

Guatemala Culture & Foods

Country of Origin: Guatemala

Primary Language(s): Spanish & 28 indigenous languages

Percent of Iowa's Population: 2.4% of the US Hispanic population

Where are we from?



Patterned clothing, such as a traditional dress, can tell you where someone is from as each town and village uses different designs. (9)



Education and Literacy

Similar to the United States, the educational system in Guatemala is divided into three levels: primary (elementary), secondary (high school), and university. Education in Guatemala is free and compulsory through sixth grade, or between the ages of 7 and 14. (2) The literacy rate of Guatemalans over the age of 15 is just 75%, the lowest literacy rate in Central America. Males are more likely to be able to read (80%) than females (69%). (3)

Background

The Republic of Guatemala is one of seven countries located in Central America. Bordered by Belize, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, and the Pacific Ocean, Guatemala has a land area of 108,430 square kilometers (41,865 square miles or approximately the size of Tennessee) and a population of 13 million, representing over one third of Central America's entire population.

Much of Guatemala's history has been marked by violence. For 36 years, the country was embattled in a civil war that took the lives of more than 200,000 people. The war brought about mass murders and resulted in millions of people being run off of their land. Guatemala's civil war ended in December 1996, but the war scars still remain. Violence and intimidation are major problems in private life and in politics too. (13) The climate of Guatemala is primarily tropical, although it contains cool highlands in the north and tropical jungles in the south. The central terrain is largely mountainous, while the coastal region is bordered by plains. There are many active volcanoes in the country, and the area is also subject to hurricanes and earthquakes. (5) Approximately 40 percent of the population of Guatemala is urban. The most populated area is the country's capital, Guatemala City, which boasts a metropolitan population of over two million people. Guatemala is a leader in Central America's commerce and manufacturing. It produces and exports petroleum, minerals, tobacco, electrical goods, pharmaceuticals, food, and textiles. Tourism in Guatemala also thrives, particularly in Antigua, which is a major cultural center of Guatemala City. Agriculture represents about 25 percent of the Guatemala's income, and farming accounts for nearly half of the nation's workforce.

Traditions, Customs, & Taboos

Guatemalan customs are largely influenced by the predominant Roman Catholic Church, even for those who do not profess that faith. Each village and town honors their respective saints every year. (4)

If invited to dine in a Guatemalan home, it is polite to bring a small gift or dessert. The signal to start eating is when the host says "Buen provecho!" When not eating hands should remain above the table with the wrists resting on the edge. Dishes are passed to the left. Take small portions, as you will be expected to clean your plate. (8)

Loud voices in public are looked down upon.

Holidays & Celebrations

Christmas, Advent, Three Kings, and Easter are the most important holidays of the year.

Easter Week (Semana Santa) is a festive time in Guatemala and particularly in Antigua, where famous religious processions take place through the streets of the town.

Each year on September 15th, Guatemala celebrates its independence from Spain. Lively parades and other events occur to the beat of military bands and are back-dropped by buildings decorated with blue and white fabric.

All Saints Day on November 1st, is a day when giant kites are flying and cemeteries are filled with life. Cemeteries erupt into full-fledged celebrations, where families bring past family members' favorite foods and drinks. Christmas is also a time of special processions, fireworks, and nativity scenes complete with clay figures and houses. (4)

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Health Disparities

There are many communicable diseases and conditions that threaten Guatemalan people on a day-to-day basis. Parasites, diabetes, and malnutrition are huge health problems in Guatemala. Given the prevalence of poverty, many residents have limited access to quality nutrition, limited education, and higher rates of disease. Guatemala is characterized by high infant and maternal morbidity and mortality rates, pervasive malnutrition, and high incidences of infectious diseases. The prevalence of Type 2 diabetes and obesity has also risen. For women and children, the health discrepancies are very visible. In children, infant mortality and malnutrition are rampant. Severe health and nutritional deficiencies are associated with deaths of children under the age of 5. At-risk women and infants frequently die because of their limited access to quality health care, as well as their perilous living conditions. (10) Chronic malnutrition in Guatemala is attributable to income inequality (much of the population lives on under \$2 a day), political unrest, a lack of education, increased price of food (particularly protein foods), poor infrastructure, and uncertain access to clean water. (8)

Traditional Foods & Meal Patterns

Food is an important part of Guatemalan customs and culture. Three meals a day is the norm with the largest meal being lunch. Staple foods throughout the country include corn tortillas and tamales, black beans, rice, wheat bread, and pasta. Guatemala is also popular for its wide variety of vegetables and exotic fruit. (4)

A typical meal in wealthier areas might include soup, meat, rice, tortillas or bread, and substantial garnishes like guacamole, fried plantains, and pickled vegetables. Rural diets include more simple ingredients, particularly beans and corn, which are eaten at every meal by the poor. Snacks usually consist of a sweetened drink and a pastry. (8)

Considerations for WIC

- Indigenous Guatemalans might find it difficult to understand the Spanish language as there are 28 different Mayan languages spoken in Guatemala.
- Half of Guatemalan girls have a child before the age of 19.
- The patriarchal society contributes to alarming rates of sexual violence and killings of women (ranked 3rd globally).
- The average length of education in Guatemala is 4 years and only 1/3 graduate from the sixth grade.
- Children are often cared for by their mothers, grandmothers, & young women hired as nannies. Infants may be breastfed for a few months but then are given bottles, which they may continue using until four or five years.
- Guatemalans tend to favor direct eye contact over indirect and view it as an important way of showing interest in what the speaker is saying.

What's the Iowa Connection?

In 2017, an estimated 1.5 million U.S. residents claimed Guatemalan ethnicity. (14) Guatemalans are the sixth-largest population of Hispanic origin living in the United States, accounting for 2.4% of the U.S. Hispanic population in 2013. (11) The "Latino boom" hit Iowa around 1993. Latino immigrants began moving to Iowa primarily from California, Illinois, New York, Texas and other states. They were chiefly drawn by jobs in the dairy industry, hog lots, egg farms and other agricultural-related plants, as well as the low cost of living and good schools. (12)

Common Guatemalan foods: meat, rice, and black beans



How are we Living?

Guatemala is the most gender unequal country in Latin America.

Only 49% of adult women in Guatemala are employed compared to 86% of men.

In Guatemala, 75% of the indigenous population live in poverty.

