



## **Volunteer Handbook for Antigua, Guatemala**

Hola!

Welcome to our Volunteer Handbook for Antigua, Guatemala.

While no person or book or website can give a new traveler to Guatemala a full understanding of its culture, we believe that this Handbook will go a long way in preparing you for your trip and the living experience there.

We have spent years revising this Handbook, based on the experiences of our volunteers and staff who have spent significant time in Guatemala. They have all contributed their unique insights and advice to the information in this Handbook.

Although there is some overlap, our Volunteer Handbook for Guatemala does not try to duplicate all of the general travel information you will find in published guide books such as Lonely Planet or the Moon Handbook for Guatemala.

Our main focus in the Volunteer Handbook for Guatemala is on travel information that is specifically relevant to a volunteer like yourself who will serve others in Guatemala and become a member of the local community.

We encourage you to share the Volunteer Handbook for Guatemala with your family and friends and anyone else interested in your trip to Guatemala. We also recommend taking a copy with you on your trip.

As always, if you have any questions about the Volunteer Handbook for Guatemala or any other issues or concerns, please get in touch with us.

Regards,  
Scott Burke

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Founder & Director  
Cosmic Volunteers  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania USA

## **BEFORE YOU GO**

### **Passport**

In order to enter Guatemala, you must have a passport that is valid for at least the next six months.

### **Visa**

A visa is not required for a stay of up to 90 days.

### **Health**

Guatemala does not require any vaccinations in order to enter the country. However we strongly recommend that participants consult with a travel doctor at least two months before arrival. The doctor should provide you with information about immunizations and advice on how to stay healthy while traveling. Cosmic Volunteers does not provide health insurance to participants, but we do recommend that you obtain coverage for your entire stay in Guatemala. There are many reputable companies that offer coverage at reasonable rates, such as Travel Guard ([www.travelguard.com](http://www.travelguard.com)) and Multinational Underwriters ([www.mnui.com](http://www.mnui.com)). For online travelers health information, a decent place to start is the Centers For Disease Control at <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/Guatemala.aspx>

### **Photocopy Important Documents**

Before you leave home, make two sets of photocopies of all important documents. Put one set of copies in your checked luggage, and leave a set of copies at home with your family. Keep your original documents in your carry-on bag while you are traveling to Guatemala.

#### Documents to Photocopy:

- Passport ID page
- Plane Ticket
- Contact information of Coordinators / Cosmic
- Contact Information for family/friends at home
- Travel Insurance Policy
- Prescriptions for medication(s)
- Credit card(s)
- Travelers Checks (if you have them)
- Power-of-Attorney (if you have one)

### **Contact Information**

Before you leave home, we will send you the mobile numbers of your Coordinators in Guatemala and the US. **They will be your 24 hour contacts during your program.** Please carry their contact numbers on your person (not your bags) while en-route to and in Guatemala.

### **Packing List**

#### Carry-On Bag

- Passport
- Plane Ticket
- Contact information of Guatemala Coordinator, Scott Burke, Family/friends
- Travel Insurance Policy
- Cash (at least \$100 USD or equivalent)
- Credit card(s)
- Travelers Checks (if you have them)
- Any prescription medicine
- Any electronic equipment (laptops, mobile phone, camera, mp3 player)
- Toiletries (Toothbrush/paste, contact lens solution/case)
- Reading materials
- Pen(s)

#### Checked Baggage

- 4-6 pair of long pants (a pair of jeans is OK but can be hot)
- 1-2 pairs shorts
- 7-10 short-sleeved tops/t-shirts
- 1-2 long-sleeve shirts
- 4-6 pair of socks
- Sturdy sneakers / shoes for walking
- Sandals / flip-flops
- Sleepwear: long-sleeved shirt(s) and long bottoms
- Lightweight jacket
- Sun screen
- Bug spray with DEET (I use Jungle Juice)
- Hat (for sun)
- Paper journal / pens
- Eye re-wetting drops (whether you wear contacts or not).
- Hand sanitizer
- Over-the-counter medications for pain relief, fever, diarrhea
- Toiletries (soap, shampoo etc)
- Lightweight, quick-dry towel for bathing

### **Other Packing Tips**

- > There is no need to bring bedding, pillows etc.
- > Theft can be a problem on flights to destinations like Guatemala, so do not pack anything valuable in your checked luggage. Pack valuables in a carry-on bag such as a laptop, camera, cash, jewelry, gifts etc.
- > Do not over-pack. Except for some prescription medicine, you can buy anything in Guatemala that you forget or leave home on purpose, including toiletries, clothes, electronics, etc.
- > Luggage:
  - Instead of new / nice luggage, I suggest buying a cheap suitcase at a thrift store. Especially harder-type suitcase that will protect your stuff.
  - Also use a small backpack as a carry-on (for laptop, any electronics, a few toiletries).
  - I am not a fan of huge backpacks, as they seem very hard on one's back and they don't always have wheels.
  - Duffel bags are too soft and things tend to get broken inside.
  - Bags seem to get really roughed up on these international flights.

#### > What NOT to bring:

- 1) Plug adapter for electrical appliances. But them in Guatemala, as they cost only \$1 USD there and will definitely work. Most host families even have extra.
- 2) Things like items for donation to orphanages or sports equipment etc: You can buy them cheaply in Guatemala.

### **Passport**

When flying, always carry your passport on your person and not your bags. I've found that cargo pants with deep/secure pockets are a good place to hold the passport. I also put my own passport in a Ziploc baggie at all times, to protect it from sweat / dirt / humidity / spilled drinks -- both when flying and when in Guatemala. You do not need to carry your passport to your volunteer job each day. However, when you travel around Guatemala, please carry your passport with you (again - on your person).

**Register Your Trip with your Home Government**

An optional but highly recommended pre-trip step is to register your travel plans to Guatemala with your home country's government. Doing this can be helpful if you lose your passport in Guatemala or if there is a country-wide emergency and you need your embassy's help. You can register with your respective government online at the following websites:

USA Citizens: <https://travelregistration.state.gov/ibrs/ui>

UK Citizens: <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/>

Canadian Citizens: <http://www.voyage.gc.ca/index-eng.asp>

Australian Citizens: [www.orao.dfat.gov.au](http://www.orao.dfat.gov.au)

**Power-of-Attorney**

Another optional but recommended pre-trip step is to consider creating a Power-of-Attorney document (POA) which lets you appoint someone at home to manage important financial and legal matters on your behalf while you are in Guatemala. This is a particularly smart thing to do if you will be staying in Guatemala for an extended period of time. You can create a custom POA document for under \$50 USD online with Legal Zoom (which Cosmic staff uses when traveling). Legal Zoom's website is <http://www.legalzoom.com/power-of-attorney/power-of-attorney-overview.html>. You must get the document notarized by a notary public before the document can take effect.

## Traveling to Guatemala

### Getaway Day

- **Before you leave home, make sure you have your passport!**
- Make sure to bring any prescription medicines.
- Everything else can be replaced easily: clothes, toiletries, etc.

### Check-in at airport

- Arrive at the airport at least 3 hours before your flight.
- Assume the airline will be strict with luggage weight rules.

### Keep Away Germs on the Flight(s)

The air circulating on airplanes is actually very clean and sanitary (despite public perception). But you still must take steps to avoid germs that might lead to cold or flu. The reasons? The dry air plus the germs from fellow passengers. This is what I do on all of my flights:

- Drink lots of water (nasal membranes need to be moist to work well)
- Use saline nasal spray (ditto)
- Use hand sanitizer
- Wipe down trays and seat handles (with hand sanitizer or anti-bacterial wipe)
- Increase the ventilation at your seat (to avoid saliva droplets from sneezing, coughing and conversation from passengers).

### Passing Time on the Flight

- The obvious: sleeping, reading, movies, music, writing, drawing.
- Stay awake and sleep according to the time zone in your destination, in order to adjust more quickly to the time zone there.
- Walk around and exercise your calf muscles every hour in order to prevent [DVT](#).
- Talk to fellow passengers. Perhaps you'll make a new friend, and maybe learn about your destination – especially if they are a local returning home.
- Look out the window! You are 30,000 feet above the earth! Isn't it amazing to see the clouds, stars, the moon, even other planes from this perspective? You're traveling perhaps half-way around the world in less than 24 hours. These things were unfathomable to humans not even a century ago. Consider yourself very fortunate.
- Take photos – some of you, some out the window, maybe even a new friend. You might not realize it now, but in 5, 10, 20+ years these photos will become part of your memories of this special trip.

### Afraid of Flying?

I was deathly afraid of flying until 2005. My two fears? I thought turbulence would cause a crash AND I thought the flexing wings meant they might crack from stress. I got “cured” when I educated myself. I read [articles about turbulence](#) – it (almost) never causes jetliners to crash. I also found videos of wing stress tests ([like this one](#)) that show just how strong they are. My favorite author on air-travel is Patrick Smith, who writes a popular [blog on Salon.com](#), published a book, and has his own [website](#).

## **ARRIVING IN GUATEMALA**

This section describes the normal schedule and activities for volunteers arriving in Guatemala. Your actual schedule might vary slightly from what is described below, depending on your arrival day and time as well as your volunteer location.

Our local Coordinator will meet you at the airport in Guatemala City, then travel with you to Antigua to drop you off at your host family. Depending on your arrival time, they will start your orientation and tour of Antigua either the same day or meet you early the next morning at your host family. Your Coordinator will also drop you off at your volunteer job the first couple of days.

### **Arriving at the Airport in Guatemala City**

- When your plane lands in Guatemala City, you will be directed inside the airport's main building.
- You will be directed to the **Immigration counters**. Have your passport and disembarkation card ready (you receive the card during the flight).
- After the Immigration officer stamps your passport, walk to **baggage claim**. Grab your luggage, then walk through the **Customs** lines.
- Before you exit the airport, the staff might ask you to show your **luggage tags** given to you by the airport check-in staff before you boarded your flight.
- There are sometimes **big crowds** waiting outside the airport exit door. The scene can look chaotic and intimidating. Try to look calm (even if you're not).

### **Emergency: If You Do Not Meet Our Coordinator at the Airport**

There might be an extremely unusual situation where you do not meet our Program Coordinator at the airport. In this situation, speak to an airport staff person and ask for help in making a telephone call to our Program Coordinator in Guatemala. If you cannot reach the Program Coordinator in Guatemala, call Cosmic Volunteers' Coordinator in the US 24 hours, Scott Burke. He will arrange as quickly as possible for another Coordinator to pick you up at the airport, or he will direct you to take a taxi on your own to a hotel. (We will reimburse you for all costs: transport, hotel, phone, food.)

### **Introduction to Guatemala**

On your first full day in Antigua, one of our Program Coordinators will pick you up from your host family and provide you with an **Introduction to Guatemala**. The Program Coordinator taking you around town to see life on the streets. This normally includes visits to local markets and cultural sites. They will also go over the major points in this Volunteer Handbook to make sure that you understand about staying healthy, safety, street smarts, living with your host family, the volunteer work, contact information, etc.

We also recommend that you take care of any practical errands such as:

- Buying a mobile phone / SIM card / phone credit
- Exchanging money / travelers checks
- Using an ATM machine
- Buying electrical adapters
- Buy any toiletries
- Buying a small flashlight

### **Enjoy the Scenery!**

Starting with your ride from the airport in Guatemala City with your Coordinator, your road travel in Guatemala can really provide you with an unparalleled insight into the people, the sights, sounds, and smells(!) of Guatemala – all from the relatively insulated environment of your vehicle. So watch, listen, smile, ask questions, and just try to soak it in.

As *Verge Magazine* says (Winter 2008): **"Fifteen minutes on a bus usually teaches you more about a country's social, political, and economic conditions than three hours studying a guidebook."**

### **Jet Lag**

If you are flying across multiple time zones to reach Guatemala, keep in mind that you may experience “jet lag” because your travel is disrupting your body’s circadian rhythm.

Symptoms often include insomnia, waking early, excessive sleepiness, headaches, irritability, digestive problems like constipation or diarrhea, muscle aches, and difficulty concentrating. Younger travelers and female travelers are more susceptible to jet lag, while some travelers are not affected much.

As a general guideline, the recovery rate from jet lag is one day per time zone traveled. So if you live in London (6 hours ahead of Guatemala), it could take you one week to recover from the jet lag.

To recover from jet lag:

- Drink plenty of water before, during and after your flight
- Try to sleep on the plane if it's nighttime in Guatemala
- Adjust to the local day/night schedule immediately
- Try not to sleep until nighttime in Guatemala, no matter how tired you are
- Exercise daily (during daylight hours, especially early morning)
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol



## WHILE IN GUATEMALA

### **Orientation in Antigua**

Antigua is not very large, with a population of about 34,000. The streets are cobblestone and there are very narrow sidewalks, often with window boxes protruding into the sidewalk, and there are beautiful churches and ruins. It is very easy and fairly quick to walk anywhere in town. As in most Guatemalan cities, Antigua has numbered Avenues going north (*norte*) to south (*sur*) and numbered Calles going east (*poniente*) to west (*oriente*). In Antigua, Volcán Agua is always to the south, so it's easy to orientate yourself.

### **Post office**

The post office is located on the corner of Alameda Santa Lucía and 4a Calle. Mon-Fri, 8am-12pm, and 2pm-4pm. Unfortunately, the national mail service is not 100% reliable, so we recommend you to only send postcards.

### **Food**

There also are lots of places to eat out in Antigua. You can get a breakfast dish for \$2.50 to \$4 (EUR1.50 to 3) called *tipico* that consists of eggs, black beans, tortillas, and a piece of fried plantain. There is also great yogurt and granola. Lunches and dinners can be as inexpensive as \$3 to \$7 (EUR2 to 5). Guatemalan food is not spicy like Mexican food and there isn't too much variety in the local food. A typical local lunch or dinner will be chicken pepian with rice and maybe a vegetable like squash, beans with sausage and rice, or a bowl of beef soup with vegetables, all served with tortillas and maybe part of an avocado or some papaya. There are also bars, pizza, McDonalds, local fried chicken outlets, etc.

### **Weekend Trips**

- Volcano Pacaya (half day, strenuous).

Pacaya is one of the active volcanoes of Guatemala, and can be reached from Antigua by car/bus in about an hour and a half. You can hike up the steep slopes of Pacaya for about an hour and a half to reach the top and see live lava flow!

- Tour with traditional weavers in Santiago Zamora (half day, easy)

The women's weaving cooperative in Santiago Zamora produces beautiful textiles and supports the local school with a part of their earnings. They provide an afternoon tour with a lunch, showing you how traditional back-strap weaving is done and telling you about the history of their village. Santiago Zamora is about 20 minutes outside of Antigua.

- Coffee Finca Tour (half day, easy).

Visit one of the coffee fincas around Antigua and get to know everything about how coffee is grown, harvested, roasted and tasted!

- **Macadamia Nut Tour (half day, easy)**

Visit an organic Macadamia Nut farm that also runs sustainability and reforestation projects. Here you can enjoy a macadamia nut pancake breakfast!

There are many other tours that you can take, like climbing other volcanoes, go to the beach, visit Lake Atitlan, Chichicastenango, or Tikal. We can help you find the tour that suits you best!

### **Staying Healthy and Safe**

The top causes of injury and death for travelers abroad are road accidents and drowning. This comes as a surprise to many, because the media tends to focus on terrorism, political strife, and infectious diseases as the most likely dangers for travelers abroad.

If you become ill or injured in Guatemala, please seek medical treatment immediately. Then as soon as possible, inform your host family and local Program Coordinator. They will contact our staff in the US so that we can assist in any way we can, such as notifying your family back home.

There are both government and private health facilities near all of our volunteer areas, with emergency and outpatient care available. There are also pharmacies (“drugstores”) throughout the country where you can buy medications. A doctor’s prescription is often required.

The three areas you need to focus on daily for staying healthy and safe in Guatemala are:

- **Food and Water**
- **Avoid Insect Bites**
- **Avoid Injuries**

#### Food and Water

Traveler’s Diarrhea is the most common illness suffered by travelers to Guatemala. It’s usually caused by bacteria in the food or water you consume, and usually occurs within the first week of travel. You must be extra cautious about food and water. Some very important tips:

- Do not drink tap water at any time in Guatemala
- Do not consume ice cubes
- Drink only bottled water, boiled water, or carbonated drinks in bottles/cans
- Wash your hands often with soap and water
- Avoid restaurants that look dirty
- Avoid food from street vendors
- Avoid raw fruits and vegetables unless you peel them
- Brush your teeth using only bottled water
- Stay hydrated

You will be given more information during your orientation about foods that your host family will serve you. Your family will have lots of fresh fruits and vegetables – in fact, with many of these, you'll likely be encountering them for the first time. The sheer variety of fresh food available in Guatemala will likely amaze you. By the same token, we will also advise you in Guatemala about what foods you may wish to avoid.

### Avoid Insect Bites

You must avoid insect bites in Guatemala because you are at risk for illnesses such as malaria. Although there is no malaria risk in Guatemala City and Antigua, there is malaria risk if you travel to rural areas on excursions as many of our volunteers do. Malaria is transmitted to humans by the bite of an infected female Anopheles mosquito. The first symptoms of malaria are normally fever, chills, sweats, headaches, muscle pains, nausea and vomiting (For a definitive diagnosis, you must have a lab test). The peak biting period for malaria is dusk and dawn.

To prevent insect bites in rural areas:

- Stay indoors at dawn and dusk as much as possible
- When you are outside at night, wear long sleeves and long pants
- For sleeping, wear long sleeves and long pajama bottoms
- For sleeping, use a mosquito net treated with permethrin (mosquito nets cost \$5-\$10 USD in Guatemala)
- Use an insect repellent with 30%-50% DEET

### Avoid Injuries

- As a **pedestrian**, you must be very cautious, especially at night:
  - Vehicles always have the right of way
  - Assume that vehicles will not stop for you
  - Streets often have no lighting, so stay out of the road at night as much as possible since drivers might not see you
  - Jogging can be very dangerous due to traffic and uneven surfaces
- For **road travel**, accidents happen regularly in Guatemala. Most accidents involve speeding and careless driving. Here are some tips for safe road travel:
  - Do not travel in vehicles at night if possible
  - Never sit in front seat of any vehicle (most accidents are head-on)
  - Wear seat belts when possible
  - For city-to-city travel, take large buses rather than “chicken buses”
  - Do not take unlicensed taxis or cars
  - Never ride on the top of any vehicle
  - Do not ride on any motorcycles, either as driver or passenger

- Do not go **swimming**. While taking a dip can be very tempting, please resist the temptation, as it is simply not worth the risk from drowning as well as parasites etc.
- Do not have contact with street **animals**. You will often see dogs and cats (as well as farm animals in rural areas) walking among people on the streets, even in large towns. You could get rabies, insect bites, and skin rash/infections, etc.

### **Medical Concerns**

The best way to stay healthy in Guatemala is to be careful about water and food (as discussed above) and to wash your hands often with soap and hot water. There have been no serious illnesses suffered by our volunteers. The most serious have involved stomach upsets caused by drinking contaminated water or food (water and meat are usually to blame).

There is a very small risk of malaria in some rural areas, and some volunteers do take malaria medication. Check with your travel doctor to determine if you should be taking preventative medicines of any kind. We recommend using insect repellent, long-sleeved clothing, and mosquito nets to avoid mosquito bites in some of the rural areas.

If you have a travel insurance policy that covers your medical expenses in Guatemala, please be aware that **most insurance plans require you to pay up-front for all of your medical care**, then submit forms later to get reimbursed by the insurance company. So when you walk into a clinic, have cash and/or credit cards with you so that you can pay.

### **Climate**

Antigua has a pleasant climate year-round, due to its higher elevation. The rainy season is between May and November. Daytime temperatures are typically in the 70s-80s F.

### **Transportation**

You will be able to walk to most places in your community, but you should not walk at night, especially alone. Please inform your host family and Program Coordinator when you make plans to travel. Try to avoid overnight buses for due to driving safety. Otherwise they are safe from thievery. In cities, taxis are everywhere and they're inexpensive.

### **Dress Code at the Volunteer Job**

- For bottoms: I recommend khaki pants or capris.
- For tops: short-sleeve t-shirts are fine.
- For footwear: closed-toe shoes are best (sneakers, clogs etc).
- Please: no cleavage, short-shorts, or form-fitting clothes, as it is disrespectful to locals.
- You will see tourists and locals breaking these rules, but you are a volunteer / "insider" so the rules are different for you (if you want to be respectful, which of course you!).
- It's highly unlikely anyone would say something to you about inappropriate dress.

### **Living With Your Host Family**

One of the most rewarding, challenging, and meaningful experiences of your time in Guatemala is likely to be the time you spend living with your host family. You are encouraged to cultivate the habit of listening and observing, rather than merely hearing and seeing. Be sensitive to the feelings of others and enjoy the company of people with different life experiences! Here are few more tips to help you prepare for your Guatemalan living experience.

- Electricity in Guatemala is particularly expensive, so please avoid excessive use of electric appliances, and turn off the lights when leaving your room or the bathroom.
- Do not leave the water running when it is not necessary.
- Our host families will treat you as another member of the family, which means you will pick up after yourself, keep your area neat, and help out with the cooking and cleaning when appropriate.
- Most of our Guatemalan host families consist of a mother/father and young children. However it is not uncommon for several generations to live in the same household. Children in Guatemala, like children anywhere, can be both adorable and a handful, so try to maintain your patience with them in order to integrate smoothly in the household.
- Please advise your family before you invite anyone to the house. Your family will really appreciate your courtesy.
- If you make plans to go out for an evening, please advise your family and make arrangements to get home and back into the house. They may express some worry that you're going out at night. Try not to be offended, they are just concerned about your safety. They will likewise encourage you to go out with family members, co-workers, or friends, so that you are not out alone at night.
- If you make plans to travel out of town, please let your family know where and for how long. If possible, give them a contact name, address, and phone number.
- Keep items of value, such as cameras, cash, and passport locked in your luggage.
- You will use your own toiletries and towels.
- Many Guatemalans are interested in a foreigner's life and you are encouraged to share pictures of your family and stories of your life at home. But you will learn a great deal if you spend more of your time listening, asking questions, and sharing your thoughts about the issues that concern your host family and Guatemalan friends.
- Practice your Spanish!! Your family will absolutely love to help you practice your Spanish, especially the children. Don't feel shy – they will totally appreciate your willingness to learn and speak their language.
- Laundry is often done by hand in Guatemala. Some families might offer to help with your laundry, but **you should expect to do your own laundry**.

### **Photos / Video / Electronics**

- Always ask before taking a photo or video of someone.
- Be very careful when wielding your cameras in public because of theft. The worst place for a camera abroad is usually around your neck, as it's visible and easy to snatch from you.
- When flying or on a bus: always pack electronic equipment in your carry-on bag (laptop, cameras, mp3 player etc) so they are always in-sight. We just had a volunteer finish her

wonderful trip to Ghana in March, only to find that during her trip home, her camera was stolen from her checked luggage.

- Always-Always back-up your photos and videos regularly – even on a daily basis if possible! Transfer them to a laptop, smart phone, pen drive – anything so that you have backups in case your camera is lost/stolen/damaged.

### **Passport**

- You do not need to carry your passport to your volunteer job each day.
- However, when you travel around the country, please carry your passport with you (again - on you person). There are occasional security checkpoints on the roads between cities in Guatemala. Do not be surprised or offended if the police ask only you for your passport (as a foreigner). These checkpoints are basically just bribery points for the police to supplement their income (usually only the bus drivers have to pay; only occasionally foreigners).
- Some hotels in Guatemala require you to surrender your passport to them at check-in; you get it back when you check-out.
- Lock your passport, cash, camera and other valuables inside your luggage when you are out during the day from your host family or hotel. It is usually best to bring small locks from home.

### **Learn some basics about Guatemala before you arrive**

- President: Álvaro Colom Caballeros (2008 – )
- Population is 13 million
- Life expectancy is 70 years
- Religions: Roman Catholic, Protestant, indigenous Mayan beliefs
- Languages: Spanish 60%, Amerindian languages 40% (23 officially recognized Amerindian languages, including Quiche, Cakchiquel, Kekchi, Mam, Garifuna, and Xinca)
- Literacy Rate: 69%

### **Greetings**

- Man to Man: hand shakes with eye contact, with slaps on back for friends and family.
- Woman to Woman: hand shakes with eye contact, with kiss on cheek for friends and family.
- Man and Woman: hand shakes with eye contact, with kiss on cheek for friends and family.
- “Mucho Gusto” is often said when greeting.
- Handshakes are often limp; do not crush anyone's hand!

**General Knowledge and Etiquette**

- Most Guatemalans (about 60%) are of indigenous origin. There is also a sizable “Mestizo” population of mixed Spanish and indigenous descent.
- Personal space: generally, most locals are comfortable being an arms-length away. Women tend to touch each other during conversations, but men usually do not (with either sex).
- Use the “usted” form when talking to strangers / elders / authority.
- Maintaining eye contact is important during conversations.
- Time is a fluid concept to Guatemalans, so do not feel bad if people show up late for parties, meetings or other functions.
- Timetables for flights and buses however are mostly adhered to.
- The culture is a “macho” one, with men dominant in most ways, with women expected to do things like cooking and cleaning.
- Women visitors will usually experience “catcalls” and other annoying “flirting” from local men.
- Lunch is considered the main meal of the day, and will probably include black beans, tortillas or meat, and fruit and vegetables.
- Corn is king in Guatemala, along with black beans, eggs, and rice.
- Coffee is very popular, although much of the quality / strong beans are exported, leaving locals with usually a weaker cup.
- There is a huge variety of tropical fruit available, so please try them.
- Never give white flowers, because they are reserved for funerals.
- Try to address people with titles: Doctor, Professor, Senora, Senor, Senorita.
- Speaking softly is considered polite; shouting / being loud is rude.
- It's usually not a good idea to talk about politics or crime in Guatemala.
- Good topics for conversation include the culture, geography etc.
- Always engage in social conversation before talking “business”.
- Avoid hand gestures as much as you can. For example, the “thumbs-up” sign is considered obscene there!
- It is considered extremely rude to be excessively drunk in public.
- It is OK for a woman to dine alone, but do not go alone to local bars and clubs.
- Same-sex relationships are not illegal but are taboo.

**Do Not Swim in Guatemala**

The reason is that drowning is the second leading cause of injury and death for travelers abroad, next to road accidents. This comes as a surprise to many, because the western media tends to focus on terrorism, political strife, and infectious diseases as the most likely dangers for travelers abroad. As tempting as it might be, the ocean currents in Guatemala are too strong, unpredictable and dangerous.

## Money

The **quetzal** (ket-sahl, abbreviated to Q) is Guatemala's currency. The exchange rate is typically at around Q8 = US\$1. The quetzal is divided into 100 centavos.

Guatemala is mostly a cash-based society, so **expect to pay cash for everything**.

We recommend that you **bring from home at least \$100 USD** (or equivalent currency) in cash. Do not bring bills larger than \$20, because money exchangers might consider them to be counterfeit (there's only a small chance of this, but it's one less hassle you can easily avoid).

While in Guatemala, the best way to get cash is to use an **ATM machine**. ATM's dispense money in quetzals. There are ATM's in most towns even in rural areas.

The banks in Antigua are usually open Mon-Fri 9am-6pm.

Consider using **Visa's TravelMoney card** which is a prepaid card that is a Visa debit card accepted worldwide including stores, online, over the phone, and via mail. You can also get cash at Visa/PLUS ATMs worldwide. Each time you make a purchase, the purchase amount is automatically deducted from the card. If you lose the card, simply call them to report it, at no loss to you. This is a great replacement for travelers checks.

For **spending money** during your trip, count on spending \$5-\$10 per day. The actual amount can vary considerably, depending on factors such as:

- How often you buy meals outside your host family
- Whether you buy / use a mobile phone
- Extra sightseeing you choose to do
- Shopping for clothes, toiletries, souvenirs

If you need **fast cash from home**, your family can send you instant cash using services like Moneygram ([www.moneygram.com](http://www.moneygram.com)) or Western Union ([www.westernunion.com](http://www.westernunion.com)), with Moneygram by far the cheaper option. If you do not need the money in a timely manner, have your family back home make a deposit at your bank account or Visa TravelMoney card, then you can withdraw the money in cash using your ATM card.

## News

- CNN: <http://topics.edition.cnn.com/topics/guatemala>
- BBC: see their web page for full list of TV, newspaper, radio stations:  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/country\\_profiles/1215758.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/country_profiles/1215758.stm)



### **Telephone Contact**

We encourage you to have a mobile phone in Guatemala. This can be a phone you bring from home or one you purchase in Guatemala.

- You can bring a phone from home, but the phone must be “unlocked.”
- Most mobile phones from America are purposely locked by the carriers and will not work in Guatemala
- Only mobile phones on the 850Mhz and 1900 Mhz frequency work in Guatemala
- With an unlocked phone, you just need to buy a SIM card in Guatemala for about \$8 USD. The SIM card will have a local Guatemala telephone number
- New mobile phones in Guatemala start at \$30-\$40
- Mobile phone usage in Guatemala is mostly pay-as-you-go
- You buy phone credits from street vendors and phone shops
- Incoming calls are free – including incoming international calls
- The two large mobile phone providers are Claro and Movistar

Do not rely on text messages as a means of communicating, whether local or international, because they often do not go through. If you want to communicate with home, voice calls are the only reliable way.

### **Family and Friends Calling You from Home**

Your folks back home will be able to call you either on your host family’s landline or on your mobile phone. They can use their own landline phone to direct dial your Guatemala number. However unless they have an “international” phone service plan, direct-dialing can get very expensive. We recommend instead that they buy prepaid phone cards from a company like [www.nobelcom.com](http://www.nobelcom.com) (not a typo). Another option that we strongly recommend is for them to use Skype to call your landline/mobile. The connections are much clearer this way, and it's usually slightly cheaper than calling from landline phones.

### **Parcels/Letters**

You can also send and receive parcels and letters via the post office – please see the mailing address in the Contact Information section. When sending parcels/letters from Guatemala, do not use Guatemala's postal system – use an international carrier instead like DHL or UPS because it's safer. Also, take the parcel to the office unsealed, as the customs officer may want to inspect the contents. **Caution:** Do NOT send anything valuable by post.

### **Email**

Internet available in Antigua at Internet cafes and some host families. Please consider creating a new email address (Gmail or Yahoo) to be used only during your trip. The reason is security - since you'll be using public computers during your stay, you don't want anyone gaining access to your true personal email account. This may sound a bit paranoid, but it does happen to international travelers.

**For Women Travelers**

As a female visitor in Guatemala, you are likely to experience unwanted attention from men. The sexual attention will usually amount to “come-ons” and inappropriate comments. Very rarely will there be inappropriate touching or actual assault.

Keep in mind that you are not at home and that different rules apply. Women generally play a submissive role to men in Guatemala. A woman who acts like a man will not be respected. Men you meet may misinterpret your appearance, body language, or simple presence as invitations to approach you. Even a smile to a stranger may be misunderstood. You will need to modify your behavior in order to avoid unwanted attention.

Here are some tips on avoiding unwanted attention:

- Do not wear skimpy clothes
- Some women wear a “wedding ring and say they are married
- Never admit that you’re traveling alone. Tell people that your boyfriend or husband will be along shortly to join you
- Steer the conversation in another direction by asking questions – about local culture, politics, news
- Use humor to diffuse the situation
- If the man persists, be very direct and firmly tell him to stop, and be specific
- Walk in a group at night
- If you go to nightclubs, go with a group of friends
- Do not go to a secluded area or hotel/apartment with a man you do not know well

**At the End of Your Program**

At the end of their programs, our volunteers sometimes take time to travel around Guatemala for extra sightseeing. If you wish to extend your stay with your host family, please discuss this directly with our Coordinators in Guatemala who will discuss how much you would have to pay the family.

## **Returning Home**

When you return home from your trip, the “reverse culture shock” can be just as significant as the culture shock when you arrived in Guatemala.

- Returning home is often not a predictable process and can be more stressful than you anticipate.
- You might find yourself different than you were before you left home.
- You might feel like a “stranger” even among friends and family.
- You might get frustrated because it is difficult for others to know what your experiences have meant to you and how you might have changed.
- You may need significant time to return to your old roles and relationships.
- Be aware that things at home may have changed while you were away, both in the society and among friends and family. Even if you have heard about these events, the impact at home may not have been obvious.
- Your friends and family might notice that you have different patterns of behavior, speech, or new attitudes.
- Strange as it may seem to others, returnees often grieve for what they have left behind. You might be missing overseas friends, a stimulating environment, the feeling of being special, experiencing greater freedoms or responsibilities, or special privileges.

Some strategies for coping with returning home:

- Make contact with other volunteers who have successfully gone through the experience of returning home from abroad. This can help you through a difficult period of re-adaptation.
- Maintain personal and professional contacts with friends and institutions in Guatemala.
- Write and reflect about your experiences in a journal. This can be private or can be shared with friends, family, or the world (via a blog).
- Tell others your stories, show them your photos and videos.
- On a medical note: If you become ill with a fever or flu-like illness up to one year after returning from Guatemala, seek immediate medical care and tell them you were in Guatemala.

**AND FINALLY . . .**

The following was written by a seasoned world traveler and friend of Cosmic Volunteers. The advice for volunteers is inspiring. Take a look...

Make the most of every moment. Explore side streets. Take miracle walks. Perform random acts of kindness: buy fruit and share it, give flowers, pass out pens, coins and other useful and interesting things. Say hello. Smile. Take pictures. Share them. Learn about the depth of poverty. Count your blessings. Refuse to take things for granted. Give presents carefully. Play with everything. Share your toys. Blow bubbles. Spread laughter. Be kind to animals. Offer to help. Clean up your own mess without being asked. Clean up someone else's mess too. Ask questions. Answer questions. Collect addresses of people you meet. Send them postcards and email from home. Be aware that you are foreign and exotic. Hold babies. Giggle with children. Listen to old people. Be brave. Invite a dangerous stranger to dinner. Pay the bill. Learn to say thank you in the local language. Sing out loud, songs you sang as a child and songs children will teach you. Try something totally new. Don't just sight-see, sight-think. Donate energy. Spend time. Give hugs. Be thoughtful about donating, spending, and giving money. Support good work done by local people, buy a man a bike, pay a child's school tuition, offer a mother seed money and supplies to start a small business out of her home. Teach. Learn. Explore your own cultural perspective. Be subjectively aware. Touch the world. Allow the world to touch you. Come home safely . . . And remember, a true gift of seeing the world is to return where you started and see your place for the first time.