

## INFORMATION FOR GUATEMALAN VOLUNTEERS

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This is information that I think volunteers who are new to Guatemala, especially those planning to volunteer in the Antigua area, might find useful. It is strictly from my own experience and thoughts, and does not represent any agency or organization. Feel free to pass it on.

### Miscellaneous

- There are hotels, hostels, travel agencies, *tiendas* (small convenience stores), Spanish Schools, and internet places everywhere in Antigua.
- Do not expect Guatemalans to understand your English. My two years of Spanish in college have barely gotten me by and I have missed a lot.
- Although Spanish is the official language and over 95% of the media is in Spanish, there are 23 different indigenous dialects spoken in the rural areas and many rural Guatemalans do not speak or read Spanish.
- Public bathrooms often charge a quetzal or two and **may** give you a length of toilet paper
- It is rude to take photos of people or their handicraft without asking permission and offering a donation; in some of the more rural areas locals are afraid that gringos who are taking pictures may steal their children and tourists have actually been killed.
- We experienced two earthquakes in our first two weeks in Antigua and it is clearly a fairly common occurrence. There was no damage at all with either one.
- Many hotels and hostels have free computer use or wifi; in addition there are reasonably priced internet cafes on most blocks.
- Guatemalans write their 1's like my 7's. Sevens are always crossed. This caused confusion when I was helping some children with math.

### Things you may want to bring or buy when you get here

- Reusable grocery bag
- Bag for laundry: It costs between 4q and 8q per pound to have your laundry done in Antigua. Some hotels and hostels have a place for you to wash and hang your own laundry. There are not many coin Laundromats in Antigua. Most small communities have a central area where women go to wash their laundry referred to as *tanque*.
- Refillable water container: Never drink tap water, even to brush your teeth. I always try to stay at a place where filtered or purified water is available. In more rural areas make sure your coffee or tea has been really boiled, bring your own water, or drink bottled drinks.
- Daypack or other portable bag
- Raincoat or umbrella: May through October is the Guatemalan rainy season and it often rains daily.
- A padlock if you stay in a hostel.
- Mosquito coil or repellent or mosquito net (rainy season May to October)
- If you are cooking for yourself bring your own knife.
- Many things that we take for granted are very precious here. The average Guatemalan makes 1000q per month, or less in the rural areas. Bring things to

give away, especially children's books in Spanish and school supplies. Kids love to be given pencils and pens. I hit my dentist up for toothbrushes. Children's shoes are expensive relative to the income, especially for people with lots of children. While there is a large used American clothes market in Antigua, clothes, and everything else in the more rural areas are harder to access because many roads are barely passable and most people don't have cars. I brought lightweight jackets and found a place to send them where it is colder, but this really is a hot climate and many people wear traditional garb, so clothing is not top priority. **Best gifts are books in Spanish and other learning tools or toys that promote learning. Backpacks for school are very useful too.**

### **Be aware of the environment and be mindful of the local customs**

- Bring or buy a refillable water container for filtered or purified water instead of buying water in plastic bottles. Trash disposal is a big problem in Guatemala.
- Toilet paper goes in the waste can next to the toilet.
- Most places you stay in cities will have an instantaneous hot water heater on the shower head. If the water isn't hot enough, reduce the water flow to lower a pressure. If you plan to visit rural areas be prepared for water issues. Many rural Guatemalans must carry their water from rivers or central municipal areas. Many hotels turn off the water during certain areas. Most rural families heat their water on their wood stoves.
- Sinks, or *pilas*, are three part concrete structures with the faucet in the middle, deeper part. The middle part is only for clean water. Never wash your hands or dishes in that part but instead use a bowl to transfer the clean water to a side section for washing and rinsing. Water is a precious resource never to be wasted.

### **Money**

- The money used in Guatemala is the Quetzal. Right now the exchange rate is 8q per 1 US dollar, or one quetzal is worth about 12.5 US cents. It changes slightly each day.
- Change your money at a bank during daylight hours; there are a number of banks on the central square in Antigua. You will need your passport to exchange money at the bank.
- ATMs are useful but they sometimes run out of money.
- While some places do take credit cards, using them in many restaurants is risking theft. Some of the restaurants/shops will charge you 4% to 5% commission on the top of your bill when using credit card.

### **Food and Eating in Antigua**

- There are lots of places to eat out in Antigua. You can get a breakfast dish for \$2.50 to \$4 called *tipico* that consists of eggs, black beans, tortillas, and a piece of fried plantain. They also have great yogurt and granola. Lunches and dinners can be \$3 to \$7. Of course you can spend more. Guatemalan food is not spicy like Mexican food and there isn't too much variety in food that is local. A typical local lunch or dinner will be chicken pepian with rice and maybe a veggie like squash, beans with sausage and rice, or a bowl of beef soup with veggies, all served with tortillas and maybe part of an avocado or some papaya. There are also bars, pizza, McDonalds, local fried chicken, etc.

- We have been told to never eat off the street and that sometimes people have trouble with lettuce and strawberries in particular. We've eaten both with no problems (but others have!)
- If you stay at a place with a kitchen and plan to eat in, the local market is full of wonderful fruits and vegetables at excellent prices. We have gone there daily but on Saturday it was crowded and therefore dangerous. You can also buy almost anything else, from local crafts to used American clothes and shoes. Keep your money in your front pocket or in a place where you can always see or feel it.
- Women on the street have large covered baskets full of fruit, vegetables, or tortillas (3-5 for 1q)
- Plan to peel all fresh produce or wash in either salt water, bleach water, or water with drops of grapefruit seed extract, available at health food stores in the US.
- Antigua has a very large supermarket, called *La Bodegona* (4th Calle Poniente N. 27). They seem to be open every day of the week. Our host also tells us they are very supportive of good causes. We have bought our dairy, canned and packaged goods, and meat there and have found most of what we were looking for. It also has cosmetics, toiletries, etc., sort of like a super Wal-Mart. The *Bodegona* is almost across the street from the Mercado and where all the buses are based. You can also buy most things in the market if you search for them.
- If you are bread eater, you will love Epicure, Deliciosa, Pan Colonial, and Doña Luisa. They have a good selection of breads.
- Only buy fish on Mondays, Thursdays, or Saturdays in the mornings.

### **Transportation**

- From Aurora Airport in Guatemala City it is about an hour drive to Antigua. The taxis and shuttles at the airport are regulated and should be safe. We paid \$10 US per person to be delivered to our hotel in Antigua. It is usually about \$30 for up to 3 or 4 if you prearrange a pickup. We have been told that non airport taxis in *Guate* (Guatemala City) are not regulated and can be dangerous. However, we had to take one trip and it was fine.
- Antigua is not very large, only 34,000 people. The streets are cobblestone and there are very narrow sidewalks, often with window boxes sticking out into the sidewalk. There are beautiful churches everywhere and various ruins every block or so. It is very easy and fairly quick to walk anywhere inside the town. As in most Guatemalan cities, Antigua has numbered Avenues going north to south and numbered Calles going east (*poniente*) to west (*oriente*). In Antigua, Volcán Agua is always to the south, so it's easy to orient yourself.
- Because Antigua has so many tourists, it is a place where poor people may work but cannot afford to live. Therefore the preschools and various other volunteer opportunities tend to be in the "suburbs" or farther, and therefore require a bus ride. Even then you may need to walk some distance to get to the specific site, so be clear with your volunteer contact what you needs are.
- Everyone in Guatemala uses the buses, which are cheap and colorful. Buses have the requisite driver but they also have a helper who calls out to potential riders, helps people on and off the bus, and collects the money (1 1/2 q to 5q per local ride) after they are seated. If you change buses there are no transfers; you just get on the next bus and pay their fee. Try to have change.
- If a bus is full—which is most of the time—people sit three to a seat and then just press together in the aisle.

- The bus parking in Antigua is behind the market, so we usually did our food shopping after we arrived back from the tiny villages where we volunteered. Buses to different locales are located in various areas of the bus parking area.
- There are cars in the urban areas, but they are scarce in the rural areas of the country and many rural places are accessible only when it is not raining and the rivers are down. We have traveled to four different communities where the only vehicle access was by 4 wheel drive; each time we drove over several rivers which, at times could not be crossed. When we visited our sponsor child up in Baja Verapaz at the beginning of this (our second) trip to Guatemala, her community was the end of the last road, a 45 minute ride from a paved road. From there you had to walk over a very long suspension bridge and beyond that there were 14 more communities!
- There are many bus companies, sometimes competing for business. Except for local towns around Antigua and tourist spots, you have to go to Guate to get buses to more off the beaten path places. When we went to Baja Verapaz we had to go to the specific bus station in Guate that served that particular area. From there it was a four hour bus ride with no stops except to pick up or drop people. When the bus was full, they added plastic stools to the aisles. When we got back to Guate we took a taxi to the bus station to go back to Antigua. The taxi cost almost as much as the four hour bus trip north!
- To go to Lago Atitlan or Tikal or any of the other wonderful natural wonders in Guatemala. There are numerous travel agencies—compare prices. By US standards travel is very cheap. Be aware that the shuttles can be really full and stuffy, and sometimes they take you to the right bus station in Guate, help you get your ticket, and leave you there. So ask for specifics.
- Tuc tucs, similar to taxis, but small three wheel vehicles, are an alternative to taxis. (They drive only till 10pm.) They usually cost 10 to 15 q depending on the distance, number of people, and time of day. We have been told that at night, one should only ride with a driver that is either known personally or has been recommended by someone you trust. Foreigners in particular have been known to be robbed by taxi or tuc tuc drivers. We have had no problem with either.

### **Safety**

- Many hotels have lockable safes; they have you put your valuables in an envelope and write your name across the sealed closure. We use that system to keep money we won't need during that part of our stay and also for our passport. Keep a copy of your passport elsewhere also. Some places have a way for you to lock your room or have a lockable locker so you may want to bring a lock.
- Keep your money on your body in your front pockets. Three of us in the space of one week got bags slit and the thief got two people's wallets which were in their bags.
- It is recommended that you not walk alone in deserted areas or where there is no light, especially at night.
- We have had no problems, but we haven't gone out at night or come home drunk.
- There are two kinds of police in Guatemala: the regular police (black uniforms) and the tourist police (uniform with green or white). Avoid the regular police and ask for help from the tourist police. Regular police have a reputation as being corrupt and even robbing tourists.

- Try to carry only the cash you need for that trip, but also try to keep about 50q with you in case you do get robbed so that you don't "insult" your robber. All tourists are rich in the eyes of the local poor, and in most cases we are, by comparison.
- Just like elsewhere, don't be too fast to trust strangers and let them into your house or go to their house. We have heard many scary stories that could have easily been avoided had travelers used common sense—what you wouldn't do at home, don't do in a third world country.
- There is always safety in numbers. If you must travel at night or in deserted places alone, consider taking a taxi or a tuc tuc. Establish your fare ahead of time and try to have proper change.

### **References you might want to check out**

- Antiguadailyphoto.com
- [www.revuemag.com](http://www.revuemag.com)
- [www.grupoquepasa.com](http://www.grupoquepasa.com)