El Salvador

Country Facts
Population: 7,185,218
Languages: Spanish
Predominant Religions: Christian (Roman Catholic)
Time Zone: Six hours behind Greenwich Mean Time
Voltage Requirements: 110 volts
Telephone Codes: 503, country code

Introduction:

El Salvador is not a country for pessimists. This small land has endured more than its share of war, poverty and natural disasters. However, look a little closer and you’ll also see the resilience and optimism such tragedy can inspire. Impoverished communities such as Ilobasco and La Palma have become renowned for their handicrafts and folk art. The National Civilian Police, created in the wake of war, seems to be earnest about improving safety.

Though the civil war ended nearly two decades ago, El Salvador is not a carefree place to visit. Crime is a problem, and it’s sometimes targeted at travelers.

Compassion in El Salvador:
Compassion International’s work in El Salvador began in 1977. As of 2010 more than 36,000 children participate in more than 160 child development centers. The Child Survival Program serves more than 210 mothers or caregivers and their babies through 10 centers. Compassion partners with churches to help them provide El Salvadoran children with the opportunity to rise above their circumstances and become all God has created them to be.

Cultural Information:

- Handshakes are common among men and women, both when meeting and departing, although some people will limit greetings to a nod.
- Male friends may hug and women friends may kiss briefly and lightly on the cheek.
- Salvadorans are warm, gregarious and family oriented people. However, it is not a good idea to use someone’s first name until you know him or her better.
- Titles are commonly used with last names. Only very close friends use first names or surnames without a title.
- Salvadorans highly regard formal etiquette. Prepare to engage in courtesies with a very respectful manner.
- Politics can be a touchy subject because of El Salvador’s violent and polarized past.
- Aggressive or disrespectful behavior is generally not part of the social fabric in El Salvador.
- Religion is a common topic of conversation, and people can be very open about their beliefs. Dress modestly when visiting a church. Men should remove their hats before entering places of worship.
• El Salvador is getting away from the Latin American “machismo” tradition to some extent: Many women have been appointed to positions of power, and the water company is training women to be plumbers.
• El Salvador’s crime problems have been worsened by street gangs with roots in the United States. Salvadoran immigrants convicted of crimes in the United States are often deported back to El Salvador. Some who were members of gangs have established similar organizations in their home country.
• Because of its rolling, green countryside, El Salvador is sometimes called “the Ireland of Central America.”
• El Salvador is one of the world’s largest producers of coffee. October through November is coffee-picking season.

Dos and Don’ts:
• Don’t get caught up in a protest. Visitors, by law, are not allowed to participate in political demonstrations.
• Do visit local markets on Friday, the market day in most towns.
• Do watch two films focusing on the turbulent 1980s in El Salvador before traveling: Salvador, by director Oliver Stone [criticizing U.S. policy during the war], and Romero, starring Raul Julia [about the 1980 murder of Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero].
• Do be aware that many Salvadorans carry firearms. Foreigners are prohibited from carrying guns, however, unless they receive a firearms permit in advance from the Salvadoran government. Arriving with a gun and no permit is bad news.
• Do expect shops and restaurants to close for siesta in the early afternoon.
• Do introduce yourself as a “U.S. citizen,” if that’s where you’re from. Salvadorans consider themselves to be as “American” as anyone else on the continent.

Travel Tips

Personal Safety:
Crime continues to be a problem. Avoid wearing or carrying valuables [including cameras] in public places and be cautious around ATMs and banks. If you are assaulted, surrender your valuables immediately — those who don’t might be shot. Armed robberies are more common on rural roadways. If you are renting a car, drive with the doors locked and windows up, and do not travel after dusk or before full daylight.

Be aware that land mines left over from the war linger in isolated areas. People leaving the roads should inquire locally and stick to well-worn trails.

El Salvador is in an active earthquake zone, so check with your hotel regarding evacuation procedures and the location of emergency exits.

Leave at home all unnecessary credit cards, social security card, library cards and similar items you may routinely carry in your wallet. Do not take more cash than you reasonably require for that day. Use the room safe or hotel safe to secure valuables as well as additional cash. Secure
cash in multiple locations – wallet, various pockets, money belts. Carry items in front pockets, not back pockets. Do not display large sums of money in public; only make visible the amount of money that approximates your purchase. Maintain a close awareness of your purse, wallet, backpack, etc. as well as the people around you. It’s a good idea to keep one hand or arm in constant contact with these items especially in areas of high people traffic. Never leave items with cash in them [purse, wallet, backpack, etc.] on a bus, car, or any other location, even if the vehicle is being watched by Compassion staff or Compassion-hired contractors. Stay alert and be cautious at all times. Don’t take safety & security for granted.

Health:
Malaria and dengue fever are present, so try to avoid mosquito bites by using a repellent containing Deet. You should also see a doctor about anti-malarial medication. Avoid animals because of the danger of rabies. Prevent skin infections by disinfecting and covering even the smallest wound.

Do not drink the tap water: Stick with prepackaged or boiled drinks. Avoid fresh salads, peel fresh fruit and raw vegetables, choose meat that is cooked thoroughly, and avoid unpasteurized dairy products. Most hot, freshly cooked food should be safe. The best precaution is to follow the guidelines on eating and drinking listed here.

Adequate medical facilities are available in San Salvador, but health care outside the capital is limited. Bring all prescription medicine needed for the trip. The sun can be very strong, so use sunscreen liberally and wear a hat.

We strongly advise you to contact the CDC [www.cdc.gov] or check with your personal physician for more information about your specific health needs while traveling, including any recommendations for immunizations.

Money:
El Salvador has used the U.S. dollar as its currency since 2001. Major credit cards are widely accepted, and some banks have ATMs that take international credit and debit cards and dispense U.S. dollars. Traveler’s checks can be cashed at major hotels and banks in larger cities.

Carry small-denomination bills because $50 and $100 bills are not widely accepted. Canadian dollars cannot be exchanged in El Salvador. Avoid money changers on the streets and at international border crossings. ATMs in El Salvador only accept four-digit bank codes.

Weather:
Vegetation is green and lush just after the rainy season, around November. From November to April, it may be very dry and dusty. From May to October, rainfall may be heavy but usually comes in short bursts. Daytime temperatures in the lower elevations are typically in the 80s-90s F / 27-37 C, with nights in the 60s F / 16-21 C.

Dress:
Pack casual, summer clothing and light outdoor wear and a suitable pair of walking shoes or light hiking boots. Sun hats and sunscreen are recommended. Bring a sweater or jacket, both for evenings and for visits to higher altitudes.

*All information taken from Weissmann Reports, the World Factbook and Compassion International.*