Guatemala

Country Facts
Population: 13,276,517
Languages: Spanish, more than 20 indigenous languages
Predominant Religions: Christian (Roman Catholic, Protestant) and traditional Maya
Time Zone: Six hours behind Greenwich Mean Time
Voltage Requirements: 110 volts
Telephone Codes: 502, country code

Introduction:
Guatemala, known as “the country of eternal spring,” is valued for the stunning Maya ruins at Tikal, the well-preserved colonial city of Antigua, a vibrant indigenous culture, active volcanoes, highland lakes and exotic wildlife, among other highlights. But it’s also one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere and poses risks for tourists and travelers who don’t use appropriate caution.

From the 1950s until the mid-1990s, political unrest, followed by the country’s bloodiest civil war, kept many visitors away. Since the war ended in 1996, there have been improvements in accommodations and infrastructure. But endemic poverty and a continuing high crime rate — including violent attacks targeting travelers (and, in particular, those wishing to adopt children) — have made Guatemala at best unpredictable but also potentially dangerous.

Compassion in Guatemala
Compassion International’s work in Guatemala began in 1976. As of 2010 more than 33,900 children participate in more than 140 child development centers. The Leadership Development Program serves more than 90 students. Compassion partners with churches to help them provide Guatemalan children with the opportunity to rise above their circumstances and become all God has created them to be.

Cultural Information:
- Handshakes are the common greeting among both men and women; handshakes are gentle, almost limp, and somewhat prolonged.
- Women may pat each other’s right forearm or shoulder instead of shaking hands. Female friends may also hug and lightly kiss each other on the cheek.
- Gift-giving, or invitations to a meal, are common social pleasantries in Guatemala, as are social outings with business associates. Business and social time often overlap.
- The main meal is eaten at lunchtime and an afternoon "snack" or "coffee break" is common around 4 p.m. Business dinners tend to be lighter fare and begin after 7 p.m.
- Traditions are important at meals. Guests are expected to clean their plates and wait politely for their host to ask them if they would like more. Visitors with good manners first decline but then finally accept second helpings when their host insists. This is seen as a compliment to both the host and the cook.
• Corn and tamalitos (commeal steamed in corn husks) are eaten with every meal. Meats are usually stewed in an amazing variety of sauces, each with its own distinctive flavor; mainly because individual villages grow and use their own herbs and spices and use them in unique ways. Coffee follows the meal.
• Restaurants expect a 10 percent gratuity for service.
• Although women in Guatemala generally occupy a somewhat secondary status in this traditionally male-dominated society, many operate businesses and may have considerable personal freedom.
• Women should take care to not behave aggressively, but with graciousness. Women can generally walk the streets and dine alone, but may feel more comfortable if escorted.

Dos and Don’ts:

• Do ask before photographing the Maya people, particularly children and women. A few travelers have been attacked while taking pictures of youngsters because locals thought they might be kidnappers. [Tales of outsiders stealing children are widespread in Guatemala.] Beyond the threat of violence, many Maya people find it offensive and belittling to have their photos taken without permission.
• Don’t engage in loud and aggressive behavior. Guatemalans tend to be polite and on the formal side.
• Do leave a tip if you stop to listen to a street performance on a marimba, which looks like a large xylophone. The national instrument of Guatemala can be played by as many as nine people. Tips are the musicians’ livelihood.
• Don’t ever argue or offer resistance if you’re stopped at a roadblock, whether military or otherwise. Vehicles that don’t stop at roadblocks are often shot at. People who cooperate with armed robbers are usually not harmed.
• Don’t flush toilet tissue. The wastebasket you’ll find in some restrooms is a none-too-subtle request for you to throw used tissue in the basket, not in the bowl, because of narrow pipes. Only the most modern hotel facilities are designed to accommodate flushed toilet tissue.
• Don’t go out without a photocopy of your passport at all times. It’s against the law not to carry a copy with you, and police at roadblocks will ask to see it. Keep your actual passport in a secure place, such as your hotel’s safe. Likewise, if you are driving a rented car, have your International Drivers License at hand.

Travel Tips

Personal Safety:
Crime, including armed robbery and rape, continues in Guatemala. While improvements have been made in some of the primary tourism centers, the country as a whole remains comparatively dangerous. Use extreme caution. Because many of the incidents have involved roadway attacks on cars and buses, we recommend that you don’t rent a car, and avoid the public buses [local and intercity]. Political demonstrations in Guatemala can turn violent, so it is wise to stay away. Emergency phone numbers in Guatemala are 120, 122, 128 or 911.
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:
Guatemala City has good quality medical services, but this isn’t the case in much of the rest of the country. Private urban hospitals tend to be better equipped than public and rural facilities, but be aware that doctors and hospitals may ask for immediate payment in cash. Bring all needed prescription medicines. Arrange for adequate out-of-country medical insurance. Note that private insurance coverage is not commonly honored.

Sanitary conditions can cause problems, so be careful what you eat. Avoid fresh salads (or ask in a restaurant if the salad vegetables have been disinfected), 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. Do not drink the tap water. Ask if ice cubes have been made with tap or bottled water. Stick with bottled purified water and prepackaged or boiled drinks.

Because of the presence of malaria and dengue fever — although both are becoming less common — avoid mosquito bites by using a strong repellent, particularly in jungle environments. You should also see a doctor about anti-malaria medication before your trip. Leptospirosis, a bacterial disease found in water contaminated with animal urine, is in Guatemala. Take care to minimize contact with standing water in rural areas.

Avoid contact with animals because of the danger of rabies; if you are even nipped, consult a doctor. Prevent skin infections by disinfecting and covering even the smallest wound. The sun can be very strong, so wear sunscreen and 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. Tetanus/diphtheria, typhoid, hepatitis, and adult polio immunizations may be recommended, as well as anti-malarial medication.

Money:
The Guatemalan currency, the quetzal, is named after the spectacular bird of the same name. In ancient Maya society, the quetzal’s plumage was used as currency. Bills are in denominations of
5, 10, 20, 50 and 500 quetzals, while coins are denominated as 10, 25, and 50 centavos and 1 quetzal. ATMs are available in major cities only and usually accept either Visa/Plus system cards or MasterCard/Cirrus.

Weather:
A good time to visit Guatemala is November through April, when less rain means less mud, but it will also be hotter in the El Peten region and on both coasts. It’s cooler in the mountains (usually in the 60s-70s F / 15-22 C) and hot and humid in the lowlands (especially on the Pacific coast). Hurricanes are a distinct possibility in September and October.

Dress:
Guatemala is a conservative country where shorts are reserved for beach resorts. Modest dress is wise when visiting churches and historical sites. In the cities and highlands, bring spring clothing and a light jacket for cool evenings. When visiting the archaeological sites and beaches, wear light-colored cotton clothing — long pants and a long-sleeved shirt — and comfortable shoes with nonslip soles. Sandals are permissible year round, but never in a business environment. During the rainy season, waterproof, lightweight rain gear is more practical than an umbrella. Immediately remove your sunglasses if speaking with the military or a policeman. For men, beards are much less common here than elsewhere in Latin America, and long hair is frowned on.

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