

# GUATEMALA

## PRE-DEPARTURE TRAVEL GUIDE



The following general outline offers practical information, suggestions, and answers to some frequently asked questions. It is not intended to be the definitive guide for your trip. Be sure to check the reading listing included here for more information.



## Guatemala City, Guatemala

Elevation: 4917 feet

Latitude: 14 35N

Longitude: 090 31W

### Average Temperature

°F	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
	64	66	68	70	70	69	68	68	67	67	66	64

### Average Number Of Rainy Days

Days	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
	4	3	4	5	14	23	20	20	23	15	7	5

### GENERAL INFORMATION

**Area:** 108,889 sq km (42,042 sq miles).

**Population:** 14,223,400 (2003).

**Population Density:** 130.6 per sq km (2003).

**Capital:** Guatemala City. Population: 3,009,800 (2003).

**Geography:** Guatemala is located in Central America and shares borders to the north and west with Mexico, to the southeast with El Salvador and Honduras, to the northeast with Belize and the Caribbean sea and to the south with the Pacific ocean. The landscape is predominantly mountainous and heavily forested. A string of volcanoes rises above the southern highlands along the Pacific, three of which are still active. Within this volcanic area are basins of varying sizes which hold the majority of the country's population. The region is drained by rivers flowing into both the Pacific and the Caribbean. One basin west of the capital has no river outlet and thus has formed Lake Atitlán, which is ringed by volcanoes. To the northwest, bordering on Belize and Mexico, lies the low undulating tableland of El Petén, 36,300 sq km (14,000 sq miles) of almost inaccessible wilderness covered with dense hardwood forest. This area covers approximately one third of the national territory, yet contains only 40,000 people.

**Government:** Republic. Gained independence from Spain in 1821. Head of State and Government: President Oscar Berger Perdomo since 2004.

**Language:** The official language is Spanish. English is widely spoken in tourist areas and major hotels and restaurants. Twenty-three indigenous languages are also spoken.

**Religion:** The constitution guarantees freedom of worship, but Catholicism is the most widespread religion with a 20 per cent Protestant minority. Some indigenous communities hold services combining Catholicism with pre-Columbian rites.

**Time:** GMT - 6.

**Electricity:** 115-125 volts AC, 60Hz. There are some regional variations.

### COMMUNICATIONS

**Telephone:** IDD is available. Country code: 502. Outgoing international code: 00. Telephone calls to Europe are slightly cheaper between 1900 and 0700.

**Mobile telephone:** Handsets can be hired from Ruracel and other companies. Some hotels also supply them. Coverage is increasing in Guatemala; consult network operator for details.

**Fax:** Most hotels have facilities.

**Internet:** There are several Internet cafes in Guatemala City and the main tourist areas.

**Telegram:** Local telegrams can be sent from the central post office. Urgent telegrams are charged at double the ordinary rate.

**Post:** Regular airmail to Europe takes 12 days.

### PASSPORT / VISA

**Passports:** For international travel, a U.S. passport valid for at least six months from date of departure, containing **at least** two blank pages is necessary.

**Visas:** U.S. and Canadian citizens do not require visas in advance. Citizens from other countries, consult the nearest Guatemala consulate.

**Important:** Please look at your passport prior to travel to insure that:

- 1) Your passport is valid for at least six months after the date of travel.
- 2) You have sufficient blank pages for visa stamps that will be added as you travel in and out of various countries.

**Please note:** Pages reserved for amendments & endorsements cannot be used for visas.

### MONEY

**Currency:** Quetzal (Q) = 100 centavos. Notes are in denominations of Q100, 50, 20, 10, 5 and 1. Coins are in denominations of Q1, and 50, 25, 10, 5 and 1 centavos.

**Currency exchange:** The Quetzal is extremely difficult to obtain outside Guatemala or exchange after leaving Guatemala, and visitors are strongly advised to exchange local currency before departure. It may be difficult to negotiate notes which are torn. Unused local currency can be exchanged at the bank at the airport (opening hours: Mon-Fri 0800-2000.) ATMs are common throughout the country.

**Credit & debit cards:** Visa and American Express are accepted, whilst Diners Club and MasterCard have a more limited acceptance. Check with your credit or debit card company for details of merchant acceptability and other services that may be available.

**Travelers checks:** Accepted by most banks and good hotels, although visitors may experience occasional problems. To avoid additional exchange rate charges, travelers are advised to take travelers checks in US Dollars.

**Currency restrictions:** The import and export of local currency is prohibited. The import and export of foreign currency is unlimited.

**Banking hours:** Mon-Fri 0900-1500 (certain branches 0900-2000), Sat 0900-1230.

### DUTY FREE

The following goods may be imported into Guatemala by persons over 18 years of age without incurring customs duty: *80 cigarettes or 100g of tobacco; 1.5l of alcoholic beverages; a reasonable quantity of perfume.*

### PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

Jan 1 ..... New Year's Day.  
Apr 8-11 ..... Holy Week.  
May 1 ..... Labour Day.  
Jun 30 ..... Army Day.  
Aug 15 ..... Assumption  
..... (Guatemala City only).  
Sep 15 ..... Independence Day.  
Oct 20 ..... Revolution Day.  
Nov 1 ..... All Saints' Day.  
Dec 24 ..... Christmas Eve (afternoon only).  
Dec 25 ..... Christmas Day.  
Dec 31 ..... New Year's Eve (afternoon only).

### HEALTH

**Vaccinations:** A yellow fever vaccination certificate is required for travelers over one year of age coming from countries with infected areas.

Following WHO guidelines issued in 1973, a cholera vaccination certificate is no longer a condition of entry into Guatemala. However, cases of cholera were reported in 1996 and precautions are essential. Up-to-date advice should be sought before deciding whether these precautions should include vaccination as medical opinion is divided over its effectiveness.

**Food & drink:** Bottled water is available everywhere. Other water sources may be contaminated, and water used for drinking, brushing teeth or making ice should have first been boiled or otherwise sterilized. Milk may be unpasteurized and should be boiled. Powdered or tinned milk is available and is advised, but make sure that it is reconstituted with pure water. Avoid dairy products which are likely to have been made from unboiled milk. Only eat well-cooked meat and fish, preferably served hot. Pork, salad and mayonnaise may carry increased risk. Vegetables should be cooked and fruit peeled.

**Other risks:** Malaria risk exists throughout the year below 1500m (4921ft), especially in Alta Verapaz, Baja Verapan, Ixcán, Petén and San Marcos. Chloroquine is the recommended prophylaxis. Onchocerciasis (river blindness) occurs in localized foci in rural areas. Dengue fever may occur. Dysentery and diarrhoeal diseases are common. Visceral, cutaneous and mucocutaneous leishmaniasis also occur. Hepatitis A occurs and inoculation is recommended. Altitude sickness may be experienced in higher places such as volcanoes and mountains, and exertion should be avoided. Rabies occurs. For those at high risk, vaccination before arrival should be considered. If you are bitten, seek medical advice without delay. Typhoid occurs.

**Health care:** There are both public and private medical facilities in Guatemala City, but insurance is strongly advised. Some hotels offer doctor's services to their guests.

### TRAVEL - INTERNATIONAL

**Approximate flight times:** From Guatemala to London is 11 hours (plus stopover time in USA or Madrid), to Los Angeles is 6 hours, to New York is 6 hours and to Miami is 2 hours 30 minutes.

**Departure tax:** US\$30.

### SOCIAL PROFILE

**Food & Drink:** There is a variety of restaurants and cafes serving a wide selection of cooking styles including American, Argentinean, Chinese, French, Italian, Japanese, Mexican and Spanish. Fast-food chains also have outlets here and there are many continental-style cafes. The visitor should note that food varies in price rather than quality.

**Nightlife:** In Guatemala City in particular, there are nightclubs and discos with modern music and dance, featuring national and international artists. Guatemala is the home of marimba music, which can be heard at several venues. In the cities, the marimba is a huge elaborate xylophone with large drum sticks played by four to nine players. In rural areas the sounding boxes are made of different shaped gourds (marimbas de tecomates). There are regular concerts throughout Guatemala. There are also theatres and numerous plays in English and other cultural performances. Films with English and Spanish subtitles are often shown in major towns. The most important museums and art galleries are found in Guatemala City, La Antigua Guatemala and Tikal National Park.

**Shopping:** Special purchases include textiles, handicrafts, jewelry, jade carvings, leather goods, ceramics and basketry. Markets are best for local products and bargaining is necessary. Ceramics can be purchased cheaply in many places including Villa de Chiantla, San Luis Jilotepeque and Rabinal. Cobán is the cheapest place to buy silverware. The Central Market in Guatemala City and the Craft Market provide a range of crafts combining traditional and modern styles. Guatemala City contains many modern shopping centres and malls. Gran Centro Comercial Los Proceres, Galerías La Pradera, Plaza Cemaco and Geminis International Mall are all located in Zone 10. In addition, visitors may make use of the facilities at Tikal Futura, Peri-Roosevelt Shopping Mall and the Century Shopping Centre. Shopping hours: Mon-Sat 0930-1930. Malls are also open on Sunday.

**Social Conventions:** Guatemala is the most populated of the Central American republics and is the only one which is predominantly Indian, although the Spanish have had a strong influence on the way of life. Full names should be used when addressing acquaintances, particularly in business. Dress is conservative and casual wear is suitable except in the smartest dining rooms and clubs. Tipping: 10 per cent is normal in restaurants where service has not been included.

### BUSINESS PROFILE

**Economy:** Coffee is the leading export in this largely agricultural economy, accounting for about one third of foreign earnings. Other major crops are sugar cane, bananas, cardamom and cotton. In the fishing industry, shrimps are a significant export earner. Guatemala boasts the largest manufacturing sector in Central America, accounting for 20 per cent of GDP, and produces processed foods, textiles, paper, pharmaceuticals and rubber goods. Oil deposits, first

discovered in the mid 1970s, are being exploited by French and American concerns but the country remains a marginal producer and continues to rely heavily on imported oil. There is a small mining industry producing marble, copper, lead, zinc and other metals.

Although Guatemala has received solid support from the USA and international institutions such as the Inter-American Development Bank and the IMF, its economic development in the last 25 years has been undermined by chronic internal conflict, exacerbated by several major natural disasters and low prices for Guatemala's main export commodities. Nonetheless, the economy has grown steadily in the last few years and is currently 4 per cent. The USA is substantially Guatemala's largest trading partner, followed by El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico and some EU countries, notably Germany and Italy. Guatemala is a member of the Central American Common Market.

**Business Office hours:** Mon-Fri 0800-1800, Sat 0800-1200.

## CLIMATE

Guatemala's climate varies according to altitude. The coastal regions and the northeast are hot throughout the year with an average temperature of 20°C (68°F) sometimes rising to 37°C (99°F). Generally, nights are clear all year round. In higher climes, near the centre of the country, the rainy season, running from May to September, is characterized by clear skies after abundant rainfall in the afternoons and evenings. Temperatures fall sharply at night.

**Required clothing:** Lightweight tropical clothing. Jacket or light woollens for the evening.

## HISTORY AND GOVERNMENT

**History:** The Mayans were dominant through much of Central America from the fifth until the eighth century when their civilization declined and a variety of other ethnic groups moved into the region. Europeans arrived in the 15th century, and Guatemala was one of the territories overrun by the Spanish conquistador Cortés in the 17th century. Pressure on their empire during the early 19th century forced the Spanish to concede independence to their American colonies, principally Mexico, into which Guatemala was briefly incorporated in 1822. Subsequent plans to fuse the countries of the Central American isthmus were equally short lived. Guatemala enjoyed comparative stability, punctuated by brief periods of upheaval, under a series of dictators who were content to keep the country under a quasi-feudal regime underpinned by a small clique of land-owning families.

The government of Colonel Arbenz Guzman attempted various land reforms in the early 1950s, but was overthrown by a US-backed invasion led by military opponents of Arbenz. The country then slid into a state of almost perpetual civil war between a series of right-wing military governments and various leftist guerrilla movements: a major figure during this period was the former general Efraín Ríos Montt, a self-styled evangelist who as army chief of staff and (briefly) president during the 1970s and 80s presided over a vicious counter-insurgency campaign whose savagery was exceptional even by the standards of the era and the region.

Although Guatemala has completed a successful transition from military to civilian government, the military retains considerable political power. This transition began in May 1985, when Guatemala's new constitution was put into effect. The centre-right Partido Democracia Cristiana

(PDCG) formed the majority party in the new National Congress, staying in control until 1995 when they came up against serious challenges from the Plan por el Adelantamiento Nacional (National Advance Party, PAN), which is dominated by business interests, and the Frente Republicano - Guatemalteco (FRG), which enjoys close relations with the army and a coterie of established landowners. A period of political musical chairs ended at the start of 1995 with a FRG/PDCG coalition in control of the legislature. The 1995 election was notable for the participation, for the first time, of some left-wing parties allied to the anti-government guerrillas.

The most recent polls in November 1999 brought victory for the FRG whose presidential candidate, Alfonso Portillo Cabrera (known by his peculiar nickname 'Husky Chicken'), defeated the PAN's Oscar 'The Rabbit' Berger at the run-off while the FRG obtained a small absolute majority in the National Assembly. The FRG and PAN now dominate Guatemalan politics. Only now has the Government been prepared to admit that its predecessors, especially the Ríos Montt regime, were responsible for massive human rights abuses: this is still a central and highly sensitive issue in Guatemalan domestic politics. An exhaustive UN-sponsored investigation concluded in 1999 that the army was responsible for 90 per cent of the estimated 200,000 killings. The complicity and active assistance of successive American governments in the counter-insurgency campaign was also highlighted, and drew an unprecedented apology from US president Bill Clinton. Under the terms of the deal (see above) which ended the civil war, the culprits will go unpunished.

One of the most prominent is ex-General Ríos Montt who, despite his record, is a significant influence on the Portillo government. Despite attempts to debar him, he is expected to stand as a candidate in the forthcoming presidential election in November 2003.

In July 2002, the Pope visited Guatemala. This was a major event in this deeply Catholic country. John Paul canonized the country's first saint, the 17th-century missionary Pedro de San José de Betancur.

Abroad, the main issue facing the country remains the dispute with neighboring Belize, over which Guatemala has territorial claims; 1993 saw the signing of a non-aggression pact by the two governments, and as a concession, Belize granted the Guatemalans access to its maritime facilities. The following year, however, the Guatemalan government reasserted its territorial claim at the UN; in 2000, it did so again, claiming half of Belize's current territory. Despite international mediation efforts, relations between the two remained tense. Then, in September 2002, the Organization of American States (the main pan-regional political alliance) brokered a draft settlement of the dispute which may form the basis for a permanent accord.

**Government:** Under the 1986 constitution, legislative power is vested in a single-chamber elected assembly with 80 members directly elected every 4 years. The President, also elected every 4 years, holds executive power.

## INTRODUCTION

For travelers, Guatemala represents an intriguing mix. It is a diverse country with landscape that ranges from lush tropical rainforest in the northern lowlands, where some of the most spectacular Mayan archaeological sites (including Tikal) are found, to the pine forested hills of the Highlands, which are home to Mayan communities that still wear their traditional weavings. Guatemala has around 21 different ethnic groups,

such as the Quichés, Mams, Tzutujils and Cakchiquels, speaking some 23 languages (21 of Mayan origin; the other two are Garifuna and Xinca).

While the country's political heart is found in the capital, Guatemala City, more attractive still is the former colonial capital, Antigua Guatemala, which is saturated with the ruins of old convents and churches and surrounded by majestic volcanoes – some still active – that are good for hiking and climbing. The Caribbean (with its fishing communities of Afro-Caribbean heritage) and Pacific coastlines offer good fishing, swimming and boating opportunities, as do the beautiful lakes of Atitlán and Izabal. Guatemala also has unspoiled tracts of virgin rainforest (protected in a network of national parks), spectacular waterfalls and underground caves (such as those in the Verapaz region).

For the purposes of this section, the country has been divided into seven regions: Central Guatemala, Petén, Verapaz Region, Caribbean Coast, Eastern Guatemala, Pacific Coast and the Highlands.

## **CENTRAL GUATEMALA**

Those visitors from overseas not landing at the international airport at Flores (for connections to Tikal) land at La Aurora International Airport in Guatemala City. Other than being the primary urban centre in the country, Guatemala City is ideally positioned for visitors wishing to make the short journey by road to La Antigua Guatemala, situated 45km (28 miles away).

**Guatemala City:** There were three attempts to establish a capital before Guatemala City was founded in 1775. The first colonial settlement called Santiago de los Caballeros Guatemala was built in 1524 by the conquistador, Pedro de Alvarado close to the Cakchiquel settlement of Iximché (near the present day town of Tecpán – see Iximché under The Highlands section). After continuing battles with the Cakchiquel warriors, the capital was relocated in 1527 to the Almolonga Valley, near present-day San Miguel Escobar, between the volcanoes Agua and Fuego until an earthquake destroyed it in 1541. A third capital was then established just a few kilometers away on the present site of La Antigua Guatemala in the Panchoy Valley (see the Antigua section below). Established as the new city in 1543, it was decided to retain the name of Santiago while the former (second) capital was referred to as Ciudad Vieja or Old City. The new capital grew in wealth, size and prestige, surviving a number of earthquakes until 1773, when it was hit by a huge earthquake and eventually abandoned. The capital moved to its present location while the former capital was thereafter known as La Antigua Guatemala or Old Guatemala.

The capital, Guatemala City lies at the edge of a plateau cut by deep ravines in the Valley of the Hermitage. Few colonial buildings remain but the old quarter, with its low colonial houses, is situated in the northern part of the city. The main plaza, Parque Central lies at its heart and is bordered by the National Palace, the Cathedral, the National Library and an arcade of shops. In the south of the city, close to the airport and the national racecourse, are Parque La Aurora, which contains the zoo, the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology and the Ixchel Museum, housing a good collection of hand-woven textiles. Other museums with fine collections include the Popol Vuh Museum (a private collection of Mayan and Spanish colonial art) and the National Museum of Modern Art. Some of the most interesting religious buildings (mainly either neo-classical or

Baroque) include the 17th-century Hermitage of El Carmen and the churches of La Merced, Santo Domingo, Santuario Expiatorio, Las Capuchinas, Santa Rosa and Capilla de Yurrita (built in the first half of the 20th century).

**La Antigua Guatemala:** The former capital (originally called Santiago de los Caballeros Guatemala), Antigua is situated southwest of Guatemala City, and was considered to be one of the most splendid cities in Central America before its partial destruction in the earthquake of 1773. Further devastation to many buildings was wreaked in the massive earthquake in 1976 and the town is now a UNESCO Cultural Heritage Site. Despite the damage of countless earthquakes, floods and fires, Antigua is a beautiful place of multi-coloured, single-storey buildings, tropical gardens, plazas, fountains and cobbled streets. A popular tourist centre, it has several good hotels, restaurants and bookshops with a fairly lively nightlife. Monuments, former palaces, convents and churches that have survived in varying degrees of intactness include the Main Square, Cathedral, Palace of the Captains General, University of San Carlos (containing the Museum of Colonial Art), and the churches of La Merced, Santa Clara, Las Capuchinas, La Recolectión and San Francisco. The Casa Santa Domingo is a former convent that is now a smart hotel with two small but fine collections housed in the Colonial and Archaeological museums. The town is particularly busy at Easter time where locals and visitors flock to see the spectacular Easter processions when huge litters bearing religious icons are carried over carpets of flowers and colored sawdust. Antigua is also one of the main centers for Spanish-language schools in Guatemala.

**Beyond Antigua:** Just outside the town is a coffee plantation, which now houses the small but interesting Coffee Museum (Museo del Café) and Music Museum (Casa K'ojom). (K'ojom means music in the Cakchiquel language). Three nearby volcanoes, Agua, Acatenango and Fuego, all offer incomparable views of the city and surrounding countryside. Santa María de Jesús is the starting point for climbing to the crater of the Agua Volcano. Two towns worth visiting for their fine crafts are Jocotenango (a centre for ceramics, as well as the site of a lively fiesta held to celebrate the feast day of the Virgin of the Ascension on 15 August) and San Antonio Aguascalientes (for beautiful hand-woven textiles). The Day of the Dead festival (on 1 November) is a celebrated ritual in Santiago Sacatepéquez when hundreds of multi-colored circular or hexagonal kites, made from bamboo or tissue paper (increasingly polyester or plastic) are flown in honor of the dead.

## **PETÉN**

The vast tropical lowland jungles of the Petén department share borders with Belize to the east and Mexico to the north and west. It is home to most of the major Mayan sites in Guatemala and many visitors exploring the Mayan sites in all three countries tend to fly direct from either Mexico or Belize into the international airport at Flores. Most of the major Mayan sites are located in this department.

**Flores:** This former Mayan ceremonial centre is built on an island in the middle of Lake Petén Itza. None of the Mayan structures survived the arrival of the conquistadors who built their main plaza, church and government building on the top of the hill in the centre of the island. The town's hotels, restaurants and shops are laid out below. A causeway connects Flores to the mainland town of Santa Elena, where

the banks and main shops are located. Buses run throughout the day from both Santa Elena and Flores to Tikal, passing through the pleasant village of El Remate, which has a couple of lakeside restaurants, lodgings and language schools. Also accessible from Flores is the Cerro Cahú Biosphere – a 600-hectare (1482 acres) nature reserve that contains cedar, sapodilla, indigo and mahogany trees, orchids and ferns as well as fauna such as white-tailed deer, armadillos, spider monkeys, hawks, parrots and toucans. From October to April, hundreds of migratory birds settle in the reserve.

**Tikal:** The spectacular Mayan ruins of Tikal (City of Voices) encompass vast pyramidal temples, ball courts, causeways, plazas and public buildings that extend over some 16 sq km (6 sq miles). While there are about 3000 known structures, many more lie buried under dense jungle vegetation. First occupied in about 800 BC, this great city was eventually abandoned around 1000 years later. Copies of some of the more elaborate friezes, stelae, sculptures and bas-reliefs are found in the Sylvanus Morley Museum, which is near the entrance. At least 2 days are recommended to see all of the archaeological sites. Visitors can stay in the park lodges, in Flores, Santa Elena or El Remate, and guided tours around the ruins can be arranged both for the evening and at sunrise. The site is located in the heart of Tikal National Park, where there are over 50,587 hectares (125,000 acres) of rare forest (kapoka, breadnut, mahogany and cedar) and tropical vegetation. Wildlife that can be seen there includes howler monkeys, tropical birds, reptiles, red coates, raccoons and white-tailed deer. Tikal National Park is itself situated in the much larger Mayan Biosphere Reserve.

Other Mayan sites in north Petén: Several Mayan sites are currently under excavation, one of the most impressive of which is El Mirador, about 4km (2.5 miles) from the Mexican border. Also in the northern part of the department, Uaxactún (Eight Stones) shows how developed the Mayan civilization had become by the ninth century AD. Building E-VII-B was used for determining the precise dates of the equinoxes and the solstices. Ixlú was an important lake port, situated in between the Petén Itza and Salpetén lagoons. Further east, on the edge of the Yaxhá Lagoon, Yaxhá (Green Water) is an extensive Mayan site of terraces, plazas and causeways. North from here are the smaller sites of Nakum and Naranjo.

**Sayaxché:** This town in the southern part of the Petén department provides a good starting point for exploring other major Mayan sites. Ceibal, southeast of Sayaxché, has a small observatory that was designed to pinpoint the location of galaxies, planets and stars. It is also where some of the finest post-Classical stelae (AD 900 to 1523), carved with large anthropomorphous clay figures, were recovered. Other impressive stelae representing battle scenes were found at Dos Pilas. Southeast from here, the post-Classical site of Aguateca was once an important ceremonial centre.

## VERAPAZ REGION

This region is made up of the two departments of Alta (high) and Baja (Low) Verapaz, which are located in the north central part of Guatemala. While many of the towns and villages retain their folklore, traditional handcrafts and religious feast days, the region is also a prime destination for whitewater rafting, caving and other outdoor activities. As access may be difficult or remote, many of the national parks and rivers need to be visited with registered guides and four-

wheel drive vehicles, either arranged privately or as part of a package offered by tour operators.

**Cobán:** This is the capital of the Alta Verapaz department that, along with Antigua, produces some of the best coffee in Guatemala. Situated on the banks of the Cahabón River, the town's colonial past is reflected in its architecture, such as that of the El Calvario church. It is also a centre for the production of many fine silver handcrafts. Celebrations to mark the ancient Mayan feast of Paabanc are still held in Cobán and San Pedro Carchá to the east. Some of the region's most colorful hand-woven clothes can be seen in towns and villages such as Tactic, San Juan Chamelco and Lanquín.

One of the highlights of the region are the Semuc Champey Waterfalls, which are formed as the Cahabón River falls some 300m (985ft) across rocks and ledges. Around 10km (6 miles) further on, the river enters the Languin Caves, parts of which can be explored with a guide, either on foot or by boat. Some 200km (124 miles) from Cobán is the National Park of Lanchúa, which is a very humid, subtropical rainforest teeming with many species of mammals and amphibians. Visitors to the park will need a guide and full camping equipment. From the Lanchúa Lagoon, it is possible to take a boat to explore parts of the Caves of Candelaria. These ancient caves were considered sacred by the Maya and remnants of ceremonial altars and pots have been found here.

**Salamá:** The attractive departmental capital of Baja Verapaz is a good place to buy souvenirs handcrafted from silver, clay and leather. The nearby town of Purulhá is the location for the Mario Dary Rivera Nature Reserve, which was set up to protect the quetzal, Guatemala's national bird and a symbol of liberty. Two walking trails cut through the cloud forest, where visitors can see about 50 different types of trees and a variety of tropical birds such as toucans, hummingbirds and macaws.

## CARIBBEAN COAST

Caribbean Guatemala is less developed than some other parts of the country in terms of tourism infrastructure. As a result, the villages along the coast, inland and around Lake Izabal, Guatemala's largest, remain unspoiled. The coast has strong Afro-Caribbean influences as black Afro-Guatemalans known as Garífunas, the descendants of former African slaves who intermarried with the indigenous Maya, settled here. Caribbean traditions remain evident in the area's music, festivals and cooking (in dishes such as tapado – made with fresh fish, coconut milk and green bananas). Sailing, fishing, swimming and scuba diving are all popular activities and trips to the Belize Keys (such as the Cayos Sapodillas) are possible.

**Puerto Barrios:** The main port, Puerto Barrios is the capital of the Izabal department. It is a safe harbor for yachts and the starting point for trips up the inland waterways and rivers that crisscross the region. Southeast of Puerto Barrios is the remarkable UNESCO Cultural Heritage Site of Quiriguá. The Maya carved stelae and altars with intricate details that reveal much of their beliefs, animal deities, battles, the feats of their kings and cosmology. Stela E, at 11m high (36ft), is one of the tallest that has been recovered across the former Mayan Empire.

**Livingston:** Accessible from Puerto Barrios, this small town of brightly painted wooden houses and balconies is located in the jungle among coconut groves. Formerly the departure point for coffee farmed in the plantations of the Verapaz region, it still has a small fishing economy. Celebrations during Easter Week and on 12 December (the feast day of the Virgin of Guadalupe) are particularly colorful.

From Livingston, boat trips can be taken along the Río Dulce, a jungle river that has its source in Lake Izabal and winds its way between steep cliffs and dense vegetation, through the lake of El Golfete, to flow into the Amatique Bay. Along the river, near Fronteras, is the fort of San Felipe, which was constructed by the Spanish in the 17th century as a defense against pirate attacks. The waterways of the river also pass through the mangrove swamps and lagoons of the Chocón Machacas Biosphere. This is a habitat for the endangered manatee (sea cow), which is Guatemala's largest aquatic mammal. North of Livingston is the Siete Altares, a series of waterfalls and pools, which have been formed where the Río Dulce empties into the Caribbean.

## **EASTERN GUATEMALA**

Encompassing parts of the El Progreso, Zacapa, Jalapa, Chiquimula, Santa Rosa and Jutiapa departments, this is one of the most varied regions in the country – both geographically and culturally. Visitors can tour fine colonial churches, small local museums, coffee plantations and buy excellent handcrafted souvenirs while traveling through a changing landscape of subtropical forests, past volcanic peaks and sulphurous lakes.

**El Progreso & Zacapa Departments:** Two of the finest examples of 16th-century Baroque architecture can be found about 90km (56 miles) from Guatemala City in the parish churches of San Agustín Acasaguastlán and San Cristóbal Acasaguastlán in El Progreso. The departmental capital of Zacapa is well known for its distinctive hand-woven cloth and for its small Museum of Paleontology, Archaeology and Geology. Nearby Estanzuela also has a Paleontology Museum.

**Chiquimula & Jalapa Departments:** The town of Esquipulas in the Chiquimula Department is one of the most significant in Central America. Second only in importance to the shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe outside Mexico City is the Basilica of Esquipulas with its Icon of the Black Christ that dates back to 1595. Pilgrims from all over Central America gather here on the feast day of 15 January. Esquipulas is also the seat of the Central American Parliament and, given its location just a short distance from the borders with Honduras and El Salvador, it has also been the place where several important peace agreements have been signed. Other attractions include the Franciscan Sanctuary, Belén Convent and colonial Little Bridge (Puente Chiquito). Montecristo National Park (the Tri-State Park) is located nearby and extends over the borders of all three countries. Over half of its 12,000 hectares (29,652 acres) of humid and subtropical forest are in Guatemala.

The villages, forests and mountains of Mataquesuintla are home to the Pocomam Indians who produce some outstanding textiles and ceramics. Under the Spanish Rural Tourism Plan, visitors can travel on horseback, by bicycle, on foot or by four-wheel drive vehicle from Quetzaltepeque, through San Luis Jiltepeque to the attractive departmental capital of Jalapa, staying in family homes en route.

**Santa Rosa Department:** Located near Pueblo Nuevo Viñas and surrounded by mountains and forests is sulphurous Lake Ixpaco, which is the site of many springs that are believed to have healing properties. Northwest through a landscape of pine forests and low subtropical mountains is Ayarza Lagoon, also slightly sulphurous but with shoals of tilapias and mojarras.

## **PACIFIC COAST**

The Pacific coastline stretches some 250km (155 miles) from the Mexican border in the west to the border with El Salvador to the east and includes parts of six administrative departments. The region is characterized by black volcanic sand beaches on the coast; mangrove swamps irrigated by numerous rivers behind and lush, subtropical forests further inland. Agriculture is the prime industry, with extensive coffee, sugar cane, cardamom, cotton and banana plantations. As well as enjoying watersports and swimming on the coast and exploring the rainforests and swamps with their unique habitats, visitors can tour several important Olmec archaeological sites.

**San José:** After Puerto Barrios on the Caribbean, San José is the country's second-largest port, which is connected to Guatemala City in the north by Highway CA9 (more commonly known as the Pan American Highway). There are several seaside resorts on either side of San José where a variety of watersports are available. The waters here have abundant marine life (such as red snapper, tarpon, bass and sailfish) and the sea fishing is rated very highly. To the west, an interesting journey can be taken by launch from the old Spanish port of Iztapa through the Chiquimulilla Canal, which runs through mangrove swamps rich with plant life such as water lilies and irises. This canal is part of the Monterrico Nature Reserve, which was created to conserve coastal wildlife such as the green iguana, marine turtle and crocodile.

**Escuintla Department:** Guatemala has 33 volcanoes, three of which are still active. Although not the highest, one of the most dramatic is the Pacaya Volcano (2252m/7388ft), which is located about halfway between Guatemala City and Escuintla. During periods of activity, guided tours are organized to watch the eruptions and the lava flows. When inactive, an ascent of the volcano can be made by a marked route from San Francisco de Sales. Northwest of Escuintla are the sugarcane fields of Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa. The remains of great stone heads and other carved reliefs are dotted throughout the fields belonging to three fincas (plantations) – Bilbao, El Baúl and Las Ilusiones. South from here is the site of La Democracia, which contains dramatic basalt sculptures of heads with closed eyes and furrowed brows.

**Retalhuleu Department:** North of Retalhuleu is El Asintal and the site of Abaj Takalik ('standing stone' in the Quiché language). This is one of the few sites that has remnants of terraces, carved stones, inscribed altars and calendars from two civilizations: the Mayan and the Olmec, who preceded the Mayas. A little further east in San Martín Zapotitlán is the Xocomil Aquatic Park – a theme park with pools and waterslides built around replica Mayan temples, palaces and sanctuaries.

## THE HIGHLANDS

Known in Spanish as El Altiplano, the highlands region is one of the most popular for visitors to Guatemala. The towns and villages there are inhabited by the greatest number of modern day, indigenous Mayan groups – many of whom still speak the languages and uphold the sacred rituals of their ancestors. Although this practice is gradually dying out, many of the villagers in more remote areas still wear traditional hand-woven garments and market days or fiesta celebrations are the best times for visitors to appreciate their vibrant colors. While the main towns are connected with paved highways, some of the outlying villages are accessible only by four-wheel vehicles. Tourism infrastructure, however, is developing all the time.

**Huehuetenango:** The departmental capital of Huehuetenango makes a good base for exploring as it has more accommodation options and facilities than some of the smaller villages surrounding it. To the west is the small post-Classical site of Zaculeu (White Land in the Quiché language). A number of tombs containing objects carved from pyrite and ceramic vessels have been found here. North of Huehuetenango is Chintla whose church contains the silver Virgin of La Candelaria, which draws many worshippers. A beautiful drive into the mountains further north in the region lies the isolated village of Todos Santos Cuchumatán. The men's traditional costumes of high-necked red shirts, red and white-striped trousers, black capes and red fabric tied under straw hats are particularly smart. One of the best times to visit is during the annual fiesta between 31 October and 5 November. On the Day of the Dead (All Souls' Day) on 1 November, a traditional horse race takes place in the village. Fuelled by quetzalteca (the local sugar cane spirit), the riders in traditional costume race up and down a dirt track at the far end of the village. The winner is the last man still on his horse.

**Santa Cruz Del Quiché:** The Spanish used the carved stones from the ancient Mayan Quiché capital they had destroyed to build the church in Santa Cruz. The town has a good market but even more famous are the market days held every Thursday and Saturday in the small hill village of Chichicastenango, 19km (12 miles) to the south. Mayan traders from outlying villages spread their traditional food, cloth and wooden masks on stalls around the steps of the Church of St Thomas in a wonderfully colorful spectacle. Many others come to burn copal (incense) and pray on the church steps, combining ancient Mayan and Catholic rituals. On the south side of the main square, the Regional Museum houses a fine collection of jade and ceramic pieces and incense burners. Located on a hilltop above the town is the Mayan stone idol of Pascual Abaj.

**Totonicapán:** The regional capital, Totonicapán is a thriving industrial town. One of the best times to visit is during the week celebrating the feast days of San Miguel Arcangel (24-30 September) when traditional dances (morerias) are held here with descriptive titles such as Mexicans, The Deer and the Monkey and Mexicans. To the west is San Cristobal Totonicapán, whose market day on Thursday is the best time to purchase outstanding ceramics. It is also an important centre for textiles. Momostenango (City of Altars), in the north, is the centre for traditional hand-woven ponchos.

**Quetzaltenango:** After the capital, this is the second most important city in Guatemala, set amongst a group of high

mountains and volcanoes. Although Quetzaltenango (often referred to as Xela) is quite modern, it also contains narrow colonial streets, broad avenues, fine public buildings such as the neo-classical City Hall, Municipal Theatre and Natural History Museum, and a magnificent central plaza. It is also an important centre for language schools. Other places to visit outside the city are the hot sulphur springs at Fuentes Georginas, Aguas Amargas and Los Vahos. Several picturesque towns include Salcajá with the 16th-century Church of San Jacinto, Zunil, dominated by the ornate façade of its church and one of the places where Maximón is still worshipped actively (see Santiago Atitlán below), San Andrés Xecul and San Francisco El Alto.

**Solola:** The road through Solola winds down to the beautiful, volcanic Lake Atitlán, much praised by Aldous Huxley, and is surrounded by purple highlands, olive-green mountains and three distinctive volcanoes – Tolimán, Atitlán and San Pedro. Although there are some small hotels around the edge of the lake, most visitors stay at Panajachel, the key tourist centre with a long strip of guesthouses, restaurants, bookshops, cafes and banks. Water-skiing, swimming and boating are all available on the lake, which is 19km (12 miles) in length and between 6.5km (4 miles) and 12km (7.5 miles) wide. Around the lake are several villages, each of whose inhabitants wear differently colored, densely embroidered clothes. Santiago Atitlán is the largest of these. Easter Week is famous for combining two traditions – the Catholic Easter procession and the rival procession conducted by the *confradia* (religious brotherhood). Their idol is Maximón – a black-suited figure with a moustache that combines physical characteristics and attributes of St Simon, Mam (a Mayan god), Alvarado (the Guatemalan conquistador) and Judas Iscariot. Inside the church, a little Maximón figure is carved into the altar, as is a scene showing the feast day of the *confradia*. Some of the women in Santiago still wear traditional headdresses that are made from long lengths of cloth wound repeatedly around the back of the head (a visual reference to Ixchel, the snake goddess of weaving). In San Antonio Palopó, the women weave on long rectangular backstrap looms. The men use the standing loom introduced by the Spanish and wear a type of wrap-around brown and white kilt. Both men and women in San Catarina Palopó wear shirts, huipiles (blouses), skirts and trousers embroidered with colourful geometric designs.

**Chimaltenango:** Northwest of Chimaltenango is the important fortified hilltop site of Iximché. Having conquered the Cakchiquel warriors, the Spanish conquistadors established their first capital near here in 1524. Today, there are well-preserved ruins of the former ball court, four main plazas and a temple. Almost on the border with the Quiché department is the site of Mixco Viejo (Pocomán), which was also a fortified city like Iximché. A shrine to San Simon (Maximón) is also found at San Andreas Iztapa.

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## LUGGAGE

Traveling light is always the first and best rule! We recommend passengers limit their luggage to one medium-sized soft bag per person or two small duffel bags. In this security conscious era, airline luggage restrictions may change without notice. Also, luggage limits vary depending on ticket class, plane size, destinations, etc. It is always best to confirm with airlines for specific limitations.

Generally speaking, from the US, economy class passengers are allowed to check in two (2) normal size pieces of luggage (each piece measuring no more than about 62 linear inches, which means length plus width plus height), and not exceeding 70 pounds per bag.

Scheduled flights from other countries and within foreign countries generally limit luggage to 44 pounds total, plus one carry-on personal item. Further restrictions apply for charter flights. We will advise you of those restrictions in your final documents.

Most airlines now allow only one carry-on bag in addition to one personal item such as a laptop or handbag. Most bags within the 22 x 14 x 9 (or, a total of 45 linear inches) size restriction will be considered legal carry-on size by major domestic U.S. airlines. Many US airlines check-in desks have sizing boxes within which your bag must fit. Obviously, no knives or cutting instruments are allowed in carry-on baggage.

All luggage should have identification inside as well as secure baggage tags on the outside.

Please note that the US National Transportation and Safety Board now suggests that you do not lock your checked luggage. If a screener has to open your bag, the locks may have to be broken. This applies to flights within the US and international flights originating in the US. This, however, does not address other international travel issues. We suggest that you lock your luggage and bring a couple of spare locks in the event one or more are cut off. But the choice is up to each individual traveler to make.

Hint: Some companies such as Aurora Luggage (<http://www.auroraluggage.com/>) post the most current luggage requirements for many individual airlines on their web sites.

## **CAMERAS & FILM**

**Photography:** Please, approach people with an attitude of respect, just as you would want to be treated. Do not take anyone's picture without permission. Many times it is necessary to negotiate a fee beforehand. Never take any photos of airports, police or government buildings, military installations, or borders.

**Equipment:** Bring cameras and lenses you are comfortable using. If you get new equipment before you go, do so as far in advance as possible. Shoot and develop at least a dozen rolls before departure to work out problems. And, don't forget your camera operation manual, filters, and a flash unit. Cameras should be packed with good cushioning. The roads are sometimes rough, and constant vibration can do damage. Keep your camera with you as much as possible, and do not leave it on the floor of the vehicle when on the road. Make sure you have lens caps for all your lenses. Clean your equipment frequently. Bring along a puffer brush and lens cleaning tissues.

**Lenses:** A combination of fixed and/or zoom lenses with focal lengths from 28 mm to 200 mm is good for general travel photography, although you can take excellent photographs with only a 50 mm lens. Zoom lenses such as 35-80mm, 70-210 mm, or 100-300 mm will help you capture the sights in a variety of different settings. Serious photographers will want them handy. A macro lens is helpful for shooting close-ups, but a good set of extension tubes will work very well. A 2x converter is also a handy. Point and shoot cameras are nice for a group or indoor shots, but leave something to be desired

when photographing outdoors. Bring a small cleaning kit and blower brush to keep equipment clean.

**Video:** If you are planning to shoot video on a safari, be sure to bring plenty of tape and batteries with you. Do not plan to buy videotape. Videotape is not affected by airport x-ray; only magnetic fields or prolonged exposure to heat will damage videotape. Your battery charger should be capable of automatically adjusting to 240 volts. You will probably have no problem finding a plug in most of the lodges and larger tented camps, but be prepared with plenty of batteries

**Batteries:** Put fresh photo-quality batteries in your camera and other electric equipment before you leave and bring at least two sets of spare batteries with you. Your camera will be useless without them, and batteries can be hard to find and expensive.

**Film:** It is always best to bring along whatever you need with you. Film is generally more expensive abroad and it may be hard to locate. You'll be surprised at how much film you use when you are trying to capture all those special moments. Even those not all that interested in photography will probably shoot a couple of 36-exposure rolls per day, and enthusiastic shooters will easily double or triple that amount. Be sure film is fresh and, when possible, keep it refrigerated. A film speed of ASA/ISO 64 is an excellent choice for color slide film. Use this speed when possible rather than higher speed films. There is a noticeable difference in quality that it is worth the extra effort to keep your camera steady at a somewhat slower shutter speed than you would otherwise use. For color prints, there are several good choices, including Kodak and Fuji films (ASA/ISO 100 & 200) for daylight photography, ASA/ISO 400 & 1000 are good for lower light and nighttime situations.

It is helpful to set up a numbering system for your film, marking each roll with masking tape and numbers or letters, before leaving home. This way you can code the rolls of film and where they were shot. It's quite a job to sort through hundreds of pictures with no clue where or when they were taken.

Avoid airport x-ray machines whenever possible and request a hand search of your film only. While security people are often obliging, some are not so allow a little extra time. X-rays are cumulative on exposed and unexposed film so the more times film is x-rayed, the more risk of damage. This is especially true with older machines found in many countries. Lead bags for film are available for purchase and are worth the small investment. Do not have film in your camera because it may be opened for inspection.

**NOTE:** Recent news reports warn that new explosive detectors used in more than 100 US airports to scan checked baggage will ruin unprotected, unexposed film. This technology will eventually be in place at all airports worldwide. Experts suggest either carrying your film in your carry-on luggage and/or placing film in safety, lead-lined bags to prevent X-ray damage.

## **SAFETY**

Common sense safety precautions you normally observe when traveling anywhere should be followed to minimize the risk of personal injury or property loss.

Leave jewelry at home! Do not leave cash, traveler's checks, airline tickets, etc. in an unattended room, even in a locked suitcase. Most of the accommodations have

safe deposit facilities at the front desk for your valuables. Use them.

In cities here as in cities at home, be aware! During the day and in crowds, be careful when carrying purses or cameras. Do not carry large amounts of currency or valuables. Take taxis from hotels and do not accept rides from unauthorized cabs. Do not walk around unfamiliar cities alone at night. Be wary of entering into conversation with unknown people on the street. These are the same precautions a visitor would observe in North American cities. Common sense is the best defense.

Pamphlets addressing safety issues abroad are available from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402. Or, from Bureau of Consular Affairs' website: <http://travel.state.gov>.

### **TRAVELER'S ETIQUETTE**

You are guaranteed to come up against cultural differences between our society and that of other countries that may think and do things differently from the way we do them. Traditions and philosophies, some of which are very old, govern attitudes toward time, business, family, and politics. But this is at the heart of why we travel -- to experience the world through other cultures and other people.

Travel necessitates being a good-natured realist as well as a romantic. Being a genial traveling companion makes for an enjoyable travel experience for everyone and a great safari. Observing simple rules of common courtesy will better assure the success of your travel.

### **DEALING WITH JET LAG**

With the joys and adventures of international travel come certain unavoidable inconveniences such as occasional lost luggage or bouts of jet lag. In fact, studies reveal that as much as 90% of long distance travelers experience a degree of jet lag.

Jet lag describes that out-of-sorts feeling associated with long flights, particularly those across time zones. Symptoms and severity vary but may include drowsiness, fatigue, irritability, difficulty concentrating, headaches, insomnia, and swelling of the extremities.

The number of time zones crossed affects the severity of jet lag. The internal body clock follows circadian rhythm, which is controlled by the hypothalamus that processes nerve signals. That clock is designed for regular cycles of light and darkness. Depending on the number of time zones crossed, it may take several days for that rhythm to be restored.

But that is not the only influence. Other factors include cabin pressure, stale air, lack of humidity, and your overall physical condition at the beginning of your trip.

Although jet lag can not be completely avoided, there are some simple things you can do to help minimize its affects.

Consider the following for your next scheduled trip.

- Start your trip well rested with a good night's sleep prior to departure. Getting adequate rest before starting on your journey will help minimize the amount of catching up you'll have to do when you arrive at the destination. Once home, try to schedule a day of rest before returning to work.
- Drink plenty of fluids -- water and juices will help you to stay well hydrated. Seasoned travelers recommend that you carry a bottle of drinking water with you and drink eight ounces every hour.
- Avoid alcohol and caffeine just before and during flights. Both possess diuretic properties that promote dehydration. Alcohol also causes drowsiness and contributes to feeling sluggish.
- Once settled onboard, reset your watch to the time zone to which you are traveling. This small act helps you begin adjusting to your destination's local time.
- As much as possible, create a dark environment during flight. Studies have shown that bright lights strongly affect individuals' body clocks. If necessary, try eyeshades and earplugs to help block distractions and convince your body that it is nighttime. Closing window shades and turning off overhead lights may also help. Sleep on the plane if your flight has an early morning arrival time.
- Wear loose-fitting clothing and comfortable shoes that will help in the event you experience mild swelling. Experienced travelers often bring lightweight slippers to wear during flights.
- Although not always feasible, look for opportunities to walk around while in flight. Do simple isometric exercises (contracting and relaxing as many muscle groups as possible) in your seat. These will improve circulation, help promote increased alertness, and reduce chances of swelling.
- If you arrive in the morning, plan to stay awake. If possible, wait until the local bedtime to sleep. Many people swear that this is key in determining how quickly they adapt to local conditions. You will sleep better and will be less likely to suffer insomnia than if you nap upon arrival.
- During extended stopovers, showers are sometimes available. If you have the opportunity, shower. Trans-Pacific pilots report that taking a shower in Hawaii helps them recover more quickly from the general effects of jet lag after the flight.