WHY GUATEMALA?

Guatemala is a developing country in Central America bordering Mexico, Belize, Honduras and El Salvador, and with both Pacific and Caribbean coastlines. It has mountainous forest highlands, lowland jungle and tropical coastlines. Guatemala is often referred to as the Land of Eternal Spring, a corruption of the Aztec word Quahttemallan, the Land of Many Trees.

60% of Guatemala’s eleven million people are Ladino (of mixed Amerindian-Spanish blood), and 43% are indigenous Maya. 60% speak Spanish and the remainder use twenty-one (or is it twenty three, I can never remember) assorted Mayan dialects. The largest linguistic group is K’iche’, with over a million K’iche’ speakers (also sometimes spelt Quiche). So far the diversity of dialects has not posed our volunteers any problems as we have the help of local translators.

Guatemala emerged from a 36-year civil war in 1996. The war left an estimated 150,000 dead, 40,000 disappeared, 440 indigenous villages razed to the ground, and more than a million people uprooted, forced to seek refuge in other departments of the country or in neighboring countries. The great majority of the victims were Mayans. On 29 December 1996, peace was signed between the rebels and the government, and a series of peace accords were established. Unfortunately the lack of significant financial support and political will behind these accords brings into question their full implementation.

Guatemala is one of the poorest countries in Latin America. A recent UN report shows 60% of the population lives in poverty (<US$2 per day) and 27% in extreme poverty (US$1 per day). Of the indigenous population 93% live in poverty and 91% in extreme poverty. 65% of the population lives in rural areas, 85% of which live in communities of less than 500 people. The Mayan people have the highest mortality and malnutrition rates. Recently released World Health Organization figures show that 67.3% of the Mayan population suffers from chronic malnutrition, as opposed to 34.1% of the ladino or mixed population. Only 8% of the indigenous population has access to regular healthcare, and an estimated 21,000 communities in different regions of Guatemala do not have access to Department of Health services.

For those interested in some statistics the following figures from the Pan American Health Organization and UNICEF illustrates the problems faced in Guatemala:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Guatemala</th>
<th>Canada</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>per capita GNP in $US</td>
<td>1660.00</td>
<td>19320.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Income ratio - top 20% vs bottom 20%</td>
<td>30x</td>
<td>5.2x</td>
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<tr>
<td>per capita National Health spending</td>
<td>56.00</td>
<td>2110.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>physicians per 10,000 population</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>22.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>births attended by trained personnel</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>99.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>infant mortality per 1,000 live births</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maternal mortality per 100,00</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>4</td>
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Apart from poverty, the Mayan population has suffered extreme marginalization and discrimination. Since the Spanish Conquest in 1524, Mayans have been progressively deprived of their lands and forced to work as tied laborers or day laborers. Lands worked for generations have been taken from villagers leaving them with small, hardly viable, parcels of land. This has been used to justify paying starvation wages without the labor benefits required by Guatemalan law. Communities live in miserable conditions without access to drinking water, electricity, schools or health services. The years of civil unrest, and the total lack of infrastructure, have inhibited the process of community development and assisted in maintaining the legacy of submission, marginalization and isolation of indigenous people. The plight of the Maya was brought to light with the 1983 publication of *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, the autobiography a young Maya woman whose father, mother and brother where killed by the military in the course of their pacification program (see SUGGESTED READING on page 17 for details).

Since the official end of the civil war in December 1996, the Government has undertaken a program of institutional modernization including healthcare, however, in the rural areas, and particularly among the indigenous population, access to the facilities is extremely limited. Spending on healthcare at US$56.00 per person is extremely limited.

**SAVVY TRAVELLERS – health and safety**

Most of these are simply safety measures practiced by sensible travellers, however, please remember that we are depending on you to stay healthy If you want to live/eat dangerously please leave it for another trip.

**Drinking Water:**
- This may be really obvious but DON'T DRINK TAP WATER !!!!!!
- Only drink bottled water or Agua Pura (purified water)
- Avoid ice cubes unless you know they have been made of Agua Pura
- WASH TEETH WITH BOTTLED WATER.

**Stay Healthy**
- Avoid purchasing food from roadside stands and street vendors (this may be tempting but please do not do it even if it is cooked). Many have come unstuck this way.
- Either peel raw fruit and vegetables, or wash with bottled water.
- Be careful of salads and dishes with raw vegetable unless you know they have been washed in agua pura.
- Be careful of dairy products unless you know the milk has been pasteurized.
- Do not eat raw meat or raw seafood.

**Money**
- Be discreet with money. Carry small bills in a separate pocket from larger bills so you're not flashing lots of money around unnecessarily.
- Some people like a money belt.
Jewellery and valuables

- Leave all jewellery/expensive watches at home.

Passports

- Make photocopies of your passport and birth certificate, pack them in different bags. Do not carry the original with you. This is probably excessive protection, but purses and bags do periodically get stolen on the streets in Antigua.

On the Streets

We have never had any safety problems while in Guatemala, however, it is advisable to be sensible:

- When out in the evenings walk in groups.
- Stay in lighted areas and walk in the middle of the street as opposed to dark alleys or doorways.
- In the unlikely event that you are involved in a robbery, do not resist and calmly hand over your valuables. Please report any problems to us.
- If you are taking a taxi in Antigua, it should be yellow with numbers printed on the side (approved by the government).
- Refrain from picking up children or showing more than polite interest in them in public places (kidnapping children by foreigners is a real fear for some Guatemalans).

Unsafe places

- The cross on the hill just north of Antigua is not safe. Robberies do occur there. If you want to go to the cross the Tourist Police can provide escorts.
- The cemetery in Antigua is also not safe.
- After dark, avoid going alone to monuments, ruins, and isolated places.

TIPS AND ETIQUETTE - cultural observations.

Flexibility and an Open Mind

One of the most important things is to have a flexible attitude and an open mind. The pace in Guatemala is different and more relaxed than our rushed, time-conscious one in the west (Inge suggests wearing a rubber band on the wrist to remind you of this). Guatemalans do not judge themselves according to the speed with which tasks are done. This can be a bit frustrating if we try and do things at our North American pace, but is also a very enlightening and enjoyable difference if you go along with it.

Dress Code

Guatemala is a country where religious feelings run deep and revealing dress is considered offensive to both men and women. Most of the Guatemalans we are here to serve are very conservative in dress and attitude.

- Skirts, culottes, and loose fitting pants are appropriate for women.
- Short shorts or very tightly fitting shorts are not appropriate. Knee length shorts are fine.
- Please do not wear scrubs on the street.
• Traditional clothing designates people's origin, family status and their place in the world. Most Guatemalans consider it an insult for outsiders to wear their traditional *huipiles*, *cortes* etc so please do not wear them.

**Mayans are quiet people**
- Mayans are very gentle and quiet people in comparison to most North Americans (who have the reputation of being loud and boisterous). When walking down the street or going out to a restaurant, bear in mind that you may talk more and than anyone else around you. While this may not be offensive, it is something to keep in mind.
- Many Guatemalans understand more English than they speak. An unintentional joke or comment in English may be misunderstood or taken personally.
- Drunkenness is unacceptable in Guatemala and is detrimental to our reputation.
- The clinic does not permit smoking or drinking.

**Greeting Guatemalans**
- When meeting or passing someone in the street or at work, a friendly greeting is customary.
- A smile and *Buenos Dias* (until noon), *Buenos Tardes* (noon until 6.00 pm) or *Buenos Noches* (6pm until midnight) are always appropriate. *Hola* is a less formal greeting at any time of the day, and *Adios* means good-bye.
- A firm handshake is always correct and polite when meeting someone for the first time, when greeting someone to start a day's work, and when finishing a day's work, or leaving a location for some time.
- If you want to introduce yourself try: *Me llamo…*. (We will all have name tags in the clinic so hopefully this will help).

**Taking pictures**
- Guatemalans (except perhaps children) are much more sensitive to having their pictures taken than we are. It is respectful to ask permission before taking a picture of an individual. They may agree or they may ask for payment (1Q is customary) in exchange for the picture.
- Never take a picture of Guatemalan military.
- If you take a picture of a Guatemalan and tell them that you will send them a copy of the picture, please do it. They take you at your word and will be eagerly waiting for the picture. Since they have no way of getting pictures of themselves, the few pictures they do have are very precious.

**Handing out candy and toys**
This issue of gifts is a difficult one as if you give out one gift you can be sure the whole village will follow.
- We do not recommend that you give gifts or candy or money to anyone. If they ask just say: *No lo tengo* (I don’t have it).
- Handing out gifts sets a difficult precedent in that Guatemalans already see North Americans as people with unlimited wealth who come simply to offer gifts.
- HANDS will be giving gifts to the helpers at the clinic and to the patients who have surgery so you do not need to do this.
Street vendors
In Antigua especially vendors may approach you on the street.

- If you are not interested in purchasing something, the best approach is to say a firm No, gracias and keep walking. Sometimes you may have to repeat this a few times.
- If you stop, be prepared to negotiate and to buy something, or be courteous in your refusal.
- Haggling is customary but be respectful during the process, and remember that both parties must be happy with the outcome.

Different, not better or worse
Indigenous Guatemalans are very skilled and strong and do most tasks by hand (you may see people manually washing clothes, mixing concrete, hauling wood and carrying wardrobes and concrete blocks on their backs). Many North Americans are quick to think the Guatemalan way of doing things by hand is inferior. Try to be open-minded and not assume that one way of doing things is necessarily superior to another way; it is just different. Anytime you are working alongside a Guatemalan, and you see a more efficient way of doing something, please talk to a bilingual staff person before you make a suggestion. Sometimes, what you meant as a suggestion is taken by a Guatemalan as an order.

GETTING MONEY IN GUATEMALA

- The Guatemalan currency is the Quetzal, although many tourist-oriented items, such as sightseeing trips, are quoted in US dollars.
- Bank debit cards are the easiest and most practical way to obtain cash, although not all machines work with all cards, so if one doesn’t work look for another one.
- Visa/M/C are accepted in some place but anything paid for with a credit card is automatically subject to a 10% government tax.
- Travelers cheques must be in US dollars, however, line-ups at banks in Guatemala can be very long (one or two hours at a time) so changing them can be a pain. Most hotels change travellers cheques at a slightly lower rate.
- It is possible to exchange money for Quetzales at Dallas and Houston airports.
- Exchange rate at time of writing is approximately:

  $1 CAD and $1US = approx 7.7 GTQ
  1 pound sterling = approx 15 GTQ

LA ANTIGUA GUATEMALA

La Antigua Guatemala is a beautiful Spanish colonial city of about 30,000 people which lies forty-five kilometres west of Guatemala City. It lies an elevation of 1530 metres and is surrounded by three volcanoes Agua, Acatenango and Fuego. Only Fuego is active and the plume of smoke and glow of lava are constant reminders of the geological activity that has affected the city from its beginnings.
The first things that hit travellers to Antigua are the colour, the numerous ruins of churches and convents, and the colour of the textiles and indigenous people’s clothes. The house walls are brightly coloured in ochres, sands, cornflower blues and emerald greens. In the market Mayan women from the surrounding villages wear colourful, embroidered huipiles and carry their babies on their backs in vibrant woven shawls called tzuts. Colourful textiles fill the shops and hang on the walls. In the courtyards flowers blossom throughout the year and out on the streets sprays of bougainvillea drape over walls. On almost every block stand the romantic ruins of a church destroyed by the earthquakes that have plagued Antigua’s past, and in the background are the volcanoes. On a clear day the conical shape of Vulcan Agua rises above the city and on many nights a golden ribbon lava can be seen flowing from Vulcan Fuego.

La Antigua is a small city covering ten by ten blocks, with approximately four houses in each. Primarily due to its bizarre history (see below), the city remains very much like it was in the 18th century. As with typical Spanish towns, all the houses face internal courtyards with the street side of their walls finished in stucco. Carved wooden gates and windows with wrought iron grilles pierce the walls. One of the great pleasures of walking around Antigua’s streets is peering through these gates and finding gardens, cinemas, internet cafes, Spanish language schools, laundries, craft shops, restaurants and cafes hidden discretely behind the colonial walls.

Antigua’s Past:
The city of La Antigua Guatemala dates back to 1543 when it became the Spaniard’s third capital after Santiago de Guatemala was destroyed by a mudslide. Upon its inception the city received the name of its two predecessors and became the third la Ciudad de Santiago de Caballeros de Guatemala, a name it retained until 1774. Barely twenty years after its birth the new capital suffered the first of several earthquakes have plagued it for centuries. Each time the earthquakes hit, the city rebuilt.

Following the 1773 earthquakes the Captain General used the earthquakes as an excuse to relocate the capital. He chose a new location in the Valley of La Ermita was chosen for the country's fourth post-conquest capital, and gave it the name La Nueva Guatemala de la Asuncion (Guatemala City). In 1774 the order was given to abandon the old capital and from then onwards it became known as La Antigua Guatemala (the Ancient Guatemala). Today it is more commonly known as La Antigua, or simply Antigua.

Ironically it was the much-hated edict to abandon the city that saved it. For nearly four years after the proclamation the population resisted the order to move, but in 1777 when the government declared the city would be levelled the following year, this changed. For the next few years mules carried gates, windows, beams, statues, pictures, altars, tiles, furniture, ornaments, artwork and anything else that could be moved was taken across the mountains to La Nueva Guatemala. Private homes were stripped to furnish buildings in the new capital. All the churches were ravaged of their paintings statues, altars and windows. The Captain General even wanted to dismantle his palace and move it, but fortunately the mules could not carry the first load and the plan was abandoned.

The old capital was not leveled in the end but it became a ruin. The fine houses and churches stood empty and bare. Holes gaped where carved wooden gates and ornate shutters once hid
secrets within. Around the central plaza the ruins of the palace, city hall and cathedral looked onto weed-infested cobbles and a dry fountain. Nothing of value remained. Only a few poor stayed, living in crude mud and thatch huts

For fifty years the city wore its tattered coat, but upon the introduction of coffee to the area around 1830 everything changed once again. By then the government had lost interest in the abandoned city and people had begun to move back, and began to renovate the old houses. The request to rebuild the city according to original plans was denied, but work went on nevertheless and by the end of the 19th century the Cathedral, City Hall Palace, Palace of the Captains General, La Merced Church and the Santa Catalina Arch had been restored, and new life flooded into the old colonial streets.

With the arrival of the 20th century concerns rose that some of the colonial structures were being destroyed. One of those damaged was the fountain in the middle of the plaza, which had the heads of its four mermaids chopped off and thrown away. A handful of people became alarmed at the destruction and began working for the protection of the city. In 1944 Antigua became one of the first colonial cities in Latin America to become a national monument, and in 1965, the General Assembly of the Pan American Institute of Geography and History declared it a Monumental City of the Americas. In 1979 the city received the ultimate acclaim when UNESCO declared it a World Heritage Site.

Getting Around Antigua:
The town is laid out on a rectilinear grid system which fans out from the main plaza. Avenidas run north (norte) to south (sur) and Calles runs west (poniente) to east (oriente), but this probably doesn’t help very much as there aren’t many street names. It is easier to navigate by landmarks and just remember the hill with the cross is to the north, the volcano (Agua) to the south and the cathedral is on the east side of the main square.

What to do in Antigua:
The best way to see it is just to wander around. There are lots of great photo opportunities with plenty of churches, romantic ruins, courtyards, a pila (still used) and the backdrop of the volcanos.

Shopping:
There is lots of shopping in Antigua be it in shops or at the craft market or market. Most of the street vendors have been moved to the craft market but you might still find some around. It is customary to haggle at the markets and with street vendors but not in the shops.

Travel Agents:
Plenty of these all over the place.

- Adventure Travel Centre – 5a Avenida Norte No 25-B, (just past the Arch. In the back of the bookshop. English spoken. www.adventuretravelguatemala.com
- Sin Fronteras – 5Ave Norte No 15A (on the road with the arch on the right in the first or second block from the square. English spoken. www.sinfront.com

Internet Cafés:
Plenty of these everywere. We recommend:
• Conexion - 4 a Calle Oriente #14 (inside La Fuente). They have wired inside or wireless if you want to sit in the café around the courtyard.

Restaurants:
There are many good restaurants but prices are equivalent to those in Canada.

SIGHTSEEING IN GUATEMALA

Guatemala is a beautiful country with an abundance of colourful crafts and markets, mountain, jungle and coastal scenery, and some spectacular Mayan ruins. Most travel agents in Antigua can arrange trips to the following places:

• **Tikal**: magnificent Mayan ruins in the jungle of northern Guatemala. Towering pyramids rising out of a jungle canopy. Extremely atmospheric. A MUST for first time visitors. Best done in a two day trip from Antigua.

• **Lago de Atitlan**: a beautiful volcanic lake nestled in a spectacular location between a ring of volcanoes. Several small towns and villages lie around its shores. The largest, Panajachel, though not particularly interesting in itself, is one of Guatemala's oldest tourist hangouts and the jumping off point for boat trips round the lake. The most popular destination is the traditional village of Santiago Atitlan, where the cigarette-smoking and rum-drinking god Maximon is still worshipped. Other boats stop at smaller, more villages some of which cannot be reached by road. Some still retain their original character whereas others are more heavily influenced by tourists.

• **Monterrico**: small fishing village on the Pacific Coast. Tropical and lazy with a few rustic cabins with thatched roofs right on the beach. Boat tours to a coastal nature reserve with mangrove swamps and breeding grounds for the endangered leatherback and ridely turtles.

• **Copan**: Copan lies just across the border in Honduras and is one of the most important Mayan ruins. Very different to Tikal. Great museum explaining the ruins.

• **Quirigia**: Quirigia also has Mayan ruins, which are known for their intricately carved stelae. Much smaller site but again interesting.

• **Rio Dulce and Lago de Izabal**: The Rio Dulce flows through tropical jungle scenery as it connects Lago de Izabal, Guatemala’s largest lake, to the Caribbean coast. Boat trips on the river can take travellers as far as quirky Livingstone, with its black Guatemalans and Garifana culture, on the coast. From there your boatman can take you to the Seven Altars hot-spring further up the coast.

• **Biotopo del Quetzal, the Grutas de Lanquin caves and Semuc-Champey**: In the Coban area. If you are very lucky you might catch a glimpse of Guatemala’s national bird the quetzal in this protected Biotopo reserve. North of Coban, visit the caves at Lanquin (bring a flashlight) and soak in the hot-springs at Semuc Champey, which some say is the most beautiful spot in Guatemala.

READING SUGGESTIONS

• **Guatemala**, Lonely Planet.

• **Belize, Guatemala & Yucatan: La Ruta Maya**, Lonely Planet.
• **I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala.** Edited by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, translated by Ann Wright.
Rigoberta Menchu's story reflects the experiences common to many Indian communities in Latin America today and recounts the murder of her brother, father and mother by the Guatemalan military.

• **Time Among the Maya.** Ronald Wright.
The author travels through jungles and mountains to explore the ancient roots of the Maya, their recent troubles, and prospects for survival.

• **The Heart of the Sky: Travels Among the Maya.** Peter Canby.
Seeking to understand the secrets of Mayas’ survival, Peter Canby discovers their genius at remaining virtually undetected by the outside world.

• **Sweet Waist of America.** Anthony Daniels.
A book about the author’s travels, in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua.

• **The Mayan Prophecies.** Andrew Gilvert and Maurice Cotterell.
Lost in the jungles of Central America are the remains of the Maya. The authors ask who were the Maya, where did they come form and what message, if any did they leave for our own times?

• **Bird of Life, Bird of Death; a Naturalists Journey through a land of political turmoil.** Jonathan Maslow.
The author travels in Guatemala to find the resplendent quetzal (bird of life). He finds the quetzal is increasingly endangered while the *zopilote* (vulture), the 'bird of death', flourishes.

• **The Blood of Guatemala; A History of Race and Nation.** Greg Grandin.
In the wake of the civil war a vibrant pan-Mayan movement has emerged to challenge Ladino (non-indigenous) notions of citizenship and national identity. Focusing on Mayan elites in the community of Quetzaltenango, Paul Grandin shows how their efforts to maintain authority and secure power over the indigenous population played a crucial role in the formation of the nation.

• **Antigua Guatemala: the City and its Heritage.** Elizabeth Bell.
The author has been a resident of Antigua for thirty years. With an emphasis on cultural tourism, she conducts tours around Antigua, has developed slide presentations about the city, and is an active supporter of the restoration efforts of the Colonial Art Museum. This book endeavours to give the reader a deeper appreciation of the city's rich heritage. Only available in Antigua.