

FROM:

**INTERCULTURAL
ENCOUNTERS**



RE: TRAVEL INFORMATION FOR GUATEMALA

Dear Participants in CEDEPCA's Intercultural Encounters Program,

On behalf of CEDEPCA, we would like to convey our pleasure in your decision to participate in a program designed to put you in touch with the Guatemalan people and to give you a look at the Guatemalan reality.

During the last thirty years, hundreds of U.S. and Canadian participants have encountered Central America through our immersion program. Few have come through the experience unchanged. You can expect to be confronted with the violence and repression of the powerful, yet challenged by the hope and creative energy of the poor and powerless. You may be struck by both the similarities and the differences between Central and North America. You may find yourself struggling with issues of justice or the historical role of the U.S. government in the region. You may sense the presence of the Holy Spirit very vividly during your trip. You may begin to rethink and "re-feel" your faith in light of your contact with the Guatemalan people. Many participants have spoken of their experience in terms of "conversion" and "new commitment" to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They have expressed this in acts of love and justice in their own communities when they have returned home. Perhaps the same may happen to you...

The amount of time you invest in preparing for the trip will be proportional to the value of your participation in the actual event. Take time to participate in your group's orientation process. Read at least one book on Guatemala. Try to learn some Spanish words and phrases if you don't already know some. Think prayerfully about the people you will meet on this trip and for your ability to learn from new perspectives and experiences. Ask your congregation or community to have a commissioning service for you before you leave. Share the plans for your trip with one or more friends and ask them to covenant with you to pray for you daily during your time in Central America. Plan a brief devotional or meditation to share with the group while here.

There are other practical matters to handle as you prepare for your trip. In order to help with those, we have compiled the following travel information. Please read the material carefully. If you have any questions, please check with your group facilitator.

The CEDEPCA team looks forward to seeing you in Guatemala.

Hasta Pronto,

Emerson A. Morales

Esvin Sirin

Nancy Carrera

Intercultural Encounters Team



Overall Preparation Information

DOCUMENTATION:

A valid passport is needed for travel in Central America. If you already have a passport, check to be sure that it will be valid for at least six months beyond the dates of your trip. If you do not have a passport, you should apply for one as soon as possible. Start early; it can take 6-8 weeks to receive your passport.

<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/passports.html>

When you receive your new passport, be sure to SIGN IT at the appropriate place, thereby validating it. Then make a photocopy of the first several pages of your passport. Bring this copy with you on the trip, though separate from your passport. In case your passport was to be lost or stolen, application for a new passport would be facilitated by having this copy on hand.

For U.S. citizens, tourist cards and visas are no longer required by the Guatemalan government. The only legal document needed is a validated passport. For visitors from other countries, please check the requirements with a Guatemalan Consulate in your country or a local travel agency.

The group leader will need to have a photocopy of each person's passport on them, as well as basic health information of each participant, such as blood type and any medications they take regularly. If anyone takes a regular medication, please bring, in writing, the generic name of the medicine. (Should medicine get lost or stolen, this will facilitate purchasing replacement medications.)

WHAT TO BRING:

The first rule is to **PACK LIGHTLY!** Your bags should be of a manageable size and weight so that **you** yourself can be responsible for handling them. Two smaller bags are better than one big one, especially since they often have to be put on the TOP of the bus we use. The best idea is to bring only carry-on luggage to avoid the frustrations of late or lost items. If you do check luggage, you should still plan on carrying with you important items such as a change of clothes, toothbrush, prescription medicines, camera, etc. in the event your checked luggage were lost or delayed. *Additionally, please bring a refillable, reusable water bottle.*

Daytime weather is warm (70-80's; 90's only on the Pacific lowlands), but nights are cool to chilly (Guatemala City 50's, highlands 30-40's). The layered look (e.g. turtleneck + t-shirt + sweater or sweatshirt) will be helpful for changes in temperature. Trips to the highlands will require some WARM clothing. However, weather in coastal regions and Cahabón is HOT and HUMID.

Casual, but neat, wash-and-wear apparel is appropriate--the kind that can pick up dust and dirt and not show it. Comfortable walking shoes are a must. One skirt or pair of dress slacks is important if the group will be attending worship or having a formal interview in an office. Capris for women work quite well. Bathrooms may be dormitory style so you may want to bring along a lightweight robe. If your trip falls during the rainy season (May-October), you will need a lightweight raincoat, poncho and/or collapsible umbrella. Work groups only may need work clothes, rubber boots and/or work gloves.

What NOT to Bring: Please avoid using t-shirts or other clothing that have slogans or commercial advertising. Avoid faded or torn jeans as well as outfits that wrinkle easily. Shorts are appropriate only at the hotel or playing soccer. WE STRONGLY ADVISE LEAVING ELECTRONIC DEVICES SUCH AS IPODS, CELL PHONES AND EXPENSIVE JEWELRY AT HOME. However, some hotels do offer WiFi and these devices may be utilized inside the hotels, but never in public or while walking or traveling.

A small backpack or bag with a lock on the zipper comes in handy to carry items during the day or on an overnight trip.

Additional Items to Bring

- Reusable water bottle
- Toiletries
- Prescription meds (Bring the generic name of any prescription medicine, including dosage.)
- Medication such as Dramamine for motion sickness
- Pepto Bismol tablets
- Small flashlight
- Spanish/English dictionary
- Notebook and pens
- Bible
- Moist towelettes
- Camera **(bring a spare battery or charger!)**
- First aid kit
- Reusable water bottle
- Feminine hygiene products
- Insect repellent
- Warm sweater &/or rain jacket
- Swimsuit
- Sunscreen
- Sun hat, visor or scarf
- Quick energy snack foods
- Acidophilus (optional)
- Wash cloth
- Ear plugs
- Glasses for contact users or solution and an extra pair of contacts
- Work gloves (for work groups)

INOCULATIONS

No shots are required. However, it is recommended that you are up-to-date on the following inoculations:

- hepatitis A (Havrix: 2-3 shots, 30 days apart)
- diphtheria/tetanus
- typhoid
- polio

Bountiful use of insect repellent should be sufficient protection against malaria should your group travel to the Pacific lowlands or Petén; however, if you wish to take further preventive steps, please consult your doctor. Also, there is no known vaccine to prevent the mosquito-borne diseases dengue, Chikungunya and/or zika, so insect repellent is very important.

Though cholera is present in Guatemala, the danger of your becoming infected is minimal. The vaccine is not recommended because of its limited effectiveness. Good hygienic procedures are the best way to avoid the disease, especially washing hands with soap and water several times a day.

HEALTH CARE

Some visitors suffer from diarrhea or nausea caused by bacteria to which their bodies are not accustomed. For minor cases, Pepto-Bismol or Acidophilus are recommended. Medications such as Immodium, Lomotil and preventive antibiotics are discouraged, but sometimes are useful for long bus rides.

Please bring along antibiotic spray, such as bactine, and acetaminophen or ibuprofen. These items can be quite expensive to obtain in Guatemala and it is better that you bring them along with you.

Other factors that may affect you:

- High altitude in Guatemala City and the highlands (5-8,000 ft), heat and high humidity at sea level, possible strain from culture shock, and an intense schedule. A snap, no? Rest assured that in case of severe illness for whatever reason, excellent medical care, including safe blood supply, is available in Guatemala.
- Participants may want to check to see that their health insurance policies still cover them while traveling outside the USA. Those without insurance will need to purchase travel insurance.
- Participants with mobility-related issues should be aware that some strenuous activity is involved; for example, climbing in and out of buses and boats; almost all buildings and hotels will have stairs that cannot be avoided. Also, we have learned that sitting on buses for extended periods combined with high altitude causes some people's legs and feet to swell. Those with circulation issues should plan accordingly.

ZIKA

Group leaders sometimes ask what we have heard concerning reported cases of the Zika virus in Guatemala (especially in the areas where groups will be traveling). We are aware about the news and warnings about the Zika virus and we as an organization are working on precautions concerning this.

As you know, there is a travel alert for all pregnant women. Even if you have no pregnant women coming with you, (nor women intending to get pregnant or women of childbearing age who may not yet know that they are pregnant), we suggest that group leaders keep an eye on the Center for Disease Control's (CDC) website and then send out the precautionary/preventive info to your team.

<https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/notices/alert/zika-virus-guatemala>

We at CEDEPCA don't believe that there is any need for this to negatively affect your travel or your trip. We do recommend that you take precautions to avoid mosquito bites.

There are particular areas of the country where Zika seems to be a more serious issue, such as Petén, Izabal, the Southern Coast and more tropical areas. Even if you will not be traveling to those areas, it is still possible to be exposed here in the capital and in the Western highlands (where most of our groups travel), so bringing and using insect repellent regularly and consistently will be very important for all participants. Bear in mind that the *Aedes aegypti* or *Aedes albopictus* mosquito responsible for transmitting the Zika virus (as well as dengue and chikungunya) bites most frequently during the daytime.

Another pro-active step for preventing insect and mosquito bites is to treat your clothes with Permethrin prior to traveling. This is in addition to using repellent, as some insects bite people right through their clothing (rendering long pants and long sleeved shirts relatively useless). Apparently treating the clothes one will be wearing while traveling can be a useful additional step. The Permethrin is supposed to last through several washes.

In case you're not already familiar with Permethrin for treating clothing, please see the following links:

<http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/page/avoid-bug-bites>

<http://npic.orst.edu/pest/mosquito/ptc.html>

Finally, for participants who are really worried about this issue, we suggest mosquito netting.

This would be an additional step that people could take/bring. Bear in mind, again, that the *Aedes aegypti* or *Aedes albopictus* mosquito responsible for transmitting the zika, dengue and chikungunya viruses bites most frequently during the daytime. Nevertheless, these tents can help prevent other types of bites while sleeping: <http://www.sansbug.com/>.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Groups are lodged in double or triple occupancy rooms in modest hotels or pensions. Linens are provided, but you may want to bring along an extra hand towel. Laundry services are available on occasion; otherwise, light clothing can be washed by hand and hung out to dry. If you are staying in a remote area, you will probably need sheets and a towel. Check with your trip co-coordinator.

If the group has an overnight stay in a village, accommodations will be more primitive. Participants should be aware that this trip is to be an immersion experience that emphasizes experiencing the reality of life in Central America.

GIFT-GIVING

Coming in contact with poverty in Guatemala produces the natural desire to give generously to whomever is near and in need. However, gift-giving can create problems for those who receive a gift as well as for those who do not. Therefore, it is preferable to not give gifts to individuals during your trip. Your presence and interest in the people themselves are important gifts that can be offered to those with whom you come in contact.

One idea might be to take a group photo before leaving the USA and to make copies of it which could be distributed to those with whom you come in contact. Another idea would be for the group to make a banner (or banners) which could be left with one of the churches or organizations with which you will be meeting here, and/or to bring copies of a photo of your group taken prior to departure.

Please remember that we should not act like Santa Claus when visiting villages. It is not a good idea to distribute sweets, pens, money or other presents to the people, especially children. It is a generous act, but teaches people to beg. Many aid organizations consider the increase in begging to be due to tourists distributing gifts indiscriminately in some areas. Also, many village elders see a loss of their people's dignity when their children start asking visitors for things.

If your group desires to make a donation to one of the villages, institutions, or churches that we visit, please speak with your group facilitator and they will work with you on finding the best way to do so. The priorities would include the following: medical equipment and supplies, antibiotics in quantity, aspirin, children's vitamins, office

supplies, bilingual school supplies, and Sunday School arts & crafts supplies such as colored paper, crayons, scissors, paste, etc. From time to time, special items may be needed. Again, please advise CEDEPCA prior to your trip if you plan on bringing any substantial amount of donations. Any items brought should be in good condition. Bottom line, we believe that it is best to make an institution to institution donation, which can be done through CEDEPCA, who will forward the gift through the appropriate channels to your chosen project. This allows for institutional accountability on all sides.

MONEY EXCHANGE

Please do not bring traveler's checks, as they are VERY difficult to exchange within the country.

Money for personal purchases and souvenirs should be in cash. U.S. cash to be exchanged MUST be new or in excellent condition: No ink stains, marks, writing, tears, staple holes; nothing. **Additionally, as of January 2017 small bills of US \$5, \$10, \$20 dollars will no longer be exchanged inside Guatemala.**

Further, it is no longer feasible to take a group into a bank and have each person exchange their own money. The best and easiest place to exchange your cash into Guatemalan *Quetzales* will be:

1. **AAA (if you are a member) OR**
2. **At your international departure airport (LAX, Houston, Dallas, Atlanta, Washington DC, etc.) OR**
3. **At the Guatemalan airport, prior to going through baggage claim, immigration & customs.** Be sure and ask for Q100 in small bills. A money belt is highly recommended. Unless you are a BIG spender, some amount between US\$150-250 should easily cover your needs. On the other hand, Guatemala's hand-woven items are some of the most beautiful to be found anywhere--and you could get a head start on your Christmas shopping. Favorite items are vests, sweaters, placemats, blankets, liturgical stoles, handbags, leather items, but there's so much more....
4. **ATMs:** It is possible to use US debit cards and credit cards at ATMs (*Cajeros*) in Guatemala. Please be aware that up to \$10 of fees may apply for each withdrawal, and that there are safety risks involved. Up to Q2,000 per day (approximately \$260, plus fees) may be withdrawn from an ATM. You will need to know your PIN, even for a credit card. Be sure to notify your bank or credit card company BEFORE TRAVELING if you plan to do this in Guatemala. Otherwise, the fraud prevention mechanisms may freeze use of your card.

PRE-TRIP ORIENTATION

Generally, the more a group prepares itself ahead of time (reading, group processing, reflection, etc.), the more rewarding the actual experience. It is very important to have the group meet together for orientation sessions several times before the trip. It is also helpful to encourage, if not require, participants to do some pre-trip reading on their own.

We will also be sending out a few more documents that should be helpful. These should either be copied and distributed to every member of the group OR incorporated into materials of your own, ones specifically applicable to your group.

We encourage you to prepare devotional material to use during the trip or make plans with the group as to who will be responsible for leading daily devotions. These moments can be part of or separate from the evening reflection sessions. Many groups find it valuable to base their experiences here on prayer and Bible study. Group

reflections are an important part of processing information that is learned throughout your group's intercultural week in Guatemala. We invite you to consider leading a daily conversation with your group and CEDEPCA is happy to begin and end your week with a reflection. Let us know how we can assist you in this process.

SECURITY CONCERNS

As of January 10, 2018, the US State Department has posted an updated travel warning for Guatemala, principally due to a high level of street crime. For safety tips and further information on Guatemala, you can visit:

<https://gt.usembassy.gov/travel-advisory-guatemala/>

<https://gt.usembassy.gov/improvements-safety-security-information/>

We at CEDEPCA understand that there are safety concerns about visiting Guatemala. While nothing in life can be guaranteed 100%, please be assured that we will take every possible precaution to ensure that your group has a safe and enjoyable trip. For example, your group will always be accompanied by two group facilitators (or more for larger groups), and we use private transportation. Please feel free to be in contact with your trip coordinator if you have any specific concerns or questions. Also, it may be good for people to have the chance at one of your pre-trip orientation sessions to talk about any fear or trepidation they might be feeling about the trip. This often can help people be more supportive of one another.

ARRIVAL AT GUATEMALA AIRPORT

Here are some tips to keep in mind:

- 1) You will be given a form on the plane to fill out for Guatemalan migration. They will ask where you will stay while in Guatemala. You may put CEDEPCA. (Not necessary for the immigration form, but for your information, the address of CEDEPCA is: 8ª Avenida 7-57, Zona 2, Guatemala; Phone number 502-2254-1093).
- 2) If you need help getting the group's luggage to the airport door, carts are available at a cost of \$2. Outside the door, carts must be given to a porter or you must carry your own luggage. People should keep track of their own luggage, especially as you are exiting the airport. If you want a porter to help with your bags, stay close by and keep your eyes on your bags. Each person should help to load their own luggage onto the tourism bus which CEDEPCA will have rented for your trip. (Hint: baggage must go on TOP of the bus, therefore 2 lighter bags are far better than 1 heavy one. Again, please remember to pack lightly.)
- 3) Order of stops at the airport:
 - Bank kiosk (change ALL personal spending money, remember to ask for some small bills in *quetzales*)
 - Immigration (passport check)
 - Pick up checked baggage (BE SURE you have your baggage claim tickets for any checked luggage to match with your luggage tag)
 - Pass customs inspectors
 - Out the door together with other members of your group, then onto the bus (see #4 next)
- 4) A CEDEPCA team member will be waiting for you at the airport with a sign that has our CEDEPCA logo:



CEDEPCA If you have any questions or run into any problems (like lost baggage), the CEDEPCA team member will be there to help.

EMERGENCY CONTACTS

In case of family emergency, messages can be left at the following numbers:

--weekdays CEDEPCA phone PBX: 011-502-2254-1093

--e-mail: emerson@cedepca.org, esirin@cedepca.org or nancyc@cedepca.org

--Cell phones: Emerson: 502-4472-9732, Esvin: 502-5697-3948 or Nancy: 502-5709-8340

Weekends: --Judith Castañeda cell phone: 011-502-5709-9912 (if you call from the U.S. you should dial 011 then the country code: 502 and then the number)

Time zones: U.S. Central Standard time = Central American time. When the U.S. is on Daylight Savings time, Rocky Mountain time = Central American time. Though you will not always have immediate access to a phone during your trip, it is possible to make (expensive) collect or credit-card calls to the USA via US phone services. In some communities, it also may be possible to access your e-mail.

If you are left with any questions, please speak with your group leader.

Muchas gracias!

If anyone wants more reading, see: <http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/go/checklist.html>