The Day of the Dead (known as Día de los Muertos in Spanish) is a holiday celebrated throughout Latin America where people honor their dead ancestors and celebrate the cycle of life. While the meaning of the holiday is the same across countries, it is celebrated differently in different countries.

The tradition of flying kites (called barriletes) on November 1 is a unique aspect of the Guatemalan celebration. This custom reaches its height in the town of Santiago, Sacatepequez, where residents spend months constructing enormous kites, up to several stories high, to fly from the cemetery hillside. Kites serve as a symbolic connection to the dead and help guide the returning spirits to their families. Once the celebrations have ended, the kites are burned so that the dead may return peacefully until the next year.

As in Mexico, Catholics in Guatemala prepare special foods and offerings to honor their loved ones on El Día de los Todos Santos (All Saints’ Day), and then proceed to the cemetery to share the day with the deceased. The native Maya adorn gravesites with pine needles, yellow marigolds (called flor de muerto), candles, liquor, and incense (called copal pom). By early afternoon, the cemetery overflows with families celebrating their loved ones with marimba music, dancing, food, and drink.

In the town of San Jose Petén in northern Guatemala, an important tradition is the procession of three sacred skulls (called las santas calaveras). Said to be skulls of native Mayan kings or priests, they are sought out by individuals who ask them for health, a blessing in marriage, or productive crops. Anyone who makes a request accepts the responsibility to receive the skulls at his or her house for the following three years. At
nightfall on November 1, one of the skulls is taken from house to house in a candlelight procession. Upon entry to a house it is placed atop an altar laden with offerings of food, most commonly hen, tamalitos, liquor, and *ixpasaa* (a drink of maize, cinnamon, anise, and allspice made especially for the spirits of children). The skulls are then displayed in the church for nine days, during which a town elder keeps vigil.

![A plate of food](image)

Another special Guatemalan tradition for the Día de los Todos Santos is *fiambre*, a cold dish served only at this time of year. The preparation of this dish in association with the dead dates back to the late 16th century, and the dish itself traces a historical trajectory from the Moorish occupation of Spain (in the 8th to the 15th centuries) to the Spanish settlement of the Americas. The principal ingredients of *fiambre* include vegetables native to the Americas such as *pacay* (a date palm tree blossom), foods introduced by the Spanish such as smoked sausages, cured meats and fish, cheeses, and delicacies from Arabia including olives, capers, and chickpeas. These ingredients are soaked in vinegar for several hours, arranged on a platter, and then sprinkled with the reserved soaking vinegar, called *caldillo*. There are several variations of *fiambre* but all include pickled vegetables and cured meats, making it an ideal dish to await the dead. Derived from a colloquial Spanish word for cold (*frío*), the name *fiambre* alludes both to the cold meats in the dish as well as to a cadaver.