

# A Culture of Faith in Guatemala

By Lisa López

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In the 68 years since the Church was first introduced in Guatemala, membership has flourished. Guatemala is a country rich with rainforests and a diverse Mayan culture. Despite its beauty, Guatemala is often characterized by its poverty and political strife. This does not mean, however, that it is a country poor in spirit. Merci Arens, a 25-year-old from Guatemala City, personally feels blessed to live in a country where people, in large part, tolerate and accept different religions. “One of the key characteristics of Guatemalan culture is that, by nature, we are a religious people,” she says. “The culture and the environment are very hospitable and lively.” That being said, finding peers that share her same beliefs has not always been easy.

“My standards seem radical to the people at work and school who have never heard of Mormonism,” she says. This is not discouraging for Merci, who emphasizes the importance

of being active in Church callings and activities. “When I go to these activities, I am socializing to create relationships with people who fundamentally have my same goals and principles.” She has found that having friends to share spiritual experiences with has helped her testimony to grow. Because of these friendships, Merci has also found an unexpected blessing. “I have found dating easier because I date friends. I’ve seen them in different situations, which allows me to get to know them in a more natural way.”

On occasions Merci admits to feeling pressure to marry; however, she holds to the security that she has in her heart that everything is and will turn out fine. “I look forward to meeting a companion who, through our relationship, helps draw me nearer to God and together we build an eternal family.”

Out of all the blessings that Merci has received, there is one in

**Merci Arens finds that defending her standards is easier when she has the support of friends who share those standards.**

particular that stands out to her: “I lost my mother at 15. With her passing came a lot of questions. However, these questions and the subsequent answers to them have completely shaped my life.” Through honest prayer, Merci has been able to receive comfort that she will be able to one day give her mother the same type of hugs her mother gave her as a little girl. “The truth of the gospel illuminates my everyday life and activities,” she says. “I know I am connected to the divine love of God, and that fulfills me in every way.” ■



## MORE ABOUT MERCI

*What is your favorite Guatemalan dish?*

It's called "Hilachas"—a stew comprised of red potatoes and long strips of beef. Some people add green beans or carrots, but I prefer mine with just potatoes.

*What are some of your favorite sites?*

Guatemala is a place of natural beauty. One of my favorite places to visit is Lake Atitlan and the surrounding town, Panajachel, which exudes Mayan culture. The natives have worked hard to preserve their traditional language, and I love to admire the colors and intricacies of their hand-woven clothing.

*What is higher education like in Guatemala?*

In my country the issue of education is a complex one. Illiteracy is a problem that much of the population faces. After graduating high school, most young adults are faced with economic responsibilities that force them to choose between attending a university and working full-time. But the Church has been a wonderful tool for helping members access higher education.

## FACTS ABOUT GUATEMALA

Capital: Guatemala City

Language: Spanish

## BY THE NUMBERS

14,647,083 people (estimate as of July 2014)

21 national parks

3 active volcanoes

## THE CHURCH IN GUATEMALA

247,708 Latter-day Saints

417 wards and branches

2 temples

6 missions