

BIG FIVE[®]

TOURS & EXPEDITIONS

Enriching Lives Through Distinctive Journeys

Destination Information Guide

Guatemala



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Welcome to the World of Big Five!

The following general outline offers practical information, suggestions and answers to some frequently asked questions. It is not intended to be the definitive guide for your trip.

Big Five Tours & Expeditions is pleased to welcome you on this exciting adventure. We take great care to insure that your travel dreams and expectations are well met. Our distinctive journeys allow you to experience the finest aspects each destination has to offer. We also aim to provide you with a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the places you'll visit and the people you'll meet.



Guatemala City Elevation: 4917 feet Latitude: 14 35N Longitude: 090 31W
Average High Temperature Years on Record: 16

YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	
°F	74	72	75	77	78	78	75	74	74	73	73	72	72

Average Low Temperature Years on Record: 16

YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	
°F	59	55	56	58	60	62	62	61	61	61	61	58	57

Quezaltenango Elevation: 7795 feet Latitude: 14 54N Longitude: 091 30W
Average Temperature Years on Record: 14

YEAR	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
°F	53	50	51	55	57	57	57	57	55	55	53	51

WEATHER

Guatemala's climate is lovely year round and makes travel possible at any time. The rainy season is generally from May to November. Climate variations are due to altitude, but it is generally hot throughout the country. The north has a hot, tropical climate with maximum rainfall between May and September. The coastal regions and north east are hot, with a dry (November to April) season and rainy season, with temperatures averaging 68°F, sometimes rising to 99°F. The highlands, including Guatemala City and Antigua, have a pleasant climate with less rainfall than the coast, and cold temperatures at night.

TIME ZONES

GMT -6 hours.

PASSPORTS & VISAS

Passports: For international travel, a passport valid for at least six months from date of departure, containing at least 3 blank pages are necessary.

Visas: Many countries require travelers to obtain visas prior to arrival. Big Five Tours & Expeditions has appointed Trivisa to process required visas for our passengers. You can find the necessary forms from Trivisa's website at: www.trivisa.com. Please use account code JP1551, and follow the directions.

Important: Even if you do not need a visa prior to departure, please check your passport well in advance of departure to insure:

- 1) It is valid for at least six months after the date of travel.
- 2) You have sufficient blank pages for visa/entry stamps that will be added as you travel in and out of various countries.

Please note: Pages reserved for amendments and endorsements cannot be used for visas.

AIRPORT FORMALITIES

Upon arrival, proceed through immigration and baggage claims and customs. Once you are outside customs, Big Five personnel or their representatives will assist you with your baggage and escort you to your hotel. They will also help with hotel check-in.

Departure tax: US\$30.

GUATEMALA CUSTOMS

Duty-Free Items: The following goods may be imported into Guatemala by persons over 18 years of age without incurring customs duty: 80 cigarettes or

100g of tobacco; 1.5l of alcoholic beverages; two bottles of perfume.

U.S. CUSTOMS

Returning U.S. residents are allowed to bring back \$800 worth of merchandise duty-free. There are limits on some items. Regulations frequently change. For a list of exempt items and more information contact your nearest Customs office or write the U.S. Customs Service, Box 7407, Washington, DC 20044.

HEALTH REQUIREMENTS

Currently, no vaccinations are required for travelers coming from the US and Canada. International travelers should be in generally good health. Talk with your personal physician, several weeks in advance, about any shots or boosters recommended depending on your personal health profile and your itinerary are advised to take the latest medical advice at least three weeks prior to departure.. Tetanus and polio vaccines should be up to date. Be prepared to take precautions against sunburn with sunscreen and lip balm.

Yellow Fever: Yellow fever inoculation is required if one of the following applies:

- If you are coming from any area other than the United States, Europe, or Canada.
- If you plan on visiting more than one country. A yellow fever vaccination certificate, however, is required from travelers over one year of age coming from countries with infected areas.

Following WHO guidelines issued in 1973, a cholera vaccination certificate is no longer a condition of entry into Guatemala. However, cases of cholera were reported in 1996 and precautions are essential. Up-to-date advice should be sought before deciding whether these precautions should include vaccination as medical opinion is divided over its effectiveness.

Malaria risk exists throughout the year below 4921 feet, especially in Alta Verapaz, Baja Verapan, Ixcán, Petén and San Marcos. Chloroquine is the recommended prophylaxis. There is no risk in Antigua or Lake Atitlán.

Other Risks: Onchocerciasis (river blindness) occurs in localized foci in rural areas. Dengue fever is endemic in Guatemala. Affected areas include Escuintla, the Pacific Coast towns, Zacapa, and Peten. Dysentery and diarrhea diseases are common. Visceral, cutaneous and mucocutaneous leishmaniasis occur. Filariasis and American trypanosomiasis are diseases carried by insects in the region. Myiasis (botfly) is endemic in Central America. Hepatitis A occurs and inoculation is recommended. Altitude sickness may be experienced in higher places such as volcanoes and mountains, and exertion should be avoided. Rabies occurs. For those at high risk, vaccination before arrival should be considered. If you are bitten, seek medical advice without delay. For more information, consult the Health appendix.

Please note: If you are on medication, be sure to bring enough for the duration of the trip. Prescription medicines should always be carried in their original containers in your hand luggage.

Health insurance is strongly advised during any foreign travel. Please check the latest regulations with your local health office or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention hotline for international travelers at 1-877-FYI-TRIP (1-877-394-8747); fax: 1-888-CDC-FAXX (1-888-232-3299), or their main telephone number in Atlanta, 404-332-4559. Or, visit the CDC Internet home page at <http://www.cdc.gov>.

CLOTHING

*For general clothing information, please review the **Travel Handbook** in your pre-departure materials. See pre-departure information for general packing check list.*

Required Clothing

Lightweight tropical clothing. Jacket or light thermal clothing for evenings, when the temperatures drop. Rain gear and good hiking shoes are needed for forest walks, especially during rainy May-September season.

LUGGAGE

*For general baggage information, please review the **Travel Handbook** in your pre-departure materials.*

Luggage restrictions change frequently for individual carriers as well as in the industry as a whole. In this security conscious era, they may change without notice. It is always best to call the specific airline prior to departure for the latest information. The information in the Travel Handbook is intended as a guideline.

MONEY

Currency: Quetzal (Q) = 100 centavos. Notes are in denominations of Q100, 50, 20, 10, 5 and 1. Coins are in denominations of Q1, and 50, 25, 10, 5 and 1 centavos. **Currency exchange:** The Quetzal is extremely difficult to obtain outside Guatemala or exchange after leaving Guatemala. Visitors are strongly advised to exchange any local currency before departing Guatemala. US currency notes should not be torn or badly worn, they may be difficult to exchange. Unused local currency can be exchanged at the bank at the airport. ATMs are common throughout the country. **Credit & debit cards:** Visa and American Express are accepted, whilst Diners Club and MasterCard have a more limited acceptance. Check with your credit or debit card company for details of merchant acceptability and other services that may be available. **Travelers' checks:** Accepted by most banks and good hotels, although visitors may experience occasional problems. To avoid additional exchange rate charges, travelers are advised to take travelers checks in US Dollars. **Currency restrictions:** The import and export of local currency is prohibited. The import and export of foreign currency is unlimited.

LANGUAGE

The official language is Spanish. English is widely spoken in tourist areas and major hotels and restaurants. 22 indigenous languages are also spoken.

ELECTRICITY

115-125 volts AC, 60Hz. There are regional variations. A variety of plugs are in use including the flat two-pin, flat three-pin and the UK-style three-pin.

FOOD AND DRINK

Bottled water is available everywhere. Other water sources may be contaminated, and water used for drinking, brushing teeth, cleaning contacts and making ice should have first been boiled or otherwise sterilized. Milk may be unpasteurized and should be boiled. Powdered or tinned milk is available and is advised, but make sure that it is reconstituted with pure water. Avoid dairy products which are likely to have been made from unboiled milk. Only eat well-cooked meat and fish, preferably served hot. Pork, salad and mayonnaise may carry increased risk. Vegetables should be cooked and fruit peeled. Restaurants and cafes serve a wide selection of cooking styles including American, Argentinean, Chinese, French, Italian, Japanese, Mexican and Spanish. Fast-food chains also have outlets here and there are many continental-style cafes.

The visitor should note that food varies in price rather than quality.

TIPPING

Tipping should be done at your discretion and as a reward for good or exceptional service.

For general tipping guidelines please refer to:

www.cntraveler.com/travel-tips/travel-etiquette/2008/12/Etiquette-101-Tipping-Guide

SHOPPING

Special purchases include textiles, handicrafts, jewelry, jade carvings, leather goods, ceramics and basketry. Markets are best for local products and bargaining is necessary. Ceramics can be purchased cheaply in many places including Villa de Chignautla, San Luis Jilotepeque and Rabinal. Cobán is the cheapest place to buy silverware. The Central Market in Guatemala City and the Craft Market provide a range of crafts combining traditional and modern styles. Guatemala City contains many modern shopping centers and malls. Gran Centro Comercial Los Proceres, Galerías La Pradera, Plaza Cemaco and Geminis International Mall are all located in Zone 10. In addition, visitors may make use of the facilities at Tikal Futura, Peri-Roosevelt Shopping Mall and the Century Shopping Centre. Shopping hours: Mon-Sat 0930-1930. Malls are also open on Sunday.

SOCIAL CONVENTIONS

Guatemala is the most populated of the Central American republics and is the only one that is predominantly Indian, although the Spanish have had a strong influence on the way of life. Full names should be used when addressing acquaintances, particularly in business. Dress is conservative and casual wear is suitable except in the smartest dining rooms and clubs. Photography: Locals are often suspicious of foreigners taking photographs, particularly of young children. Before approaching children for photos, or even just to talk to them, you should check with an adult that this is acceptable. However, if you are in any doubt, refrain from doing so. You may be asked to pay a small amount of money to take photographs of both children and adults. Ask permission before taking photographs, particularly of children, as local people are suspicious of foreigners approaching children for pictures.

OVERVIEW

Guatemala is a diverse country with landscapes that range from lush tropical rainforest in the northern lowlands, where some of the most spectacular Mayan

archaeological sites (including Tikal) are found, to the pine forested hills of the Highlands, which are home to Mayan communities that still wear traditional weavings. Guatemala has around 21 different ethnic groups, such as the Quichés, Mam, Tzutujil and Cakchiquel, speaking some 23 languages (21 of Mayan origin; the other two are Garifuna and Xinca).

Coffee is the leading export in this largely agricultural economy, accounting for about one third of foreign earnings. Other major crops are sugar cane, bananas, cardamom and cotton. In the fishing industry, shrimps are a significant export earner. Guatemala boasts the largest manufacturing sector in Central America, accounting for 20 per cent of GDP, and produces processed foods, textiles, paper, pharmaceuticals and rubber goods. Oil deposits, first discovered in the mid 1970s, are being exploited by French and American concerns but the country remains a marginal producer and continues to rely heavily on imported oil. A small mining industry produces marble, copper, lead, zinc and other metals.

Mayans dominated much of Central America between the 5th and 8th centuries before their civilization declined and a variety of other ethnic groups moved into the region. Europeans arrived in the 15th century, and Guatemala was one of the territories overrun by the Spanish conquistador Cortés in the 17th century. Pressure on their empire during the early 19th century forced the Spanish to concede independence to their American colonies, principally Mexico, into which Guatemala was briefly incorporated in 1822. Subsequent plans to fuse the countries of the Central American isthmus were equally short lived. Guatemala enjoyed comparative stability, punctuated by brief periods of upheaval, under a series of dictators who were content to keep the country under a quasi-feudal regime underpinned by a small clique of land-owning families.

Three attempts to establish a capital were made before Guatemala City was founded in 1775. The first colonial settlement was built in 1524 but continuing battles with Cakchiquel warriors necessitated relocation in 1527 near present-day San Miguel Escobar. An earthquake destroyed this in 1541. A third capital was then established on the present site of la Antigua Guatemala and survived until 1773, when it was hit by a huge earthquake and eventually abandoned.

Today's capital, Guatemala City lies at the edge of a plateau cut by deep ravines in the Valley of the

Hermitage. Few colonial buildings remain but the old quarter is in the northern section of the city. The main plaza, Parque Central lies at its heart and is bordered by the National Palace, the Cathedral, the National Library and an arcade of shops. In the south of the city, close to the airport and the national racecourse, are Parque La Aurora, which contains the zoo, the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology and the Ixchel Museum, housing a good collection of hand-woven textiles. Other museums with fine collections include the Popol Vuh Museum (a private collection of Mayan and Spanish colonial art) and the National Museum of Modern Art. Some of the most interesting religious buildings include the 17th-century Hermitage of El Carmen and the churches of La Merced, Santo Domingo, Santuario Expiatorio, Las Capuchinas, Santa Rosa and Capilla de Yurrita, dating from the early 1900s.

Petén: The vast tropical lowland jungles of the Petén department share borders with Belize to the east and Mexico to the north and west. It is home to most of the major Mayan sites in Guatemala and many visitors exploring the Mayan sites in all three countries tend to fly direct from either Mexico or Belize into the international airport at Flores. Most of the major Mayan sites are located in this department.

Flores: This former Mayan ceremonial centre is built on an island in the middle of Lake Petén Itza. None of the Mayan structures survived the arrival of the conquistadors who built their main plaza, church and government building on the top of the hill in the centre of the island. The town's hotels, restaurants and shops are laid out below. A causeway connects Flores to the mainland town of Santa Elena, where the banks and main shops are located. Buses run throughout the day from both Santa Elena and Flores to Tikal, passing through the pleasant village of El Remate, which has a couple of lakeside restaurants, lodgings and language schools. Also accessible from Flores is the Cerro Cahú Biosphere – a 600-hectare (1482 acres) nature reserve that contains cedar, sapodilla, indigo and mahogany trees, orchids and ferns as well as fauna such as white-tailed deer, armadillos, spider monkeys, hawks, parrots and toucans. From October to April, hundreds of migratory birds settle in the reserve.

Tikal: The spectacular Mayan ruins of Tikal (City of Voices) encompass vast pyramidal temples, ball courts, causeways, plazas and public buildings that extend over some 16 sq km (6 sq miles). While there are about 3000 known structures, many more lie buried under dense

jungle vegetation. First occupied in about 800 BC, this great city was eventually abandoned around 1000 years later. Copies of some of the more elaborate friezes, stellae, sculptures and bas-reliefs are found in the Sylvanus Morley Museum, which is near the entrance. At least 2 days are recommended to see all of the archaeological sites. Visitors can stay in the park lodges, in Flores, Santa Elena or El Remate, and guided tours around the ruins can be arranged both for the evening and at sunrise. The site is located in the heart of Tikal National Park, where there are over 50,587 hectares (125,000 acres) of rare forest (kapoka, breadnut, mahogany and cedar) and tropical vegetation. Wildlife that can be seen there includes howler monkeys, tropical birds, reptiles, red coatis, raccoons and white-tailed deer. Tikal National Park is itself in the much larger Mayan Biosphere Reserve.

Mayan sites in north Petén: Several Mayan sites are currently under excavation, one of the most impressive of which is El Mirador, about 4km (2.5 miles) from the Mexican border. Also in the northern part of the department, Uaxactún (Eight Stones) shows how developed the Mayan civilization had become by the ninth century AD. Building E-VII-B was used for determining the precise dates of the equinoxes and the solstices. Ixlú was an important lake port, situated in between the Petén Itza and Salpetén lagoons. Further east, on the edge of the Yaxhá Lagoon, Yaxhá (Green Water) is an extensive Mayan site of terraces, plazas and causeways. Smaller sites of Nakum and Naranjo are north of here.

Sayaxché: This town in the southern part of the Petén department provides a good starting point for exploring other major Mayan sites. Ceibal, southeast of Sayaxché, has a small observatory that was designed to pinpoint the location of galaxies, planets and stars. It is also where some of the finest post-Classical stellae (AD 900 to 1523), carved with large anthropomorphic clay figures, were recovered. Other impressive stellae representing battle scenes were found at Dos Pilas. Southeast from here, the post-Classical site of Aguateca was an important ceremonial center.

VERAPAZ REGION

This region is made up of Alta (high) and Baja (Low) Verapaz, which are in north-central Guatemala. While many of the towns and villages retain their folklore, traditional handicrafts and religious feast days, the region is also a prime destination for whitewater rafting, caving and other outdoor activities.

Cobán: This is the capital of the Alta Verapaz department that, along with Antigua, produces some of the best coffee in Guatemala. Situated on the banks of the Cahabón River, the town's colonial past is reflected in its architecture, such as that of the El Calvario church. It is also a centre for the production of many fine silver handicrafts. Celebrations to mark the ancient Mayan feast of Paabanc are still held in Cobán and San Pedro Carchá to the east. Some of the region's most colorful hand-woven clothes can be seen in towns and villages such as Tactic, San Juan Chamelco and Lanquín. One of the highlights of the region is Semuc Champey Waterfalls, formed as the Cahabón River tumbles some 300m (985ft) across rocks and ledges. Around 10km (6 miles) further on, the river enters the Languin Caves, parts of which can be explored with a guide, either on foot or by boat.

Salamá: The attractive capital of Baja Verapaz is a good place to buy souvenirs handcrafted from silver, clay and leather. Mario Dary Rivera Nature Reserve, near Purulhá, was set up to protect the quetzal, Guatemala's national bird. Two walking trails cut through the cloud forest, where visitors can see about 50 different types of trees and a variety of tropical birds such as toucans, hummingbirds and macaws.

CARIBBEAN COAST

Caribbean Guatemala is less developed than some other parts of the country in terms of tourism infrastructure. As a result, the villages along the coast, inland and around Lake Izabal, Guatemala's largest, remain unspoiled. The coast has strong Afro-Caribbean influences as black Afro-Guatemalans known as Garífunas, the descendants of former African slaves

who intermarried with the indigenous Maya, settled here. Caribbean traditions remain evident in the area's music, festivals and cooking (in dishes such as tapado – made with fresh fish, coconut milk and green bananas). Sailing, fishing, swimming and scuba diving are popular activities and trips to the Belize Keys are possible.

EASTERN GUATEMALA

Encompassing parts of the El Progreso, Zacapa, Jalapa, Chiquimula, Santa Rosa and Jutiapa departments, this is one of the most varied regions in the country – both geographically and culturally. Visitors tour colonial churches, small local museums, and coffee plantations and buy excellent handcrafted souvenirs while traveling through changing landscapes of subtropical forests, volcanic peaks and sulfurous lakes.

PACIFIC COAST

The Pacific coastline stretches some 250km (155 miles) from the Mexican border in the west to the border with El Salvador to the east and includes parts of six administrative departments. The region is characterized by black volcanic sand beaches on the coast; mangrove swamps irrigated by numerous rivers behind and lush, subtropical forests further inland. Agriculture is the prime industry, with extensive coffee, sugar cane, cardamom, cotton and banana plantations. As well as enjoying water sports and swimming on the coast and exploring the rainforests and swamps, travelers can tour several important Olmec archaeological sites.

HIGHLANDS

Known in Spanish as El Altiplano, the highlands region is one of the most popular for visitors to Guatemala. The towns and villages there are inhabited by the greatest number of modern day, indigenous Mayan groups – many of whom still speak the languages and uphold the sacred rituals of their ancestors. Although this practice is gradually dying out, many of the villagers in more remote areas still wear traditional hand-woven garments and market days or fiesta celebrations are the best times for visitors to appreciate their vibrant colors. While the main towns are connected with paved highways, some of the outlying villages are accessible only by four-wheel vehicles.

SUGGESTED READING LIST

Many comprehensive and readily available guides produced by Lonely Planet, Fodor, Insight, The Rough Guide, etc.. Longitude Books at <http://www.longitudebooks.com> has an extensive collection of books, searchable by country.

TIME AMONG THE MAYA: TRAVELS IN BELIZE, GUATEMALA, AND MEXICO

by **Ronald Wright**

The Maya created one of the world's most brilliant civilizations, famous for its art, astronomy, and deep fascination with the mystery of time. Despite collapse in the ninth century, Spanish invasion in the sixteenth, and civil war in the twentieth, eight million people in Guatemala, Belize, and southern Mexico speak Mayan languages and maintain their resilient culture to this day. Traveling through Central America's jungles and mountains, Ronald Wright explores the ancient roots of the Maya, their recent troubles, and prospects for survival. Embracing history, anthropology, politics, and literature, *Time Among the Maya* is a riveting journey through past magnificence and the study of an enduring civilization with much to teach the present.

MAYAN FOLKTALES: FOLKLORE FROM LAKE ATITLAN, GUATEMALA

by **James D. Sexton (Translator)**

This collection of folklore offers a rich and lively panorama of Mayan mythic heritage. Here are everyday tales of village life; legends of witches, shamans, spiritualists, tricksters, and devils; fables of naguales, or persons who can change into animal forms; ribald stories of love and life; cautionary tales of strange and menacing neighbors and of the danger lurking within the human heart. These legends narrate origin and creation stories, explain the natural world, and reinforce cultural beliefs and values such as honesty, industriousness, sharing, fairness, and cleverness. Whether tragic or comic, fantastic or earthy, whimsical or profound, these tales capture the mystery, fragility, and power of the Mayan world. Editor and translator James D. Sexton is a professor of anthropology and Regents' Professor at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff.

SECRETS OF THE TALKING JAGUAR: MEMOIRS FROM THE LIVING HEART OF A MAYAN VILLAGE

by **Martin Prechtel, Robert Bly (Foreword by), Robert W. Bly (Foreword by)**

This powerful memoir of an American who was adopted by a shaman and allowed to study the secrets of a Tzutujil Mayan village in deepest Guatemala "offers readers a privileged and rare glimpse into [the village's] complex and spiritually rich life." (Rocky Mountain News)

Twenty-five years ago, a young musician and painter named Mart'n Prechtel wandered through the brilliant landscapes of Mexico and Guatemala. Arriving at Santiago Atitlan, a Tzutujil Mayan village on the breathtaking shores of Lake Atitlan, Prechtel met Nicolas Chiviliu Tacaxoy--perhaps the most famous shaman in Tzutujil history--who believed Prechtel was the new student he had asked the gods to provide. For the next thirteen years, Prechtel studied the ancient Tzutujil culture and became a village chief and a famous shaman in his own right.

In *Secrets of the Talking Jaguar*, Prechtel brings to vivid life the sights, sounds, scents, and colors of Santiago Atitlan: its magical personalities, its beauty, its material poverty and spiritual richness, its eight-hundred-year-old rituals juxtaposed with quintessential small-town gossip. The story of his education is a tale filled with enchantment, danger, passion, and hope.

BITTER FRUIT: THE STORY OF THE AMERICAN COUP IN GUATEMALA

by **Stephen C. Schlesinger, Stephen Kinzer**

Bitter Fruit is a comprehensive and insightful account of the CIA operation to overthrow the democratically elected government of Jacobo Arbenz of Guatemala in 1954. First published in 1982, this book has become a classic, a textbook case of the relationship between the United States and the Third World. The authors make extensive use of U.S. government documents and interviews with former CIA and other officials. It is a warning of what happens when the United States abuses its power.