

## **Visiting Guatemala? Here Are Our Most Frequently Asked Questions...**

Thank you for visiting our website to find out more about Guatemala. Our hope is that this set of ***Frequently Asked Questions*** (and the accompanying photos) will provide you with some basic information about Guatemala and the area surrounding Antigua as you plan your visit.

To find the answers to any of the following questions, simply click on the question and you will be automatically taken to our answer.

### **GENERAL TRAVEL QUESTIONS**

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### **SAFETY, SECURITY AND PERSONAL WELL-BEING**

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**Are there serious medical risks in Guatemala?**

**Are there a lot of bugs (or other poisonous critters)?**

**What if I get really sick or am seriously injured while in Guatemala?**

**Can't find the question or answer you were looking for? Feel free to [Contact Us](#) and we will be happy to answer your question.**

## INTRODUCTION



In many ways Guatemala is a microcosm of both the tragedy and hopes of our world. In its people, culture and natural surroundings it shows forth profound beauty even in the face of severe poverty and a long history of injustice and oppression. By coming to Guatemala, people have the opportunity to engage with another culture, and gain a deeper understanding of the effects of poverty on indigenous peoples, while also having the opportunity to compassionately consider the social, political and environmental issues critical not only to Guatemala, but to the entire world.

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### WHAT ARE SOME OF THE HOUSING OPTIONS AND HOW MUCH DO THEY COST?

In terms of housing arrangements, many people on a limited budget choose the option of living in home-stays with Guatemalan families in or very near the city of Antigua. These home-stays are in modest Guatemalan homes where Spanish is the primary language. Typically, they provide a small private bedroom (with bed linens, but no towels), a shared bathroom, and 3 family meals a day, six days a week (excluding Sundays and holidays). Home-stays generally cost between \$75-95 per week.

Other visitors with slightly more resources and who come for only a short time choose to stay in moderately priced hotels (Between \$30-45/night). Other long-term visitors to Guatemala have sought out shared or individual housing where they can do their own cooking and have slightly more privacy. (Apartments or homes in the Antigua area will generally rent from \$300-900 per month.)

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### WHAT IS ANTIGUA LIKE?



As a protected United Nations Historical City, Antigua contains beautiful colonial architecture, colorful open air markets, and number of historical ruins, all surrounded by a spectacular backdrop of three volcanoes (one active) and lush green foothills. Antigua attracts visitors from around the world who come to experience its unique Guatemalan culture, its world famous Spanish language schools, or to simply relax and immerse themselves in the laid back atmosphere of this small, yet historically important colonial town (population, 38,000).

Antigua has many of the same amenities that can be found in most developed countries (although with a unique Guatemalan character). There are banks with cash machines, a post office, numerous internet cafes, a well-stocked grocery store, two indoor gyms, a very large open food market, laundries, beauty salons, and a number of specialty clothing and crafts stores. You would also have the opportunity to experience a taste of Guatemala cuisine and other favorite foods in one of the many bars and restaurants that are here. There is also an active night life that entertains the many locals and tourists who want to unwind and relax at the end of the day.

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### HOW IMPORTANT IS IT THAT I BE ABLE TO SPEAK SPANISH?

Being able to speak Spanish is not absolutely essential for surviving in Guatemala, but it certainly helps. In some parts of Guatemala City and in Antigua, those people who have frequent contact with foreigners will generally be able to speak some English. However, once you travel outside those two areas, you will rarely find anyone capable of speaking English with any more than a few simple phrases of greeting.

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### DO I NEED TO OBTAIN A VISA TO COME TO GUATEMALA?

For U.S. and Canadian citizens, there is no special visa required for coming to Guatemala. You will, of course, need your passport. If you do not have a passport yet, we encourage you to apply for one as soon as possible, since that process will usually take 6-8 weeks to complete. Also, if your passport was issued some time ago, double check to make sure that it will not expire during the time you are planning to be in Guatemala.

When you first enter Guatemala, you will automatically be given a 90 day tourist visa. However, if you chose to stay longer than 90 days, it will be necessary to renew your visa at the immigration office in Guatemala City for a small fee (around \$17.00), or to exit Guatemala for 72 hours and then re-enter Guatemala from a neighboring country. Failure to renew your visa could result in a fine of 10 *Quetzales* (around \$1.25) per day and also restrict your ability to board your airplane when leaving Guatemala at the end of your stay. (This is a major hassle that you don't want to experience since you can't pay the fine at the airport, but must go to the immigration office in Guatemala City to pay the fine.)

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### HOW MUCH DO THINGS COST?

As one of the poorest countries in Latin America, the cost of living in Guatemala is considerably less than in either the United States or Europe. Locally produced food is relatively inexpensive and good quality used clothing can be purchased at the local markets for a fraction of their original costs in the U.S. For comparison, a nutritious lunch (or dinner) can range from \$1.50 per person in a local *comedor* (a small family-run restaurant) to \$8.00 in some of the fancier "gringo" restaurants. A latte or a cup of espresso generally runs between \$1.25-2.00, and a bottle of local beer can be bought in a restaurant for around \$2.00, but if you know the right *tienda* (small store), the same can be purchased for around \$0.75.

Medications and small appliances seem to cost about the same in Guatemala as in the U.S. Other items, such as computers, digital cameras and other electronic equipment tend to be slightly more expensive than in the U.S., mostly because of Guatemalan import taxes.

Of course, Guatemala is world famous for its beautiful hand-made textiles which can be purchased for very reasonable prices. Beyond the basic living expenses (food and lodging), we have found that most folks on a limited budget will generally spend between \$25-40 per week for personal expenses and entertainment while in Guatemala.

Bring your bargaining skills since the price of many items in Guatemala are "negotiated."

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### HOW DO I ACCESS MONEY IN GUATEMALA?



Most of Guatemala operates as a cash economy. A few of the higher-end stores, hotels and restaurants in Antigua or Guatemala City will accept credit cards, but in most cases, stores, restaurants and others services require payment in *Quetzales* (the Guatemalan currency) at the time of purchase. While some stores and restaurants in highly touristed areas will accept U.S. dollars, they will not give a very good exchange rate. Also, some stores and restaurants that do accept credit cards charge an

additional 6-10% to the purchase price of the goods being bought with a credit card.

It is highly recommended that people bring with them several methods for accessing cash from the cash machines in Antigua. It is a good idea to have two major credit cards if you can. That way you have a backup in case one of them has a problem. (Visa is more accepted in Guatemala than MasterCard.) **Because of recent incidents of “skimmers” being used on ATMs and in stores in Guatemala, we no longer recommend using debit cards that allow direct access to your bank account.** Be sure to inform your credit card company of your travel plans and that you plan to be withdrawing money from a Guatemala location, since they have been known to deny access to accounts if they see what they consider to be unusual activity, (i.e., transactions in a foreign country).

Most ATMs in Antigua have a daily limit of around Q2000 per day (or around \$260.00) and that is generally more than enough to meet your daily expenses while in Guatemala. It is possible to obtain a cash advance of up to \$ 399.00 per day, but that requires speaking personally to a bank representative and will sometimes generate an additional cash advance fee.

It is also a good idea to bring several hundred dollars in U.S. American Express Travelers checks as a backup. (Note: Most banks in Guatemala will **not** accept traveler’s checks from other countries or in currencies other than U.S. dollars.) If there is a problem with accessing money through your debit card or credit card, you will at least have some money to hold you over until things can be worked out with your bank or your credit card company. In addition, some folks will bring several hundred dollars in cash, which can be converted to *Quetzales* when you arrive in Antigua.

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### WHAT IS THE WEATHER LIKE?



The climate in the area of Antigua is very mild with temperatures generally ranging from 60-80 degrees Fahrenheit. In Guatemala there are two distinct seasons: the dry season, or “summer” (from November through early May), and the rainy season, or “winter” (mid-May through October). During the dry season, there might be one or two light rain showers over the span of the entire six months. During the rainy season, however, one can count on heavy and sometimes torrential thunderstorms on many afternoons. (Fortunately, they are generally less than 45-60 minutes long.) During the months of January through March strong winds are not unusual, bringing with them much dust and blown-about garbage.

In other parts of Guatemala, such as the jungles to the north and on the Caribbean and Pacific coasts, the weather is generally 10-15 degrees warmer than the central highlands (where Antigua is located) and with significantly higher humidity. Conversely, in the higher mountains in the Northwestern part of Guatemala, the nights can be quite chilly requiring several layers of clothing and heavy blankets.

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### WHAT TYPES OF CLOTHING SHOULD I BRING?

As mentioned above, the weather in Guatemala is generally mild and temperate. In the mountainous area around Antigua, the days are warm (in the mid 70’s to lower 80’s) and the nights, while cool, would never be described as cold such as we are used to in the northern parts of the United States. Generally a light shirt, sweater and light pants are all that are needed during the dry season. During the rainy season, the

temperature remains mild but you would also want to carry a small umbrella or light plastic poncho with you since the rainstorms in the afternoon can be quite torrential. While sandals are perfectly OK to wear in Antigua, most people will also want to have relatively sturdy, closed-toe shoes for their volunteer work setting or longer walks. Sneakers, tennis shoes or light hiking boots seem to work pretty well. In addition, walking is very much a part of life in Guatemala, so having a good sturdy pair of shoes will make your feet happier.

The types of clothing worn by native Guatemalans can vary from very colorful *traje* (the traditional dress worn primarily by the women in Guatemala) to the latest fads emerging from youth culture and the mass media. Yet, for the most part, people are fairly poor, so their dress tends to be fairly low-key and inexpensive. The most popular place to buy clothes in Antigua is the *paca* (benches upon benches of used, but clean, clothing that didn't quite make the thrift shop cut in the United States). Most Guatemalan men will wear jeans or cotton slacks with T-shirts or casual dress shirts. Most of the women in the cities and larger villages will wear western style clothing, but which is still relatively modest and definitely not flashy. On the other hand, the youth of Guatemala have been highly influenced by media and it is not unusual to see the younger girls wearing tank-tops, low-ride jeans combined with sneakers, sandals, or high heels. (How they walk on the cobblestone streets without breaking their ankles is still one of those great mysteries of life.) Rarely, if ever, do Guatemalans wear shorts.

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### **WILL MY PERSONAL APPLIANCES WORK IN GUATEMALA?**

Guatemala has electrical service in nearly all parts of the country, even in most of its rural villages. The electricity in Guatemala is 110 volt, so appliances made for the U.S. will also work in Guatemala. However, in many buildings, the electrical outlets have only two prongs, thus lacking the third grounding prong found in most outlets in the U.S. Be sure to pack several three-prong adapters to deal with this situation.

One does have to be prepared for intermittent disruptions in electrical service. Typically, in the Antigua area, electrical service will be disrupted once or twice a week, but generally not for more than an hour at a time. Another good thing to pack would be a small flashlight. Don't bother to pack candles since they are easily purchased here.

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### **WHAT DO PEOPLE USE FOR TRANSPORTATION IN GUATEMALA?**



While always crowded and joyously noisy, the local and inter-city public transportation system of brightly colored and refurbished (sometimes) school buses is actually quite dependable and punctual, especially in the Antigua area. Many of the locals also use bicycles. The fastest-growing mode of transportation used by Guatemalans is the small scooter or motorcycle. You will find significant auto traffic in Guatemala City, Antigua and the major highways. However, for most Guatemalans, the most common form of transportation is either walking or the *camionetas* (the refurbished school buses, which are also referred to as “chicken buses” because you never know when you will be sharing a seat with a basket of chickens).

Antigua itself is small enough that it can be walked across from end to end in about 15-20 minutes. For short trips at night, folks are highly encouraged to use either local taxis or “*tuk-tuks*” (small three wheeled gas powered covered vehicles) which are always readily available. For large group excursions, private min-vans with drivers can be easily arranged through local tour operators.

If people wish to visit other parts of Guatemala during their free time, (volcano climbs, black-sand beaches,

Mayan ruins, etc.) those trips can be easily arranged with any of a number of tour agencies in Antigua.

There are car rental agencies in both Antigua and Guatemala City, but unless you have been here a while, driving in Guatemala is recommended only for the highly skilled, the foolhardy or those with direct connections to a guardian angel.

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### **WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BEST PLACES OR THINGS TO SEE WHILE I AM IN GUATEMALA?**

**Antigua** is a fascinating small city with a bustling market, a number of major ruins left from the devastating earthquake of 1773, beautiful colonial architecture and churches, and a large number of small shops and restaurants. It is also world famous for its colorful processions during Lent and Holy Week (*Semana Santa*).

Outside of Antigua, the places we have found most interesting to visit include:

**Lake Atitlan:** Sometimes called the eighth wonder of the world, this lake contained within a collapsed volcanic crater is a truly magical place to see. It is also ringed by a number of small villages well known for their pottery and crafts.

**Santiago at Lake Atitlan:** This village is famous for its syncretism of Mayan and Catholic religions (including the infamous San Simeon) and for the fact that it was the first village during the recent Guatemalan Civil War that was able to force the Guatemalan Army to leave.

**San Antonio Aguas Calientes:** Best known for its weaving cooperatives.

**Santa Maria de Jesus:** An indigenous community on the eastern flank of the volcano Agua, about 45 minutes from Antigua by *camioneta* (Chicken Bus).

**Comolapa:** A community in the Central Highlands very well known for its large number of artists and folk art galleries.

**Todos Santos and the Chuchumantane Mountains:** Located in the northwest region of Guatemala, this village is one of the few villages where you will still see nearly all the men dressed in their traditional *traje* (colorful village identifying clothing). Nestled in a deep valley among non-volcanic peaks rising to 10-11,000 feet, it takes nearly a full day to get to from Antigua, but is well worth the trip.

**Tikal:** These world famous Mayan ruins are one of the most heavily touristed (and expensive) areas in Guatemala. They are located in the jungle in Petén, so be sure to bring lots of mosquito repellent.

**Pacaya:** Climbing this active volcano just outside of Guatemala City is definitely worth the effort. We have especially liked the afternoon-evening climb where you are able to watch the sunset and the erupting lava at the same time. For those less physically able to make the 2 hour climb there are the Pacaya “taxis” (horses).

**Semuc Champey:** Many folks consider this the most beautiful spot in Guatemala. It is a bit difficult to reach, but its 300 meter natural limestone bridge and turquoise and emerald green “swimming holes” make the trek worthwhile.

**Pacific Coast Beaches:** Monterrico is the best known of the Pacific Beach resort towns. It has two centers for the hatching and release of sea turtles. Usually quiet during the week, but a bit harried and overcrowded on the weekends with both Guatemalan and foreign tourists.

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## WHAT IS THE FOOD LIKE IN GUATEMALA?



The primary food staple in Guatemala is the *tortilla*. (The Guatemalan version is usually smaller, thicker, more dense and with a stronger corn flavor than is typical in the U.S.) It is most often combined with *frijoles* (refried brown or black beans), *guacamole* (made from avocados just picked from the tree and mixed with lime and salt), and *salsa* (a combination of finely chopped tomatoes, onions, and peppers.)

A *comida típica económica* (typical and inexpensive meal) in many home-stays and small restaurants will include fried or baked chicken, rice, refried beans, *ensalada verdura* (a combination of chopped cabbage, carrots, and other vegetables) or a variety of small squashes common to Guatemala, and for dessert, fried plantains. Guatemalan food is not usually very spicy, but can be made so by adding “*Picamás*,” a common condiment made from hot chili peppers.

In Antigua, there are a number of ethnic restaurants, including Thai, Korean, Italian, Irish, German, Mexican, and Japanese, all with a distinctly Guatemalan interpretation of the dishes from those countries. For those of you who will be missing American style “comfort food” there are several restaurants in Antigua that offer a very good hamburger with french fries, along with pizza, wraps, and nachos.

A common drink is the *liquado*, a mixture of one of many fruits or melons common to Guatemala (which includes pineapple, cantaloupe, watermelon, papaya, mango, limes, etc.) combined with water, sparkling water, milk or yogurt.

There are several good Guatemalan beers (the brewing process was brought to Guatemala in the late 1800’s by German immigrants) ranging from a light pilsner to a more hearty dark ale. And as is typical throughout most of Central America, rum is available in all sizes and qualities.

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## WHAT IS THE POVERTY LIKE IN GUATEMALA?

Guatemala is ranked as one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere. Current estimates are that between 50-60% of the population lives in poverty (the ability to purchase basic food necessities, but insufficient resources to provide adequate shelter, education, or medical care) and 25-30% live in extreme poverty (lacking sufficient resources to meet minimal daily food needs.) It is also estimated that 45% of all children in Guatemala under the age of five suffer from serious malnutrition. These conditions are much more prevalent in the rural areas of the country where the concentration of the indigenous population is greatest.



In the poorer villages, housing is often constructed of cane or *lamina* (scrap corrugated metal). Families with slightly more resources will construct their homes from concrete blocks, but often with only dirt floors. Even in the poorer villages many homes do have electricity, but water is often available only from a central location in the village and must be carried in jugs or plastic buckets to the homes. Unfortunately, recent estimates are that over 90% of the surface springs in Guatemala are contaminated, oftentimes with human waste. Cooking is usually done over a wood fire which contributes to a high rate of respiratory problems for the women and children.

Over the last 30 years there has been a very large migration from the countryside into Guatemala City. This migration is the result of the Guatemalan Civil War, the destruction of many villages and homes by hurricanes Stan and Mitch, and two severe droughts in the early 2000's. Many of these internal refugees live in squalid *favelas* (hillside slums) where crime, violence, prostitution and drug use are daily facts of life.

On occasion, one does see beggars and the homeless on the streets of Antigua. But because it is one of the most affluent cities in Guatemala, and the police want to keep the city as "tourist-friendly" as possible, they are not very prevalent and are certainly not aggressive. Those beggars that are tolerated by the police are those who are pretty low-keyed in their approach and have a disabling condition such as blindness or a physical deformity. Also, at the bus terminal in Antigua, it is quite common to have people come onto the bus and explain their situation and then go down the aisle collecting whatever money people wish to give them.

In a more quiet and obscure way, it is not uncommon for a Guatemalan in need to approach a foreigner whom they have come to know and ask for a "loan" to carry them through a difficult situation. From our experience, it is unlikely that the loan will ever be repaid. We find that we are approached in this manner at least several times a month and always need to weigh the severity of need against our own financial resources (which from a U.S perspective are quite limited, but from a Guatemalan perspective seem enormous.)

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### **HOW CAN I KEEP IN TOUCH WITH MY FAMILY AND FRIENDS WHILE I AM THERE?**

There are a large number of Internet cafes in Antigua and the typical cost ranges from \$0.75-\$1.00 per hour of time on-line. In addition, some of the Internet cafes have *Skype* capability. There are also shops that offer international phone calls for around \$0.12-15 per minute. Sometimes, cell phones from the U.S. can be fitted with a Guatemalan network chip for around \$6.00 and then local minutes can be bought on a pre-paid basis for between \$0.05-0.12 per minute depending on the plan purchased. International calling minutes will cost approximately twice that (\$0.10-\$0.24 per minute) again depending on the type of pre-paid minutes purchased. One nice thing about the Guatemalan cell phones is that you are never charged for incoming calls, only outgoing, so if you are on a tight budget, you can have your family and friends call you.

There is postal service from Guatemala to the U.S. and from our experience it usually takes about two weeks for a letter to travel from Guatemala to the States. Going the other way, mail has sometimes taken a little as two weeks to reach us, but other letters and cards have taken up to three months.

Packages can be sent to Guatemala via FedEx (very expensive), but there is always the problem that it will be opened by customs and you will be charged an import tax (depending on the value of the items) for the contents before you can receive the package. The U.S. Postal Service is generally the cheaper and more preferred way to send packages to Guatemala.

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### **WHAT ESSENTIAL ITEMS SHOULD I BRING WITH ME?**

The longer we have been in Guatemala, the less we find that we need to get along. So, in general, pack light and save yourself from excess luggage fees. It is nice to have about a week and a half's worth of clothes (shirts, underwear, socks, etc.), but pants, especially if they are jeans, will probably last for a couple of days before they need to be washed. In addition, there are many *lavandarias* (laundries) in Antigua where you can drop off your clothes in the morning and have them washed, dried and folded by mid-afternoon. If you do run short of clothing, there are many used clothing stalls that are part of the Antigua market. There are also stores that sell American brand clothing, but they tend to be a little pricey. Again, the weather is pretty mild, so layers of light clothing when it gets cool in the evenings work much better than heavy clothing such as coats, or heavy sweaters. During the rainy season, it is nice to have a light raincoat. However, we have found that U.S. raincoats (the Gore-Tex kind) tend to be on the hot and heavy side, so we opt for inexpensive plastic ponchos (around \$6.00) that are readily available here. During the rainy season having the "polypro" type socks that wick off water will keep your feet more comfortable than regular cotton socks.

If you will be staying in a homestay, be sure to bring your own towel and washcloth. Also, the pillows in Guatemala are generally pretty thin, so if you like a thicker pillow and have room in your luggage, bring your own.

Another item that we have found essential is a small, but comprehensive Spanish-English dictionary. The phrase books don't quite cover enough situations, yet you also don't want to be lugging around a large reference book either. Also, if you do plan to be studying Spanish here, we highly recommend bringing a copy of Barron's *501 Spanish Verbs*.

Guatemala is a photographer's paradise. Therefore, be sure to bring a camera. We have found that a small digital camera works really well since it can easily be carried around without drawing too much attention (either from prospective subjects or from thieves.) Film can be purchased here, but the selection can be quite limited so digital seems to be the easier medium to work in. The quality of the batteries available here is also questionable (most seem to have gone past their shelf life), so having a camera with rechargeable batteries is your best bet. (Remember to pack the charger. They are very hard to find here in Guatemala and when you do, they are about twice as expensive as in the States.) Also, bring extra memory for your camera. We have found that a 4Mb memory card allows us to take a lot of pictures (and videos) when we run into something really beautiful or colorful.

If you already have a cell phone and are pretty sure that it can be switched over to a Guatemala cell-phone network, bring it. If you are here for more than two weeks you will find that having a cell phone is essential in Guatemala. (There are very few land-line phones available.) If you don't have one that can be switched over, inexpensive cell-phones can be purchased here for less than \$25.00.

You will likely be doing a lot of walking while here, so a small, inexpensive backpack is an excellent thing to have. (Old and funky is even better.) You won't want to bring anything fancy or large, since those only tend to attract attention to you (and your belongings). Like used clothing, backpacks can be purchased here, but they are generally of pretty low quality and seem to fall apart the minute it rains or if you put anything remotely heavy in them. Also, be sure to include a sturdy pair of tennis shoes or light hiking boots.

Many medicines in the U.S. are also available here in Guatemala without a prescription, so it is helpful to find out and bring a list of the generic names of any medications you use regularly. However, it is also a good idea to bring a supply of your own, just in case. If you take medications that contain any narcotic, or are in the MOI inhibitor or anti-depressant category, you should bring a sufficient supply to last throughout the trip, since those do require a doctor's prescription.

Because of frequent power outages, it is nice to have a flashlight. Cheap and small is better than big and powerful. Also, because electricity is relatively expensive in Guatemala, reading lamps are not very common here. If you like to read a lot, bring a small book light.

Internet cafes are very common in Antigua (almost like Starbucks stores in Seattle), so bringing your own laptop is definitely not recommended, unless you have specific programs that are not generally available on public computers and you will need them to complete your work or study. Having your own personal laptop can be a hassle and can actually put you into some danger. When carrying it you will need to be extremely careful about where you use it and you won't want to be carrying it in a fancy laptop computer case. We have a number of "horror stories" about people using their laptop in a free wi-fi café, only to have it ripped off when they walk out onto the street. (Or worse yet, being shot for them in Guatemala City.) Conversely, we would recommend bringing one or two flash-drives. Those are quite handy when you need to download files off the Internet or save copies of your best photographs.

The altitude in Antigua is relatively high (5,000 feet) and the sun shines most of the time, so do bring sun-screen. If you have concerns about skin cancer, you will also want to bring some type of brimmed hat. While

there are not a lot of bugs in Antigua, there are different times of the year (and different parts of the country) where they are more prevalent, so bring insect repellent and anti-itch cream to put on the bug-bites when they do occur.

If you wear glasses or contacts, bring along an extra pair (and your prescription). Replacing them here can sometimes take one-two weeks.

In terms of identification, you will need to have your passport (or a photocopy) of it with you all the time. Generally, we recommend that folks only carry the photocopy of the passport with them, and keep their actual passports in a safe place. You will also want to bring your driver's license with you as a backup piece of ID and in case you need to drive a vehicle while in Guatemala. (Guatemala will accept any valid driver's license from the United States as a license to drive a car in Guatemala.)

We speak to this issue more in the section on accessing money, but bring at least two methods for withdrawing money from ATM's, either two different credit cards from different banks, or a credit card and a debit card. We also recommend at least several hundred dollars in cash or in American Express Traveler's Checks in U.S. dollars. (Note: Visa cards are more commonly accepted in Guatemala than Mastercard.)

Finally, in spite of that fact the pharmacies in Antigua have most everything you would need you may want to pack a small first aid kit for those times you might be traveling away from Antigua. Include within it any prescription items that you normally require, plus any of the following recommended items you feel you might need:

- Antibacterial wipes (pre-moistened towelettes)
- Antibiotic ointment
- Antifungal powder or cream
- Aspirin, Tylenol or Ibuprofen
- Cough Suppressant
- Decongestant (Sudafed, Actifed, etc.)
- Diarrhea Relief (Pepto-Bismal, Imodium, etc.)
- Hydrocortisone (ant-itch) cream
- Laxative, fiber supplement or stool softener
- Oral re-hydration salt packets for fluid replacement and re-hydration during moderate to severe diarrhea
- Throat lozenges
- Antiseptic solution such as Betadine
- Small bandages in assorted sizes
- Gauze pads and medical adhesive tape
- Ace Bandage
- Moleskin for blisters
- Insect repellent or spray
- Safety pins
- Contact lens solution
- Sanitary supplies (tampons, napkins, etc.)
- Sunscreen
- Small pocket knife (Remember this can't be carried in your carry-on luggage)
- Toilet paper
- Thermometer
- Tweezers
- Water purification tablets.

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### **WHAT IS GUATEMALA LIKE FOR A PERSON WHO IS PHYSICALLY CHALLENGED?**

Unfortunately, Guatemala lags significantly behind the United States in having facilities or services that accommodate people with physical or developmental challenges. For the few people we have seen in wheelchairs in Guatemala, almost always they have been accompanied by another person to help them get onto buses, up and down stairs, etc. On the positive side, it is common in Guatemalan culture to extend help to a person who is having difficulty. Just this last year in Antigua, the government did put in wheelchair ramps at some of the busier sidewalk corners in the central part of the city, but in general, it would still be very challenging to get around independently in Guatemala in a wheelchair. Also, probably because of their weight, cost and the cobblestone nature (or dirt/mud) of most streets in Guatemala, we have never seen a motorized wheelchair here.

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### **ARE THERE ANY GOOD BOOKS OR WEBSITES THAT WOULD TELL ME MORE ABOUT GUATEMALA?**

There are hundreds, but for now we will keep our recommendation list to just two.

The latest edition of the **Lonely Planet Guide to Guatemala**

**Guatemala: A Guide to the People, Politics and Culture** by Trish Kane, published by Interlink Books, New York, 2006. (Available used on Amazon.com-very cheap.)

There are also a number of websites that can give you good up-to-date information about Guatemala in general and Antigua in particular.

[www.prensalibre.com.gt](http://www.prensalibre.com.gt) Prensa Libre is the major newspaper of Guatemala. (In Spanish)

[www.grupoquepasa.com](http://www.grupoquepasa.com) Publishers of a monthly activity guide for Antigua. This website promotes many hotels, restaurants and bars that purchase advertising from them.

[www.revuemag.com](http://www.revuemag.com) Publishers of Guatemala's English language magazine with information on activities and events of interest.

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2045.htm> This page on the U.S. State Department website gives general information about Guatemala.

[http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/cis/cis\\_1129.html](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1129.html) This page on the U.S. State Department website provides additional information regarding travel in Guatemala, including information about entry/exit requirements, safety and security warnings, and medical situations. This page contains some pretty frightening information. However, our personal experience and the experiences of the people we have hosted here in Guatemala have been significantly less problematic than what is described on this page. (Please see the following section, "Will I Be Safe in Guatemala?")

<http://www.who.int/ith/en/> The World Health Organization webpage for international travelers.

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## **SAFETY, SECURITY AND PERSONAL WELL-BEING**

### **WILL I BE SAFE IN GUATEMALA?**

Visiting Guatemala can be a very rewarding and culturally enriching experience. However, there is also some risk involved due to high levels of poverty, substance abuse, gang activity and crime, especially in certain parts of Guatemala City.

We have found that the likelihood of being the victim of a crime or an assault in Guatemala has much to do with the types of situations one chooses to be in. Being out late at night, being in isolated areas, having too much to drink, being alone or only in a small group, engaging in illegal activities, being careless with showing money or valuables are all factors that contribute to being the target of criminal activity.

However, even if a person is very careful, there can be no guarantees that one will not be a victim of a crime or an accident. This would be true if one were in New York, Rome, or any other major world city.

While accounts regarding criminal activity in Guatemala can be somewhat disturbing, our own personal experience in Guatemala has been generally very positive, and that on the whole, the Guatemalan people are extremely welcoming and courteous to people from outside the country. If reasonable precautions are taken, the risks involved can be minimized significantly.

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### **IS THE COUNTRY POLITICALLY STABLE?**

Since the signing of the Peace Accords in December of 1996, thus ending its 36 year long civil war, Guatemala has continued to make significant progress in achieving political stability. While the last election in 2011 did have some reported instances of candidate assassinations (mostly at the local municipal level and in areas where drug-trafficking is prevalent) the national election was carried out without any significant problems and the transfer of power to the new administration occurred without incident. The 2011 election was the fourth election since the signing of the Peace Accords and was monitored and declared fair and honest by a number of foreign organizations and observers.

The newly elected President of Guatemala is Oscar Perez Molina, who ran on a law-and-order platform of *Mano Dura* (Strong Hand). His administration will continue to face significant challenges with the issue of criminal/gang violence. Guatemala is a major transfer point for drugs coming from Colombia through Mexico and then on to the U.S., (mostly along Guatemala's northern frontier with Mexico) and there have been a number of drug-related killings in that part of Guatemala. In addition, criminal gangs in many of the impoverished zones of Guatemala City continue to engage in such activities as extortion and inter-gang violence. Fortunately, because of such a strong police presence in Antigua, the types of violence seen in other parts of Guatemala are rare in the Antigua area. To put things in perspective, tourists or foreigners may be the occasional victims of petty crime (robbery or pickpocketing), but rarely are they involved in the more serious and violent criminal activity in Guatemala.

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### **ARE THERE SERIOUS MEDICAL RISKS IN GUATEMALA?**

In general, we have found the exposure to dangerous diseases in and around the Antigua area to be slightly greater than found in most major North American cities. This is due primarily to lower health standards regarding food handling and the fact that many Guatemalans do not have access to high quality or preventive health care. Simple precautions such as washing your hands frequently, drinking bottled water, eating in established restaurants rather than from street vendors, preparing uncooked foods properly, and avoiding as much as possible people with such symptoms as excessive coughing and/or sneezing can help reduce exposure to most communicable illnesses. Medical issues that may be encountered in Guatemala and should be discussed with your local doctor or travel medicine clinic include the following:

**Traveler's Diarrhea:** Almost inevitably, any person visiting Guatemala for an extended period of time will

experience one or two bouts of diarrhea. The symptoms can be uncomfortable, but will usually resolve without any specific treatment within 2-3 days. Self-treatment for traveler's diarrhea usually consists of bed-rest and soft foods and fluids. Additional self-treatment can include the use of antibiotics, such as Ciproflaxin, which is easily purchased over the counter in the local pharmacies. (Women who are pregnant, children, and persons with a history of allergies to drugs or underlying chronic medical conditions, should consult a doctor before taking any medications.) Occasionally, visitors will encounter more serious issues with diarrhea and fever which can be caused by amoeba or parasites, and would need to be treated by a doctor.

**Malaria and Dengue Fever:** Because of the altitude there is only a minimal risk of malaria or dengue fever in and around Antigua or Guatemala City. However, the incidence of malaria is more prevalent in Guatemala's jungle and coastal areas. If you plan to travel to those areas, we would recommend a prophylactic medication such as Chloroquine, clothing and night-time screens that minimizes skin exposure, and liberal use of mosquito repellants.

**Viral Hepatitis:** Hepatitis A is transmitted by the fecal-oral route which generally happens as a result of poor food-handling and sanitation practices. Hepatitis E is similar to Hepatitis A, but is more severe. It appears to be spread when water supplies are contaminated with fecal material. To reduce exposure to Hepatitis A and E, we recommend caution in choice of eating venues and drinking bottled water whenever possible. If you are considering coming to Guatemala for an extended period of time and have not done so already, you should check with your doctor or local travel medicine clinic regarding possible vaccinations for the various forms of Hepatitis.

**Air Quality:** Because of a combination of volcanic ash, thinner air, (Antigua is slightly above 5,000 feet in elevation), low to non-existent pollution control standards, and the amount of dust in the air during Guatemala's dry season (November-April), people with respiratory issues such as asthma or emphysema are likely to experience some difficulties. While this is usually restricted to a shortness of breath, or a minor, but nagging cough, it could become a serious issue for people already experiencing respiratory problems. In addition, during the rainy season (May-October), because of the high humidity there can be issues if you are allergic to molds and mildew.

It is highly recommended that you consult with your local travel medicine clinic **several months prior to your coming to Guatemala**. They will be able to advise you more specifically regarding the medical issues that we have described above.

**Availability of Prescription Drugs:** In terms of medications available in Guatemala, there are a number of well-stocked pharmacies in Antigua and some drugs that require a prescription in the United States can be purchased over the counter here. Drugs that do require a prescription in Guatemala are any that contain a narcotic. However, if you have specialized medical needs, it is best to bring along whatever medications you might need.

**Notice to Visitors with Diabetes:** The good news is that oral diabetes medications such as Metformin are available in Guatemala over the counter without prescription. The bad news is that there are very few options available when it comes to finding sugar-free products. While Splenda can be found (sometimes) in one store in Antigua, there is very little else available in terms of sugar-free desserts, syrups, etc.

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### **ARE THERE LOTS OF BUGS (OR OTHER POISONOUS CRITTERS)?**

Because of its altitude, the area around Antigua is not plagued with many flying, biting insects. During the rainy season, there are some mosquito hatchings, but they are never very numerous and can be easily dealt with using a mild insect repellent spray.

The only really annoying bug problems that we have seen in the Antigua area are the occasional infestation

of bedbugs and/or fleas. That can usually be solved with either a chemical spraying (not ecologically ideal) or simply waiting till the infestation passes and using a lot of anti-itch ointment in the meantime.

There are a numerous types of ants, and food left out can be a magnet for their taking up residence with you. Being careful about not leaving food out on counters generally keeps them at bay.

At the lower elevations on the Pacific slope and in the more humid areas of Guatemala, mosquitoes and large flying beetles are much more common. Using mosquito netting, long sleeve shirts, insect repellent and anti-malarial medications are highly recommended.

In some parts of Guatemala there are poisonous snakes and scorpions. However, encounters with them are rare, and the scorpions tend to be rather small and their stings more painful than dangerous. There are also wasps and bees, which make their nests under overhanging eaves, so if you are allergic to bee-stings, make sure to bring the appropriate medications.

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### **WHAT IF I GET REALLY SICK OR AM SERIOUSLY INJURED WHILE IN GUATEMALA?**

In terms of medical facilities, there is one hospital and several clinics in the Antigua area of reasonable quality. For very serious medical emergencies, there are several hospitals in Guatemala City that have highly trained English speaking medical staff and modern medical equipment and facilities. We highly recommend that people coming to Guatemala obtain medical insurance which also covers medical services in a foreign country and emergency medical evacuation back to the United States if that becomes necessary.

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**More Questions? Just go to the [Contact Us](#) page on our website.**