

Guatemala City

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In 1520, the conquistador Pedro de Alvarado arrived in the American continent and was sent from Mexico by Hernán Cortés to conquer Guatemala. After bloody battles with the indigenous peoples, he succeeded in his objective and in 1524 the first capital of Guatemala was founded, called Santiago de Guatemala. The name "Guatemala" means "[Land of Trees](#)" in Nahuatl—the language spoken by the Mexican Indians who accompanied de Alvarado—and refers to the forests that were everywhere in this land.

The first capital essentially usurped the city of Iximché, which belonged to the Cackchiquel people. After several revolts by the indigenous population, it was moved, in 1527, to the Almononga valley at the foot of the Volcan de Agua ("the Volcano of Water") in a place that is now a small village called the Ciudad Vieja, or "Old City."

In 1541, an earthquake brought a mudslide down from the side of the volcano and destroyed the town. After much study, it was decided to move the capital to the Panchoy valley, still near the Volcan de Agua, but also near the Volcan de Fuego and the Volcan de Acatenango.

The city assumed its administrative duties two years later and in 1566 was bequeathed the official title of "The Very Noble and Very Loyal City of Santiago of the Knights of Guatemala." Despite frequent earthquakes and volcanoes, Guatemala City continued to grow and today some considers it the third city of the New World, after Mexico City and Lima.

Santiago de Guatemala was the capital and economic hub of the Kingdom of Guatemala—what are now the five countries of Central America—and it was here that most of the royalty lived. The future looked bright for this city until the devastating "Santa Marta" earthquakes in 1773 ended its colonial role.

Despite opposition from the church, the city was moved once again. Santiago de Guatemala, now known as Antigua, is a national monument and was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1979. It is, today, the second most visited tourist destination in Guatemala.

Although the new Guatemalan capital, called Guatemala de la Asunción, was founded at the end of the colonial era, it preserved the design and the social separation of a Spanish colonial city. The new urban area was more spacious, the new Plaza Mayor (Great Plaza) was almost double the size of the one built in Antigua, and the streets were considerably wider.

The architecture of the public buildings was not dominated by the colonial Baroque style, but by Neo-Classicism. The secular and ecclesiastical buildings were built around the Plaza Mayor with the town hall on the north and the Palacio Real on the west side. The cathedral and the Palacio Arzobispal were built on the east. Construction was limited by lack of money and workers, which is why many of the new buildings were built with materials salvaged from old Antigua.

Four blocks from the Plaza Mayor other squares were built, one in each direction. The presence of religious temples was not so predominant as it was in Antigua, but

nevertheless the Church took possession of 60 percent the city's central sector. Private properties, called “Solares”, were distributed according to the size and location of the ones abandoned in Antigua. The Mudejar style characterized all the central houses, with an outward appearance so uniform that the only difference between houses was their size.

Commerce was conducted in the central market at the Plaza Mayor and in the stores located at the Portal del Comercio to the south. The principal road axis was the Calle Real, (Royal Road) between the Plaza Mayor and the Calvario, known today as 6 South Avenue, Zone 1. After the Independence of Guatemala 1821, few modifications were made to the city until the Liberals came to power in 1871.

The Conservative Government, which came to power in 1855, introduced street nomenclature based on proper names such as Calle del Calvario or Calle del Olvidos. The names indicated salient features about the street, its history or zone.

During this period, the University of San Carlos de Guatemala was built, begun in 1786 and finished in 1849 (today in 9 Avenue 9-79, Zone 1). This building was declared a National Monument in 1970 and in 1985 the University of San Carlos began restoration works on the building in order to install the University's museum, MUSAC.

During the Conservative reign, many church buildings were constructed, as were two military forts, for use during the Central American civil wars. The San José fort, built in 1846, was demolished and replaced by a modern construction, the Teatro Nacional, on Calle 24 3-81, Zone 1.

The San Rafael de Matamoros fort was constructed in 1858 in the northeast of the city and still functions as a military base today. Another building that typifies the epoch is that which housed the Economic Society for Friends of the Country, finished in 1855 at what is now 9 Avenue 9-44, Zone 1. The Liberal Government later used this building for its Legislative Assembly and now serves as the National Congress.

When the Liberals took office, they made many changes to the colonial way of life of Guatemala. The national economy was oriented towards coffee cultivation, and still constitutes the country's principal export. The Liberals encouraged European immigration, which led to the first phases of urbanization, and in turn the establishment of European institutions such as banks. The expansion was made possible by the seizure of church property.

In 1877, the street's nomenclature changed, with proper names substituted by a numerical system that is still used today. In 1890, President Barillas ordered the construction of a suburb called “Exposicion”, with the Guatemalan Pavilion of the Paris World Exhibition at its center. With this suburb the first diagonal streets were created, today the routes and vias are in Zone 4.

The Liberal president José María Reyna Barrios (1892-1898) was a typical Euro-centric oligarch. He decided to give the city a facelift, taking as his model Paris. In 1892, he decreed the creation of a public garden as site for the upcoming Central American Exhibition. He ordered the establishment of the Boulevard 30 de Junio, known today as Avenida La Reforma, and one of the most popular tourist attractions in the city. The beautification drew the wealthier families from the center into the south. The

architectural style of the private houses was also modified, replacing the Mudejar style with other imported styles.

Another prestigious neighborhood was the Hipódromo Norte around the Avenida Hipódromo. With the construction of Minerva's temple and park, the central Avenida 6 was also extended north, and became Avenida Minerva, today known as Avenida Simeón Cañas, Zone 2. After the earthquakes in 1971, the Minerva Temple was demolished, but in its garden the famous relief map of the Republic was built. This is a must-see attraction!

In the 1950s, many of modern buildings were constructed, such as the Centro Cívico, where the Public Finance Ministry, the Instituto Guatemalteco de Turismo (INGUAT) and other institutions are located. As Guatemala has grown, new architectural styles have appeared, which is very apparent on the Avenida La Reforma.

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