



# 2023

## MISSION TRIP PLANNING GUIDE

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW FOR YOUR TRIP!

[TEAMS@MISSIONGUATEMALA.COM](mailto:TEAMS@MISSIONGUATEMALA.COM)



# A letter from our Directors

Hola, and greetings from Guatemala!

Since Mission Guatemala was founded in the fall of 2010, we have had the opportunity to welcome over 318 teams to share in our goal of “doing all the good we can” here in Guatemala! Thanks to these wonderful groups of volunteers, we have had the opportunity to realize numerous projects to benefit under-resourced rural schools, such as building bathrooms, classrooms, kitchens, playgrounds, soccer and basketball courts, and other facilities that serve the families and communities of San Andrés Semetabaj and the surrounding areas.



Since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Spring of 2020, our desire to “do no harm” as we serve here in Guatemala has been at the forefront of all decisions we have made. While we feel we are now safely able to receive teams here in-country, we have made modifications and created policies and procedures to help ensure, as best we can, that we are able to work alongside communities while not putting them at risk. We ask you to join with us in also committing to “do no harm” as we love and serve together.

This Trip Planning Guide is the general information that we have traditionally provided through the years for volunteer teams, and it is now accompanied by an additional document providing the updated safety requirements and restrictions that have been made necessary by the COVID-19 pandemic.

We have worked to provide you all the information you will need as you prepare and plan for a mission trip with us. As always, once you arrive in Guatemala, we will do our best to ensure that all logistics and support are taken care of, so that your team can focus on loving, serving, and building relationships with our brothers and sisters here in Guatemala.

If you have questions about any aspect of a mission trip with us, please do not hesitate to ask us. We look forward to having you be a part of Mission Guatemala’s story!

David Burns  
Executive Director

Leigh Randall  
Director of Development



## I. PLANNING YOUR TRIP

### Choosing your week.

You can see available dates and find one that works for your group at [missionguatemala.com/calendar](https://missionguatemala.com/calendar). To request a week, please fill out the Trip Reservation form found at [missionguatemala.com/missiontrips/trip-reservation](https://missionguatemala.com/missiontrips/trip-reservation). After you submit a Trip Reservation form, you will receive an email from a Mission Guatemala staff member to confirm that the week you have requested is available. Once your dates have been confirmed with us and your team is on our Team Calendar, we will ask that you pay a \$500 non-refundable deposit to permanently secure your team's reservation for the week. The \$500 non-refundable deposit that reserves your spot on our calendar goes toward the project donation.

### Keeping in touch.

Approximately six months before your trip, we will begin communicating with you through Basecamp. Basecamp is a simple online project management system that provides you with a place to plan and discuss your trip with our staff, a checklist of items with deadlines you will need to complete, as well as other important information. Using Basecamp helps us keep everything organized and ensures your trip is as smooth as possible.

There is a video on our website that shows how easy it is to use Basecamp!  
(<https://missionguatemala.com/missiontrips/basecamp.html>)

### Team cost.

Cost per person is \$675 for in-country costs PLUS a project donation of \$2,000 towards your construction project. This project donation will help cover expenses for materials and Mission Guatemala operations over the entirety of the construction project.

**PLEASE NOTE:** Team costs are based on a typical Saturday arrival with Sunday departure (9 days and 8 nights in Guatemala), and an average team size of 10-20 people. Please let us know in advance if you will have a very small or very large group. The project donation may be adjusted based on the size of your group.

### What's included?

Everything you will need during your stay in Guatemala is covered as part of your in-country cost.

- All advance coordination and planning for your arrival
- A host to be with you during your entire stay
- Pick-up at the airport and transportation to Panajachel
- 8 nights lodging (double or triple occupancy) at the River House (our mission house) or local hotel
- All meals, beginning with dinner on arrival day (for teams with standard schedules)
- All taxes, tips and gratuities
- Transportation to and from your work site each day

- Guatemalan construction foremen to help oversee and instruct construction
- Translators for the week

**Note: Airfare to and from Guatemala and some tuc-tuc rides (Q10 per person, per trip) are not included.**

### **Payment.**

After your trip is confirmed, you will receive an invoice for the \$500 non-refundable deposit along with a remittance slip. Please mail the remittance slip along with your deposit to help us be certain your payment is properly accounted for in our system. This non-refundable \$500 deposit will go towards the project donation.

After your team has been invoiced, we ask that you send your full team payment in one check instead of a check from each team member, and that your total payment be made at least one month before you travel. Please include the remittance slip from the invoice when mailing your final payment.

We know that unexpected changes to travel plans can occur, and when necessary, we can issue refunds for the per-person costs for team members who are unable to travel. However, in the case of cancellations made within 2 weeks of a team's travel date, there will be a \$50 per-person charge.

### **Children's Activities.**

If you would like to have a Vacation Bible School or other children's activities be a part of your week, please let us know beforehand. Though it may not always be possible, we will do our best to arrange this. (These activities are usually scheduled on Wednesday and Thursday afternoons, from 2:30-3:30 p.m.)

If we are able to organize these activities, we would ask that you plan on bringing all needed items, but please help us reduce our carbon footprint by bringing reusable items in place of disposable ones. Also, we may ask you to use markers, art supplies, and other items previous teams have brought in order to save new items for our yearly Christmas parties or our scholarship program.

## **2. PREPARING AND PACKING**

### **Traveling to Guatemala.**

Please plan to travel together as a group. Since teams arriving on different flights have a much greater potential for complications, unless otherwise arranged and agreed upon with us in advance, teams should arrive and depart together. Multiple airport pick-ups and drop-offs will have an additional fee.

Please try to schedule your flights to Guatemala to arrive before 3:00 p.m. and depart after 11:00 a.m. Depending on traffic, the trip from the airport to the town of Panajachel, where the



River House is located, can easily be a 4 to 5 hour drive, so if you have a late afternoon arrival or an early morning departure, you will need to spend a night in Guatemala City. There is an additional charge for this and you will be responsible for your own meals.

### **Additional costs associated with late arrival/early departure.**

- If you have a late arrival or early departure, there will be a **\$50 per-person fee** for an overnight stay at a quality hotel in Guatemala City, and meals will be your responsibility.
- For a private shuttle to or from the airport for persons not arriving or leaving with the rest of the team, there will be a **\$125 transportation fee**.

### **Team preparation for the trip.**

We ask that team leaders prepare their team for the mission journey. There is a resource for this provided by United Methodist Volunteers in Mission (UMVIM) called “The Movement,” which can be found on their website here: <https://www.umvim.org/movement-video-series>. “The Movement” series offers team leaders a tool to start conversations about international missions, theology, and effectiveness. Each video has a leader’s discussion guide which can help guide the conversation for your team.

### **Orientation prior to the mission trip.**

- **Team Leader Orientation:** An orientation led by a Mission Guatemala Staff member will be held with the Team Leader approximately three to four months before the Mission Trip. Our goal is that this orientation will help review the policies and due dates for the trip.
- **Team Orientation:** An orientation for the entire mission team will be led by Mission Guatemala Staff approximately two weeks prior to the Mission Trip. Our goal is that this orientation will introduce the team to the Mission Guatemala Staff and help share important information prior to their Mission Trip.

### **Packing guidelines.**

- Do not pack anything of value in the external pockets of your luggage. Pack small, portable valuables (i.e., your Leather-man multi-tool, etc.) deep in your luggage to limit the possibility of them being lost or stolen.
- Check your airline’s restrictions on luggage weight, and weigh your luggage before leaving home. Airlines are strict about weight limits, and may make you repack your bag or pay an additional cost if you exceed the limit.
- We recommend that you pack essential items such as medications and basic clothing items in your carry-on. This will be helpful in the unlikely situation that your checked bag is lost by the airline.
- There are few restrictions on liquids in your checked luggage, so if in doubt, pack any liquids there. See the TSA website for more details on current carry-on restrictions.
- At this time, there is no exit fee for leaving Guatemala.
- We recommend that teams mix donation items in with their personal clothes and belongings and then separate them once they arrive in Guatemala. This can help teams avoid issues clearing customs as they enter Guatemala. (See “Immigration and Customs”)

- Please plan on packing enough clothes for the entire week in order to avoid doing laundry. There is generally not enough free time during the week to wash clothes and Mission Guatemala does not have a laundry facility onsite for teams.
- We are not able to utilize any donations of used clothing, so we ask that team members do not leave their clothing behind. However, for those who would like to donate their sheets or towels, the government hospital nearby has said they would welcome them in order to better serve their patients.
- Liquids purchased in the Duty-Free shops in the Guatemala City airport can be carried onto the departing flight. However, when you pick up your checked luggage at your first stop in the United States, you will need to pack any liquids into your checked luggage before clearing customs. You will not be allowed to carry on any liquids of more than 3 ounces on the subsequent flight.
- Please consult the Packing List that we will provide in Basecamp for a list of items to pack.

### **Immunizations.**

Check with your doctor and consult the Center for Disease Control travel website:  
[wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/guatemala](http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/guatemala)

Malaria is not a concern since you will be at an altitude above 5,000 feet (1,500 meters). Because biting insects are not uncommon, we recommend the use of insect repellent.

**Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Mission Guatemala STRONGLY RECOMMENDS that all team members be vaccinated and boosted for COVID-19.**

### **Insurance.**

Since most US insurance plans offer limited coverage outside the US, we require that teams purchase travel insurance that covers COVID-19 for each of their team members. The purchase of this insurance is an additional cost to be paid by team members directly to the insurance provider.

While travel insurance is readily available from a variety of providers, many teams purchase insurance through United Methodist Volunteers in Mission (UMVIM), and the North Central Jurisdiction of UMVIM welcomes any Mission Guatemala team to purchase insurance through their office.

For more information, contact Tammy Kuntz at [umvimncj.coor@gmail.com](mailto:umvimncj.coor@gmail.com)  
 Complete information can be found here: <https://www.umvim.org/ncjins>

### **COVID-19 related information.**

To find our most updated information concerning COVID-19 in Guatemala, please see the **COVID-19 Information for Teams** document. This document will be available in Basecamp.



## **Required forms.**

We require all team members to fill out a basic Team Member Form that will provide us with essential information about each team member. We ask that this form be completed and returned to the team leader so that they can return it to us prior to the trip. This form will be available in Basecamp. In addition, a copy of each team member's passport is required.

Mission Guatemala's Safe Spaces Policy will also be available in Basecamp, and the Team Leader will be responsible for sharing it with each team member and for securing signatures from each team member showing their understanding and willingness to comply. The Team Leader is responsible for scanning all documents and uploading them to Basecamp prior to the team's travel date, and for bringing the physical documents to Guatemala to be available in a Team Notebook at all times.

## **Important notes on passports.**

If you don't have a valid passport, you should apply for one as soon as possible. Passport processing usually takes 10 to 12 weeks, but we recommend beginning the application process at least 6 months prior to your trip to minimize potential complications.

It is also important that you check your passport expiration date before you travel. Since you will be issued a 90-day visa when you enter the country, it is important that your passport does not expire within 90 days of your travel date. The Guatemala immigration agent could refuse to issue you the visa to enter the country if your passport expires before 90 days, even if you plan to return to the United States before that date.

## **3. ONCE YOU ARRIVE**

### **Immigration and Customs.**

Entering Guatemala is fairly easy. During the flight, you will be issued a combination Immigration/Customs form. Make sure you complete this form before landing. On the form, please write "Panajachel, Sololá" as your destination address, and check the "Tourism" box in the section "Purpose for Travel." We will provide an example of this completed form in Basecamp.

This Immigration/Customs form has two parts. The top page will be used for clearing immigration, which will be your first stop after landing. After the immigration agent scans your passport, they will take the top portion of your completed form, leaving the bottom portion of the form for you to use later as you clear Guatemala customs.

After clearing immigration, you will enter the luggage claim area. It is not unusual for airline security to ask to see your baggage claim sticker to make sure it matches the checked bag sticker on your luggage, so make sure you keep your luggage claim tag in a safe place when you check your luggage in the United States. This will also help in locating your luggage should it be delayed or lost by the airline.

After you have left the baggage claim area, you will clear customs. At this point, you will need the second page of your form to present to the customs agent. After clearing customs, you may be randomly selected to have your baggage x-rayed. If not, you will be directed towards the exit. Though clearing immigration and getting your luggage can sometimes be a little bit of a lengthy process, it is normally relatively easy.

Customs agents may sometimes attempt to spot humanitarian aid groups and stop them in hope of assessing a tax on items they are bringing into the country.

To help avoid this, we suggest the following:

- That your team does not travel wearing identical t-shirts identifying you as a group.
- That large amounts of donated items are not packed all together in one piece of luggage. Instead, spread donated items among team members and mix them in with personal belongings.
- That your team members not attempt to all go through the same customs line together. Instead, have members line up in different lines. You will meet up with the rest of your group as soon as you clear customs.

## Housing information.

Lodging will be at our mission house in Panajachel, which is known as the River House or "La Casa del Río." The River House has reliable wireless internet and on-demand hot water, and is divided into separate apartments that provide a variety of rooming options. Each team leader will have the opportunity to provide input on the rooming options that will work best for their group. Depending on overflow at the River House, our teams may spend a night upon arrival and/or departure at a safe, comfortable local hotel.

## Communicating back home.

The River House has wireless internet, so during your stay you will be able to easily communicate with family and friends back home. Please keep in mind that Internet speeds in Guatemala are generally slower than in the United States. You can also check with your cell phone carrier to see if they offer a short-term plan for travel abroad.

## Daily devotion.

- If your team would like to have a an in-country daily devotional to use during your week with us, we have one compiled by Rev. Rodney Frieden with contributions from other UMC clergy, available at the River House and on our website.
- **During your week with us, we do not lead devotions for your group, but instead leave those to the direction and planning of each team leader.**

## Weather.

Guatemala is often called "the land of eternal spring" since, for much of the year, the average high temperature is 77 degrees and the average low is 55 degrees. Guatemala has only two main seasons: dry and rainy. Guatemala generally goes without rain from November through April, while from May to October it often rains every day. "Rainy season" does not mean,



however, that it rains all day long. On a typical day, there is sunshine in the morning before the clouds begin to appear midday, and sporadic rain from early afternoon into the evening.

## **Typical itinerary.**

We may adjust this itinerary depending on your flight arrival and departure times, or for a variety of other reasons. This is a general example of a typical week serving with us in Guatemala.

### **SATURDAY**

- Arrive at La Aurora Airport in Guatemala City and travel to Panajachel (This is typically a 4-5 hour journey)
- Check in at the River House and relax from the day's travel
- Dinner

### **SUNDAY**

- Breakfast
- Brief overview and history of Mission Guatemala
- A cultural activity, which will include lunch
- After lunch, free afternoon. Each person is responsible for returning to the River House, by tuk-tuk or walking
- Dinner

### **MONDAY TO THURSDAY**

- Breakfast
- Travel to work site, with lunch midday
- Leave work site for the River House (typically around 4:30)
- Dinner
- Evenings are on your own. We can arrange for teams to go into town if they desire

### **FRIDAY**

- Breakfast and relaxation at Casa del Mundo, with an opportunity to shop in Panajachel in the afternoon
- Dinner

### **SATURDAY**

- Trip to San Antonio Palopó for Ceramics and Weaving Tours\*
- Lunch
- Dinner, with announcements and closing reflections on the week

### **SUNDAY**

- Travel to La Aurora Airport in Guatemala City. We will schedule your departure time from the River House to ensure that you will arrive at the airport 3 hours before your departure time

\*If you would like to schedule an alternate activity for your team for this day, please let Mission Guatemala staff know beforehand, so we can help organize this.

## 4. IMPORTANT THINGS TO KNOW

### **Standard of living.**

The standard of living in Guatemala is among the lowest in Central America and even perhaps the Western Hemisphere. Large portions of the population survive on less than \$5 per day. Unemployment is high, and poor nutrition and limited health care are common.

### **Dress.**

The indigenous people in the rural communities of Guatemala are normally conservative in their dress, wearing modest shirts and blouses, and not wearing shorts unless they are playing a sport. Since dressing inappropriately is one of the easiest ways to offend our hosts, we should dress according to local standards, not wearing shorts on the worksite and avoiding any tight or revealing clothing. Additionally, given the history of military aggression and violence in the rural areas of Guatemala, no camouflage clothing or items with an overt military appearance or significance should be worn or carried.

Conspicuous displays of wealth are also disrespectful and could gain you unwanted attention, so dress simply and leave expensive watches and jewelry at home.

### **Food and water.**

NEVER eat unpackaged food from street vendors, or unwashed and unpeeled fruit or vegetables. Vegetables and fruits should always be disinfected or peeled before eating.

NEVER drink tap water. We will always provide purified water at the River House and on the work site. When ordering in restaurants, specify “agua pura” for purified water. You should also always brush your teeth with purified water.

### **Sanitation.**

Other than at the River House, you should never put toilet paper into any toilet in Guatemala. Use the trashcan next to the toilet to deposit toilet paper. Even at the River House, please DO NOT flush wipes or sanitary products, even if they say they are flushable!

Always wash your hands before eating. If water is not available, you should use alcohol-based wipes or antibacterial gel.

### **Photography.**

Unless someone asks you to take their photo, you should always ask permission before doing so! The beautiful smiles and colorful traditional dress of the indigenous Mayan people are eye-catching and may be exciting to photograph, but you should always ask permission. Many adults are especially sensitive to being photographed, and some people in the rural communities dislike their photo being taken because they believe that tourists will make money from their picture. Respect for both the Mayan people as well as team members and staff is paramount.



Please also remember that the trip is not a photo safari, but a chance to interact and get to know new friends. Be sure to put away the camera occasionally so that you can be completely present.

### **Code of conduct.**

We are striving to present a responsible, caring image as respectful visitors from a foreign country. To that end, we must do our best to conduct ourselves in an appropriate and respectful way.

In the rural areas of Guatemala, drinking alcohol in moderation is unfortunately not the norm; if a person drinks at all, it is often to excess. Tobacco use is virtually unknown in the rural areas, and most local evangelical churches prohibit smoking and drinking. For these reasons, alcoholic beverages may not be consumed on the work site or in the rural community areas where we will be working during the day. It is preferable that tobacco products not be used while on the worksite, however, if this is not possible, team members should consult Mission Guatemala staff to ensure that it will be used in the most inoffensive manner possible. At the worksite, team members should also refrain from using profanity or having conversation about drugs or alcohol.

In Guatemala, we must remember to show respect at all times. Here, as elsewhere, “please” and “thank you” (“por favor” and “gracias”) go a long way. Be sure not to make jokes or speak disparagingly about the local food, accommodations, practices, or people.

### **Electricity.**

Guatemala is on the same electrical current as the United States, and uses the same outlets. However, 3-prong outlets are sometimes not available, so if you are bringing a device with a 3-prong cord, you should also bring a simple 3-prong to 2-prong adapter, just in case.

### **Safety.**

Rural Guatemala is a generally safe place as long as common-sense precautions are observed:

- Watch your luggage closely, especially in Guatemala City.
- Be extremely alert for cars, bicycles or other vehicles when crossing or walking on streets.
- Don't openly display large amounts of cash.
- In the marketplaces, pickpockets are common and quite skilled. Keep your wallet in a secure pocket or under your clothes.
- Carry your backpack on the front of your body when walking in crowded spaces.

### **Money.**

The local currency in Guatemala is the quetzal (pronounced “ket-záll”). The exchange rate is currently approximately \$1 to 7.5 quetzales.

Over the past years, we have seen the way banks here in Guatemala handle currency exchanges between US dollars and quetzales change somewhat randomly, with the exchange limit sometimes lowered to \$120 per adult, per week, and minors not being allowed to exchange money. Because of this, we are now recommending that teams talk with their local banks about exchanging money in the US before arriving in Guatemala. Most US banks/AAA can handle these requests in a couple of days.

The ATMs in Panajachel also provide a fairly dependable method for getting local currency and usually charge \$4 - \$6 per transaction. Let your bank know if you plan on using your ATM card in Guatemala to help ensure that you won't have any issues.

An increasing number of local stores and restaurants do accept credit cards, but you should not count on always being able to use a credit card to make purchases.

If it is necessary for you to exchange money in-country, we can help arrange a time and place for you to do this. Please make sure that any US currency you bring has absolutely no tears in the bills and no extraneous marks. A torn or damaged bill is almost impossible to exchange in Guatemala.

### **Tipping and gift-giving policy.**

Though it is not expected or required, some teams may want to leave gratuities for the workers or staff that they get to know during the week. While this is a kind gesture, if it is not done properly it can cause a variety of problems for Mission Guatemala. Since there are many members of our staff who teams may not meet during their week with us, but who play an integral part in the programs and services that Mission Guatemala provides, we believe it is only fair that any gift is shared with our staff as a whole. As such, if you desire to leave a gratuity for our staff, we request that you leave it with Dave Burns, Mission Guatemala's Executive Director, and he will ensure that it is distributed among all our staff.

In general, during your week in Guatemala, gift-giving must be done with extreme care. Please do not give away anything (i.e., clothing, shoes, watches, etc.) to members of the local community or of our staff without talking to us first.



# ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Guatemala and its indigenous Mayan residents have a difficult and painful history shaped by conquest and colonization, beginning with the arrival of Spanish invaders in 1524 and continuing through to the torture, abuse, and genocide that occurred during the 36-year civil war that stretched from 1960 to 1996. To truly appreciate the reality of life in the Mayan communities where Mission Guatemala works, it is vitally important that we do our best to understand the history that they have lived. These books are a good place to start.

## Books about Guatemala.

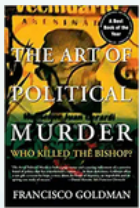
(All book descriptions are excerpted from [goodreads.com](https://www.goodreads.com))



*Silence on the Mountain: Stories of Terror, Betrayal, and Forgetting in Guatemala*

By Daniel Wilkinson

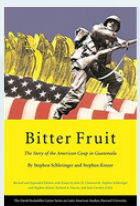
Silence on the Mountain is a virtuoso work of reporting and a masterfully plotted narrative tracing the history of Guatemala's thirty-six-year internal war, a conflict that claimed the lives of some 200,000 people, the vast majority of whom died (or were "disappeared") at the hands of the U.S.-backed military government.



*The Art of Political Murder: Who Killed the Bishop?*

By Francisco Goldman

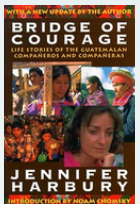
Bishop Juan Gerardi, Guatemala's leading human rights activist, was bludgeoned to death in his garage on a Sunday night in 1998, two days after the presentation of a groundbreaking church-sponsored report implicating the military in the murders and disappearances of some two hundred thousand civilians. (This book has been adapted as an HBO documentary.)



*Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala*

By Stephen C. Schlesinger, and 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 Developing World.



*Bridge of Courage: Life Stories of the Guatemalan Compañeros & Compañeras*

By Jennifer K. Harbury, Noam Chomsky

"A book not only for those interested in Guatemala, but for those who want to know what makes people give up everything and fight for justice everywhere."—Margaret Randall



*Love in a Fearful Land: A Guatemalan Story*

By Henri J.M. Nouwen

This is Henri Nouwen's personal account of a pilgrimage to Santiago Atitlan, a Mayan town in the highlands of Guatemala. It was there that an American priest, Father Stanley Rother, was murdered by a death squad in the parish where he served.



*Tree Girl: A Novel*

By Ben Mikaelson

In her remote Guatemalan village, 14-year-old Gabriela is known as Tree Girl for her habit of fleeing to the forest and climbing high to escape the world. When guerrilla warfare comes to her area, her life is changed forever.