

Guatemala City



Guatemala's capital city, the largest urban agglomeration in Central America, spreads across a flattened mountain range run through by deep ravines. Let's just say that there are more beautiful places on earth.

Depending on who you talk to, Guate (as it's known) is either big, dirty, dangerous and utterly forgettable or big, dirty, dangerous and fascinating. Either way, there's no doubt that there's an energy here unlike that found in the rest of Guatemala, and the extremes that categorize the whole country are in plain view.

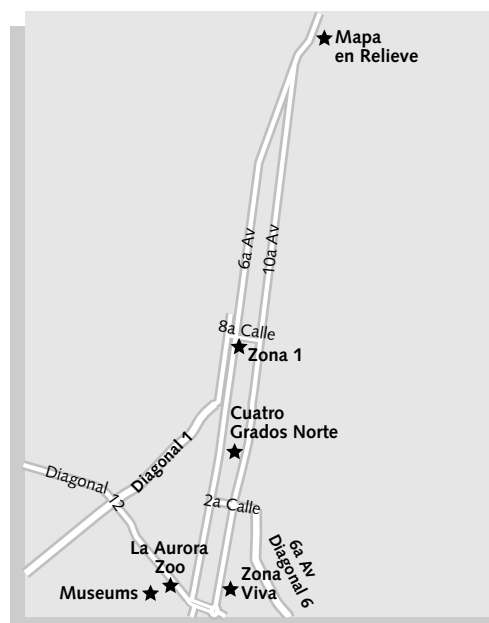
It's a place where dilapidated buses belch fumes next to Beamers and Hummers, where skyscrapers drop shadows on shantytowns and immigrants from the countryside and the rest of Central America eke out a meager existence, barely noticed by the country's elite.

This is the real cultural capital of Guatemala – the writers, the thinkers, the artists mostly live and work here. All the best museum pieces go to the capital, and while nearly every city dweller dreams of getting away to Antigua or Monterrico for the weekend, this is where they spend most of their time, a fact reflected in the growing sophistication of the restaurant and bar scene.

Many travelers skip the city altogether, preferring to make Antigua their base. Still, you may want, or need, to get acquainted with the capital because this is the hub of the country, where all transportation lines meet and all services are available.

TOP FIVE

- Visiting the country's best **museums** (p79) and **zoo** (p79)
- Hitting the bars in Zona 10's **Zona Viva** (p88)
- Getting amongst the thick of it in busy **Zona 1** (p76)
- Gazing on Guatemala from above at the **Mapa en Relieve** (p78)
- Soaking up some culture in Zona 4's **Cuatro Grados Norte** (p89)



■ POPULATION: 3.1 MILLION

■ ELEVATION: 1500M

HISTORY

Kaminaljuyú, one of the first important cities in the Mayan region, flourished two millennia ago in what's now the western part of Guatemala City. By the time Spanish conquistadors arrived in the 16th century, only overgrown mounds were left. The site remained insignificant until the earthquake of July 29, 1773, razed much of the then Spanish colonial capital, Antigua. The authorities decided to move their headquarters to La Ermita valley, hoping to escape further destruction, and on September 27, 1775, King Carlos III of Spain signed a royal charter for the founding of La Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción. Guatemala City was officially born.

Unfortunately, the colonial powers didn't move the capital far enough, for earthquakes in 1917, 1918 and 1976 rocked the capital and beyond, reducing buildings to rubble. The 1976 quake killed nearly 23,000, injured another 75,000 and left an estimated one million homeless.

ORIENTATION

The formal and ceremonial center of Guatemala City is the Parque Central at the heart of Zona 1, which is home to most of the city's better budget and midrange hotels, many of its bus stations and a lot of commerce. South down 6a or 7a Av from Zona 1 is Zona 4. Straddling the border of the two zones is the Centro Cívico (Civic Center), with several large, modern government and institutional buildings, including the main tourist information office. Southwestern Zona 4 is a chaotic area where the city's local market district and the biggest 2nd-class bus station, the Terminal de Autobuses, fuse into one overcrowded mess.

South from the southeast corner of Zona 4 runs Av La Reforma, a broad boulevard forming the boundary between Zonas 9 and 10. These zones are among the city's poshest residential and office areas, especially Zona 10 with its Zona Viva (Lively Zone) where deluxe hotels, fancy restaurants and night-clubs, and glitzy malls all congregate.

The city's airport, Aeropuerto La Aurora, is in Zona 13, just south of Zona 9 and a 6km drive or bus ride from the heart of Zona 1. Zona 13 has several museums and the parklike La Aurora Zoo.

Maps

Intelimapas' *Mapa Turístico Guatemala*, Inguat's *Mapa Vial Turístico* and International Travel Maps' *Guatemala* all contain useful maps of Guatemala City (see p315). Sophos (below) is one of the most reliable sources of maps. The **Instituto Geográfico Nacional** (IGN; ☎ 2332 2611; www.ign.gob.gt in Spanish; Av Las Américas 5-76, Zona 13; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) sells 1:50,000 and 1:250,000 topographical sheets of all parts of Guatemala, costing US\$6 each.

INFORMATION

Airline Offices

American Airlines (www.aa.com) airport (☎ 2260 6550; Aeropuerto Internacional La Aurora); city (☎ 2422 0000; Guatemala City Marriott Hotel, 7a Av 15-45, Zona 9)

Continental Airlines (www.continental.com) airport (☎ 2331 2051; Aeropuerto Internacional La Aurora); city (☎ 2385 9601; Edificio Unicentro, 18a Calle 5-56, Zona 10)

Copa Airlines (☎ 2385 5555; www.copaair.com; 1a Av 10-17, Zona 10)

Cubana (☎ 2367 2288/89/90; www.cubana.cu; Local 29, Edificio Atlantis, 13a Calle 3-40, Zona 10)

Delta Air Lines airport (☎ 2260 6439; Aeropuerto Internacional La Aurora); city (☎ 1 800 300 0005; Edificio Centro Ejecutivo, 15a Calle 3-20, Zona 10)

Grupo TACA (Aviateca, Inter, LACSA, Nica, TACA; www.taca.com) airport (☎ 2260 6497; Aeropuerto Internacional La Aurora); city (☎ 2470 8222; Avenida Hincapié 12-22, Zona 13)

Iberia (www.iberia.com) airport (☎ 2260 6337; Aeropuerto Internacional La Aurora); city (☎ 2332 0911, 2332 3913; Oficina 507, Edificio Galerías Reforma, Av La Reforma 8-00, Zona 9)

Mexicana (www.mexicana.com) airport (☎ 2260 6335; Aeropuerto Internacional La Aurora); city (☎ 2333 6001; Local 104, Edificio Edyma Plaza, 13a Calle 8-44, Zona 10)

United Airlines (www.unitedguatemala.com) airport (☎ 2660 6481; Aeropuerto Internacional La Aurora); city (☎ 2336 9900; Oficina 201, Edificio El Reformador, Av La Reforma 1-50, Zona 9)

Bookstores

Geminis Bookstore (☎ 2366 1031; Casa Alta, 3a Av 17-05, Zona 14) Good range of books in English, but rather far from the center of things.

Sophos (☎ 2334 6797; Av La Reforma 13-89, Zona 10) Relaxed place to have a coffee and read while in the Zona Viva, with a good selection of books in English on Guatemala and the Maya, including Lonely Planet guides, and maps.

Vista Hermosa Book Shop (☎ 2369 1003; 2a Calle 18-50, Zona 15) Ditto.

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