

IDENTITIES ABROAD: GUATEMALA



IDENTITIES ABROAD

As you prepare for your education abroad program, you may be considering how your own identities may or may not interact with the host culture in similar or different ways than they do at home. Below you will find country-specific information on potential challenges for students who are from backgrounds traditionally underrepresented in education abroad programs. This information, adapted from the Diversity Network's Country Diversity Notes (via [Diversity Abroad](#)), is intended to assist you in exploring how you might be received abroad based on your race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, religion, or ability.

The information below features a country overview for Guatemala as well as information pertinent to the socio-cultural climate that U.S. students of diverse backgrounds can reasonably expect while living in the country. It also offers bulleted information noting facts that may directly relate to student experiences in the country. Links with additional information resources on the various topics are also offered.

The below information provides a bird's-eye view of diversity matters in the country as they pertain to U.S. students. Purchase understands the below information is not exhaustive or inclusive of all possible student identities and experiences. We encourage you to conduct further research and chat with relevant points of contact including your program advisor, faculty leader, or peers who have traveled to Guatemala, to gain a greater understanding of your host country and/or city.

If you would like to speak with us about any questions pertaining to diversity and inclusivity abroad, please contact us at study.abroad@purchase.edu and we will answer your inquiry to the best of our ability and/or refer you to others with the expertise that you need. Additionally, if you are interested in discussing other geographical locations, please don't hesitate to contact us.

COUNTRY OVERVIEW

FAST FACTS:

Capital: Guatemala City

Population: 17,422,821

Language(s): Spanish (official) 69.9%, Maya languages 29.7%, other 0.4%. The 2003 Law of National Languages recognized 23 indigenous languages which includes 21 Maya languages, Xinka and Garifuna.

Religions: Roman Catholic 41.7%, Evangelical 38.8%, other 2.7%, atheist 0.1%, none 13.8%, unspecified 2.9%.

Ethnic groups: Mestizo (mixed Amerindian-Spanish) 56%, Maya 41.7%, Xinka 1.8%, African descent 0.2%, Garifuna 0.1%, foreign 0.2%.



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Guatemala is a Central American country located south of Mexico and Belize and north of El Salvador and Honduras in between the Gulf of Honduras on the eastern coast and the North Pacific Ocean on the west coast. It is slightly smaller than the state of Pennsylvania. The climate in Guatemala is mostly tropical, hot and humid in the lowlands and a little cooler in the highlands. There are two mountain chains that divide the country into three parts: the mountainous highlands, the Pacific coast and the northern Peten lowlands. The national language is Spanish and there are several indigenous populations throughout the country with 23 different languages, including 21 Maya languages. Guatemala is known for its volcanos and the Mayan culture and ruins.

Guatemala is the most populous country in the Central American region, but the GDP per capita is roughly half of the average for Latin America and the Caribbean. Distribution of income is highly unequal and more than half of the population lives below the national poverty line with 23% living in extreme poverty. The country struggles a great deal with many areas of health and development, especially in Guatemalan youth and indigenous populations which are disproportionately affected, 79% of the indigenous population lives in poverty and nearly 40% in extreme poverty. Malnourishment is also a major issue in the country with about half of Guatemalan children under the age of 5 categorized as chronically malnourished.

The ancient history of Guatemala starts with the Mayan civilization and the modern history begins with the Spanish conquest of Guatemala in 1524. The country was party of the Captaincy General of Guatemala for 330 years which also included part of Mexico as well as El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. The colony gained its independence in 1821 and was a part of the First Mexican Empire for about two years when it became part of the Federal Republic of Central America. When this Republic formally dissolved in 1841, Guatemala gained its full independence.

The 19th and 20th centuries brought several agricultural companies to Guatemala which were supported by authoritarian rulers and the US government. But with this came ruthless labor regulations and increased the wealth of already wealthy land-owners. In 1944, the Guatemalan Revolution began with an uprising against the policies of Jorge Ubico and lasted for 10 years. The following two elected presidents of the country, Juan Jose Areval and Jacobo Arbenz brought social and economic reform. It also caused one of the major agricultural companies that had come to Guatemala earlier in the decade, the United Fruit Company, to request that the US government overthrow the presidency. A US planned coup ended the revolution in 1954 and marked the beginning of a military regime. This caused a civil war in Guatemala from 1960-1966 which included a number of human rights violations and a genocide of the indigenous Mayan population by the military. In 1997, the country re-established its representative democracy but continues to struggle with high crime rates and extrajudicial murders by security forces.

Review current travel risks for Guatemala:

- [U.S Department of State Travel Risks](#)

According to the Institute of International Education (IIE) [Open Doors Report 2019](#), 1,976 students from the United States studied abroad to Guatemala.

ETHNIC MINORITIES IN GUATEMALA

SOCIAL CONTEXT:

The main minority and indigenous communities in Guatemala today include the K'iche', Kaqchikel, Mam, Q'eqchi', other Mayan, indigenous non-Mayan, Garifuna and Xinca and there are 22 different indigenous populations throughout the country. Most of the population of the country is of indigenous or mixed Maya descent. There are many different social classes of the Mayans who can be found in all of the cities in Guatemala, but the majority live in poverty or extreme poverty and suffer cultural, social, economic, and political exclusion. Many of the rest of the population identify as ladino which refers to Europeans (particularly of Spanish and German descent) and mestizo who are mixed race Guatemalan and Mayan who adhere to a Euro-Hispanic culture. Individuals of African descent in Guatemala are either Afro-mestizos, Garifuna, or Afro-Caribbean Creole English speakers and Afro-mestizos are the largest of and most ethnically assimilated of these three populations. They are typically descendants of Africans who were brought to Guatemala for slave labor on sugar, indigo, and cochineal plantations and large cattle ranches. There are also small Chinese and Arab-speaking communities in Guatemala as well as a Jewish community. The Jewish population can be found predominantly in Guatemala City.

The indigenous communities in Guatemala have been disproportionately impacted by a very slow economic recovery and women especially are impacted in health care, nutrition, and education areas and have a much lower rate of literacy when compared to indigenous males. The health care system in the country suffers from under-staffing and a general lack of resources which again, negatively and disproportionately impacts the indigenous communities. There has also been a recent history of political violence, particularly directed towards indigenous peoples, especially under the presidency of Jose Efraín Ríos Montt who was charged with crimes of genocide and crimes against humanity at the end of his legislative term in 2012. But violence against indigenous communities remains an issue in the country. The Observatory of the human rights organization UDEFEGUA (Unit for the Protection for Human Rights Defenders of Guatemala) reported 135 attacks on human rights defenders which included 13 assassinations and two attempted murders since between January and June of 2018. Much of the violence is related to energy and extractive projects which are set to take place on indigenous of Garifuna land.

POTENTIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR:

- Since a majority of the country is Mestizo, there are not many other ethnic groups and students of color may find that they are the only person of color in their group or area.
- Students of color may experience instances of staring or people asking about their hair, etc. in Guatemala, but may find that this is far less common in larger cities than in smaller towns in the country.

ADDITIONAL LINKS:

- World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples- Guatemala, [Minority Rights Group International](#)
- [Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2019 in Guatemala](#) (see Section 6: Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons; National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities), US Department of State
- [Guatemala Travel Vlog](#), youtube

SEXUAL ORIENTATION IN GUATEMALA

SOCIAL CONTEXT:

Homosexual activity is legal in Guatemala, but same-sex marriage is currently unrecognized with the exception of foreign same-sex marriages. There is no censorship of LGBTQ+ topics in the country and it is legal to change gender without surgery. Conversion therapy is not banned in Guatemala. There are some laws preventing discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community in Guatemala. Currently, the law of children and youth protects them from sexual orientation based discrimination (but gender identity is not mentioned specifically). There is also protection against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity in employment and housing as well. But there is no comprehensive civil law that explicitly protects individuals against discrimination or hate crimes on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity.

A great deal of Guatemalans are Catholic, so there is a considerable amount of homophobia in the country. Public displays of affection between same-sex couples is rare and violence against members of the LGBT+ community are not unheard of. The Human Rights Watch reported three attacks by unidentified assailants in one week that killed two transgender women and a gay man in June of 2021, bringing the total number of murders of members of the LGBT+ community to 13 in 2021. Trans individuals and human rights defenders are particularly vulnerable in the country.

POTENTIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER OR QUEER STUDENTS:

- It is advised to keep overt displays of public affection between same-sex partners to a minimum in Guatemala.
- Cities and tourist areas of Guatemala such as Antigua, Panajachel, and Quetzaltenango are considered to be more LGBTQ+ friendly than rural areas.
- While they do exist, local LGBTQ+ communities are fairly discrete.

ADDITIONAL LINKS:

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- [LGBT Rights in Guatemala](#), Equaldex
- [LGBT Travel Information](#), U.S. Passports & International Travel
- [LGBTQ Travel Safety](#), Asher Fergusson
- [Sexual Orientation Laws in the World \(December 2019\)](#), ILGA, the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association
- [Guatemala: 3 Killings of LGBT People in a Week](#), HRW.org
- [Tips for Gay and Lesbian Travelers in Guatemala](#), Frommers.com

DISABILITY IN GUATEMALA

SOCIAL CONTEXT:

Guatemala has ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2008, but still has a way to go to becoming more accessible to citizens and visitors with disabilities. A survey completed in 2005 revealed the fact that only 10% of children with disabilities finished primary school, 77% didn't have access to rehabilitation services, and 53% could not read or write. There is also a major link between disabilities and poverty, only 15% of Guatemalans with disabilities had income.

Although there are laws in Guatemala mandating Integral Attention to Persons with Disabilities, there are very few accessible buildings and vehicles in the country outside of governmental buildings. Sidewalks in most cities tend to be very narrow, uneven and crowded. There are a few hotels that may offer accessible accommodations for visitors who use wheelchairs, but the public buses are not equipped to accommodate wheelchair using passengers.

POTENTIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES:

- Students with disabilities should know that there are not many options for wheelchair-accessible public transportation in Guatemala.
- Although sidewalks in major cities may have accessible ramps that make it easier for a wheelchair-user to navigate, the streets may be cobblestones which can be difficult to navigate.

ADDITIONAL LINKS:

- [Mobility International USA](#) Resources for Americans Traveling Abroad with Disabilities
- [Information for Students with Disabilities Traveling Abroad](#) U.S. Department of State (see section under Local Laws & Special Circumstances)
- [Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2016](#) (see Persons with Disabilities).
- [Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2019 in Guatemala](#) (see Section 6: Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons; National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities), US Department of State
- [Traveling with Disabilities and Medications](#), Transportation Security Administration
- [Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Considers Initial Report of Guatemala](#) United Nations Human Rights Office of the Higher Commissioner
- [Accessible Budapest: Discovering the Hungarian Capital with Limited Mobility](#), Culture Trip
- [Guatemala](#) Global Disability Rights Now
- [Exploring Guatemala for the Physically Challenge](#), The Wanderlust Effect
- [Tips for Travelers with Disabilities to Guatemala](#), Frommers.com

RELIGION IN GUATEMALA

SOCIAL CONTEXT:

Christianity is predominant in Guatemalan society and is the main religion of the country and the most popular is Roman Catholicism. Roman Catholicism was introduced by the Spanish and adopted by the Maya interpretations and syncretism and it was close to the universal religion for the country until the early 20th century when Protestantism was introduced. Today, Protestant Christianity

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remains the second largest religion in the country. About 11% of the population report that they do not follow any particular religion and Guatemala has one of the highest populations of atheists in the Latin American countries. About 2% of Guatemalans follow other religions that are considered minorities in the country including Mormon, Jehovah's Witness, Traditional Maya Religion, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism.

Catholic clergy have reported harassment against them and receiving threats because of their association with environmental protection work. There are certain areas of privately owned land that are considered sacred by Mayan religious groups which these groups have been denied access to which has caused some tension. But for the most part, there is little friction between different religious denominations. In fact, there is a great deal of interfaith collaboration between Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities which includes working together to provide humanitarian assistance, creating an Interreligious Humanitarian Commission, and combating malnutrition in Guatemalan children.

POTENTIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS STUDENTS:

- There is a fairly small Muslim population in Guatemala, about 1,200 individuals or 0.008% of the total population. About 95% of these individuals are Palestinian immigrants.

ADDITIONAL LINKS:

- [Countries and Their Cultures: Guatemala](#) (see section on Religion and Expressive Culture), Every Culture
- [Faith-Based Travel Information](#), U.S. Passports & International Travel
- [Guatemala Buddhist Directory](#)
- [7 Reasons Why You Must Visit Guatemala](#), Halal Trip
- [Guatemala](#), World Jewish Congress
- [2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Guatemala](#), U.S. Department of State
- [Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2019 in Guatemala](#) (see Section 6: Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons; National/Racial/Ethnic Minorities), US Department of State
- [Mosques & Prayer Time in Guatemala](#), IslamicFinder.org
- [Religious Beliefs in Guatemala](#) WorldAtlas.com

WOMEN IN GUATEMALA

SOCIAL CONTEXT:

In Guatemala, gender roles typically associate women with domestic work and men with agriculture, business, and manufacturing. There is a patriarchal and "machista" structure that can tend to exclude women and other marginalized groups. Women are statistically less educated and receive lower compensation than men in Guatemala. But there are well-educated women that hold professional roles such as owners or managers of businesses and are accepted in the society.

Violence against women has been a major issue in Guatemala. In the first four months of 2021, 160 Guatemalan women were killed and there were more than 20,000 complaints of violence against women. There have been instances of widespread institutional corruption in the police and judicial sectors and police and military involvement in serious crimes which has contributed to an increase in kidnapping, trafficking of persons and drugs, extortion, and lethal violence against women. Less than 3% of sexual offenders end up imprisoned, so there perpetrators don't fear consequences. The government's response to combat this has been to maintain the PNC's Special Unit for Sex Crimes, Office of Attention to Victims, Office of the Special Prosecutor for Crimes against Women, as well as a special unit for trafficking victims and illegal adoptions, but violence against women has remained a major problem in the country.

POTENTIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR FEMALE STUDENTS:

- If possible, avoid remote streets (both during the day and night) and walking alone late at night. Try to travel in a group if possible.
- Do not flash belongings or handle money in public areas, mugging is very common in Guatemala.
- In March, Guatemalan women started the Tengo Miedo ("I am scared") campaign to raise awareness and protest against sexual violence.

ADDITIONAL LINKS:

- [Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2016](#), (see Section 6 subheading for Women) U.S. Department of State.
- [Sexual Harassment and Prevention In College Students Studying Abroad](#)
- [Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2019 in Guatemala](#) (see Section 6 on Discrimination, Societal Abuses, and Trafficking in Persons, subheading for Women)
- [Information for Women Travelers](#), U.S. Department of State
- [Countries and Their Cultures: Guatemala](#) (see section on Gender Roles and Statuses), Every Culture
- [How Safe is Guatemala for Travel?](#) Travelsafe-abroad.com
- [In Guatemala, Women Fear for Their Lives](#) DW.com
- [Women in Guatemala](#) USAID.gov

REFERENCES

Maps, flag, and country facts are from the [CIA World Factbook](#). Accessed online in November 2021
[IIE Open Doors Report](#) | [Lonely Planet Guatemala](#)

Please note: The content within the resources provided were last reviewed in November 2021 and as such could have changed. Views expressed in links provided or in sub-links within the document do not necessarily reflect the views of the Office for Global Education.