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Guatemala Information

Location: Guatemala is the northern most country in Central America. It is bounded by Mexico, the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea.

Geography: Its 42,000 square miles of diverse landscape ranges from towering mountains (which includes 33 volcanoes) to low-land jungles, rain forest and crystal clear lakes and rivers. The altitude ranges from sea level to 13,000 feet.

Government: A constitutional democratic republic. Guatemala is divided into 22 departments each administered by an appointed governor.

Population: The country has more than eight million inhabitants. The mestizos (descended from Indian and Spanish), have kept traits from both cultures and developed their own identity. Guatemala's multicolor characteristics stem from the existence of more than twenty ethnic groups descended from the ancient Maya inhabitants of the country.

Language: Spanish is the official language. Nevertheless, there are 20 autonomous languages spoken in highlands regions.

Economy: The coffee of Guatemala ranks as one of the world's best and represents the first staple of the economy. Guatemala also has electronic assembly industries, furniture, canned goods, textiles and many other enterprises.

History: Before Christopher Columbus discovered America, the admirable Mayan civilization had already flourished in Guatemala, leaving indelible traces of its achievements. The Mayans evolved a very wide range of knowledge of astronomy, medicine, agriculture, mathematics and architecture. They also possessed and advanced political system and an amazingly accurate calendar.

In the early 16th century the arrival of Spanish troops initiated the conquest of Guatemala which did not conclude until the end of the 17th century.

The first colonial city, Santiago de los Caballeros de Guatemala, was founded in July, 1524 in the valley of Iximche, then moved to the valley of Almolonga, in November 1541. In 1543, the city was moved once more to the Panchoy valley (Antigua) and once more destroyed by the earthquakes in 1773. One more move brought the capital to the Ermita valley in 1776, where it became the modern and colorful metropolis travelers frequent today. In 1831, Guatemala became independent from Spain.