

Getting Started

Traveling in Guatemala requires little detailed planning. Bus transportation is plentiful – for many trips all you need do is show up and hop on the next bus. Accommodations are equally easy: unless you have your heart set on one hotel, booking ahead isn't usually necessary. The major exception is Semana Santa (Easter week), when the whole country takes a holiday and you need to book rooms, and often transportation, in advance.

Guatemala is a country for any budget. It's popular with backpackers because you can survive on a few dollars a day, but also has many midrange lodgings and restaurants offering comfort and quality at good prices.

WHEN TO GO

There's no bad time for visiting Guatemala, though the rainy season – called *invierno* (winter) – makes unpaved roads more difficult from mid-May to mid-October, and into November and December in the north and east. In the lowland jungles of El Petén, the mud at this time will slow you down, guaranteed. Humidity – never low on the coasts or in El Petén – increases during the rainy season, too. In the highlands things get cold and damp during *invierno*, especially at night. It doesn't rain all day during the rainy season, but you can expect daily showers (downpours in the north) at the very least. The dry season – *verano* (summer) – is from about November to April, and this means sweltering heat in El Petén and along the coasts and comfortably warm days in the highlands. In the eastern parts of the country, rain is possible at any time.

The height of the foreign tourist season is from Christmas to Easter. Things become acute around Christmas, New Year's and Easter, when Guatemalans take holidays too – in many places you'll need to book ahead. Another high season runs June to August, when throngs of North Americans descend on Guatemala to study Spanish and travel.

COSTS & MONEY

Prices in Guatemala are among the best in Central America. Beds in *hospedajes* (budget hotels) normally cost US\$4 to US\$5 per person. Markets

See the Directory (p307) for more details on climate, festivals and events.

HOW MUCH?

Three-hour, 2nd-class bus ride US\$3

A week of Spanish classes with homestay US\$100-200

Admission to Tikal US\$7

Taxi from Guatemala City airport to city center US\$10

Comfortable lakeside double with bathroom, Lago de Atitlán US\$25-35

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Checking the visa situation (p318).
- Checking travel advisories (p310).
- Warm clothes for chilly highland nights.
- A flashlight (torch) for exploring caves, ruins, and your room when the electricity fails.
- Getting the whole 'it's OK to see other people while I'm away' thing absolutely straight with your partner.
- A mosquito net, if you're planning on hitting the jungle or sleeping in cheap rooms without screens.
- Insect repellent containing DEET (p331), for wet-season travels. You may want to take medication against malaria, too (p329).
- A small towel, for rooms without one.
- Telling your mother not to worry.

sell fruit and snacks for pennies, cheap eateries called *comedores* offer one- or two-course meals for US\$3 to US\$4, and bus trips cost around US\$1 per hour. It's completely realistic to spend US\$15 a day in Guatemala without too much hardship. If you want more comfort – nice rooms with private hot-water bathrooms and well-prepared food in pleasant surroundings, you'll still only pay around US\$35 per person for a room and two – or even three – meals. Add in transportation, admission fees, some shopping and a few beers and you're looking at a total of around US\$60 a day.

There are few bargains for solo travelers, as there often isn't much price difference between a single and double room. If it's practical, hook up with some other folks to defray room costs. Many places have rooms for three or four people, where the per-person price drops dramatically. In restaurants, you can save money by opting for set two- or three-course meals (the *menú del día*). On the road, public buses are far cheaper than the more comfortable tourist shuttle buses.

ATTENTION: THIS IS NOT GOD SPEAKING

We regret to inform you that some of the best experiences you have while traveling will have absolutely nothing to do with this book.

Travel at its best is discovery – people, places, foods and experiences – and it's very hard to get that when you're mentally chained to somebody else's opinions, no matter how knowledgeable they are.

Guatemala, to wheel out an old cliché, is a land of contrasts. Some towns in this book haven't changed in years. Others move so fast that what was true today will be kind of suspect next week and seriously outdated next year. The best, most updated information you're going to get is from locals and travelers on the scene. Talk it up.

We know there's a thing called the Lonely Planet Trail – the same faces in the same kinds of places from Mexico to Patagonia – and we're doing our best to diminish its excesses. Throughout this book you'll find 'Explore More' boxes, designed to give you just enough information to get off the trail without getting into trouble. We also try to put in back-door routes whenever feasible, for the adventurous types who can do without the shuttle bus and want to get into the thick of it.

But you people have to do your bit, too. The restaurants and hotels listed in this book appear because they were the best on offer at the time of research. By now there may well be better ones. If you like the look of a place that's not listed, go in and ask to see a room or a menu. You can always walk straight back out again. Guatemalans are used to foreigners doing far crazier things than that. If, on the other hand, you like what you see, then Bam! You've made a discovery, and that's guaranteed to feel better than following the pack around. It's great to hang out with other travelers, but nothing compares to doing your own thing.

Go with your instincts. If there's one restaurant full of foreigners and another beside it full of locals, it's an easy bet which is going to have the better food (and the better prices).

Independent travelers rock for many reasons, but mostly because they interact with the country they're in – they get to know the people, the history, the language and the culture and their travel becomes what it should be – a cultural exchange.

By spreading the money around, supporting a range of small, locally owned businesses and shying away from corporate multinationals, independent travelers can do far more for a country than tour groups and cruise ships ever will.

Anyway. It's just something to think about. No doubt you're here to have fun and maybe learn something. We hope this book helps. It is a guidebook, though – with the emphasis on guide. Look at it as a list of options – a leaping off point to help you create your own adventure. It's not a checklist of things you have to do, or (much as we appreciate the compliment) the Bible.

Happy travels, and if you *do* find something new and fantastic, shoot us an email.

TOP 10

GUATEMALA

Guatemala
City

Honduras

CELESTIAL EVENTS

The stars, moon and sun were important to the Maya, so while you're here, you might find yourself looking to the heavens for inspiration. Here are some good places to start:

- 1 Sunrise from Tajumulco volcano (p166)
- 2 Sunset with a daiquiri in hand from a hammock in Monterrico (p204)
- 3 Full moon parties in San Pedro La Laguna (p141)
- 4 Stargazing from El Mirador, deep in the Petén jungle (p303)
- 5 Watching the sun set over the Lago de Petén Itzá in Flores (p272)
- 6 Hiking the Santa María (p166) volcano by the light of the full moon
- 7 Aligning your chakras by starlight in a pyramid in San Marcos La Laguna (p146)
- 8 Bathing by the light of the moon in Quetzaltenango (p161), a moon so inspiring it had a song written about it (*La Luna de Xelajú*)
- 9 Catching the sunrise from Temple IV in Tikal (p288)
- 10 Listening to jazz in the Sunset Café (p134) in Panajachel as the sun disappears behind the volcanoes

BEST MAYAN READS

The Maya, past and present, are the theme of whole libraries of writing. Here are our 10 favorite books on them:

- 1 *The Maya*, Michael D Coe (p29)
- 2 *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty & Ritual in Maya Art*, Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller (p28)
- 3 *Scandals in the House of Birds: Shamans and Priests on Lake Atitlán*, Nathaniel Tarn (p49)
- 4 *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, Rigoberta Menchú (p38)
- 5 *Maya of Guatemala – Life and Dress*, Carmen L Pettersen (p53)
- 6 *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens*, Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube (p32)
- 7 *Unfinished Conquest: The Guatemalan Tragedy*, Victor Perera (p33)
- 8 *The Maya Textile Tradition*, Margot Blum Schevill (ed) (p53)
- 9 *Breaking the Maya Code*, Michael D Coe (p29)
- 10 *The Ancient Maya*, Robert J Sharer (p28)

PLACES TO DO SWEET FA

This book is full of stuff to *do*, and one option is getting out there and *doing it*. It is your holiday, though – don't forget the tried and trusted combination of a beer, a hammock and a good book (book optional). Here are our top 10 places to get a little down time:

- 1 El Remate (p285)
- 2 Tilapita (p191)
- 3 San Juan La Laguna (p146)
- 4 El Retiro (p225)
- 5 San Pedro (p141)
- 6 El Estor (p255)
- 7 Luna Jaguar Spa Resort (p248)
- 8 The Río Sotzil (p224)
- 9 Finca Ixobel (p269)
- 10 Las Cumbres (p176)

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Ronald Wright's *Time among the Maya* is a story of travels through the whole Mayan region – Guatemala, Mexico, Belize and Honduras – delving into the glorious past and exploited present of the Maya and their obsession with time. Wright visits many of the places you'll visit, and his book is a fascinating read, even though written in the troubled 1980s.

Guatemalan Journey, by Stephen Benz, casts an honest and funny modern traveler's eye on the country. So does Anthony Daniels' *Sweet Waist of America*, also published as *South of the Border: Guatemalan Days*, where the medic author pinpoints some of the country's contradictions.

In *Sacred Monkey River*, Christopher Shaw explores by canoe the jungle-clad basin of the Río Usumacinta, a cradle of ancient Mayan civilization along the Mexico–Guatemala border.

Bird of Life, Bird of Death, by Jonathan Evan Maslow, subtitled *A Naturalist's Journey Through a Land of Political Turmoil*, tells of the author's searches for the resplendent quetzal (the 'bird of life') – which he found to be increasingly endangered, while the *zopilote* (vulture; the 'bird of death') flourished.

The 19th-century classic *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan*, by John L Stephens (illustrated by Frederick Catherwood), was the first serious look at many Mayan archaeological sites. It's a laborious but interesting read.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Gringo's Guide (www.thegringosguide.com) Useful info on the country's main travel destinations.

Guatemala (www.visitguatemala.com) Moderately interesting official site of Inguat, the national tourism institute.

La Ruta Maya Online (www.larutamayaonline.com) Reasonably useful mixed bag.

Lanic Guatemala (<http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/ca/guatemala>) The University of Texas' magnificent set of Guatemala links.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Succinct summaries on Guatemala travel; the popular Thorn Tree forum; and links to the most useful travel resources elsewhere on the web.

Xela Pages (www.xelapages.com) Good information on the highlands and coast and an excellent forum where you can get answers to even your most obscure questions.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

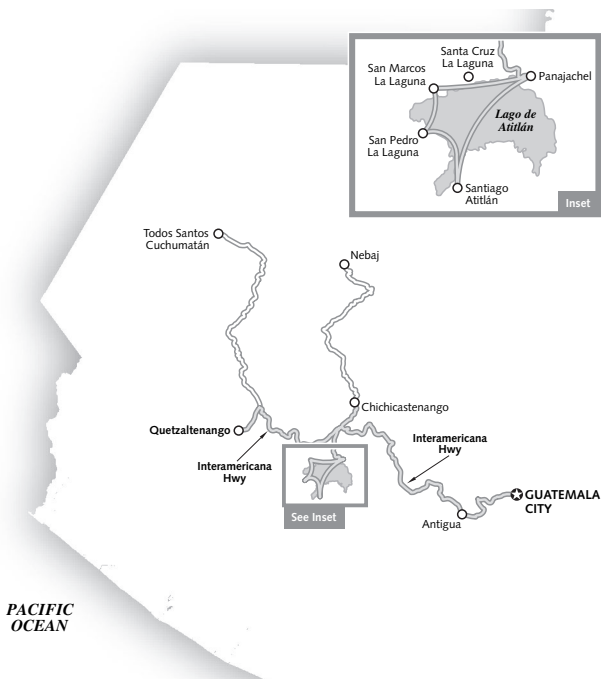
HIGHLAND FLING

10 days/Guatemala City to Quetzaltenango

Guatemala's most spectacular scenery and strongest Mayan traditions await you along this well-traveled route.

From the capital head first to gorgeous **Antigua** (p94), enjoying the country's finest colonial architecture, the great restaurants and the big traveler and language-student scene. Several volcanoes wait to be climbed here. From Antigua move on to **Panajachel** (p125) on volcano-ringed **Lago de Atitlán** (p123). Hop in a boat to check out some of the quieter, more traditional Mayan villages around the lake such as **Santiago Atitlán** (p137), **San Pedro La Laguna** (p141), **San Marcos La Laguna** (p146) or **Santa Cruz La Laguna** (p148). Now head north to **Chichicastenango** (p149) for its huge Thursday and Sunday market. If you have extra time, detour north to **Nebaj** (p158), where you'll find great walking and a strong Mayan way of life amid stunning scenery.

From Chichicastenango follow the Interamericana Hwy west along the mountain ridges to **Quetzaltenango** (p161), Guatemala's clean, orderly, second city, with a host of intriguing villages, markets and natural wonders waiting within short bus rides away. From Quetzaltenango you can head south, or on to Mexico – perhaps via **Todos Santos Cuchumatán** (p185), a fascinating Mayan mountain town with great walking possibilities.



This 320km jaunt could take a few months if you stop off to learn some Spanish in Antigua, Panajachel, San Pedro La Laguna or Quetzaltenango, and you could more than double the distance with detours to Nebaj and Todos Santos Cuchumatán.

THE BIG LOOP

3 weeks

This trip takes you to the best of Guatemala's Mayan ruins, into its dense jungles and to some of its spectacular natural marvels.

Start out northeastward from Guatemala City and detour south into Honduras to see the great Mayan site of **Copán** (p236). Return to Guatemala and continue northeastward to another fine Mayan site, **Quiriguá** (p249) and on to the curious Garífuna enclave of **Livingston** (p261) on the sweaty Caribbean coast. Take a boat up the jungle-lined **Río Dulce** (p264) to **Río Dulce town** (p251), then turn north up Hwy 13 to stay and chill out at **Finca Ixobel** (p269) before continuing to **Flores** (p272), a quaint small town on an island in the Lago de Petén Itzá. From Flores, head for **Tikal** (p288), the most majestic of all Mayan sites. Spend a night at Tikal itself or nearby **El Remate** (p285). While in the Flores–Tikal area, you should have time to take in further impressive Mayan sites such as **Yaxhá** (p297) and **Uaxactún** (p296).

From Flores head southwest to the relaxed riverside town of **Sayaxché** (p299), which is at the center of another group of intriguing Mayan sites – **Ceibal** (p300), **Aguateca** (p302) and **Dos Pilas** (p302). The road south from Sayaxché is now nearly all paved to **Chisec** (p227) and **Cobán** (p216), jumping-off points for a whole series of pristine natural wonders such as jungle-ringed **Laguna Lachuá** (p228), the **Grutas de Lanquín** (p224) and the turquoise lagoons and waterfalls of **Semuc Champey** (p225).

This 1900km round trip takes you to all the top destinations in the center, east and north of the country. Really pushing, you might do it in two weeks, but if you have four, you'll enjoy it more.



HAMMOCK FRENZY

1 week

The beaches in Guatemala take some getting used to. Black volcanic sand makes them look dirty (and some are), but there are plenty of small, laid-back towns that are great for splashing around, surfing, cruising the mangroves and just generally chilling out. There's no coast road as such, so you'll find yourself popping in and out from the main highway all the way down the coast.

Starting way up near the Mexican border, make your way to **Tilapita** (p191), not to be confused with Tilapa – the former is far prettier, with exactly one hotel at the time of writing.

From there it's back out onto the highway, east to Mazatenango and on another bus for **Tulate** (p198), the best beach along here for swimming and bodysurfing. From Tulate, there's no need to go back to the main highway – just catch a bus back to La Máquina, then another on to **Chiquistepeque** (p199), a lovely, untouched stretch of beach where you can volunteer with the French-Guatemalan NGO, Proyecto Hamaca y Pescado, working with the local community.

Moving on, it's back out to the highway, heading east with a bus change in Siquinala for the surfers' haven of **Sipacate** (p203).

The road could end at your next stop, **Monterrico** (p204), favorite of Guatemalan weekenders and Antigua language students alike. If you haven't had enough yet, make your way to **Las Lisas** (p208), where a gorgeous, exclusive island getaway near the Salvadoran border awaits.



It's only 220km as the turtle swims from the Mexican border to the Salvadoran border – you could do it in a week, but what's the rush?

ROADS LESS TRAVELED

ACROSS THE IXCÁN

2 days/Huehuetenango to Laguna Lachuá

Now that the road from Huehuetenango to Cobán is an easy one-day jaunt, adventure junkies and chicken-bus lovers have been bemoaning the loss of a difficult-but-rewarding trip.

Fear not. The route from Huehue to Laguna Lachuá pushes all the same buttons – bad roads, stunning scenery, fascinating villages and very, very few tourists.

Buses run, but less frequently than elsewhere. If you're thinking about going this route, you should have some spare time and be prepared to rumble around in the back of a pickup truck now and then.

Starting from **Huehuetenango** (p181) it's an easy, scenic ride up into the Cuchumatanes on a good road to **Soloma** (p187). Say goodbye to the asphalt here. From Soloma the road undulates over hills before reaching **Santa Eulalia** (p188), a pretty and interesting town where you may want to pause for a couple of hours.

Then it's up again, through pastures and pine forests to the town of **San Mateo Ixtatán** (p188), a good place to break for the night because transport drops off in the late afternoon and there are a few interesting sights around town.

Next day, it's a slow cruise downhill to **Barillas** (p189), from where you should be able to grab a bus or at least a pickup for the terrible-roads-but-great-scenery ride across to Playa Grande and **Laguna Lachuá** (p228).

There are serious plans to put in a highway along this 150km stretch between Huehue and Playa Grande – get in while the adventure's still alive!



TAILORED TRIPS

THE MAYA THEN & NOW

In **Guatemala City** (p70), your start and finish, don't miss the museums dedicated to Mayan archaeology and textiles. Head west to the ruins at **Iximché** (p123), and on to **Lago de Atitlán** (p123), surrounded by traditional villages such as **Santiago Atitlán** (p137). Don't miss the big Mayan markets at **Sololá** (p125) and at **Chichicastenango** (p149), also the scene of unique religious practices. Northward, visit the old K'iche' Mayan capital **K'umarcaaj** (p155), still an important center for Mayan rites. Westward, **Quetzaltenango** (p161) is a base for visiting many traditional villages (for example, **Zunil**, p175) and the sacred **Laguna Chicabal** (p180). Further north, see the old Mam Mayan capital, **Zaculeu** (p181), en route to **Todos Santos Cuchumatán** (p185), a mountain village with strong traditions and uniquely striking costumes.

Next, head east along mountain roads to **Nebaj** (p158), a center of the colorful Ixil Maya, and to **San Cristóbal Verapaz** (p223). Head north through Cobán to **Sayaxché** (p299), close to the ancient Mayan sites **Ceibal** (p300), **Aguateca** (p302) and **Dos Pilas** (p302), then on to **Flores** (p272) and the mother of all Mayan cities, **Tikal** (p288). In the Petén jungles, you can explore remoter archaeological sites such as **Yaxhá** (p297), **Uaxactún** (p296), **El Zotz** (p305) and (if you have stamina for four or five days' walking) **El Mirador** (p306).

Head back to Guatemala City via **Quiriguá** (p249) and, just over the Honduras border, **Copán** (p236).



NATURAL WONDERS

Tone up your muscles by climbing a couple of the volcanoes around Antigua: the active **Pacaya** (p104) and the mighty **Acatenango** (p105). Move on to **Lago de Atitlán** (p123), certainly one of the most beautiful lakes in the world. Continue westward to bag more volcanoes around Quetzaltenango – say, **Santa María** (p166) and **Tajumulco** (p166), the highest peak in Central America. Head north to experience the beauty of the Cuchumatanes mountains around **Todos Santos Cuchumatán** (p185) and **Nebaj** (p158). East from Nebaj is **Cobán** (p216), stepping stone for the lovely lagoons and waterfalls of **Semuc Champey** (p225), the extensive cave system of the **Grutas de Lanquín** (p224), the forest trails of the **Biotopo del Quetzal** (p215) and the jungle-surrounded **Laguna Lachuá** (p228). Move north to the thick jungles of El Petén, exploring the rich bird and plant life of **Laguna Petexbatún** (p301). The magnificent ancient Mayan city **Tikal** (p288) and the area around **El Perú** ruins (p303) are two of the finest spots in the country for observing tropical wildlife. On your way back south, pause for cave exploration at **Finca Ixobel** (p269), a boat ride along the beautiful, jungle-shrouded **Río Dulce** (p264) and a side trip to the **Refugio Bocas del Polochic** (p256), which supports over 300 bird species.

