

Directory

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ACCOMMODATIONS

Guatemalan accommodations range from luxury hotels to budget hotels to ultra-budget guesthouses called *hospedajes*, *casas de huéspedes* or *pensiones*.

This book's budget category covers places where a typical double costs US\$20 or less. Doubles under US\$10 are generally small, dark and not particularly clean. Security may not be the best in such places. An exception is the low-priced dormitories that exist alongside other rooms in generally better establishments. A US\$20 double should be clean, sizable and airy, with a bathroom, TV and, in hot parts of the country, a fan.

Midrange covers establishments with doubles between US\$20 and US\$50. These rooms are always comfortable: private hot-water bathroom, TV, decent beds, fan and/or air-con are standard. Good midrange hotels have attractive public areas such as dining rooms, bars and swimming pools. In hot regions, the rooms may be attractive wooden bungalows, with thatch roofs, verandas and hammocks; in cooler areas they may be in beautiful old colonial-style houses with antique furnishings and lovely patios. The smaller the establishment, the better the attention to guests is likely to be. Many B&Bs in Guatemala fit this description.

Anything more expensive than US\$50 is top end. Guatemala City's international-class business-oriented hotels, Antigua's very finest hostleries, and a few resort hotels elsewhere constitute nearly the whole of the top end options.

Room rates often go up in places tourists go during *Semana Santa* (the week leading up to Easter Sunday), Christmas–New Year and July and August. *Semana Santa* is the major Guatemalan holiday week of the year, and prices can rise by anything from 30% to 100% on the coast and in the countryside – anywhere Guatemalans go to relax – as well as in international-tourism destinations such as Antigua. At this time advance reservations are a very good idea. We indicate throughout this book where and when you should expect seasonal price hikes.

Be aware that room rates are subject to two large taxes – 12% IVA (value-added tax) and 10% to pay for the activities of the Guatemalan Tourism Institute (Inguat). All prices in this book include both taxes. Some of the more

BOOK ACCOMMODATIONS ONLINE

For more accommodations reviews and recommendations by Lonely Planet authors, check out the online booking service at www.lonelyplanet.com. You'll find the true, insider lowdown on the best places to stay. Reviews are thorough and independent. Best of all, you can book online.

expensive hotels forget to include them when they quote their prices.

Camping

In Guatemala, camping can be a hit-or-miss affair, as there are few designated campgrounds and safety is rarely guaranteed. Where campsites are available, expect to pay from US\$3 to US\$5 per person per night.

Homestays

Travelers attending Spanish school have the option of living with a Guatemalan family. This is usually a pretty good bargain – expect to pay between US\$35 and US\$60 a week for your own room, shared bathrooms, and three meals a day except Sunday. It's important to find a homestay that gels with your goals. For example, some families host several students at a time, creating more of an international hostel atmosphere than a family environment.

ACTIVITIES

Climbing, Trekking & Hiking

The many volcanoes are irresistible challenges, and many of them can be done in one day from Antigua (p104) or Quetzaltenango (p161). There's further great hill country in the Ixil Triangle and the Cuchumatanes mountains to the north of Huehuetenango, especially around Todos Santos Cuchumatán (p185). The Lago de Atitlán (p123) is surrounded by spectacular trails, though robberies here have made some

routes inadvisable. Treks of several days are perfectly feasible, and agencies in Antigua, Quetzaltenango and Nebaj (p158) can guide you. In the Petén jungles, treks to remote archaeological sites such as El Mirador and El Perú (p303) offer an exciting challenge.

Cycling

There's probably no better way to experience the Guatemalan highlands than by bicycle. Panajachel (p125), Quetzaltenango (p161) and Antigua (p105) in particular are the best launch points, with agencies offering trips and equipment.

Horse Riding

Opportunities for a gallop, a trot or even a horse trek are on the increase in Guatemala. There are stables in Antigua (p105), Santiago Atitlán (p137), Quetzaltenango (p161), El Remate (p285) and Río Dulce (p251). Unicornio Azul (p185), north of Huehuetenango, offers treks of up to nine days in the Cuchumatanes.

Spelunking

Guatemala attracts cavers from the world over. The limestone area around Cobán is particularly riddled with cave systems whose full extents are unknown. The caves of Lanquín (p224), B'omb'il Pek (p227), Candelaria (p227) and Rey Marcos (p224) are all open for tourist visits. There are also exciting caves to visit from Finca Ixobel (p269), near Poptún.

PRACTICALITIES

- Guatemalans use the metric system for weights and measures, except that they pump gasoline by the *galón* (US gallon) and occasionally weigh things such as laundry and coffee in pounds.
- Videos and DVDs on sale use the NTSC image registration system.
- Electrical current is 115V to 125V, 60Hz, and plugs are two flat prongs, all the same as in the US and Canada.
- The most respected of Guatemala's many newspapers are *La Prensa Libre* (www.prensalibre.com), *Siglo Veintiuno* (www.sigloxxi.com), *La Hora* (www.lahora.com.gt) and *El Periódico* (www.elperiodico.com.gt). For Guatemala-related articles from around the world and Guatemala in English, check the *Guatemala Post* (www.guatemalapost.com).
- The *Revue* is Guatemala's free, widely distributed, monthly English-language magazine – a lot of ads, a few interesting articles.
- Almost every TV is cable, which ensures reception and brings a number of US stations to hotel TVs.

Water Sports

You can dive inside a volcanic caldera at Lago de Atitlán (p123), raft the white waters of the Río Cahabón (p225) near Lanquín, sail from the yachtie haven of Río Dulce (p251), and canoe or kayak the waterways of Monterrico (p204), Livingston (p261), the Bocas del Polochic (p256) or Punta de Manabique (p260).

Wildlife Viewing & Bird-Watching

National parks and nature reserves generally have few tourist facilities, but they do offer lots of wildlife and bird-watching opportunities. Fine locations in the Petén jungles for bird-watching include Tikal (p288), El Mirador (p306), Cerro Cahúí (p285), Laguna Petexbatún (p301) and (for scarlet macaws) the Estación Biológica Las Guacamayas (p303) and the Macaw Mountain Bird Park (p243). Elsewhere, the wetlands of Bocas del Polochic (p256), Punta de Manabique (p260) and Monterrico (p204), the Río Dulce (p251) and Laguna Lachuá (p228) national parks and the Biotopo del Quetzal (p215) also provide lots of avian variety. Mammals tend to prove more elusive but you should see several species at Tikal. Monkey fans will also be happy at the Reserva Natural Atitlán (p129), the Bocas del Polochic (p256) and Cerro Cahúí (p285).

BUSINESS HOURS

Guatemalan shops and businesses are generally open from 8am to noon and 2pm to 6pm, Monday to Saturday, but there are many variations. Banks typically open 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday (again with variations), and 9am to 1pm Saturday. Government offices usually open 8am to 4pm, Monday to Friday. Official business is always better conducted in the morning.

Restaurant hours are typically 7am to 9pm, but can vary by up to two hours either way. Most bars open from 10am or 11am to 10pm or 11pm. The *Ley Seca* (dry law) stipulates that bars and discotecas must close by 1am, except on nights before public holidays. It is rigidly adhered to in large cities and universally laughed at in smaller towns and villages. If restaurants or bars have a closing day, it's usually Sunday. Typical shopping hours are 8am to noon and 2pm to 6pm, Monday to Saturday.

CHILDREN

Young children are highly regarded in Guatemala and can often break down barriers and open the doors to local hospitality. However, Guatemala is so culturally dense, with such an emphasis on history and archaeology, that children can get easily bored. To keep kids entertained, parents will need to make a point of visiting some of the more kid-friendly sites like Guatemala City's Museo de los Niños (p79) and La Aurora Zoo (p79), Autosafari Chapín (p203) south of the capital, and Retalhuleu's Xocomil water park (p197) and Xetulul theme park (p197). Most Spanish courses are open to kids, too. Many older kids will enjoy activities such as kayaking and horse riding.

Facilities such as safety seats in hired cars are rare but nearly every restaurant can rustle up something resembling a high chair. If you need supplies such as diapers (nappies) and creams, bring what you can with you and stock up in Guatemala City or, failing that, Antigua or Quetzaltenango. Fresh milk is rare and may not be pasteurized. Packet UHT milk and, even more so, milk powder to which you must add purified water are much more common. If your child has to have some particular tinned or packaged food, bring supplies with you. Public breast-feeding is not common and, when done, is done discreetly.

For a wealth of good ideas, get hold of Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children*.

CLIMATE CHARTS

For climatic considerations concerning your trip, see the charts on p310 and when to Go (p19).

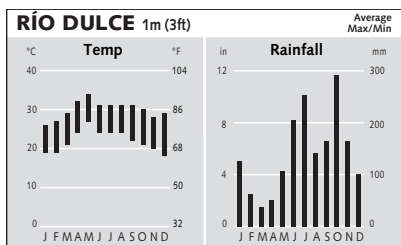
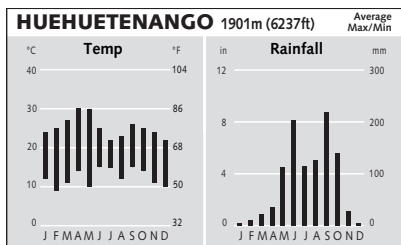
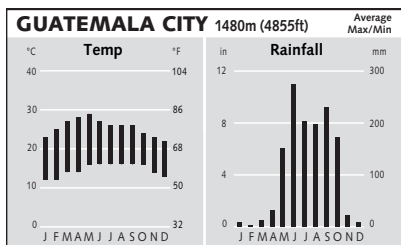
COURSES

Dance

Dancing is *everything* in Guatemala (a party is thought to be a flop unless people are dancing). The most popular formal style is merengue, with salsa coming more or less second. Dance schools in Quetzaltenango (p168) and Antigua (p115) can help you get your groove on at a fraction of the price you'd pay back home.

Language

Guatemala is celebrated for its many language schools. A spot of study here is a great way not only to learn Spanish but also to meet locals and get an inside angle on the culture. Many travelers heading down through Central America to South America make



Guatemala an early stop so they can pick up the Spanish skills they need for their trip.

Guatemalan language schools are a lot cheaper than those in Mexico, but few people go away disappointed. There are so many schools to choose from that it's essential to check out a few before deciding. It's not hard to see whether a school is professional and well organized, or whether its teachers are qualified and experienced.

Antigua is the most popular place to study, with about 75 schools (see p106). Quetzaltenango (p168), the second most popular, perhaps attracts a more serious type of student; Antigua has a livelier students' and travelers' social scene. San Pedro La Laguna (p143) and Panajachel (p129) on the Lago de Atitlán both have a handful of language schools, and if you'd like to learn Spanish while hanging out in a remote mountain town, there are schools in Todos Santos Cuchumatán (p186)

and Nebaj (p159). On average, schools charge US\$110 to US\$120 for four hours of one-on-one classes five days a week and accommodation with a local family.

Studying in a small town has its pros and cons. On the upside, you may be the only foreigner around, so you won't be speaking any English. On the downside, Spanish may be the second language of the inhabitants of the village (including your teacher), meaning that you could pick up all sorts of bad habits.

You can start any day at many schools, any week at all of them, and study for as long as you like. All decent schools offer a variety of elective activities from salsa classes to movies to volcano hikes. Many schools offer classes in Mayan languages as well as Spanish.

Weaving

Guatemalan fabrics are famed worldwide, mostly because they are produced by a traditional method known as back strap weaving. If you'd like to learn this craft, lessons are available in San Pedro La Laguna (p143) and Quetzaltenango (p168).

CUSTOMS

Customs officers only get angry and excited about a few things: weapons, drugs and paraphernalia, large amounts of currency, and automobiles and other expensive items that might be sold while you're in the country. It is also illegal to bring fruit, vegetables or plants through the international airports at Guatemala City and Flores.

Normally customs officers won't look seriously in your luggage and may not look at all. At some border points the amount of search is inversely proportional to the amount of 'tip' you have provided: big tip no search, no tip big search.

Whatever you do, keep it formal. Anger, hostility or impoliteness can get you thrown out of the country or into jail, or worse.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

No one could pretend that Guatemala is a very safe country. There are just too many stories of robbery, often armed robbery, for that. Rapes and murders of tourists have also happened. The two most frequently reported types of nasty incident involving tourists are highway robbery, when a vehicle is stopped and its occupants relieved of their belongings,

GOING BACK TO SCHOOL? BETTER DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Choosing between the mass of Spanish schools in Antigua and elsewhere can be tough. Many schools don't have in-house teacher training programs, so there aren't so many 'good schools' as there are 'good teachers.' It's best to pay for as little time as possible (a week, usually) so you can change if you're really unhappy. You should be completely up-front about what your goals (conversation, grammar, vocabulary etc) are when starting, as well as any specialized interests that you have (politics, medical, legal etc) so the school can design a curriculum and assign you a teacher to best suit your needs. If you end up liking like the school, but not the teacher, ask for a new teacher as soon as possible – personality conflicts occur, and four or five hours of one-on-one with someone you don't like can soon turn into hard work.

Here are some questions to think about when you're looking at schools. Some you can find out just by turning up, some you should ask the school, others you'll have to talk to current and ex-students to get a feel for.

- Where do the classes take place – on a quiet, shaded patio or in hot classrooms with buses roaring along the street outside?
- What experience and qualifications do the teachers have in teaching Spanish as a second language?
- Is Spanish your teacher's first language?
- What afternoon and evening activities are available (many schools offer activities like salsa classes, movies and excursions – some of them free)?
- Many schools offer gimmicks to get you in, like a half hour of free internet per day, which ends up saving you around US\$0.30 per day – should these little perks really sway your judgment?
- What is the general atmosphere of the school? Serious students probably won't fit in at a school whose activities include all-night bar crawls, and party animals may feel out of place at schools with names like the Christian Spanish Academy.
- Can the school provide opportunities for voluntary work in your free time – for example, assisting in local schools, visiting hospitals or playing with children at orphanages?
- If the school claims to be involved in social/community projects, is it a serious commitment, or just a marketing ploy?

and robberies on walking trails. For a scary litany of recent incidents, visit the website of Guatemala City's **US embassy** (<http://guatemala.usembassy.gov>) and click on 'Recent Crime Incidents Involving Foreigners.' Further, marginally less alarming, information is on the website of the **US Department of State** (<http://travel.state.gov>) and the website of the **UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office** (www.fco.gov.uk).

Vehicles carrying tourists, such as shuttle minibuses and buses, along heavily touristed routes seem to be a prime target for highway robbery. On this basis, some people argue that chicken buses are the most risk-free way to travel, but chicken buses are certainly not exempt from holdups. No road in the country is exempt from this risk, but those that are most frequently mentioned include the Interamericana (Hwy 1) between the Antigua and Panajachel turnoffs and near the Salva-

doran border, Carretera al Pacífico (Hwy 2) near the Salvadoran and Mexican borders, and Hwy 13 between the Belizean border and the Puente Ixlu (El Cruce) junction.

Robberies against tourists on walking trails tend to occur in isolated spots on well-known walks. Some trails around the Lago de Atitlán (see p123) and on Volcán Agua outside Antigua are particularly notorious. The Tikal archaeological site, Volcán Pacaya and Cerro de la Cruz (Antigua), all the scenes of several incidents in the past, have become, for now, safer because of increased police and ranger presence designed to protect tourism.

Other potential dangers are pickpocketing, bag-snatching, bag-slitting and the like in crowded bus stations, buses, streets and markets, but also in empty, dark city streets.

It is impossible to remove the element of risk from traveling in Guatemala, but it is

possible to reduce that risk by always staying alert to the behavior of people around you (watch out for people who get unwarrantedly close to you in any situation) and by following a few simple precautions:

- Only carry on your person the money, cards, checks and valuables that you have immediate need of. Leave the rest in a sealed, signed envelope in your hotel's safe, and obtain a receipt for the envelope. If your hotel doesn't have a safe, it is usually safer to secrete your money and valuables in three or four different stashes among your locked luggage in your room than to carry them with you.
- Be aware that any purse or bag in plain sight may be slashed or grabbed. At ticket counters in bus stations, keep your bag between your feet.
- Don't flaunt jewelry, cameras or valuable-looking watches. Keep your wallet or purse out of view.
- On buses keep your important valuables with you, and keep a close hold on them.
- Don't wander alone in empty city streets or isolated areas, particularly at night.
- When using ATMs (cash machines), keep alert to people nearby. Don't accept help from strangers when using ATMs.
- Keep informed by talking to travelers, hotel staff and others, and consulting official information sources such as the US and UK government websites mentioned on p311, your country's embassy in Guatemala City, and Inguat (see p76).
- Hiking in large groups and/or with a police escort reduces the risk of robbery.

- Resisting or trying to flee from robbers usually makes the situation worse.

Hiking on active volcanoes obviously has an element of risk. Get the latest story before you head out. In the wet season, go up volcanoes in the morning before rain and possible thunderstorms set in. A Canadian tourist was killed by lightning on Volcán Pacaya in 2002.

There have been a few bizarre incidents in which foreign visitors have been unjustly suspected of malicious designs against Guatemalan children; see the boxed text, p44. Be careful not to put yourself in any situation that might be misinterpreted.

Any crowd can be volatile, especially when drunk or at times of political tension.

Scams

One common scenario is for someone to spray ketchup or some other sticky liquid on your clothes. An accomplice then appears to help you clean up the mess and robs you in the process. Other methods of distraction, such as dropping a purse or coins, or someone appearing to faint, are also used by pickpockets and bag snatchers.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Guatemalan Embassies & Consulates

You'll find a full listing of Guatemala's embassies and consulates at www.minex.gob.gt (in Spanish). The following listings are for embassies unless noted:

Australia Consulate in Sydney (☎ 02-9327 7348; 5 Weldodon Lane, Woolahra, NSW, 2025)

Canada Ottawa (☎ 613-233 7237; embguate@ottawa.net; 130 Albert St, Suite 1010, Ontario K1P 5G4)

REPORTING A CRIME

Reporting a crime is always a toss-up in Guatemala. If you're the victim of something really serious, of course you should take it to the police – the phrase you're looking for here is '*Yo quisiera denunciar un crimen*' ('I'd like to report a crime'). If you've been robbed, get a statement filed so you can show your insurance company.

If it's a minor thing, on the other hand, sometimes the police are better off avoided – sometimes their services don't come cheap.

Specially trained tourist police (often English speaking) operate in some major tourist areas – you can call them in Antigua (☎ 7832 7290) and Guatemala City (☎ 2232 0202).

Outside of those areas (and normal office hours) your best bet is to call Asistur (☎ 1500), which operates a 24-hour nationwide toll-free hotline in English and Spanish. It can give you information and assistance and help with dealing with the police and even arranging a lawyer if need be.

France Paris (☎ 01 42 27 78 63; embguafra@easynet.fr; 73 rue de Courcelles, 75008)

Germany Bonn (☎ 49-228 358609; embaguatate_bonn@compuserve.com; Zietenstrasse, 16, 5300 Bonn 2)

Ireland Contact the Guatemalan embassy in London.

Japan Tokyo (☎ 3340-1830; fax 3340-1820; 38 Kowa Bldg, Rm 905, 4-12-24 Nishi-Azabu, 106-0031)

Mexico Mexico City (☎ 55-5540 7520; meroldan@iserve.net.mx; Av Explanada 1025, Lomas de Chapultepec, 11000); consulate in Chetumal (☎ 983 832 30 45; Av Independencia 326); consulate in Ciudad Hidalgo, Chiapas (☎ 962 628 01 84; 5a Calle Oriente s/n entre 1a & 3a Norte); consulate in Comitán, Chiapas (☎ 963 632 04 91; fax 963 632 26 69; 1a Calle Sur Poniente 26); consulate in Tapachula, Chiapas (☎ 962 625 63 80; 3a Av Norte 85).

There are also consulates in Puebla and Tijuana.

Netherlands Appeldoorn (☎ 31 355 74 21; PO Box 10224, 7301 GE)

New Zealand Contact the Guatemalan consulate in Sydney

Spain Madrid (☎ 913 44 14 17; embespaña@minex.gob.gt; Calle Rafael Salgado 3, 100 derecha, 28036)

UK London (☎ 020 7351 3042; embgranbretana@minex.gov.gt; 13 Fawcett St, SW10 9HN)

USA Washington, DC (☎ 202-745 4952/53/54; www.guatemala-embassy.org; 2220 R St NW, 20008); consulates in Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles (www.guatemala-consulate.org); Miami, New York, San Francisco (www.sfconsulguate.org)

Embassies & Consulates in Guatemala

All the following are embassies in Guatemala City:

Belize (☎ 2367 3883; embelguate@yahoo.com; 5a Av 5-55, Zona 14, Europlaza 2, Office 1502)

Canada (☎ 2363 4348; gtmcla@international.gc.ca; 8th fl, Edificio Edyma Plaza, 13a Calle 8-44, Zona 10)

El Salvador (☎ 2360 7660; emsalva@intel.net.gt; Av Las Américas 16-46, Zona 13)

France (☎ 2421 7370; www.ambafrance.org.gt; 5a Av 8-59, Zona 14)

Germany (☎ 2364 6700; embalemana@intelnet.net.gt; Edificio Plaza Marítima, 20a Calle 6-20, Zona 10)

Honduras (☎ 2366 5640; embhond@intelnet.net.gt; 19a Av A 20-19, Zona 10)

Mexico (☎ 2420 3400; 2a Av 7-57, Zona 10)

Spain (☎ 2379 3530; embespa@terra.com.gt.es; 6a Calle 6-48, Zona 9)

UK (☎ 2367 5425/6/7/8/9; embassy@intelnet.com; 11th fl, Torre Internacional, 16a Calle 00-55, Zona 10)

USA (☎ 2326 4000; www.usembassy.state.gov/guatemala; Av La Reforma 7-01, Zona 10)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The following events are of national significance in Guatemala.

January

El Cristo de Esquipulas On January 15 this festival in Esquipulas brings pilgrims from all over Central America for a glimpse of the Black Jesus housed in the Basilica.

March/April

Semana Santa Easter week – the week leading up to Easter Sunday – sees statues of Jesus and Mary carried around the streets of towns all round the country, followed by devout, sometimes fervent crowds, to mark Christ's crucifixion. The processions walk over and destroy *alfombras*, elaborate carpets of colored sawdust and flower petals. The week peaks on Good Friday.

August

Fiesta de la Virgen de la Asunción Peaking on August 15, this fiesta is celebrated with folk dances and parades in Tactic, Sololá, Guatemala City and Jocotenango.

November

Día de Todos los Santos All Saints' Day, November 1, sees giant kite festivals in Santiago Sacatepéquez and Sumpango, near Antigua, and the renowned drunken horse races in Todos Santos Cuchumatán.

December

Quema del Diablo On December 7 the Burning of the Devil starts at around 6pm throughout the country when everyone takes to the streets with their old garbage, physical and psychic, to stoke huge bonfires of trash. This is followed by impressive fireworks displays.

FOOD

See the Food & Drink chapter (p55) for the lowdown on what you can eat where and when and what it will cost. Where we have divided city eating sections into different price ranges, you can expect a main dish to cost under US\$5 in a budget eatery, US\$5 to US\$9 in the mid-range and more than US\$9 in the top end.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

Few places in Latin America are outwardly gay-friendly, and Guatemala is no different. Technically, homosexuality is legal for persons 18 years and older, but the reality can be another story, with harassment and violence against gays too often poisoning the plot. Don't even consider testing the tolerance for homosexual public displays of affection here.

Though Antigua has a palatable – if subdued – scene, affection and action are still kept behind closed doors; the chief exception

is the gay-friendly club La Casbah (p115). In Guatemala City, Genetic and Ephebus are the current faves (see p89). Mostly, though, gays traveling in Guatemala will find themselves keeping it low-key and pushing the twin beds together.

The websites of the **Gully** (www.thegully.com) and **Gay.com** (www.gay.com) have some articles and information relevant to Guatemala. The best site, **Gay Guatemala** (www.gayguatemala.com), is in Spanish.

HOLIDAYS

The main Guatemalan holiday periods are Semana Santa, Christmas–New Year and July and August. During Semana Santa room prices rise in many places and it's advisable to book all accommodation and transport in advance.

Guatemalan public holidays include the following:

New Year's Day (Año Nuevo) January 1

Easter (Semana Santa; Holy Thursday to Easter Sunday inclusive) March/April

Labor Day (Día del Trabajo) May 1

Army Day (Día del Ejército) June 30

Assumption Day (Día de la Asunción) August 15

Independence Day (Día de la Independencia) September 15

Revolution Day (Día de la Revolución) October 20

All Saints' Day (Día de Todos los Santos) November 1

Christmas Eve afternoon (Víspera Navidad) December 24

Christmas Day (Navidad) December 25

New Year's Eve afternoon (Víspera de Año Nuevo) December 31

INSURANCE

Signing up for a travel insurance policy to cover theft, loss and medical problems is a good idea. Some policies specifically exclude dangerous activities, which can include scuba diving, motorcycling, even trekking.

You may prefer a policy that pays doctors or hospitals directly, rather than your having to pay on the spot and claim later. If you have to claim later, ensure you keep all documentation.

Check that the policy covers ambulances or an emergency flight home.

For more information on insurance, see p322 and p326.

INTERNET ACCESS

Most travelers make constant use of internet cafés and free web-based email such as

Yahoo (www.yahoo.com) or **Hotmail** (www.hotmail.com). Most medium-size towns have cyber-cafés with fairly reliable connections. Internet cafés typically charge between US\$0.50 and US\$1 an hour.

To access your own specific account, you'll need to know your incoming (POP or IMAP) mail server name, your account name and your password. Get these from your internet service provider (ISP) or network supervisor.

If you're traveling with a notebook or handheld computer, be aware that your modem may not work once you leave home. The safest option is to buy a reputable 'global' modem before you leave home, or buy a local PC-card modem if you're spending an extended time in any one country. A second issue is the plug: Guatemala uses 110V, two-pronged, flat plugs like those found in the US. A third issue is that unless you're sporting a completely wireless system, you'll have to hunt down a hotel room with a phone jack to plug into – or find a jack somewhere else.

If you really want to travel with a laptop, consider using a local ISP, unless you use an international server with access numbers in Guatemala such as AOL or CompuServe. A good bet for a Guatemalan ISP is Conexión in Antigua (see p99), which charges US\$7.75/18/36/62 for five/24/72/unlimited hours online a month, plus a US\$3.25 set-up fee.

For more information on traveling with a portable computer, see www.roadnews.com. See p22 for a few Guatemala-related websites to start on.

LEGAL MATTERS

Police officers in Guatemala are sometimes part of the problem rather than the solution. The less you have to do with the law, the better.

Whatever you do, don't get involved in any way with illegal drugs: don't buy or sell, use or carry, or associate with people who do – even if the locals seem to do so freely. As a foreigner, you are at a distinct disadvantage, and you may be set up by others. Drug laws in Guatemala are strict, and though enforcement may be uneven, penalties are severe. If you do get caught buying, selling, holding or using drugs, your best first defense might be to suggest that you and the officer 'work things out.'

MAPS

International Travel Maps' *Guatemala* (1:500,000) is overall the best country map for travelers, costing around US\$10 in Guatemala. The cheaper *Mapa Turístico Guatemala*, produced locally by Intelimapas, tends to be the most up to date on the state of Guatemala's roads, many of which have been newly paved in recent years. It also includes plans of many cities. Inguat's *Mapa Vial Turístico* is another worthwhile map. Bookstores that sell these maps can be found in Guatemala City (p71), Antigua (p99), Panajachel (p128) and Quetzaltenango (p161). For 1:50,000 and 1:250,000 topographical sheets of all parts of Guatemala, head to the Instituto Geográfico Nacional (p71).

MONEY

Guatemala's currency, the quetzal (*ket-sahl*, abbreviated to Q), is fairly stable at around Q7.5 = US\$1. The quetzal is divided into 100 centavos. For exchange rates, see the inside front cover; for information on costs in Guatemala, see p19.

You'll find ATMs (cash machines, *cajeros automáticos*) for Visa/Plus System cards in all but the smallest towns, and there are MasterCard/Cirrus ATMs in many places too, so one of these cards is the best basis for your supplies of cash in Guatemala. In addition, many banks give cash advances on Visa cards, and some on MasterCard. And you can pay for many purchases with these cards or with American Express (Amex) cards.

If you don't have one of these cards, a combination of Amex US-dollar traveler's checks and a limited amount of cash US dollars is the way to go. Take some of these as a backup even if you do have a card. Banks all over the country change cash US dollars, and many of them also change US-dollar traveler's checks too. Amex is easily the most recognized traveler's check brand.

In many places you can make payments with cash dollars, and a few places will accept traveler's checks. Currencies other than the US dollar are virtually useless in any form, although a small handful of places will now change cash euros.

Banks generally give the best exchange rates on both cash and traveler's checks. If you can't find an open bank you can often change cash (and occasionally checks) in travel agencies, hotels or shops.

Some towns suffer from change shortages: always try to carry a stash of small bills.

See p310 for security tips about your money.

Tippling

A 10% tip is expected at restaurants and automatically added to your bill in places like Antigua. In small *comedors* (basic, cheap eateries) tipping is optional, but follow the local practice of leaving some spare change. Tour guides are generally tipped, around 10%, especially on longer trips.

PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO

Ubiquitous film stores and pharmacies sell film, though you may not find the brand you like without a hunt. A 36-exposure, 100-ASA print film normally costs around US\$4. There are quick processing labs in the main cities. Internet cafés in well-touristed areas have card readers (*lectores de tarjeta*), so you can upload your digital photos or burn them onto CD.

Photographing People

Photography is a sensitive subject in Guatemala. Always ask permission before taking portraits, especially of Mayan women and children. Don't be surprised if your request is denied. Indigenous children often request payment (usually Q1) in return for posing. In certain places, such as the church of Santo Tomás in Chichicastenango, photography is forbidden. Mayan ceremonies (should you be so lucky to witness one) are off limits for photography unless you are given explicit permission to take pictures. If local people make any sign of being offended, you should put your camera away and apologize immediately, both out of decency and for your own safety. Never take photos of army installations, men with guns or other sensitive military subjects.

POST

The Guatemalan postal service was privatized in 1999. Generally, letters take eight to 10 days to travel to the US and Canada and 10 to 12 days to reach Europe. Almost all cities and towns (but not villages) have a post office where you can buy stamps and send mail. A letter sent to North America costs around US\$0.40 and to anywhere else around US\$0.50.

The Guatemalan mail system no longer holds *poste restante* or general delivery mail. The easiest and most reliable way to receive

mail is through a private address. Language schools and some hotels will be happy to do this. If you want to get a package couriered to you, it's best to make sure the courier company has an office in the town where you are staying, otherwise you will be charged some hefty 'handling fees' along with taxes, etc.

SHOPPING

Bargaining

Be aware that bargaining is essential in some situations and not done in others. It's standard practice when buying handicrafts: the first price you're told may be double or triple what the seller really expects. Remember that bargaining is not a fight to the death. The object is to arrive at a price agreeable to both you and the seller, thereby creating a win-win situation.

Coffee

Although most of Guatemala's finest beans are exported, some are (thankfully) held back for the tourist trade. To ensure you're getting the finest, freshest coffee beans available, visit a coffee farm and/or roaster and buy from them directly. Cobán and Antigua produce some of the world's greatest coffee and both towns support growers and roasters. For more on coffee and fair trade, see p217 and p220.

Jade

Beloved of the ancient Maya, jade is mined in Guatemala today and you'll find it both as jewelry and as miniature sculpture. For more on jade, see p116.

Leather Goods

Guatemala has some terrific leather goods. Fine briefcases, duffel bags, backpacks and belts are sold in most handicrafts markets. Cowboy boots and hats are a specialty in some areas, and custom work is welcome – the best place to head for is the village of Pastores just outside of Antigua. The prices and craftsmanship of these items are usually phenomenal.

Shipping

It's best to use an international shipping service if you want to ensure the relatively safe, timely arrival of your goods. You'll find information on such courier services in this book's city sections, under Post. A 1kg package sent from Antigua to California by UPS, for example, will cost you up to US\$218 for

express (two-day) service. See www.ups.com for more information.

Textiles

Guatemala's intricate and brilliantly colored textiles are world famous. Weaving is a traditional and thriving art of the Maya here. Clothing – especially the beautiful embroidered *huipiles* (tunics), *cortes* (skirts) and *fajas* (belts) of the Mayan women – as well as purses, tablecloths, blankets, hacky-sacks and many other woven items, are ubiquitous and good value, some for practical use, some more for souvenirs.

The largest crafts markets are the Thursday and Sunday markets in Chichicastenango, the permanent stalls lining Calle Santander in Panajachel, Mercado Central and Mercado de Artesanías in Guatemala City, and the Mercado de Artesanías in Antigua. Fine textiles of an infinite variety are also available in Antigua's shops. Elsewhere, in places such as Nebaj, Sololá, Santa Catarina Palopó, Santiago Atitlán and Todos Santos Cuchumatán, you can obtain local textiles at weekly markets or a few permanent stalls.

Wooden Masks

Ceremonial masks are fascinating, eye-catching and still in regular use. In Chichicastenango you can visit the artists in their *morerías* (workshops).

SOLO TRAVELERS

On your own, you need to be even more alert to what's going on around you than other travelers, and you need to be more cautious about where you go.

Guatemala is a pretty good place for meeting people, both locals and other travelers. Language schools, group tours, volunteer work, dormitory accommodations and sociable lodgings where everyone eats together are just a few of the situations where travelers are thrown together with other people.

Since single rooms cost more per person than doubles and triples, solo travelers face higher accommodation costs than others unless they sleep in dormitories (available in a number of places) or find others to share with.

TELEPHONE

Guatemala has no area or city codes. Calling from other countries, you just dial the international access code (☎ 00 in most countries), then the Guatemala country code (☎ 502), for

then the eight-digit local number. Calling within Guatemala, just dial the eight-digit local number. The international access code from Guatemala is ☎00.

Many towns and cities frequented by tourists have privately run call offices where you can make local and international calls for reasonable rates. If the telephone connection is by internet, the rates can be very cheap (US\$0.15 a minute to the USA, US\$0.30 to Europe), but line quality is unpredictable.

A number of companies provide public phone services. The most common street phones, found all over Guatemala, are those of Telgua, for which you need to buy a Telgua phone card (*tarjeta telefónica de Telgua*) from shops, kiosks and the like. Card sales points may advertise the fact with red signs saying '*Ladatel de Venta Aquí*.' The cards come in denominations of Q20, Q30 and Q50: you slot them into a Telgua phone, dial your number, and the display will tell you how much time you have left. The second most common street phones are those of Telefónica, which require a Telefónica card, also sold by shops and kiosks. Telefónica cards are not meant to be inserted into the phone, but simply bear codes to be keyed in and instructions to be followed. Telgua is cheaper than Telefónica for local calls (about US\$0.01 per minute against US\$0.05) and for calls to Europe (about US\$1 a minute against US\$1.60), but Telefónica is cheaper for calls to the USA (about US\$0.20 a minute against US\$0.50 with Telgua).

Unless it's an emergency, don't use the black phones placed strategically in tourist towns that say 'Press 2 to call the United States free!' This is a bait and switch scam; you put the call on your credit card and return home to find you have paid between US\$8 and US\$20 per minute.

Telgua street phones bear instructions to dial ☎ 147110 for domestic collect calls and ☎ 147120 for international collect calls. The latter number is usually successful for the USA and Canada, less so for the rest of the world.

Cell phones are widely used. It is possible to bring your cell phone, have it 'unlocked' for use in Guatemala then substitute your SIM card for a local one. This works on some phones and not others and there doesn't appear to be a logic behind it. This, and the possibility of theft (cell phones, particularly high-end ones from overseas, are a pickpocket's delight) makes most people either rent in the long term, or buy a cheap prepaid phone on arrival.

Prepaid phones are available pretty much everywhere and cost around US\$25, often coming with US\$15 or so in free calls. Cards to restock the credit on your phone are on sale in nearly every corner store. Calls cost US\$0.15 per minute anywhere in the country, the same for the US (depending on the company you're with) and up to five times that for the rest of the world.

At the time of writing, Movistar had the cheapest rates (with coverage limited to major cities) and Tigo and Claro had the best coverage.

If you want to rent a phone, try Guatemala Ventures in Antigua (p100) or Xela Pages in Quetzaltenango (p162).

TIME

North American Central Standard Time (GMT/UTC minus six hours) is the basis of time in Guatemala. At the time of writing, daylight saving time was being trialed in Guatemala. From the end of March to the end of September, clocks are put forward one hour. You should bear in mind that, rural folks being somewhat independent types, the daylight savings concept has yet to catch on in many villages, meaning that there is a dual time system running – the *hora oficial* (official time) and the *hora de Dios* (God's time) – and it's always best to check which one people are referring to.

The 24-hour clock is often used, so 1pm may be written as 13 or 1300. When it's noon in Guatemala, it's 1pm in New York, 6pm in London, 10am in San Francisco and 4am next day in Sydney (add one hour to those times during daylight saving).

TOILETS

You cannot throw anything into Guatemalan toilets, including toilet paper. For this reason, bathrooms are equipped with some sort of receptacle (usually a small wastebasket) for soiled paper. Toilet paper is not always provided, so always carry some. If you don't have any and need some, asking a restaurant worker for *un rollo de papel* (a roll of paper), accompanied by a panicked facial expression, usually produces fast results.

Public toilets are few and far between. Use the ones at cafés, restaurants, your hotel and the archaeological sites. At bus stations you can pay US\$0.15 to use the toilets in bus company offices. Buses rarely have toilets on board.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Guatemala's national tourism institute, **Inguat** (www.visitguatemala.com), has information offices in Guatemala City, Antigua, Panajachel, Quetzaltenango and Santa Elena airport; a few other towns have departmental, municipal or private-enterprise tourist information offices. See city sections for details. **Asistur** (www.asisturcard.com), a joint private-government initiative, operates a 24-hour toll free advice and assistance hotline on ☎ 1500.

The Guatemalan embassies in the US, Germany, France, Italy, Spain and the UK can provide some tourist information. From the US you can call Inguat toll-free at ☎ 800 464 8281.

TRAVELERS WITH DISABILITIES

Guatemala is not the easiest country to negotiate with a disability.

Although many sidewalks in Antigua have ramps and cute little inlaid tiles depicting a wheelchair, the streets are cobblestone, so the ramps are anything but smooth and the streets worse!

Many hotels in Guatemala are old converted houses with rooms around a courtyard; such rooms are wheelchair accessible. The most expensive hotels have facilities such as ramps, elevators and accessible toilets. Transportation is the biggest hurdle for travelers with limited mobility: travelers in a wheelchair may consider renting a car and driver as the buses will prove especially challenging due to lack of space.

Mobility International USA (www.miusa.org) advises disabled travelers on mobility issues, runs exchange programs (including in Guatemala) and publishes some useful books. Also worth consulting are **Access-Able Travel Source** (www.access-able.com) and **Accessible Journeys** (www.disabilitytravel.com).

Transitions (☎ 832-4261; transitions@guate.net; Colonia Candelaria 80, Antigua) is an organization aiming to increase awareness and access for disabled persons in Guatemala.

VISAS

Citizens of the US, Canada, EU countries, Norway, Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand, Israel and Japan are among those who do not need visas for tourist visits to Guatemala. On entry into Guatemala you will normally be given a 90-day stay. (The number 90 will be written in the stamp in your passport.)

In August of 2006 Guatemala joined the Centro America 4 (CA-4), a trading agreement with Nicaragua, Honduras and El Salvador. Designed to facilitate the movement of people and goods around the region, it has one major effect on foreign visitors – upon entry to the CA-4 region, travelers are given a 90-day stay for *the entire region*. This can be extended *once* at the **Departamento de Extranjería** (Foreigners' Office; ☎ 2411 2411; 6a Av 3-11, Zona 4, Guatemala City; ☎ 8am-2:30pm Mon-Fri). For an extension take with you *one* of the following:

- A credit card with a photocopy of both of its sides.
- An airline ticket out of Guatemala with a photocopy.
- US\$500 worth of traveler's checks.

The extension will normally be issued in the afternoon of the working day after the day you apply.

Citizens of some Eastern European countries are among those who do need visas to visit Guatemala. Inquire at a Guatemalan embassy well in advance of travel.

Visa regulations are subject to change and it's always worth checking them with a Guatemalan embassy before you go.

If you have been in the CA-4 for your original 90 days and a 90-day extension, you must leave the region for 72 hours (Belize and Mexico are the most obvious, easiest options), after which you can return to the region to start the process all over again. Some foreigners have been repeating this cycle for years.

WOMEN TRAVELERS

Women should encounter no special problems traveling in Guatemala. In fact, solo women will be pleasantly surprised by how gracious and helpful most locals are. The primary thing you can do to make it easy for yourself while traveling here is to dress modestly. Modesty in dress is highly regarded, and if you practice it, you will usually be treated with respect.

Specifically, shorts should be worn only at the beach, not in town, and especially not in the Highlands. Skirts should be at or below the knee. Wear a bra, as going braless is considered provocative. Many local women swim with T-shirts over their swimsuits; in places where they do this, you may want to follow suit to avoid stares.

VOLUNTEERING: OUR TOP PICKS

There's a wealth of volunteering opportunities in Guatemala. A lot of them center on education and environmental issues. Here are a few off-beat ones that may appeal:

AIDG (www.aidg.org) Works with Guatemalan engineering students to make renewable energy solutions from recycled materials.

Ak' Tenamit (www.aktenamit.org) A grassroots organization working to promote ecotourism around the Río Dulce area.

Arcas (www.arcasguatemala.com) Works to protect the endangered sea turtle population on the southern coast. Also has projects in El Petén.

Entre Mundos (www.entremundos.org) Produces a bi-monthly newspaper and acts as a bridge between volunteers and NGOs.

Ix Canaán (www.ixcanaan.org) A community library and literacy project in El Remate in El Petén.

Proyecto Payaso (www.proyectopayaso.org) A traveling clown troupe specializing in community AIDS awareness and education.

Safe Passage (www.safepassage.org) Provides education, health care and opportunities for kids working scavenging in Guatemala City garbage dumps.

Women traveling alone can expect plenty of attempts by men to talk to them. Often the men are just curious and not out for a foreign conquest. It is, of course, up to you how to respond, but there's no need to be intimidated. Consider the situation and circumstances (on a bus is one thing, on a barstool another) and stay confident. Try to sit next to women or children on the bus if that makes you more comfortable. Local women rarely initiate conversations, but usually have lots of interesting things to say once the ball is rolling.

Nasty rumors about Western women kidnapping Guatemalan children for a variety of sordid ends have all but died down. Still, women travelers should be cautious around children, especially indigenous kids, lest misunderstandings occur.

While there's no need to be paranoid, the possibility of rape and assault does exist. Use your normal traveler's caution – avoid walking alone in isolated places or through city streets late at night, and skip hitchhiking.

WORK

Some travelers find work in bars, restaurants and places to stay in Antigua, Panajachel or Quetzaltenango, but the wages are just survival pay. If you're looking to crew a yacht, there's always work being offered around the Río Dulce area, sometimes for short trips, sometimes to the States and further afield. Check notice boards (Bruno's, p253, has the best one) for details.

Volunteering

If you really want to get to the heart of Guatemalan matters and you've altruistic leanings, consider volunteer work. It's rewarding and exposes foreigners to the local culture typically out of reach for the average traveler. Opportunities abound, from caring for abandoned animals and kids to writing grant applications to tending fields. Travelers with specific skills such as nurses, doctors, teachers and website designers are particularly encouraged to investigate volunteering in Guatemala.

Most volunteer posts require basic or better Spanish skills and a minimum time commitment. Depending on the position and the organization, you may have to pay for room and board for the duration of your stay. Before making a commitment, you may want to talk to past volunteers and read the fine print associated with the position.

Four excellent sources of information on volunteer opportunities are Proyecto Mosaico Guatemala and AmeriSpan Guatemala, both in Antigua (see p101), and EntreMundos and Guatemaya Intercultural, both based in Quetzaltenango (see p168). You only have to visit the websites of Entremundos or Proyecto Mosaico to realize what a huge range of volunteer action is happening in Guatemala. Many language schools have close links to volunteer projects and can introduce you to the world of volunteering. Well-established volunteer organizations include Tortugario Monterrico and Reserva Natural Hawaii, Casa Guatemala, Arcas and Estación Biológica Las Guacamayas.

Transportation

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THINGS CHANGE...

The information in this chapter is particularly vulnerable to change. Check directly with the airline or a travel agent to make sure you understand how a fare (and ticket you may buy) works and be aware of the security requirements for international travel. Shop carefully. The details given in this chapter should be regarded as pointers and are not a substitute for your own careful, up-to-date research.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

ENTERING THE COUNTRY

When you enter Guatemala, by land, air, sea or river, you should simply have to fill out straightforward immigration and customs forms. In the normal course of things you should not have to pay a cent.

However, immigration officials sometimes request unofficial fees from travelers. To determine whether these are legitimate, you can ask for *un recibo* (a receipt). You may find that the fee is dropped. When in doubt, try to observe what, if anything, other travelers are paying before it's your turn.

To enter Guatemala, you need a valid passport. For information on visas, see p318.

AIR

Airports & Airlines

Guatemala City's Aeropuerto La Aurora (GUA) is the country's major international airport. The only other airport with international flights (from Cancún, Mexico and Belize City) is Flores (FRS). The Guatemalan national airline, Aviateca, is part of the regional Grupo TACA, along with El Salvador's TACA, Costa Rica's Lacs and Nicaragua's Nica. The US Federal Aviation Administration has assessed Guatemala's and El Salvador's civil aviation authorities as Category 2, which means they are not in compliance with international aviation safety standards.

Airlines flying to and from Guatemala:

American Airlines (AA; ☎ 2260 6550; www.a.a.com; hub Dallas & Miami)

Aviateca See Grupo TACA.

Continental Airlines (CO; ☎ 2385 9601; www.continental.com; hub Houston)

Copa Airlines (CM; ☎ 2385 5555; www.copaair.com; hub Panama City)

Cubana (CU; ☎ 2367 2288/89/90; www.cubana.cu; hub Havana)

Delta Air Lines (DL; ☎ 1 800 300 0005; www.delta.com; hub Atlanta)

Grupo TACA (TA; ☎ 2260 6497; www.taca.com; hub San Salvador)

Iberia (IB; ☎ 2260 6337; www.iberia.com; hub Madrid)

Inter See Grupo TACA.

Lacs See Grupo TACA.

Maya Island Air (MW; ☎ 7926 3386; www.mayairways.com; hub Belize City)

Mexicana (MX; ☎ 2260 6335; www.mexicana.com; hub Mexico City)

TACA See Grupo TACA.

Tropic Air (PM; ☎ 7926 0348; www.tropicair.com; hub Belize City)

United Airlines (UA; ☎ 2336 9900; www.united.com; hub Los Angeles)

From Guatemala

The best place to buy flight tickets out of Guatemala is Antigua, which has many agencies offering good fares (see p100). Some agencies also issue the student, youth and teacher cards needed to obtain the best fares.

From Australia & New Zealand

The cheapest routings usually go via the USA (often Los Angeles). Many Australasians visiting Guatemala are doing so as part of a longer trip through Latin America, so the most suitable ticket might be an open-jaw (into one city, out of another) or even a round-the-world ticket. From Sydney, you'll pay approximately A\$2700 return to Guatemala City via LA or San Francisco.

The following are well-known agents for cheap fares, with branches throughout Australia and New Zealand:

Flight Centre Australia (☎ 133 133; www.flightcentre.com.au); New Zealand (☎ 09 355 7550; www.flightcentre.co.nz)

STA Travel Australia (☎ 134 782; www.statravel.com.au); New Zealand (☎ 0800 474 400; www.statravel.co.nz).

From Canada

There are no direct flights. Routings are usually via the USA. Montreal to Guatemala City costs in the region of C\$900 return.

Travel Cuts (☎ 1 866 246 9762; www.travelcuts.com) is Canada's national student travel agency. For online bookings try www.expedia.ca and www.travelocity.ca.

From Central America & Cuba

Grupo TACA flies from San Salvador (economy return fare US\$300 to US\$400); Tegucigalpa, Honduras (US\$330) via San Pedro

Sula; Managua, Nicaragua (US\$395); and San José, Costa Rica (US\$310 to US\$370). Copa flies direct from Panama City (US\$285), and from San José (US\$200). United Airlines also flies from San José to Guatemala City. Cubana flies twice weekly to/from Havana. Return fares cost around US\$410.

From Europe

Iberia is the only airline flying direct from Europe to Guatemala at the time of writing (with a stop in Miami), and the cheapest fares from many European cities are usually with Iberia via Madrid. Depending on the season, you can expect to pay from £800 (round-trip) from London and from €950 to €1200 from Frankfurt.

Recommended UK ticket agencies include the following:

Journey Latin America (☎ 020 8747 3108; www.journeylatinamerica.co.uk)

STA Travel (☎ 0870 160 0599; www.statravel.co.uk)
For travelers under the age of 26.

For online bookings try www.dialaflight.com or www.lastminute.com.

From Mexico

Grupo TACA and Mexicana both fly daily direct between Mexico City and Guatemala City, with round-trip fares starting around

CLIMATE CHANGE & TRAVEL

Climate change is a serious threat to the ecosystems that humans rely upon, and air travel is the fastest-growing contributor to the problem. Lonely Planet regards travel, overall, as a global benefit, but believes we all have a responsibility to limit our personal impact on global warming.

Flying & Climate Change

Pretty much every form of motorized travel generates CO₂ (the main cause of human-induced climate change) but planes are far and away the worst offenders, not just because of the sheer distances they allow us to travel, but because they release greenhouse gases high into the atmosphere. The statistics are frightening: two people taking a return flight between Europe and the US will contribute as much to climate change as an average household's gas and electricity consumption over a whole year.

Carbon Offset Schemes

Climatecare.org and other websites use 'carbon calculators' that allow travelers to offset the level of greenhouse gases they are responsible for with financial contributions to sustainable travel schemes that reduce global warming – including projects in India, Honduras, Kazakhstan and Uganda.

Lonely Planet, together with Rough Guides and other concerned partners in the travel industry, support the carbon offset scheme run by climatecare.org. Lonely Planet offsets all of its staff and author travel.

For more information check out our website: lonelyplanet.com.

US\$430. Inter, part of Grupo TACA, flies most days from Guatemala City to Flores to Cancún and back. Round-trip fares from Cancún to Flores/Guatemala City are US\$342/334.

From South America

Lacsa (with transfers in San José, Costa Rica) and Copa (with transfers in Panama City) both fly to Guatemala City from Bogotá, Caracas, Quito and Lima.

From the USA

Nonstop flights to Guatemala City arrive from Atlanta (US\$800) with Delta; from Dallas with American; from Houston (US\$390) with Continental; from Los Angeles (US\$825) with United and Grupo TACA; from Miami (US\$680) with American, Grupo TACA and Iberia; and from New York (US\$600) with American and Grupo TACA.

The following websites are recommended for online bookings:

- www.cheaptickets.com
- www.expedia.com
- www.lowestfare.com
- www.orbitz.com
- www.sta.com

DEPARTURE TAX

Guatemala levies a departure tax of US\$30 on outbound air passengers. This has to be paid in cash US dollars or quetzals at the airline check-in desk.

LAND

Bus is the most common way to enter Guatemala, though you can also do so by car, river or sea. It's advisable to get through all borders as early in the day as possible. Onward transportation tends to wind down in the afternoon and border areas are not always the safest places to hang around late. You'll find more detail on the services mentioned here in the destination sections of this book. There is no departure tax when you leave Guatemala by land.

Car & Motorcycle

The mountain of paperwork and liability involved in driving into Guatemala deters most travelers. You will need the following documents, all clear and consistent, to enter Guatemala with a car:

- current and valid registration
- proof of ownership (if you don't own the car, you'll need a notarized letter of authorization from the owner that you are allowed to take it)
- your current and valid driver's license or an International Driving Permit (IDP), issued by the automobile association in your home country
- temporary import permit available free at the border and good for a maximum 30 days.

Insurance from foreign countries is not recognized by Guatemala, forcing you to purchase a policy locally. Most border posts and nearby towns have offices selling liability policies. To deter foreigners from selling cars in Guatemala, the authorities make you exit the country with the vehicle you used to enter it. Do not be the designated driver when crossing borders if you don't own the car, because you and it will not be allowed to leave Guatemala without each other.

From Belize

The border is at Benque Viejo del Carmen/Melchor Mencos. **Línea Dorada/Mundo Maya** (☎ 7926 3649; Playa Sur, Flores) runs two direct daily buses from Belize City to Flores (US\$15.50, four to five hours) and back. **San Juan Travel** (☎ 7926 0041; sanjuant@internetdetelgua.com.gt; Flores Map p276; Playa Sur; Santa Elena Map p275; 2a Calle) also covers this route daily. Otherwise, buses depart Belize City for Benque (US\$4 to US\$6, three hours) and vice versa about every half-hour from 11am to 4pm. Buses and minibuses run between Melchor Mencos and Flores (US\$3 to US\$3.50, two hours). There are also a few buses daily between Melchor Mencos and Guatemala City via Poptún and Río Dulce.

From El Salvador

There are road borders at La Hachadura/Ciudad Pedro de Alvarado on the Carretera al Pacífico (Hwy 2), Las Chinamas/Valle Nuevo (Hwy 8), San Cristóbal/San Cristóbal (Interamericana Hwy, or Hwy 1) and Anguiatú/Anguiatú (Hwy 10). Several companies run buses between San Salvador and Guatemala City, taking five to six hours and costing from US\$8 to US\$45 depending on the service. One of them, Tica Bus, has buses between San Salvador and all other Central American capitals except Belize City. Crossing at

the other border points is usually a matter of taking one bus to the border and another onward from it.

From Honduras

The main road crossings are at Agua Caliente (between Nueva Ocotepeque, Honduras, and Esquipulas, Guatemala), El Florido (between Copán Ruinas, Honduras, and Chiquimula, Guatemala) and Corinto (between Omoa, Honduras, and Puerto Barrios, Guatemala). **Hedman Alas** (Copán Ruinas ☎ 651 4037; La Ceiba ☎ 441 5348; San Pedro Sula ☎ 557 3477; Tegucigalpa ☎ 237 7143) runs daily 1st-class buses via El Florido to Guatemala City from Tegucigalpa (US\$68 one way, 11½ hours), La Ceiba (US\$68, 12 hours), San Pedro Sula (US\$59, eight hours) and Copán Ruinas (US\$46, 4½ hours). Cheaper local transportation serves all three border points. Shuttle minibus services run between Copán Ruinas, Guatemala City and Antigua.

From Mexico

The main border points are at Ciudad Hidalgo/Ciudad Tecún Umán and Talismán/El Carmen, both near Tapachula, Mexico, and Ciudad Cuahtémoc/La Mesilla, on the Interamericana between Comitán, Mexico, and Huehuetenango, Guatemala. All these borders are linked by plentiful buses to nearby cities within Guatemala and Mexico, and a few buses run all the way between Tapachula and Guatemala City by the Pacific Slope route through Mazatenango and Escuintla. There are also direct buses between Guatemala City and all three border points. **Línea Dorada/Mundo Maya** (☎ 7926 3649; Playa Sur, Flores) runs two direct daily buses from Chetumal, Mexico, to Flores (US\$25, seven to eight hours) and back, via Belize City. **San Juan Travel** (☎ 7926 0041; sanjuant@internetdetelgua.com.gt; Flores Map p276 Playa Sur; Santa Elena Map p275 2a Calle) also covers this route daily for US\$28.

See p281 for information on routes between Mexico and Guatemala's Petén department.

RIVER

Autotransportes Río Chancalá (5 de Mayo 120, Palenque) and **Transportes Montebello** (Calle Velasco Suárez, Palenque) run from Palenque, Mexico, to Frontera Corozal (US\$5, three to four hours) on the Río Usumacinta, which divides Mexico from Guatemala. Boats across the river to Guatemala cost US\$0.80 per person to La Técnica (five minutes) and US\$5 to US\$7

per person to Bethel (40 minutes). From La Técnica buses leave for Flores at 4am and 11am (US\$6, five to six hours); from Bethel, buses leave for Flores at 5am, noon, 2pm and 4pm (US\$4, four hours). Travel agencies in Palenque and Flores offer bus-boat-bus packages between the two places for US\$30 to US\$35. If you're making this trip it's well worth the time and expense of detouring to the outstanding Mayan ruins at Yaxchilán, near Frontera Corozal; packages incorporating this are available too.

There are other river routes from Mexico into Guatemala's Petén department: up the Río de la Pasión from Benemérito de las Américas, south of Frontera Corozal, to Sayaxché; and up the Río San Pedro from La Palma, Tabasco, to El Naranjo. There are no reliable passenger services along either river, however. You may have to hire your own boat, which can be expensive. Both Sayaxché and El Naranjo have bus and minibus connections with Flores. La Palma has transport from Tenosique, and Benemérito has good bus and minibus connections with Palenque.

SEA

Exotic Travel (☎ 7947 0048; www.bluecaribbeanbay.com) operates boat and minibus packages to and from La Ceiba in Honduras (US\$35) and Punta Gorda in Belize (US\$20, 1¼ hours) every Tuesday and Friday. **Transportes El Chato** (☎ 9948 5525) operates a daily boat to and from Punta Gorda in Belize (US\$18, one hour). The Punta Gorda services connect with bus services to/from Belize City.

There is a US\$10 departure tax when leaving Guatemala by sea.

GETTING AROUND

AIR

At the time of writing the only scheduled internal flights were between Guatemala City and Flores, a route operated daily by TACA with one-way/return fares costing around US\$130/200. For further details, see p90.

BICYCLE

Bike rentals are available in a few places: the most professional outfits include Old Town Outfitters and Guatemala Ventures/Mayan

Bike Tours in Antigua (p105), and Vrisa Bookshop in Quetzaltenango (p168).

BOAT

The Caribbean town of Livingston is only reachable by boat, across the Bahía de Amatique from Puerto Barrios or down the Río Dulce from the town of Río Dulce – great trips both. In Lago de Atitlán fast fiberglass launches zip across the waters between villages.

BUS, MINIBUS & PICKUP

Buses go almost everywhere in Guatemala. Guatemala's buses will leave you with some of your most vivid memories of the country. Most of them are ancient school buses from the US and Canada. It is not unusual for a local family of five to squeeze into seats that were originally designed for two child-sized bottoms. Many travelers know these vehicles as chicken buses, after the live cargo accompanying many passengers. They are frequent, crowded and cheap. Expect to pay US\$1 (or less!) for an hour of travel.

Chicken buses will stop anywhere, for anyone. Helpers will yell '*hay lugares!*' (eye loo-gar-ays), which literally means 'there are places.' Never mind that the space they refer to may be no more than a sliver of air between hundreds of locals mashed against one another. These same helpers will also yell their bus's destination in voices of varying hilarity and cadence; just listen for the song of your town. Tall travelers will be especially challenged on these buses. To catch a chicken bus, simply stand beside the road with your arm out parallel to the ground.

Some routes, especially between big cities, are served by more comfortable buses with the luxury of one seat per person. The best buses are labeled *pullman*, *especial* or *primera clase*. Occasionally, these may have bathrooms, televisions and even food service.

In general, more buses leave in the morning (some leave as early as 3am) than the afternoon. Bus traffic drops off precipitously after about 4pm; night buses are rare and not generally recommended. An exception is Línea Dorada's overnight *de lujo* from Guatemala City to Flores, which has not experienced (to our knowledge) any trouble of note in several years (we hope we're not tempting fate here).

Distances in Guatemala are not huge and you won't often ride for more than four hours

at a time. On a typical four-hour bus trip you'll cover 175km to 200km for US\$5 to US\$6.

For a few of the better services you can buy tickets in advance, and this is generally worth doing as it ensures that you get a place.

On some shorter routes minibuses, usually called microbuses, are replacing chicken buses. These are operated on the same cram-'em-all-in principles and can be even more uncomfortable because they have less leg room. Where neither buses nor minibuses roam, pickup (*picop*) trucks serve as de facto buses; you hail them and pay for them as if they were the genuine article.

At least a couple of times a month, a bus plunges over a cliff or rounds a blind bend into a head-on collision. Newspapers are full of gory details and diagrams of the latest wreck, which doesn't foster affectionate feelings toward Guatemalan public transportation. Equally if not more often, buses are held up by armed robbers and the passengers are relieved of their money and valuables. If this happens to you, do not try to resist or get away. You could end up losing more than your valuables. For more information on this unpleasant subject, see p310.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

You can drive in Guatemala with your home-country driver's license or with an International Driving Permit (IDP). Gasoline (petrol) and diesel are widely available. Motor parts may be hard to find, especially for modern vehicles with sophisticated electronics and emissions-control systems. Old Toyota pickups are ubiquitous, though, so parts and mechanics will be more widely available.

Guatemalan driving etiquette will probably be very different from what you're used to back home: passing on blind curves, ceding the right of way to vehicles coming uphill on narrow passes and deafening honking for no apparent reason are just the start. Expect few road signs and no indication from other drivers of what they are about to do. A vehicle coming uphill always has the right of way. *Tumulos* are speed bumps that are generously (sometimes oddly) placed throughout the country, usually on the main drag through a town. Use of seat belts is obligatory, but generally not practiced.

In Guatemala driving at night is a bad idea for many reasons, not the least of which are armed bandits, drunk drivers and decreased visibility.

Every driver involved in an accident that results in injury or death is taken into custody until a judge determines responsibility.

Rental

You can rent cars in Guatemala City (see p92), Antigua (see p117), Quetzaltenango (see p174), Huehuetenango (see p184), Cobán (see p223) and Flores (see p282). A four-door, five-seat, five-gear vehicle with air-con such as a Mitsubishi Lancer will normally cost around US\$50 a day including insurance and unlimited kilometers. The smallest cars start at around US\$40 a day. Discounts may apply if you rent for three days or more.

To rent a car or motorcycle you need to show your passport, driver's license and a major credit card. Usually, the person renting the vehicle must be 25 years or older. Insurance policies accompanying rental cars may not protect you from loss or theft, in which case you could be liable for hundreds or even thousands of dollars in damages. Be careful where you park, especially in Guatemala City and at night.

Motorcycles are available for rent in Antigua (see p117) and Panajachel (see p136). Bringing safety gear is highly recommended.

HITCHING

Hitchhiking in the strict sense of the word is not practiced in Guatemala because it is not safe. However, where the bus service is sporadic or nonexistent, pickup trucks and other vehicles serve as public transport. If you stand beside the road with your arm out, someone will stop. You are expected to pay the driver as if it were a bus and the fare will be similar. This is a safe and reliable system used by locals and travelers, and the only inconvenience you're

likely to encounter is full to overflowing vehicles – get used to it.

LOCAL TRANSPORT Bus

Public transportation within towns and cities and to nearby villages is chiefly provided by aged, polluting, crowded and loud buses. They're useful to travelers chiefly in the more spread-out cities such as Guatemala City, Quetzaltenango and Huehuetenango. Quetzaltenango has a lovely fleet of quiet, smooth, comfortable, modern minibuses.

Taxi

Taxis are fairly plentiful in most significant towns. A 10-minute ride normally costs about US\$4.50, which is relatively expensive – expect to hear plenty of woeful tales about the price of gasoline. Except for some taxis in Guatemala City, they don't use meters: you must agree upon the fare before you set off – best before you get in, in fact. Taxis will also often take you to out-of-town archaeological sites and other places for reasonable round-trip fares, including waiting time while you look around.

SHUTTLE MINIBUS

Shuttle minibuses run by travel agencies provide comfortable and quick transport along the main routes plied by tourists. You'll find these heavily advertised wherever they are offered. They're much more expensive than buses (anywhere between five and 15 times as expensive), but more convenient: they usually offer a door-to-door service. The most popular shuttle routes include Guatemala City airport–Antigua, Antigua–Panajachel, Panajachel–Chichicastenango and Flores–Tikal.

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