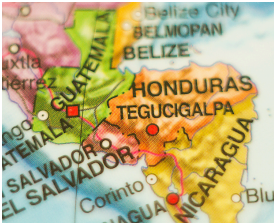


# Exploring the Guatemalan Culture

## Background



Guatemala is in Central America, bordered by Mexico to the north, Belize to the northwest, Honduras to the south, and El Salvador to the southeast. Guatemala has a lush and diverse landscape ranging from beaches to rainforests and mountains. Guatemala has a rich history dating back centuries to the Maya civilization. The country became independent from Spain and Mexico in 1821. From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, dictators have ruled the country with military coups and a bloody civil war. Today, the country is a constitutional democratic republic with a president. It is one of the poorest countries in Latin America, with over half the population living in poverty. Guatemala City is the capital and the largest city in Central America.

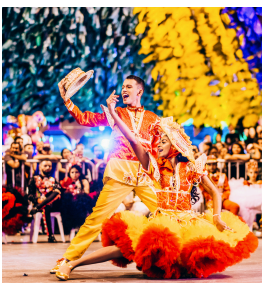
## Traditions and Customs

Guatemalan family life is either Maya (indigenous) or Ladino (non-indigenous). The Maya culture is prevalent throughout the country, including crafts, colorful handwoven textiles, and costumes that are unique to each community. Weekly market days in Maya villages are important social gatherings. Maya families primarily speak the Maya language, with the extended family as the basis of the community. Maya people rarely marry outside their local villages. Ladinos adopt a Spanish language, dress, and lifestyle, living a more Western middle-class lifestyle with extended families living in separate homes. The art of the colonial period is represented in the architecture and decor of Roman Catholic churches throughout the country.



## Holidays and Celebrations

Fairs and religious festivals are celebrated throughout the year. September 15th is Guatemala's national day of independence from Spain and is celebrated with fireworks, dances, parades, soccer matches, and cockfights. Indigenous crafts are sold at festivals, including intricately embroidered huipils (smocks) worn by Maya women. Many Guatemalans celebrate All Saints' Day on November 1 with kite flying and feasting on fiambre (cold salad). Most Guatemalans celebrate Christmas and build a brightly colored nativity scene to put under the Christmas tree.



## Education and Literacy

Spanish is the official language of Guatemala and is spoken by most. Education is publicly funded, and the country has a high literacy rate. With half the population living in poverty, most start working at a young age and are unable to attend secondary school.



## Health Disparities

Many Guatemalans experience challenges with health, including malnutrition. Infants and children often experience poor growth. Many families choose between indigenous treatments for health issues, while others choose medical interventions.

## Traditional Food Practices

Guatemalan cuisine features maize, chilies, and black beans as key ingredients. Traditional dishes include stews, such as *Kak'ik*, made with turkey in a tomato base. Tamales, fried plantains, and tostadas with tomato sauce, guacamole, and black beans are uniquely Guatemalan. *Fiambre*, a cold salad made with meat and pickled items, is served on special occasions, such as the Day of the Dead and All Saints Day. During the Christmas season, Guatemalans serve tamales and *ponche* (fruit punch). It is traditional to eat *paches* (tamale made from potatoes) on Thursdays. There are hundreds of varieties of tamales throughout Guatemala, most of which include *masa* (corn dough), a filling of meat, sometimes fruits and nuts, which are wrapped in plantain or banana leaves.



## Considerations for WIC Educators and Counselors

- Guatemalan culture is warm, generous, and emphasizes family. It values interdependence on friends, household servants, and the community for support. Protecting the family home is very important.
- Families are generally patriarchal. Men are typically the head of the household and make most decisions, while women are the moral core of the family and are responsible for household work and child-rearing.
- It is traditional for mothers to have a strong support system, including a *padrino* and *madrina* (godfather and godmother) and a *compadre* or *comadre* (close friend or companion).
- Mothers are usually very protective of their children, especially their daughters.
- Co-sleeping with infants and children is common.
- Domestic violence is often normalized and can even be viewed as an expression of affection.
- Most infants are fed human milk for one to three years, and complementary foods are introduced at 4 to 6 months of age.
- Many families experience malnutrition, anemia, and growth stunting because of food insecurity.

*Note: This is general information for staff about this culture. It does not account for the diversity within the people of this culture and society, and does not imply that this content applies to all people of this culture.*

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