



## Central America and the Caribbean Islands

**CULTURE**

### Village Life in Guatemala

*This reading focuses on two villages in western Guatemala. Like the majority of people in this region, most of the villagers and residents of the surrounding countryside are Maya.*

As early as 600 B.C. the Maya lived throughout Central America. Around A.D. 300, they began to build cities with magnificent palaces and temples. Then the Spanish arrive in the 1500s and ruled for three centuries. They enslaved the Maya, took away most of their land, and even tried to force them to give up their beliefs and traditions. . . . But the Maya resisted, passing down many parts of their heritage through the generations. . . .

[Today] most Spanish Guatemalans live in the larger cities and follow the latest trends in music, entertainment, and fashions. In contrast, most Maya live in the highland villages, follow their centuries-old customs, and speak their native languages. The Maya also tend to wear colorful handwoven *traje*, or traditional clothing. Each village has its own colors and patterns of cloth that the women and young girls weave by hand.

. . . Todos los Santos Cuchumatán [is a] little hamlet . . . nestled among the Cuchumatanes Mountains, over ten thousand feet above sea level. Little has changed in Todos los Santos over the last hundred years. It takes three hours by bus or car to reach Todos los Santos from the nearest city. Steep, twisting dirt roads make travel in and out of the village very difficult, especially during the wind-whipped, chilly winters. Some people living in the mountains around the village must walk up to twelve miles on weekly market days to buy and sell their wares and produce.

In preparation for this week's market, twelve-year-old Joel drains the blood from a slaughtered sheep his family will sell. With the blood drained, the animal weighs less and is easier to carry. . . . Joel and his family are among the very few Ladinos living in Todos los Santos. Ladinos are Guatemalans of mixed Mayan and European heritage. Most Ladinos live in Guatemala City or the coastal and eastern lowlands. However, Joel and his family choose to remain in the highland, because they believe this is the best region for raising animals. . . .

Sara also lives in the western highlands. The closest town to her home is San Francisco el Alto, meaning "the high one." Like Todos los Santos, San Francisco hosts a huge weekly market. Thousands of people gather to buy and sell livestock. On Fridays before dawn, Sara and her mother set out with their sheep for the market. Crouched in the back of a small, covered pickup [truck], Sara and her mother and several sheep ride two hours through the cold morning. The truck stops twice to pick up more villagers who wait by burning fires along the roadside with their livestock. They reach the market at 6:00 A.M., and one by one the villagers and animals climb out, stretching their cramped muscles.

The market in San Francisco is well underway by 7:00 A.M. Villagers warm themselves with coffee and hot tortillas. Thirteen-year-old Manuela and her mother run a food stall where they sell fresh bread, coffee, corn tortillas, and *chuchitos*—small dumplings made of corn flower and lard, and filled with a meat and tomato sauce. One of these . . . breakfasts sells for three *quetzales*, or about fifty cents. . . .

After the flurry of activity on market days, things quiet down in the highland villages—until Mass on Sunday morning. Most Guatemalans are Roman Catholic, though many practice a mix of Christianity and their ancient religion. The Mayan gods guide them in farming and other work, while the Christian saints guide them in family life. Every Guatemalan town has a patron saint with a special *fiesta*, or celebration, to honor it. . . . Many Maya [accept] the cross as a Mayan symbol as well as a Christian symbol. It represents the four directions: north, south, east, and west.

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**Understanding What You Read** After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. How do the Maya of Guatemala indicate which village they are from?

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2. In what ways do the Maya differ from Guatemalans of Spanish descent?

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3. How do you think that Joel will get his sheep to the market in Todos los Santos? What clues make you think so? What is the farthest distance that Joel will likely have to travel?

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4. What roles do Christianity and traditional religions play in Mayan life?

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**Activity**

Write the copy for a travel brochure describing a village market in Guatemala.