried. Beans are often served for every meal of the day. They also eat a lot of rice, eggs and cheese. The main meats they consume are chicken, turkey and beef. Guatemalans also consume fruits and vegetables they have grown and are able to eat what is left after exportation. Due
to the lack of adequate nutrition in their diets, 17 percent of the population is considered undernourished by the World Bank.

**Landmarks**

There are landmarks located all over the country, but some of the most historical would have to be the ancient Mayan Ruins. The Ruins serve as living proof that the Mayan culture flourished between 700 BC and 900 AD. Some of the amazing work can be found in the areas of Tikal and just across the border in Honduras. Tikal’s wonders include The Great Plaza, the temple of the Great Jaguar and the Temple II. Guatemala is also admired for their 37 active and inactive volcanoes. One could admire, photograph or even hike up a volcano, but please chose an inactive one!

*Kara Baker*