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GUATEMALA G105

Guatemala is a country in Central America. Guatemala means the Land of Many Trees (in a Mayan language) and the Spanish motto of modern Guatemala is 'Pais de la eterna primavera' - country of the eternal spring. These two phrases describe two of the significant features of the country - its year-round warm climate and its forests.





The country consists of three main regions - the cooler highlands (left) with the heaviest population, the tropical area along the Pacific and Caribbean coasts, and the tropical jungle in the northern lowlands (known as the Petén).



The Mayan peoples lived in large areas of the country from about 1500 BC. The Mayans built many spectacular buildings and developed a written language (right), the only one in America before the time of Columbus. Many Mayan towns declined in the eighth and ninth centuries AD, for unknown reasons, possibly because of food shortages.

In the early sixteenth century Spanish conquistadores tried to subdue the Maya. Unlike the campaigns against the Aztec and Inca states, the Maya had no single political centre and the conquistadors had to subdue them one by one. The last independent Mayan state - and the last one in Central America - was in Petén, Guatemala. It was only finally over-run in 1697.



Today, the population of Guatemala is about 13 million. About 60% of the population is of mixed Mayan and Spanish descent (Ladinos) and about 40% are of purely Mayan origin. The latter have historically suffered from discrimination, poverty and isolation. Isolation, though, has helped to preserve Mayan languages (Guatemala formally recognises 21 Mayan languages by name) and also the bright and colourful native costumes.

Left: Modern Guatemalans sitting amongst the ruins of a Mayan temple.

Reading Borough Council
Heritage Lottery Fund

Backstrap Loom

Thousands of years ago people discovered that if you take wool from some animals you can twist it together to form a thread. Archaeologists have found string skirts which are 20,000 years old.



The first threads made in this way may have been made by fastening wool to a stone which was twirled round until the yarn was sufficiently twisted, when it was wound upon the stone and the process repeated over and over.

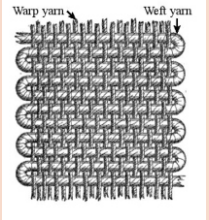
Later thread (usually called yarn) was made with a distaff and a spindle. The distaff was a large stick on which a clump of unspun wool was held. The spindle was a weighted stick onto the top of which the rough wool was fastened. The spindle was then whirled which caused the wool to be drawn out and twisted. The yarn which was made in this way was wound on the upper part of the spindle.



The distaff and spindle method was the usual way of making yarn in Europe for thousands of years. The picture on the left is from the twelfth century and shows Eve making yarn in this way, while her baby sleeps in a cradle at her feet. Spinning wheels, which were invented in India, only became widely used in the sixteenth century. The picture on the right shows one in use during the seventeenth century. These machines made the process faster.

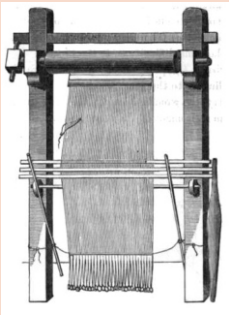


Yarn on its own has limited uses. However, if it is woven together to become cloth then it becomes more useful and valuable. The threads which run downwards are called warp threads, while the ones which run crosswise are called weft threads (right).



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In order to make cloth, a tool called a loom is necessary. A loom holds the threads tight while they are being woven together. One of the earliest looms was probably the kind known as a warp-weighted loom. With these looms the warp threads are suspended from a branch or piece of wood and each has a weight attached (some just a stone) so that they are held taut (left). The weft threads would be pushed into place by hand or a stick. This stick later became a device called a shuttle.

In many early societies the production of cloth was considered a woman's job. This was the case in Ancient Greece. A good weaver made a good wife. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, who hoped that her husband would return alive from Troy, spends each day weaving and unweaving a piece of cloth to delay having to choose a new husband. Looms are often shown on ancient Greek vases (right).



In order to push the stick/shuttle holding the weft threads through the warp threads another stick, called a shed stick, was pushed between alternating warp threads to separate them. This allowed the weft thread or shuttle to pass through the entire warp at once.

Looms gradually became more complex. In the sixteenth century a typical loom looked like the machine shown on the right. The warp threads were often separated in complex ways in order to make complicated patterns (bottom right). In England at this date, looms like this were expensive and weaving was usually a job for a male craftsmen. Reading was an important centre of cloth weaving. The father of Archbishop Laud (1573-1645) was a weaver, who had his workshop in Broad Street.





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The loom in this box is called a backstrap loom. Backstrap looms are another form of ancient loom. Instead of tying the warp threads to a branch and weighing them down with a stone, the threads are tied around the weaver's waist at one end and around a stationary object such as a tree, post, or door at the other. They are kept taut simply by leaning back. Backstrap looms are easily moveable, since they can simply be rolled up and used almost anywhere.

The photographs below show backstrap looms being used in various regions of Guatemala - and some of the colourful products that are sold.





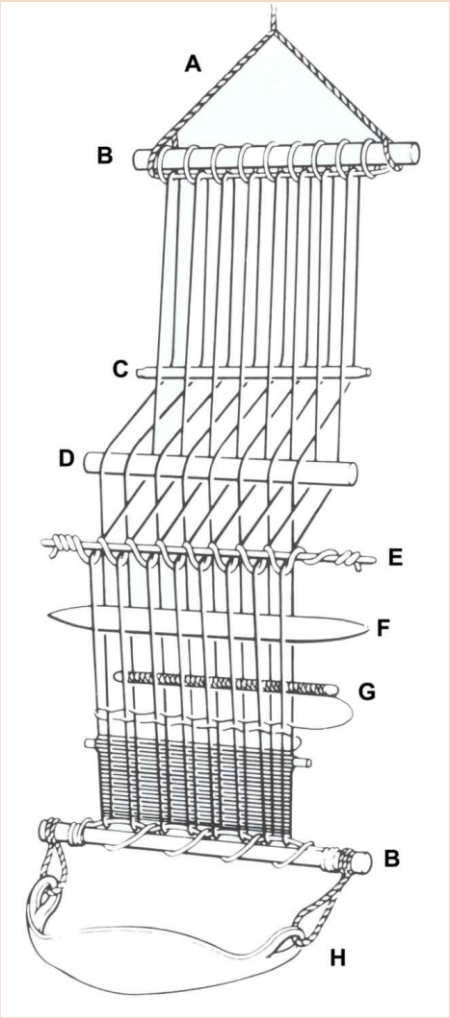




Backstrap looms are used in other South American countries, such as Peru and Equador. Although they are relatively simple, a skilled weaver can make complex and colourful designs.

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The diagram on the left shows the structure of a typical backstrap loom.

A - A cord or rope is used to tie the loom to a tree or post.

B - End bars are used to hold the warp threads to the upper and lower ends of the loom.

C and D - Shed rods. These rods open up the alternating warp threads.

E - This is called the heddle rod. The weaver manipulates this to move the warp threads backwards and forwards.

F - This batten helps to separate alternate warp threads to allow the shuttle (G) to pass through them. The batten can also be used to tighten the weft threads as they are woven.

G - The shuttle, containing the thread of the weft, passes from side to side between the warp.

H - This belt is worn around the weaver's back and connects her to the loom. The weaver controls the tension on the warp threads by leaning backward or forward.

Backstrap looms are not only used in South America. They are common in many areas of China and south-east Asia. The photograph on the right shows a lady from Indonesia using one.



Cotton Boll



Cotton is a natural fibre that comes from the seedpod of the cotton plant. The cotton plant is a shrub which is native to tropical and subtropical regions around the world, including the Americas, India, and Africa. Cotton produces fluffy fibres to protect its seeds and help them disperse in the wind. It is a member of the mallow family of plants, which includes species such as marsh mallow, hollyhock, hibiscus and lavatera. A cotton flower can be seen below left. There are thirty recognised species of cotton. However, only four are cultivated on any scale commercially. Successful cultivation of cotton requires a long frost-free period and plenty of sunshine. Cotton is also a thirsty crop and needs from 60 to 120cm (24 to 48 inches) of rainfall a year.



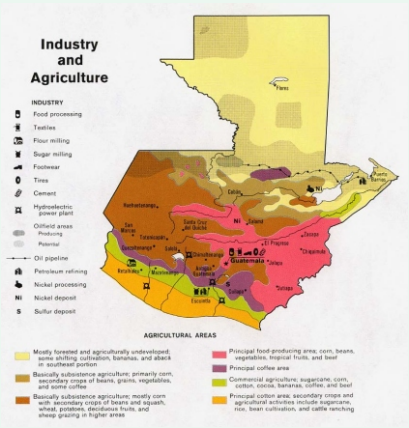
There is archaeological evidence from Peru, India and Central America that cotton has been used for thousands of years. People in Asia and South America realised that the soft white fibres of the wild cotton plant could be useful and started to grow cotton as a crop around 3000BC.



Cotton cloth was known in England in the thirteenth century and is mentioned in an Act of Parliament in 1212, during the reign of King John. At this time no one in Europe had actually seen a cotton plant. Writing in 1350 Sir John Mandeville reported that in India 'there grew there a wonderful tree which bore tiny lambs on the endes of its branches. These branches were so pliable that they bent down to allow the lambs to feed when they are hungrie.' The picture on the right shows Mandeville's lamb-tree! This belief was shared across Europe - the German word for cotton, for example, is *baumwolle*, which translates as 'tree wool'.

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One of the main export crops of Guatemala is coffee, but a significant amount of cotton is also exported, more than from any other Central American country. The map on the right shows the various agricultural areas of Guatemala. The cotton growing area is marked in orange - the strip of land that runs along Guatemala's Pacific coast.

Cotton farming supports many people, although the wages of most workers are low. About 370,000 people live in Guatemala's cotton-growing lowlands, but in the picking season as many as 600,000 Indians are estimated to migrate into the area for 30-90 days to earn about £1 for a 12-hour shift. The use of pesticides, which is widespread in cotton farming throughout the world, has been blamed for a variety of ailments suffered by cotton farm workers.

As well as raw cotton, Guatemala, like many developing countries, also has a significant garment manufacturing industry. Many pairs of jeans that are bought in the USA were made here. In 2000, garment manufacturing was one of the main sources of direct employment for more than 124,000 Guatemalans.

During the Mayan period, salt, jade, slaves and cotton were exported to other areas. Columbus captured a large Mayan boat laden with woven cotton goods that was sailing north along the Atlantic coast and promply looted it!

It is not known whether the Mayans cultivated cotton, or gathered it from wild plants; perhaps they did both. Mayan men were responsible for harvesting the cotton, while women did the spinning and backstrap weaving.



Everyday Mayan clothes were made exclusively from cotton, although some ceremonial costumes were made from more exotic materials. Mayan warriors often wore animal skins to terrify their enemy, but underneath they wore padded cotton suits of armour. It was said to be surprisingly effective. The photograph on the left shows Mayan warriors at the famous site of Bonampak, discovered in 1946, which is just over the border

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Trouble Dolls



Trouble dolls (also called worry dolls) are one of the most well-known folk products of Guatemala. Anyone who feels troubled can tell their worries to a doll and place it under their pillow before going to sleep. The doll is said to worry in the person's place, thereby allowing them to sleep peacefully. The dolls are handmade using wood or wire as a frame, cotton fabric and thread for clothing and cardboard for its body and face. Worry dolls are often sold in fair trade shops.

Although the dolls are too small to represent specific Guatemalan folk costumes, their bright colours reflect the clothes worn by people, particularly the highland Mayans. Guatemala remains a place where a high percentage of the indigenous people still proudly wear their traditional dress called *traje*. Mayan *traje* varies from village to village, so the variety of indigenous costume is truly dazzling. A couple of regional examples are shown below.



The photographs on the left show (above) the striking men's costume from San Juan Atitán. A black or dark brown wool *capixay* (a sort of pullover with partly open, short sleeves) is worn over the red shirt, and held in place by a sash. The pants are white, and plain. The lower photograph shows children from there leaving school.









The photographs on the right show women from Antigua.

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Wedding Chain



In Guatemala wedding customs vary from place to place, but one widespread custom is the use of a 'lazo', a silver rope. As the couple kneel before the altar the chain is placed around their necks, in a figure of eight shape, to symbolise their unity and the binding together of two hearts. After the service the lasso is given to the bride as a memento of her becoming the mistress of the groom's heart and home. It can be doubled to form a necklace. In Mexico a similar custom is practised, although a white rope is often used. This also sometimes happens in Guatemala (below).

Another widespread custom is the giving of gold coins. The groom is given some coins (often 13 in number), which he then gives to the bride. The procedure is said to symbolise the groom's trust in his new wife and that he is giving his worldly goods into her care.

