



Guatemala footnotes

Get the lowdown on the El Mirador trek, plus Guatemala's other unmissable attractions

ONLINE FEATURES

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VITAL STATISTICS

Capital: Guatemala City
Population: 13 million
Languages: Spanish; Maya dialects
Time: GMT-6
International dialling code: +502
Visas: Not required by UK nationals
Money: Quetzal (Q), currently around 12Q to the UK£. US dollars are widely accepted, although you'll need local currency too. Credit and debit cards can be used at ATMs but aren't widely accepted outside tourist areas.

When to go

The climate varies according to altitude. In the low-lying Petén, it's hot and sticky year-round.

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec

- The Petén's wet season: best avoided, unless you want to brave thigh-high mud and mosses (though wildlife is easier to spot)
- Cooler and drier, ideal for trekking
- Dry, but growing uncomfortably hot

Health & safety

Although most visitors experience a trouble-free visit, crime is a serious issue in Guatemala. Take precautions: register with your embassy, don't flash cash or jewellery, take registered taxis at night and steer clear of known trouble spots (Guatemala City after dark, and some trails around Lake Atitlán).

There are no obligatory inoculations. Malaria is a risk: cover up and take antimalarials. Steer clear of tap water.

Further reading

Rough Guide to Guatemala (Rough Guides, 2009) Bang up to date; good section on the Mirador Basin.
Guatemala (Lonely Planet, 2007)
Guatemala (Footprint, 2002)
The Maya (Penguin, 1971) by Michael D Coe, a great intro to Maya archaeology.

Other resources

For more on the Mirador Basin visit www.miradorbasin.com.

El Mirador is a lead conservation project for the Global Heritage Fund – for details, including video footage, see www.globalheritagefund.org

For general advice on travel in Guatemala, contact LATA (the Latin American Travel Association; 020 8715 2913, www.lata.org).

THE TRIP

The author travelled with Audley Travel (01993 838638, www.audleytravel.com) on a tailor-made itinerary. A ten-night *Highlights of Guatemala* tour costs from £2,800pp (including all flights and transfers, based on two people travelling), including time in Antigua and Lake Atitlán, and escorted tours of the Maya sites of Tikal and Yaxhá. El Mirador's inaccessibility raises the cost: a private four-day trek, with two days either side at Ni'tun lodge in Flores, costs £1,950pp.

Getting there

There are no direct flights to Guatemala from the UK. Iberia (0870 609 0500, www.iberia.com) flies from London to Guatemala City, via Madrid; returns start from around £530. Flight time to Guatemala City is from 15 hours including transfers. TACA Airlines (0870 241 0340, www.tacaairlines.co.uk) flies from Guatemala City to Flores four times a day. Return fares from around £190; flight time is one hour.

Getting around

Tourist shuttle buses, taxis or private car and driver are the best ways of getting around. Guatemala City airport to Antigua (45km) costs around £7 on the bus, £15 via taxi.

As far as public transport goes, you'll have to rely on the local or 'chicken' buses; they are inexpensive and dilapidated but offer a chance to meet ordinary Guatemalans. Poor roads make car hire challenging.

The El Mirador trek

The recommended trek to El Mirador starts from the village of Carmelita. This is a four-day return trek involving a night's camping in El Tintal. It is possible to return to Carmelita via Nakbé and La Muralla. You need to be reasonably fit, able to cope with the heat and happy to rough it – there are no permanent camps in the jungle, and facilities are basic.

Operators in Flores and Carmelita can arrange group trips for independent travellers: Los Amigos Youth Hostel (www.amigoshostel.com) in Flores charges around £150pp, including food, mules, tents (but no sleeping bag), and a Spanish-speaking guide. For those short of time, local operators (and Audley) can also arrange a helicopter day trip to El Mirador – but expect to pay around £2,400pp.

Cost of travel

If you have time to spare, Guatemala is a budget traveller's paradise: a private room in a hostel costs around £6; mid-range hotels £20-£40; luxury from £90. Street food costs pennies, while a simple meal excluding alcohol will cost around £3. Splurge at a swanky eatery and you'll still only pay around £15.

Accommodation

Ni'tun Lodge (www.nitun.com) Rainforest ecolodge on the shores of Lake Petén-Itza offering terrific food and a variety of treks. Doubles in an ensuite chalet from around £135
Laguna Lodge (www.lagunalodge.atitlan.com) Charming and friendly service, stunning suites and spectacular location overlooking Lake Atitlán. From £150 per suite.
Casa Encantada (www.casaencantada-antigua.com) Boutique hotel in Antigua. Rooms from £50.

Food & drink

Guatemalan food is hearty and filling: corn tortillas are a staple and served with refried beans, eggs, sour cream, plantain and strong coffee – make a traditional breakfast. Popular dishes include *pepián*, a chilli-infused stew made with meat and sometimes chocolate, *chiles rellenos*, chillies stuffed with vegetables and meat, and *tamales*, steamed cornmeal stuffed with chicken or meat.

Guatemalans have a sweet tooth: try *mole de platano*, plantain doused in a chocolate sauce. Gallo, the local beer, rum and aguardiente, a lethal sugar cane spirit, are all cheap and popular.



GUATEMALA HIGHLIGHTS

- Antigua**
Explore the graceful former capital, now a Unesco World Heritage site
- Lake Atitlán**
Enjoy the spectacular natural scenery: encircled by volcanoes, this is one of the world's most beautiful lakes (above)
- Maximón**
Pay your respects to this wooden cigar-smoking saint in the village of Santiago Atitlán
- Chichicastenango**
Go souvenir hunting at the colourful market in this mountain town
- El Petén**
Hike to the rainforest-engulfed ruins at El Mirador and stroll around the temples at Tikal (below)
- Río Dulce**
Take a boat cruise through the dramatic jungle-covered gorges
- Livingston**
Visit the home of the Garifuna, whose ancestors were fugitive African slaves and Carib Indians

