

GUATEMALA

Tourist Magnet

One

of the most beautiful countries in the world thanks to huge tropical rainforests, majestic volcanoes, tranquil lakes and magnificent Mayan temples, the Republic of Guatemala is an outstanding tourist destination.

The country is steeped in history and blessed with a breathtaking range of mountains, valleys, beaches, highlands and rivers, making it a natural and cultural paradise that is welcoming growing numbers of foreign tourists, particularly from the U.K.

Strategically located at the core of the Americas, Guatemala is home to 13.5 million people and bordered by the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. Tourism stands at the heart of its ambitious development strategy and the nation is served daily by flights from North America, South America, Europe and beyond.

Since taking office in January 2008, President Álvaro Colom has regularly emphasized the importance of the tourism industry and the employment opportunities, revenue and fiscal growth it generates for the national economy.

Favorable profit-repatriation terms, tax breaks and solid legal and regulatory frameworks have attracted hundreds of millions of dollars of foreign direct investment (FDI) in recent years as the republic steps on to the international stage.

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"Guatemala is a beautiful, friendly and welcoming country that offers visitors from around the world a wealth of natural, historical and cultural attractions all year round," President Colom says. "Our wonderful territory comprises a diverse range of landscapes, micro-climates and ecosystems, and our magnificent rainforests are teeming with wildlife, rare animals and an extensive range of plants species.

"These multiple habitats stretch to our lovely coastlines that enable us to offer a splendid selection of water sports such as game fishing and surfing. Guatemala also has lots of lakes and lagoons, many of which are of volcanic origin."

National Treasures Attract Record Visitors

Official statistics show the services industry generates around 20% of GDP, with that figure expected to jump sharply as FDI



President Álvaro Colom during one of his regular visits to schools

in the tourism sector continues to enjoy strong growth.

According to the Guatemalan Tourism Institute (INGUAT), more than 1.8 million tourists visited the republic last year—an annual rise of 5% that is in line with forecasts which predict 2 million visitors target will arrive between 2010 and 2011.

New figures reinforce that forecast: in the first half of 2010, 907,000 foreigners arrived in the republic, up 13% from the same period in 2009. As a result, first half tourism revenues soared 14% to U.S.\$652 million from U.S.\$573 million. This excellent performance followed a 1.8% rise in annual tourism revenue to U.S.\$1.3 billion in 2009.

The U.S. remains the principal source of tourists, with 250,000 North Americans visiting Guatemala in the first half of this year, up 8.2% year on year. This increasing popularity has been echoed in Europe, with Belgians and Austrians arriving in record numbers and 13,530 British nationals enjoying Guatemala's charms, up an impressive 10.3% year on year.

Global Promotion Platform

INGUAT, which will showcase the best of Guatemala during the World Travel Market in London from November 8 to 11, is responsible for the effective investigation, planning, promotion, protection and coordination of tourism issues.

The sector is expanding and developing in accordance with the forward-thinking National Policy for the Devel-



Álvaro Colom
President



PHOTO: CRISTIAN MONTEROSSO



Guatemala's gorgeous landscapes form the ideal backdrop to a great vacation

opment of Sustainable Tourism, which gives priority to projects and programs centered on its wonderful natural and cultural heritage.

Launched in 2004, this successful policy has helped foreign-visitor numbers rise by an average of 17% a year. However, the supply of tourist accommodation has not kept pace with

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demand and President Colom and his government are eager to entice hotel investors across the country's extremely diverse portfolio of tourist destinations and products.

Land of Eternal Spring

Often referred to as "The Land of Eternal Spring" due to a unique year-round temperate climate, Guatemala guarantees visitors an unforgettable vacation.

Tourists can discover the mysterious Mayan temples hidden deep among rainforests, stroll along beautiful colonial streets in Antigua Guatemala, climb one of 33 volcanoes—three of which are still active—or relax on sun-soaked beaches—some of which have black sand.

President Colom, who frequently tours different parts of the country as part of his hands-on campaign to raise health, education and welfare standards in rural and urban areas, believes his nation has something for everyone.

"Guatemala boasts the majestic Lake Atitlán—the deepest lake in Central America—and visitors can enjoy the stunning Lakes Ipala and Izabal. Lake Izabal—our largest freshwater lake—is surrounded by lush rainforests," he says. "The friendly and hospitable nature of our people has helped Guatemala become one of the cultural capitals of the world.

"Our colonial past retains an important presence in the 21st century, as shown by the attractive and historic city of Antigua Guatemala, while we also have the famous ancient

The magnificent Basílica del Señor de Esquipulas in southeast Guatemala

Mayan temples at Petén. In addition to all these great natural and cultural attractions, Guatemala has constructed modern accommodations and transport infrastructure such as hotels, highways, airports, landing strips and communications networks."

Vast Range of Specialty Tourism Adventures

In addition to leisure tourism, Guatemala is a leading destination for health tourists seeking high-quality medical care at a fraction of the cost in their country.

Other specialty tourism sectors include ecotourism activities such as conservation projects and bird-watching trips, community-tourism adventures and game fishing. Growing numbers of foreigners are choosing Guatemala as a tropical base to study Spanish, and thousands of cruise passengers arrive each year on luxury liners.

The country's bustling capital, Guatemala City, is the nation's main international gateway. The modern metropolis is regional leader of the fast-growing business-travel market and enjoys a superb reputation as a hub for major conventions and industry conferences.

The cosmopolitan city is located just 45 km from the nation's top tourism destination: Antigua Guatemala. Founded in 1543 as the third capital of the "New World," Antigua Guatemala offers visitors a dramatic history of conquest, grandeur, destruction and rebirth.

Designated a World Heritage site by UNESCO in 1979, Antigua Guatemala is widely regarded as the best-preserved colonial city in the Spanish-speaking Americas. Attractive parks and eye-catching colonial churches and museums border quiet cobbled streets and spacious plazas.

Key places of interest include the beautiful, centrally located cathedral that features a magnificent baroque façade created from white mortar, the Palace of the Noble City, with its two arched tiers and magnificent stone veranda, as well as the Museum of Colonial Art and its range of artistic treasures that includes a painting of Pedro de Alvarado, the conqueror of Guatemala.



The cobblestone streets of Antigua Guatemala allow visitors to journey back in time to an era of conquest, grandeur, destruction and rebirth

PHOTO: CRISTIAN MONTEROSSO

Against the backdrop of several volcanoes, visitors can buy traditional artisan crafts and paintings from street stalls and colorful markets. People living in indigenous towns such as San Felipe, San Juan del Obispo and Santa María de Jesús create many of these woven and wooden products.

Small boutique hotels characterize tourist accommodations in Antigua Guatemala, but with only around 1,300 rooms available, tourism chiefs are keen to attract FDI in the hotel sector so a greater number of visitors can stay overnight.

As the “Heart of the Mayan World,” Guatemala’s Mayan monuments, temples and ruins are outstanding, with this glimpse into life 1,000 years ago best illustrated by the famous Mayan site of Tikal, which means “Place of Voices.”

Situated in the Petén region and surrounded by tropical rainforests, the collection of stunning temples, pyramids and acropolises is Guatemala’s second most popular tourist destination.

Mirador Basin, also in Petén, is the last tract of virgin rainforest in Central America and dotted throughout the national park are rare and fascinating archaeological sites.

New Hotels Needed to Meet Soaring Demand

Business opportunities and areas for development in the Petén tourism sector include hotels—especially in the high-end four- and five-star band—lodges, restaurants, transportation services and various other mixed projects.

Famous for its beautiful beaches, clear waters and proximity to the 8th century ruins of Quirigua—which were designated an UNESCO World Heritage site in 1981—Lake Izabal is Guatemala’s third most popular tourist destination and is found close to the Caribbean coast.

This excellent location has helped the region become the entry point for cruise liners and tens of thousands of passengers. Cruise-ship arrivals have more than trebled in recent years and the area is popular with tourists en route to Petén or the Caribbean islands.

The government is promoting this region as the ideal area for luxury hotels, exclusive resorts and upscale residential

projects. Officials also want investors for similar infrastructure and tourist-oriented projects in the Lake Atitlán region. “Lake Atitlán provides excellent opportunities for the development of hotel infrastructure such as exclusive hotels, mixed projects and tourist resorts,” President Colom says.

On the opposite side of the country, Guatemala’s Pacific coast has recently earned an excellent reputation for game fishing. Rich in marine life, the area has held several top international tournaments in the last few years that have generated millions of dollars of trade for local businesses.

The scenic region is also the leading domestic vacation destination for Guatemalans. With excellent air and road links to the capital, the country’s Pacific coast offers investors a broad range of business openings.

Sustainable Tourism Plan Focuses on Natural Wonders

Meanwhile, with a third of the country covered by forest, Guatemala’s 700 species of birds mean the republic is a bird-watcher’s paradise. Enterprising specialist operators offer a selection of tours that allow enthusiasts to view the birds in their natural habitat.

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These activities form part of a drive toward sustainable tourism, and the highly enforced Guatemala System of Protected Areas (SIGAP) guarantees the conservation of every animal species as well as trees and other flora. National treasures afforded protection by SIGAP and strict environmental legislation include the Monterrico Nature Reserve on the Pacific coast that acts as a refuge to rare sea turtles during nesting.

Such initiatives mean Guatemala is now the region’s leading ecotourism destination, and tourism chiefs expect this niche market, along with game fishing and adventure and activity



PHOTO: INGUAT

Guatemala has many beautiful lakes that are surrounded by virgin rainforest

sports like diving, rafting and surfing, to expand rapidly in the short and medium term.

Guiding Investors to Business Openings

INGUAT is not alone in trying to entice FDI to the ambitious country. The government's official investment agency, Invest in Guatemala, helps investors make the most of business openings in every area of the diversified economy.

In addition to identifying and promoting the full range of FDI opportunities available in the tourism sector and the key economic areas of agriculture, manufacturing, transport and communications, the dynamic and hard-working agency represents Guatemala at international trade events.

"Guatemala offers visitors a unique and unforgettable experience. I invite everyone to come and enjoy this beautiful country at the heart of the Mayan world."

Established in 1997 as a joint venture between the public and private sector, Invest in Guatemala is responsible for publicizing the republic's many excellent competitive advantages and maximizing its full investment potential.

The agency deals with the structuring, marketing and information on tourist products and destinations, with potential investors offered a valuable insight into each industry through brochures and a user-friendly website.

"Guatemala's privileged geographical position, political stability, natural and cultural richness and year-round temperate climate are competitive advantages that make the country an attractive travel destination," says Invest in Guatemala executive director, Virgilio Cordón. "Guatemala's lodging supply had nominal growth in the last five years, with an average annual rate of 3.8%. The existing supply of rooms does not satisfy the rate of demand, which has increased by 450% more than the available capacity in the same period."

Considering this huge demand, the existing limited capacity and the diversity of tourism products and destinations



PHOTO: CRISTIAN MONTEROSSO

Mysterious Mayan temples are dotted throughout Guatemala's vast jungle

that Guatemala offers, there are many excellent investment opportunities available throughout the tourism sector."

Guatemala City receives more than 1.6 million foreign visitors a year and boasts a wide range of hotel accommodation, including many premium hotel chains that offer conference and convention facilities. Major operators include Marriott, Westin, InterContinental, Clarion Suites, Radisson, Holiday Inn and Quinta Real.

With more than 4,000 hotel rooms and a blossoming reputation among global business executives and industry professionals, the cosmopolitan capital has hosted several top events. These include the 2007 session of the International Olympic Committee and the 2010 International Coffee Conference. Guatemala is a leading coffee grower and exporter.

Famous buildings like the National Palace and National Theater are perfect for hosting business events, with support and advice to facilitate such occasions provided by bodies such as the Guatemala Conventions Bureau and the Guatemala Association of Professional Congresses, Conventions and Fairs Operators.

Guatemala is also an increasingly popular destination for health tourists, with its bilingual workforce, excellent medical facilities, highly trained surgeons and close proximity to the U.S. among the many factors that have allowed this niche tourism market to boom.

World-class surgical procedures include cardiology, oncology, plastic surgery and transplants. Affordable dental treatments and alternative medicines are also widely available, and Guatemala's warm climate conducive to recovery.

With such an outstanding diversity of micro-climates, architecture, cultural and natural assets, it is plain to see why the cradle of the Mayan civilization has emerged as the region's leading vacation destination and why its future looks bright.

As President Colom concludes: "Guatemala offers visitors a unique and unforgettable experience. I invite everyone to come and enjoy this beautiful country at the heart of the Mayan world."

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