GENERAL TOURIST INFORMATION (Basic Information)

Location

The republic of Guatemala has a unique location within Central America, which is considered the geographic center of the continent. It is bordered on the North and West by Mexico, on the Southwest by El Salvador and Honduras, on the Northeast by Belize and the Caribbean Sea, and on the South by the Pacific Ocean.

Geography

Guatemala’s 108,899 square-kilometers of territory are essentially mountainous and volcanic. At 4,211 meters above sea level, the Tajumulco volcano, in the Department of San Marcos, is the highest peak in the country. The country is traversed by numerous rivers. It is dotted with lakes and covered by tropical jungles and forested plains. Volcanic sand beaches rim the Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Sea, some of which are still undiscovered.

The low-lying jungles in the northern area of Petén harbor an abundance of wildlife, valuable hardwoods, rubber trees and petroleum. Two mountain ranges cross the country. One begins in the Niquiiful area of sierra Madre in San Marcos and on the other in Huehuetenango. The first is a 260-kilometer long stretch along the Pacific coast that forms the central plateau on which the cities of Guatemala, Antigua, Sololá, Santa Cruz del Quiché and Chimaltenango are located.

One of Guatemala’s outstanding geographical features are its 33 volcanoes. They provide a backdrop for many spectacular landscapes, offering recreational opportunities to the outdoor sports enthusiasts. Spelunkers will enjoy exploring the many caves that for several kilometers beneath the earth. Huge stalactites and stalagmites and other unusual rock formations cover the beautiful structures. Some of these caves can be entered by means of navigable underground rivers.

Climate

The average temperature is 20 degrees Celsius. The coastal areas reach temperatures of 37 degrees Celsius while freezing temperatures often prevail in the highest mountains. Nights are usually fairly cool all year round. The high central plateau enjoys dear skies after heavy rains that fall in the afternoons or evenings during the rainy season (from May to October).

Protected Areas

Guatemala is part of the ecological bridge that joins both hemispheres of the Americas. Its physical features and climate combine to produce one of the highest biological diversities in the world. There are more than 14 life zones; some of which still remain intact today. As part of the effort to preserve and protect its natural and cultural heritage, Guatemala already has 44 legally protected areas, and an additional 60 natural reserves are in consideration. The reserves will include natural areas, archeological parks such as Iximché and Quirigua, the cultural
legacy of the Mayas, and the Mayan biosphere in the North. The biosphere, which covers about 15 percent of the national territory, contains several towns and hundreds of archeological sites including Tikal, the only place in the world that has been declared a “World Patrimony Site” and a “World Natural Reserve” by UNESCO.

History
Long before Columbus arrived in America, the Mayan civilization flourished in the lowlands of Guatemala. They reached extraordinary advances in astronomy — the basis for their amazingly exact calendar — in medicine, urban planning, art and architecture. They also had an advanced political system and practiced a highly mystical polytheistic religion.

The Spanish conquest of Guatemala began in the 16th Century and ended in the 17th Century with the taking of Itzá, the last bastion of the independent native population. On September 15th 1821, a junta summoned by President-Captain General declared its independence from Spain, but shortly thereafter, in January 1822, the country was forcibly annexed to Mexico. Finally it regained its independence on July 1st 1823, and on March 21st 1847, it was officially declared a republic, a status it still enjoys today.

Languages
The official language is Spanish, but more than 23 indigenous languages, including Quiché, Cakchiquel, Mam and Kekchí, are spoken by various indigenous communities. English is spoken in almost all tourist areas, in the majority of hotels and some restaurants.

Demography
Guatemala has approximately 12 million inhabitants. A high percentage belongs to the 21 Mayan groups that still preserve the cultural heritage of their ancestors, while the inhabitants of the Caribbean coast revive their Afro-Caribbean roots.

Religion
The Guatemalan Constitution guarantees religious freedom. The prevailing religion is Roman Catholicism, but there is a trend toward Evangelical Christianity. Some indigenous communities still practice a combination of Catholicism and pre Columbian rites.

Government
The Republic of Guatemala is a democracy whose government is divided into three branches: the legislative, the executive and the judiciary. It is divided into 22 administrative subdivisions called departments, which in turn are subdivided into municipalities.

Economy
Coffee is the mainstay of the economy, but the tourism has become the second most important source of foreign revenue in recent years.
However, agriculture is still the major factor of the economy. The country produces and exports sugar, bananas, fruits, vegetables, flowers, cardamom and macadamia nuts.

Additionally, Guatemala has developed excellent industries devoted to the assembly of clothes and electronic products, as well as the manufacture of furniture and canned goods, and its petroleum industry is rapidly growing.

**Transportation**
Rural and urban buses will take you just about anywhere you would want. For special needs, there are car rentals, taxis, airplanes, and boats.

**Shopping**
Guatemala is a great place to buy textiles, carved wood, silver and jade jewelry and many other handicrafts. The products with the greatest demand are the colorful hand-woven fabrics. Many towns like Chinita, San Luis Jilotepeque, and Rabinal produce beautiful, inexpensive ceramic articles. The Central Market in Guatemala City and the Handicraft Market near the airport offer a wide selection of handicrafts. Some boutiques offer clothing in contemporary fashion decorated with traditional native motives.

High-quality locally produced articles and well-known international brand are available at many shopping centers in Zone 10, which include Los Próceres, Galerías La Pradera, Plaza Cemaco and Géminis 10, and Peri-Roosevelt and Tikal Futura, in Zones 7 and 10.

**Communications and Postal Service**
TELGUA, the Guatemalan Telecommunications Company, offer telegraph, telex, fax and international telephone services. Opening hours are from 08:00 A.M. to 7:00 P.M.

Post offices around the country are open from 08:00 A.M. to 5:30 P.M.

**Entertainment**
Many hotels, restaurants and nightclubs present shows featuring local and foreign performers. Concerts, plays and ballets are regularly performed throughout the country. Interesting museums and art galleries can be found especially in Guatemala City, Antigua Guatemala and Tikal National Park.

**Meetings and Conventions**
Guatemala boasts several state-of-the-art facilities for conventions, congresses and meetings, many of which are located in modern five-star hotels. Organizing a convention or a meeting in Guatemala City truly allows you to combine business with pleasure, as impressive archeological sites, colonial cities, and quaint native communities are all close at hand either by car or plane from the modern capital city.
Business Hours
Business hours are from 08:00 A.M. to 12:00 P.M. and from 2:00 P.M. to 6:00 P.M., Monday through Friday. Shopping centers open Monday through Sunday from 09:00 A.M. to 8:00 P.M. Government offices are ordinarily open from 08:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M. Banks are customarily open from 09:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M., Monday through Friday, but some remain open until 8:00 P.M. Most banks provide service on Saturday from 09:00 to 1:00 P.M., and also there are 24 hour ATM’s in several places.

Outdoor Activities
Guatemala offers its visitors an unparalleled opportunity to enjoy nature through many outdoor activities, as well as first-hand contact with its indigenous people. Lakes Atitlán, Amatitlán, and Izabal are ideally suited for hang-gliding or windsurfing: Lake Atitlán is also ideal for deep-water fishing and diving. Most of the country’s volcanoes are easy to climb, and spelunking enthusiasts can choose any of the several fascinating caves, including Aktun Kan, Jobitzinaj, Lanquin and La Candelaria. White-water rafting on the rivers La Pasión, Chiquibul, Usumacinta, Cahabón or Motagua is an exciting experience. Experts consider Guatemala’s Pacific coast one of the best in the world for deep-water fishing. Fishing is also enjoyed in the lakes and rivers of Péten, Río Dulce, Lake Izabal and Alta Verapaz. The wide variety of native and migratory birds make Guatemala a prime spot for observing these feathered creatures. Many towns and roads are suitable for hiking or bicycling, such as Panajachel, Antigua, Izabal, Guatemala City, and some areas in Péten.

Holidays

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Holiday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>New Years Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March or April</td>
<td>Easter Week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Labor Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 30&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Armed Forces Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 15&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>The feast of Assumption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 15&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Independence Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 20&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Day of the Revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>All Saint’s Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 24&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Christmas Eve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 25&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Christmas Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 31&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>New Years Eve</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to the above national holidays, each of the country’s 330 municipalities organizes a celebration in honor of their patron saint. There are many other festivities dating from Pre-Hispanic times. During any of these celebrations, normal activities are put on hold, the main square fills with revelers, and the richest expressions of traditional culture are proudly displayed.
**Airlines**
Guatemala is easily reached from many points. Continental, United Airlines, American Airlines, Grupo Taca and Delta, have daily flights to Guatemala, from New York, Los Angeles, Washington, Atlanta, Miami and New Orleans.

From Europe, Iberia has daily flights from Madrid via Miami.

Mexicana and Grupo Taca also flies to Guatemala from Mexico City and there are connections from Cancún, Mérida, and Belize.

Central- and South America are easily reached by Grupo Taca, Copa, and Aerocaribe.

**Ground Transportation**
Visitors can enter Guatemala from Mexico mainly through San Cristóbal de Las Casas and Tapachula. From Cancún, the route will take you through Belize, which also shares a border with Guatemala. Other highways lead to Guatemala from El Salvador and Honduras.

The 511 kilometer-long Pan-American Highway spans the country from the border of Mexico to the border of El Salvador.

Cruise ships and yachts drop anchor at Puerto Quetzal on the Pacific Ocean and also in Puerto Barrios and Santo Tomás de Castilla on the Caribbean.

**Vaccinations**
Vaccinations are generally not required for visiting Guatemala, as sanitary conditions are acceptable. Nevertheless, taking a medication to protect you against malaria is recommended for trips into the jungle.

**Immigration Requirements**
Immigration requirements vary according to the visitor’s country of origin, but a valid passport is mandatory. In general, all European nationals do not require visa. North Americans may enter with just a tourist card.

Other nationalities should check with the nearest Guatemalan Embassy or Consulate, or with their travel agent.

**Money Exchange**
All banks are authorizes to exchange any type of foreign currency, but it is easier to exchange U.S. dollars at Lloyds Bank and German marks at Banco Internacional in Guatemala City.

The Banco del Quetzal agency at La Aurora International Airport exchanges all European currencies, U.S., and Canadian dollars. It is open from 06:00 A.M. to 9:00 P.M.
Informal currency exchange (black market) with street dealers is not recommended.

Local currency
Guatemala’s national currency is the Quetzal, but U.S. dollars are widely accepted, as are major credit cards like MasterCard, Visa, American Express and Diners Club.

Electricity
110 volt current is used throughout the country.