

# Guatemala

## Worth knowing from A – Z

### Antigua

After a violent eruption of the Agua volcano, that destroyed the former capital Ciudad Veija, Antigua was founded in 1543. It's name was: La Muy Noble y Muy Leal Ciudad de Santiago de los Caballeros de Goathemala. But after the eruption in 1773, the capital was moved to the valley where Guatemala City lies now, and Antigua got its name – as the old Guatemala. Antigua is the only town in the country that preserved its small colonial houses, its simple infrastructure and cobblestone streets. The town shows old ruins, palaces and churches everywhere, and each of these buildings has its own history. The surroundings of Antigua add to its astonishing beauty as well. No less than three volcanoes look over the city. Antigua's heart is Parque Central. The beautiful park is situated between cathedrals and two old palaces and is the colourful, lively frame for street traders, shoe shining boys, catch-penny shows and doomsday preachers. Besides being the ultimate meeting point, the park also is a quiet place where you can read a book, write postcards or just lean back and observe the coloured crowd of people passing by. The town has many small restaurants, bars, cinemas and discos and despite the extensive tourism, there still are a lot of places where only local people come. The large market place is in the west side of town. Here you can buy everything from toothbrushes to pig's tails for very little money. Especially on Sunday this market place is very lively and colourful. Watch out for your money though.

### Beaches

Guatemala has natural borders to both the Pacific and the Atlantic Ocean. Only three hours drive from Antigua you can find the beaches of Montericco and Puerto San Jose. Beaches in Guatemala are black, the sand originate from the surrounding volcanoes. Take along your sandals as the sand can be burning hot. Montericco is far more peaceful and beautiful than Puerto San Jose. Livingston, ant the river Rio Dulce are situated in the North. The lifestyle here is Caribbean, people talk English and a large part of the population is black. We recommend you sail down the river and visit the small villages and the jungle.

### Chicos malos

This is the name for young guys in Antigua, abusing generosity and inclination for adventure. Use you common sense when they contact you. Host families normally do not accept that you invite Guatemalan friends into their home. Ask for permission first, and listen to the schools and families good advice.

### Departure Tax

You will be charged a departure tax of USD 30,-- when you leave Guatemala.

### Developing country

Just like every poor country Guatemala has a high crime rate. That's why it is important that you take care and use common sense. If you bear this in mind there's no reason to worry. Don't carry a lot of cash and leave expensive jewellery at home. Don't leave your drink on a table and return afterwards. Just as in Europe drugs are a problem in Guatemala between young people and at discos.

### Electricity

Electrical current is 110 volts, 60Hz. This means you cannot use devices bought in home, unless you have a transformer, which can be bought in Antigua. A variety of plugs are in use including the flat two-pin, flat three-pin and the UK-style three-pin.

### Excursions

The school organises almost every day excursions to coffee- and nut farms, indian villages, and museums round about Antigua. You pay only the transportation and entrance fees. These excursions are a unique chance to get behind the facades and discover every day life or industry in Guatemala. From time to time trips to the volcanoes Pacaya or Monterrico beach are organised. Besides the interesting cultural aspects, these trips give you the opportunity to learn to know the other students and teachers. Some afternoons, videos are shown at school. Visiting voluntary working places is also organised, which enables you to see where you want to work, and make a final decision with the coordinator.

## Food

Tortillas, guacamole, frijoles (black or brown beans), salsa picante, moshe and platanos (fried beans) are some of the specialities you are bound to eat in Guatemala. Besides these dishes the country has a large supply of vegetables and fruit which you definitely will taste at your host families table. Chicken is a regular dish – meat is not that common. Should you get tired of beans, Antigua offers a large scale of restaurants, where you even can get a Double Whopper, or Thai shrimps in lime sauce.

## Guatemala City

Is the capital and has about 3 million inhabitants. Houses are low because of the danger of earthquakes. Although some zones are not safe for tourists, the town is worth visiting, thanks to the chaotic market places where you can buy everything from key rings to turkeys or showy Americanised supermarkets where prices are like in Europe. The three major earthquakes in 1917, 1918 and 1976 destroyed a lot of the town, but if you can stand the heat, pollution and traffic noise, there are some exciting museums, parks and historical buildings worthwhile seeing. Most people prefer to stay out of the capital.

## Host families

All the families hosting students are affiliated to the school. They come to school every Friday to get paid. This way the close contact between accommodation co-ordinator and families is assured. Most families host more than one student. Hosting students means a supplement to the families' income.

Even though you will get information about your host family before you arrive in Guatemala and probably are tempted to buy some gifts for their children, it is better to wait until you know them. Families may feel embarrassed as you are a paying guest in their house. You can always later, during your stay buy a gift. It is important that you respect your host families' private life regarding girl or boy friends visiting you in your room, you will have to ask your host family if they accept. Usually they do not mind, as long as they are foreigners. Remember to warn in advance if you do not sleep at home, they might get worried. Never give the house key to anybody else! If ever a problem should arise between you and your host family, talk about it with the co-ordinator at school in order to avoid misunderstandings.

## Jungle

It takes 12 hours to get to Tikal by bus from Antigua, only one hour from Guatemala by plane. Tikal is the historical Maya town. In the middle of the jungle suddenly appear the overwhelming pyramids, which you still can climb. The park opens at 5 o'clock in the morning. It is a wonderful and unforgettable experience to sit on the top of the highest pyramid, admiring the jungle below and see the sun rising over the treetops. The jungle around you is filled with noises from howlers, toucans, budgerigars and parrots. We strongly advice you take a guide, as the temples hide a tremendous amount of stories and mysterious ornamentation's. Tikal was the centre of the Maya world some thousand years ago. Reconstruction and preservation of the pyramids is still going on.

## Luggage

- Copy of insurance policy, plane ticket and passport, to leave behind with family members;
- Visa card;
- Email address;
- Vaccinations;
- Dictionary;
- Paper and pen for school;
- Insect repellent;
- Malaria pills;
- Bathing suit, in case you have time to go to the beach;
- Sleeping bag and warm clothes, if you want to climb a volcano;
- Sandals, walking shoes;
- Raincoat, in case you are in Guatemala during rain season;
- Something for the children in the institutions. (Toys, teddy bears, dinky toys, games etc);
- Pictures of your friends and family in Europe;
- Some US dollars for the first days;

## Lago Atitlan

Surrounded by several volcanoes the lake Atitlan is situated in the middle of mountains, about three hours from Antigua. The lake itself is a collapsed volcano, and histories tell that there is no bottom. If you have a divers license you can explore the lake.

## Marketplaces

About two and a half hours by bus from Antigua you will find the big market town Chichicastenango. Every Thursday and Sunday these towns is filled by hundreds of traders, coming from the small villages nearby. They leave their homes early in the morning in order to take to town and sell their vegetables, fruit, kitchen tools, and hand woven textiles. Using

your trading skills you can buy hammocks, blankets, skirts, ceramics and masks' for very little money.

## Nightlife

Everywhere in Antigua you can find cosy colonial buildings, housing bars pub's dancing places or restaurants. Most places are open during the whole week, and "happy hour" is a well known concept in town. A Cuba Libre – rum and coke – costs about 4 Quetzales but remember you have to get up early for school next day. There are places almost exclusively attended by tourists, and there are places where mostly local visitors come. In these last places your chances to learn Salsa and Merenque are best. All bar's close at 01.00 because of "La ley seca" – the dry law.

## Ordinary courtesy

Politeness is the keyword between Guatemalans. They seldom use the word "tu" – usually say "usted". Women kiss each other on the cheek when they meet, men shake hands. You should of course treat your host family with respect. They are very tolerant towards foreigners. From experience they know that you are in a foreign country and do not speak Spanish that well, and need to learn the habits and rules of the house.

## Panajachel

This is the town where all the tourists gather. That's why it is called "Gringotenango". If you get tired of listening to travel stories, you can sail in a boat from Panajachel to the surrounding small villages. There are small cosy hotels.

## Population

The Guatemalan population is composed of many ethnic groups. Usually it is divided in three types: The Mayans, the Ladinoes and the foreign elite, that has lived in Guatemala for generations without mixing with the other inhabitants. More than 10 million people live in Guatemala. The Mayans are mostly occupied with agriculture, or as street traders, while the Ladinoes often are shopkeepers, mechanics or bus drivers. The foreign elite own hotels, or occupy higher positions. These are the people who can afford longer educations. The average percent of illiteracy is 30 percent. This is an enormous problem in the entire country. The transportation, school uniforms and books, fees etc. often exceed the monthly income of a whole family. Illiteracy is highest in the central part of the country, called Alta Verapaz – which also is the part where most Indian people live. The average here is 58 percent. Infant mortality rate is 48 per thousand, and the average lifetime is 66 years. (all figures are

from 1999). In Guatemala City 54 percent of the population live in poverty, while Alta and Baja Verapaz have a 91 percent. Highest rates are though in the North-western part of the country with a 94 percent. People living in the surroundings of Antigua (that is to say Chimaltenango, Sacatepequez and Escuintla) have a rate of 76 percent. 36 percent have no access to running water, 36 percent have no electricity or telephone, which is considered a luxury here. Especially women and even more Indian women are victims of poverty. How much poverty you will see depends on your working area as a volunteer. Watching children without shoes, or beggars in the street can make a strong impression, as you may meet the same children later that day, at the institution you are working for. (Source of information: Prensa Libre, marts 2000).

## Quetzal

Guatemala's currency is called Quetzal, named after the national bird, a little long tailed red and green bird. It is very seldom but can be seen with some luck early in the mornings in Tikal or in the Quetzal region in Coban. "Cents" are called Centavos. It is possible to pay with US Dollars, travellers' checks and credit cards in some shops. Several banks in Antigua accept Visa cards. (Master is not always accepted in banks).

Even though Guatemala is a developing country you will surely be surprised about prices in supermarkets and shops, especially in Antigua. If you choose to go shopping on the markets places you can save a lot of money buying fruit, tin food, and clothes etc. It requires some trading skills, but it is usually easier to discuss those prices than items like souvenirs. Hotel prices vary a lot. There are cosy hotels for 50 Quetzales (double room) and hotels with the same quality for 200 Quetzales. Hereby a list mentioning price levels for several items (last updated May 2000).

### Market (fruit and vegetables vary according to season)

|                     |                  |
|---------------------|------------------|
| Avocado (aguacate)  | 1,0 q. p.        |
| Oranges (naranjas)  | 2,5 q. for 5 p.  |
| Pineapple (Piña)    | 7,0 q. p.        |
| Bananas             | 5,0 q. for 12 p. |
| Peaches (melocoton) | 10,0 q. for 3 p. |
| Mango               | 5,0 q. for 12 p. |
| Melon.              | 3,0 q. p.        |
| Watermelon (sandia) | 4,0-8,0 q. p.    |
| Shirt               | 20,0-25,0 q      |
| Sandals             | 40,0 q           |
| Jeans               | 50,0 q           |

### Supermarket La Bodegona.

|                           |         |
|---------------------------|---------|
| Sanitary towel, 15 pieces | 21,0 q. |
|---------------------------|---------|

|                             |               |
|-----------------------------|---------------|
| Orange juice, 1 litre       | 4,5 q.        |
| Coca cola, 2 litre          | 7,95 q.       |
| Potato Chips, small - big   | 1,95- 12,0 q. |
| Toilet paper , 12 rolls     | 10,95 q.      |
| Detergent, 250 gr.          | 2,45 q.       |
| Stamp                       | 4 q.          |
| 30 min. Internet connection | 4 q. – 7 q.   |

## Respect

In order to respect the population that wears traditional costumes you should not wear those clothes. Indian women coming to Antigua every day to sell their articles usually wear the traditional costumes, showing which town they come from. Only few Indian men still wear their traditional clothes, mostly in towns like Panajachel and Chichicastenango, or Todos Santos.

Very short skirts or shorts can be fine to wear on the beach, but do not dress with such clothes in Antigua or other towns. Both in respect to the population, but also for your own sake, as it is not funny for girls to hear whistling all the time.

## Semana Santa

Inspired by Spanish culture, Easter absolutely is the most important Holy season. Even before the Holy week, processions are organised every Sunday through town. People carry statues of a crucified Jesus. Easter is a must, although you get tired of seeing thousands of tourists. Prices go up during this week, it is impossible to find a hotel room, or tables at restaurants. Maundy Thursday is the most important day, as the whole town is up during the night, in order to create the colourful “alfombras” – carpets made of sawdust, flowers and food. The town is buzzing of activities until early in the morning, when the first processions leave from the different churches in town.

## Shuttle

A shuttle is an alternative form of transport, arranged by small travel agencies. Shuttles are organised to the airport and all kinds of tourist areas. These shuttles may cost 8 times as much as the public busses, but can save you from many dusty hours in a warm and overcrowded bus.

## Tipping

Generally, a 10% tip is appropriate for restaurants. Ask if the trip is included since some establishments add it to the bill.

## Transport

The bus system seems unstructured and confusing, especially in the capital. But busses always show up, even in the smallest villages and drive regularly. The

bus drivers have been told not to take too many passengers and they try to stick to this new rule. Before the bus drivers had to crawl over people in order to collect the money. Don't expect though that this rule is respected, busses are still very crowded. It is a very special experience to take a “camioneta” – or “chickenbus”; you certainly get close to the population. Often three persons take a seat meant for two and nobody is offended. Taxis in Antigua are substantially more expensive than in Guatemala City. Remember always to agree on a price BEFORE you get in and take care of the so called pirate taxis. The officially recognised ones have a clear sign in the window with the driver's name and picture on it. It sometimes is better to travel with a shuttle, depending on the time of the day and destination.

## Visa

Arriving at Guatemala City airport you will get a stamp in your passport. This visa stamp is for three months. If you intend to stay longer you will have to take into Guatemala City in order to get a new permit (costs approx. 100 Quetzales). Opening a migration office in Antigua has been planned a long time ago, but has not been realised yet. Another possibility is to travel to surrounding countries for some days. Upon re-entry, you get a new stamp.

## Voluntary work

The school and its European partner organisations are directly involved with humanitarian work in Guatemala. This way we join efforts with the participants of the language- and voluntary work programme, to improve the living conditions for the poorest people of the society. The direct sponsoring of children or financial support to certain institutions is co-ordinated through the direction of projects in Guatemala. The different projects and working places need volunteers that are committed and can take the initiative to help. This means that you will have to organise your self activities for children. There will be no scheme or working schedule waiting for you, as you would expect in Europe. You will have to be prepared to work but most of all – to take the children to your heart!

## El CAMINO SEGURO

This is a new project, started in January 2000 at a big dumping place, where hundreds of people live and gather rubbish. They live in cardboard or tin sheds without water or electricity, and are amongst the poorest people in Guatemala.

*Joan with some Indian children*

The children have never been to school, and are very under stimulated, not only technically but also

when it comes to contact with adult people. The project started with 44 children. They are supplied with school uniforms, school items, a monthly food ration and school fee. In order to obtain these goods, the children have to promise to come to school every day and do their best. Volunteer work consists of helping the children to do their homework, creative activities, etc.



Joan's comment:

"Last Friday we had our monthly meeting. During this meeting mothers receive a bag with food. If their children have been absent from school more than three days, they do not receive this food ration. It's incredibly hard not to be able to give them something – they started to cry and got angry. But this is the only way to motivate the parents to send their children to school every day instead of allowing them to hang around in the streets or seek for things to eat or sell from the dumping place. This enables us to motivate not only the children but also the rest of the family. A part from this rule we now also have started a rewarding point system for each child in particular. If they show up at school every day they earn 40 points every month. These points have the same value as Quetzales and for this money they are allowed to buy certain things as toothbrushes, toothpaste, a pair of trousers, a skirt a puzzle or new shoes, etc. We don't give the money

to the children, as the parents immediately would take the money from them. Instead of this we go shopping in small groups and have the children decide what they want. But they have to live up to their promise of attending school. They can also choose to save the money and buy a new school bag. This way children have the feeling that their effort is paying off, not just for boring things like food. Of course food is vital but children are children and it is nice to own something yourself".

Here's a short description of Angelina Sofia life – in her "home" there are no rules at all. Her mother is rarely at home. Whenever she is, her mother allows her to stay at home from school. Her elder sister quit schooling early. She is 17 years old now, and mother to three children, so Angelina has no stimulating examples of grown up people. Most children from the dumping place are in the same situation. Sometimes, when she sits outside the door in front of school, she says "NO" during the whole afternoon, and usually I am the only person who can get her away from the door and start with creative activities." Comment from Joan.

## Weather

The climate is quite unstable, depending on your location in the country. Especially in the higher regions where temperatures can vary from 30 degrees during day time to 5 degrees during the night. Coastal areas and lowlands are extremely damp and warm during dry season. During rainy season, this lasts from May to September sun shines usually to 16.00 o'clock in the afternoon. Then heavy rain fall changes the streets into small rivers. December and January are the coldest months; March and April are the warmest.

Weather forecast information can be found at:  
<http://www.wunderground.com/global/GU.html>

All suggestions to improve and give advice when considered relevant to this document are very welcome. We are well aware of the limited content and kindly ask you to participate in improving it. Send us an e-mail with your suggestions to: [info@global-volunteers.de](mailto:info@global-volunteers.de)