

## THE GUATEMALA HIGHLAND

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Two things that are perhaps most interesting to a traveller in the Guatemala Plateau are the native inhabitants and the striking beauty of the country. Some four hundred years ago, Pedro de Alverado, one of Cortez's lieutenants placed in charge of the first expedition sent to Central America from Mexico, wrote as follows describing the Guatemala Plateau, "I would your Grace to know that the country is healthy and the climate temperate and well populated, with many strong towns." This first brief description is still very true.

The date of the first inhabitants is still largely a matter of conjecture. Guatemala quite definitely was the scene of one of the oldest, if not the oldest, civilizations in North or South America. A conservative estimate puts the date several centuries B. C. From what little we do know of these early people, it is clear that they had a very high civilization and culture. Their knowledge of astronomy, time recording, architecture, and many other things were on a very high plane. In fact some of these early lines of progress have never been surpassed.

A knowledge of this early history is a very fitting background for an understanding of the Guatemalan Highland, whose population is predominantly Indian, tracing their culture directly to these people of centuries ago from whom they are descended.

This first civilization, though it covers many centuries, peaks and valleys of advancement, migrations and movements that have left only scattered stone ruins to tell briefly and incompletely of various steps and stages of progress, might be referred to as the first stage in the historical development. The second stage is that of Spanish domination. During this period from 1524 to 1823 there were three different capitals of Central America. The first two were destroyed by earthquakes. Spanish control was overthrown in 1823 with the beginning of the third stage. The Federation of Central American Republics took form then as a republic. This venture failed and in 1839 the start of the most recent period began with the forming of independent republics. Until quite recently the only part of Guate-

mala that had been inhabited by white people was the plateau country.

There are four natural geographic regions in Guatemala. The Eastern Coastal region has only about twenty miles of coast line on which the principal port of the country is located. The West Coast zone with two hundred miles along the Pacific stretches between Mexico and El Salvador. It extends inland only about fifty miles to the foot of the mountain slopes. The Plains of Peten are the third and least important region although they occupy about one-third of the country. In character they are much like Yucatan, a low undulating expanse with poor soil and extreme drought during much of the year, and less than two people per square mile. The fourth and most important region is the Highland.

The Guatemala Highland consists of about one-third of the country's 48,200 square miles. The land ranges from 3,000 to 13,814 feet in altitude, Tajumulco being the highest peak in all Central America. There is a definite massing in the western part of the country fifty to one hundred miles inland from the Pacific, where the mountains reach their greatest heights and are extremely rugged. In this region where the mountains have a general northwest to southeast trend there are many volcanic peaks. Although the mountains do take a definite direction trend, there are several spurs that run off in an easterly and northeasterly direction.

The lakes Atitlan and Amatitlan are the only ones of any size in the highlands. Their chief value at present is their great beauty which definitely is an attraction to the tourists, who are just beginning to discover this charming little country. As one looks from a promontory some two or three thousand feet above at the azure blue waters of Atitlan, sheer mountains dropping into it and cutting its outline into many irregularities, volcanic craters rising in symmetrical outline, and overhead a sky of deep blue with a few drifting clouds, it is truly a sight worth traveling many miles to see.

The soil on the plateau is chiefly of volcanic origin and quite fertile. A num-

ber of years ago a survey was made. It stated that there were twenty-five million acres in the whole country of which about five million were good for cultivation. A reasonable estimate places a little more than half of the tillable land in the highlands. As a person from the United States goes through the country, he will undoubtedly wonder just what tillable land is. Certainly in the United States land that reclines at a forty-five degree angle would not be included in this classification. Yet nearly all slopes in the more densely populated regions of the highlands have some corn growing on them.

One of the chief contrasts in Guatemala is in the climate. The eastern coastal climate is the tropical jungle type. There is rain throughout the year. As one gets into the highlands, the vegetation shows quite conclusively the change in climate. From the tropical lowland to a semi-arid almost desert region along the upper reaches of the Motagua River, to the plateau country with its wooded slopes and grass covered valleys, is but a few hours train trip. The rainfall in the highlands is seasonal and averages fifty-two inches a year. The temperature is refreshing the whole year, the average being 65 degrees.

A study of the people of Guatemala is the most accurate way of obtaining a picture of the country. The 1930 census gave the population of the country as a whole as 2,426,000 or forty-six people per square mile. About three quarters of the population are in the highlands, which naturally makes the density greater. The important factor in considering statistical figures is that of the total population: 65 per cent are pure Indian and over 20 per cent are mestizos or ladinos, as they are known there; nearly all of these are strictly highland dwellers.

A large number of the Indians are living back in the highlands where they never come in contact with modern civilization. They have been living in much the same fashion for centuries. H. J. Spinden wrote in an article, "Population of Ancient America," (1928), "A missionary living in the populous Guatemala highlands estimates that there are at present 700,000 Indians speaking native languages and maintaining parts at least of the ancient culture." It has been reported on very good authority that there

are many Indians living under their ancient tribal governments, and many of these people do not know that there is a central government ruled by white men and having its capital at Guatemala City.

Several years ago one of the government's statistical bureaus issued figures stating there were 14,067 land owners in Guatemala, or about one person in every hundred and seventy-five that was a land owner. This ratio on the surface seems quite alarming. These figures, however, are of little value because of the large number of Indians living in a tribal fashion and cultivating land that has been theirs for centuries, before any white man came and issued land deeds. There have been recent attempts to classify the land and include all the Indians in the system of national economy, and in so doing to collect taxes from them. In many cases where the Indians inhabit the more accessible lands and are unable to pay these taxes in currency, they are required to make up for this by working for the government a certain amount of time each year. The traveller will often see evidence of this in the numerous road gangs that infest the roads certain times of the year.

The economic situation of Guatemala is again the reflection of its people, the Indians. What little industrial development and commercial agriculture there is, is due to the white people and the influx of some foreign capital. The railroad that runs from coast to coast by way of Guatemala City is foreign-owned, as are most of the public utilities.

Agriculture is naturally the keynote of Guatemalan life. The majority of the people of the highlands are engaged in subsistence agriculture. The only accurate figures that are available are on those crops that enter commerce. Coffee is by far the chief export crop of the country, though of recent years the banana has increased greatly. The chief coffee region which produces eighty-five per cent of the total annual crop (average crop being 130 million pounds) is located on the southern slope of the Pacific highland region. A second area of production, known as Coban, is on the slopes of the northern mountains. This produces about 10 per cent of the total. The third area is situated in the central highlands around Antigua, and raises six per cent. Coffee

fincas are the chief source of coffee production. The larger ones are set up as commercial enterprises designed for efficient production, processing and marketing. There are some 2,000 coffee plantations in the country which vary in size from quite small to many thousands of acres. The Guatemalans, like other Central Americans, claim their highland coffee to be the best coffee in the world. In recent years the export of this commodity has been a little less than one-half to Germany and almost a quarter to the United States.

While coffee is the chief and almost the only export crop of the highlands, there are several others that enter local commerce. Wheat can be grown on much the same land as coffee, and as a result wheat production has suffered, for much of the good wheat land is now planted in coffee groves. About a million dollars worth of flour is imported from the United States each year.

Corn, the chief food staple, occupies more land than any other crop. The Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce issued a report in 1927 which stated that there were 526,000 acres planted in corn. (This was for the whole country, but fully 90 per cent was in the highlands.) A report of this kind in a primitive country is naturally an estimate, and in this case probably a low one. Every little Indian hut has its patch of corn. In most localities two crops a year are possible.

Among other crops of importance are sugar, grown chiefly on the Pacific coastal plain; cacao, grown on the slopes of the Pacific range; cotton, rice, vegetables and other crops of purely domestic importance. All these are consumed within the country. The principal live stock region is around Quezaltenango. There have been a number of difficulties characteristic of the tropics that have had to be overcome before good livestock could be raised. This has been done to a large extent. In fact in 1915 a group of Guatemalans thought they could start a cattle export business to the Gulf states of the United States. Over 2,000 head were shipped to New Orleans. A series of difficulties arose due chiefly to lack of proper inspection of the cattle before leaving Guatemala and no more shipments were made, nor have there been any further attempts to revive this venture. Hides,

however, do enter foreign trade, and usually add one to two hundred thousand dollars to the annual export total.

Local open air markets are the principal means for the Indian population to market goods. The barter system of payment is often used. Markets are held at regular intervals in the various centers. Indians often travel several weeks with tremendous loads on their backs or heads to reach a certain market and sell their wares, which may not exceed several dollars in worth.

To make reference to Guatemala's industry in the modern sense is really impossible. Guatemala City, the largest city in Central America, is the center of what industry and manufacturing there is. Most of this is carried on in semi-hand mechanical fashion, and exists to meet local needs. Electric light plants, sugar mills, tanneries, distilleries, and such are the principle industrial enterprises. Weaving, pottery, cloth making, are done chiefly by hand. Quezaltenango, the second city in size, also on the plateau, is of small industrial importance. The reason for the lack of industrial development is largely due to the small, almost non-existent, demand and purchasing power of the primitive Indians.

In considering the future of this country there are many things that lead to questions that can only be answered in a problematic way. Central American politics, like most Latin American, have been turbulent and fluctuating. Public opinion because of geographic remoteness has had little influence. Dishonest motives, corruption, and exploitation have played a large part in putting these countries where they are now. Recent trends are changing this. Guatemala's neighbor to the north, Mexico, has taken the most radical stand. Guatemala herself has in the past few years made many reforms and attempts to unify and improve the country. New roads are being pushed out from the capital from all sides. These steps, generally considered forward steps, will naturally bring the highland Indians into touch with modern civilization. What will be the result? One has only to look at other primitive peoples, such as those in parts of Mexico, to see the new problem that arises when they are thrown suddenly into a modern complex form of civilization.