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Guatemala House Building Volunteers

Adventure



Relaxation



Culture



Trip Name: Guatemala House Building Volunteers **Trip Code:** GUHB **Duration:** From 2 weeks

Trip Highlights

- Build houses for some of Guatemala's poorest families and change their lives in just 5 days
- Work with an international group of volunteers, and a fantastic group of local master builders
- Live with a local Guatemalan family in the stunning town of Antigua
- See a side of Guatemala that few travellers get to see
- Make a real difference to the people you are working alongside
- Explore the best that Guatemala has to offer at weekends



Overview

This is undoubtedly one of the most rewarding projects! Not only will you make a huge difference to the people you are working with, but you will see first hand in a short space of time how you have made a difference.

Over the course of just 5 days you will not only help to build houses for some of Guatemala's poorest families, but you will change their lives forever, block by block, house by house. The houses you will help to build will replace the existing houses that families live in, typically made of cornstalk and cardboard. Over the course of 5 days you will help with all aspects of the build from digging the foundations and mixing cement to laying the blocks and painting the house. At the end of the build you will have the opportunity as a group to hand over the keys to the family, knowing that you have contributed to changing their lives forever.

This is a physical project and you should expect to get dirty, but the reward and satisfaction at the end of the build is something that will remain with you for a lifetime. No experience is necessary as you will be building alongside a fantastic team of builders who will show you the ropes.

It's not all hard work though, most evenings everyone will head straight for the bars in Antigua to sample the local

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nightlife, and weekends are free to explore Guatemala's stunning scenery, climb volcanoes and visit Mayan temples.

This really is a trip of a lifetime and a that makes a world of difference to the families of rural Guatemala. If this sounds like the ideal project for you then download the trip notes or give us a call!

Destination Info

The most populous country in central America, Guatemala is a diverse and culturally rich place – a mix of colourful Mayan and colonial Spanish makes for a spectacular and lively nation.

Guatemala's capital is Guatemala City, but for the tourist it is the colonial capital Antigua that holds sway over them. You'll be in Antigua, only 40 minutes from the capital Guatemala City – a UNESCO World Heritage site surrounded by three huge volcanoes. One of them – Volcan de Fuego – is constantly active at a low level and can be seen to be smoking daily. Which is very bad for its health.

If you're interested in varied natural habitats, you'll love volunteering in Guatemala. The country boasts two major mountain ranges, lots of volcanoes and lowlands covered in lush rainforests, dotted with Mayan remains – including the famous Tikal, with its 60 metre high temples. The rainforest around Tikal is a protected area (Maya Biosphere Reserve) and is full of wildlife including jaguars, howler monkeys, toucans and ocelots and has been designated. Where Guatemala meets the Pacific, there are vast black sand beaches home to three different species of turtle.

Itinerary



Many Guatemalan families live in poor quality makeshift homes, built of nothing more than cardboard or sugar cane walls with dirt floors. The combination of makeshift building materials and poor construction leaves families extremely vulnerable to the ramifications of harsh weather conditions during the stormy season. Poor quality, dilapidated housing fuels health problems and destroys family unity and hope. Working with this project gives you the opportunity to help directly with some of the world's poorest families to build or rebuild houses making them strong, safe, culturally appropriate and affordable to maintain. These homes become the foundation for a community building process.

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While home building is the project's main focus, there is also a drive to provide communities better access to healthcare and education by subsidising healthcare costs and school registration fees. While they can't combat this problem in its entirety, they try to assist the most vulnerable families in the highlands.

Each home costs approximately \$1,500 to build for materials and transportation. In addition to building houses, funds are put toward building bunk beds, healthcare needs and school supplies (books and markers).

Once the house is completed, the family can move their belongings into their new home and are handed the keys. This is always a very emotional time for both families and volunteers alike; an extremely rewarding moment that you'll never forget!



On your first day you will have a full briefing from staff in Antigua, here you will have a brief overview of the project aims and objectives and a chance to meet the group you will be working alongside. You will also meet the master builders who be there to oversee the build, a brilliant team with a great sense of humour!

Each day we meet in the morning at the base in Antigua before piling into a truck and driving to the village where you're building, up to 40 minutes outside of Antigua town. The first day is spent digging and laying the foundations of the house in preparation for the building. The following 3 days you will be building the house block by block. Each house are made of concrete blocks, with cement floor, corrugated metal roof, with skylight, a metal door with lock, and a metal-framed window with glass. Once the house is built the next day is spent decorating. The family choose the colour of the house and each house is furnished with a bunkbed. At the end of the final day you will gather around and present the keys to the new family, a truly unforgettable experience!

Your working day finishes late afternoon, typically around 4pm or 5pm and the evenings are yours to explore Antigua's night life. Weekends are also free to explore the surrounding area. Throughout your stay on the project you will live with a friendly local Guatemalan family not far from the centre of Antigua and close to the project base.

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Volunteering in Guatemala and changing lives house by house – this trip gives you a superb opportunity to give some of the world's poorest families direct help. You'll be building – or rebuilding – houses, making them strong, safe and affordable. Each house takes around five days from start to finish and that means you'll see lots of projects through from start to finish. Don't underestimate the power of the moment when you see a family take the keys of their new home.

Much of the housing in the area is extremely poor quality – often nothing more than cardboard or sugar cane walls with dirt floors. Simple equation – poor quality housing = health problems, family tension, lack of hope. Volunteering gives you the chance to help solve all these problems.

If you have any experience with building trades – great. But don't worry if you haven't – you'll be working alongside people who know and you'll be surprised how quickly you pick up the essentials.

Accommodation

During your programme you will be living with a typical Guatemalan family. Our staff personally knows all the families and all of their homes meet an excellent standard set by our on-site staff. All families are close friends of the on-site staff and will speak Spanish most of the time (to help you get the most from your time in Guatemala) although there will typically be at least one person who can speak English.

The families are all very warm, sociable people and are very keen to accommodate international students. You will instantly be made to feel at home and will be included in all day-to-day social activities (shopping, parties, barbecues etc) throughout your stay - a fantastic insight into life in this unique and diverse country.

Families belong to Guatemala's middle class, although students should take note that living standards in Guatemala are generally lower than Western Europe or North America. Family homes are located in neighbourhoods usually no more than seven blocks from the centre of the town.

You will be given a key to the house and will be able to come and go as you please. All families have warm water and flushing western style toilets and showers. You will have your own private room and generally share a bathroom

with other volunteers. There is also a laundry service once a week with some families though this is not guaranteed.

Programme Services and Facilities

As you are staying in Antigua, you will not be short of any of the facilities that you will need. There are plenty of bar, restaurant and cafe options for a night out with your new mates, as well as useful options like banks and grocery stores for extra supplies. You can even wander about and soak up a little history while you're at it.

Internet

Antigua has a range of Internet cafes that you will be able to visit very easily to check and send e-mails.

Telephone

Calls are pretty cheap from Internet cafes in Antigua, so think about getting yourself an International phone card. Your host family may have a phone on which they can receive international calls, but please respect the family and make sure that you are not on the phone too long.

The international dialling code for Guatemala is +502. To place an outgoing, direct dialled international call, dial +44 for the UK followed by the telephone number. For example to call Real Gap dial +44 1892 516164.

If your mobile phone is unlikely to work in Guatemala, it is possible to purchase one out there for around \$15 if you wish to do so.

Laundry

Your host family may be able to provide a laundry service for you, but this is not always guaranteed. If the service is not available, there are launderette facilities within easy reach of your accommodation and will cost you no more than a couple of dollars.

Electricity

You will be able to use the sockets in your host family's house to charge your camera and use for any electrical equipment that you may have.

Meals

Your family will provide you with two meals a day (breakfast and dinner), throughout your stay providing a great opportunity to chat and get to know your host family in an informal setting. All families are more than happy to cook any dishes that you'd like (within reason!) and many families can accommodate special dietary requirements for vegetarians and vegans.

What's Included

- Host family accommodation
- Two meals a day
- Airport transfers
- Orientation upon arrival
- 24-hour support number



What's Not Included

- All flights
- Travel insurance
- Lunches
- Visas



Is This Trip For You?

You may be the only volunteer at your chosen project at any one time. However, you will still have the full support of your in-country team and those at the project. If you are looking for a group volunteering experience we have plenty of options for you to consider.

Additional Information

Orientation

On arrival at the project you will have a brief orientation from the organisation leaders. This will include being shown around the project site, being introduced to the project co-ordinator and staff, a health and safety briefing and an introduction to your tasks while on the project.

Throughout your stay in Guatemala you will have the support and guidance of our co-ordinator and team. You will be provided with competent assistance and help with any questions or advice you may need during your stay. In addition you will have access to a 24 hour emergency contact number so you can contact one of our staff at any time should you need to.

What to Pack

Please note that this kit list is intended to help you plan what you may need to take with you and therefore you may not need all of the listed items on your travels. In addition it is worth noting that you can buy lots of the below in Guatemala and at a very cheap price and there will be opportunities for you to shop in local markets and towns.

Personal Admin

- Passport, insurance certificates and personal documentation
- Photocopies of all the above to be left at home with your next of kin
- Spending money
- Cash for airport departure tax
- Proof of inoculations (please speak to your GP about necessary immunisations)
- Guidebook on country - recommended Lonely Planet or Footprints

General

- Camera / Film / Batteries
- Notebook and pen / diary
- Torch / Extra Batteries
- Sunglasses
- Pocket-knife (comes in handy for general use)
- Water bottle – at least 1 Litre
- Day pack/rucksack for everyday use
- A 3-Season Sleeping bag (especially useful when on weekend excursions)
- Mosquito Net
- Personal enjoyment - books, cards, music, to enjoy with your fellow volunteers etc.
- Personal hygiene items (deodorant, soap, shampoo, toothbrush etc)
- Spanish dictionary, verb book etc.

Clothing

- Hat
- A pair of thick socks for walking
- Comfortable walking shoes
- Sandals
- Waterproof Jacket
- Fleece/pullover (for cool evenings)
- Long trousers
- Warmer clothing for winter
- Swimwear
- Towel
- Work gloves, particularly during the rainy season

Medical Kit

- Personal Medication
- First Aid Kit (e.g. Antihistamines, Anti- diarrhoea tablets, headache tablets)
- Sunscreen
- Mosquito and insect repellent

Possible gifts for your host family

Please do not spend a lot of money on these gifts. They are simply polite tokens to thank your host family for their services. Possible gifts could include:

- Items typical of your home country such as biscuits, cakes, English tea etc.
- Photo frame or small ornament
- Something for the kitchen...tea-towels, utensils
- Nice toiletries

Minimum Age

Minimum 18 years, maximum dependent upon individual participant's health.

Minimum Numbers

There are no minimum numbers on the trip.

Please note: you may be the only volunteer at your chosen project at any one time. If you have any questions about this, please feel free to contact us

Flights

Your flight to Guatemala should arrive at Guatemala City Airport on your programme start date, and your return flight should be arranged for your programme end date.

To book your flights, please contact your travel advisor who will do their best to get you the best deal on the day. Please provide them with your full name as it is stated in your passport. Before you make the call please make sure you have your required departure dates, return dates and other details you may require.

Please note: If you are flying to Guatemala via the USA you will need to obtain Travel Authorisation by registering online through the Electronic System for Travel Authorisation (ESTA) no later than 72 hours before departure. This is compulsory and will cost USD\$14 to register. To register, please visit: www.esta.cbp.dhs.gov

It is important that once you have booked your flights you add these details to your Online account, or alternatively you can contact us with your departure date, the flight number and arrival time at your destination.

FAQs

1. Do you need to understand Spanish?

We advise that you pick up the basics before you arrive however if you don't speak Spanish then don't worry. If you would like to learn Spanish before you start the building project then check out our language school.

2. What level of fitness is needed and do you require experience in building?

A reasonable fitness level is required and no you don't require any previous experience in building.

3. Do I get time off for extra activities?

Yes, every evening and you will generally have weekends to yourself.

4. How long does a house take to build?

Each house takes around five days to be built from start to finish which allows volunteers to see completion of a project and (most rewarding) the final results.



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Police Check

This trip requires a Police Check to be carried out - please contact us for further information on how to do this.

Support & Advice

Your safety is paramount which is why all our programs have been visited and assessments have been conducted to ensure any major risks have been minimized.

In addition, you will have access to a 24 hour emergency contact number so you can contact one of our staff at any time should you need to. In addition our overseas partners and coordinators are on hand in-country to assist you.

Financial Security

We know that the last thing you want to worry about when you're planning your trip of a lifetime is whether your money is in safe hands. As a leading global gap year provider it's our job to make sure your finances are secure, so when you book with us you can be confident that we do just that.

Real Gap Experience is part of TUI Travel Plc, one of the largest travel organisations in the world, and these days in the travel industry, large means secure.

Insurance

Whether you're traveling for two weeks or two years, trekking the Amazon in Ecuador or on safari in Africa, insurance is an essential part of your adventure and will help you enjoy your travels, secure in the knowledge that you have the protection you need. In fact, everyone traveling with us must have adequate cover before their trip begins.

Of course you are free to buy insurance from any provider, however at Real Gap Experience, we have partnered with World Nomads to offer policies that have been specifically designed to meet the needs of global travel. If you think you're already covered by an existing policy, such as those offered by credit card providers, check the policy wording very carefully to ensure it covers you for your Real Gap Experience.

For more information on travel insurance please contact us to speak to one of our travel advisors.

Money Matters

In Guatemala the currency is the Quetzal (GTQ; symbol Q), which is subdivided into 100 Centavos. Coins come in denominations of 1, 5, 10, 25 and 50 Centavos and 1 Quetzal. Notes come in denominations of 1, 5, 10, 20, 50 and 100 Quetzals.

The US Dollar is also accepted as an official currency and Euros are increasingly easy to change at central banks. The best credit cards to take are American Express, Visa or MasterCard which are accepted by larger business and at ATMs (cajeros automáticos) in all but the smallest towns.

Meal, Inexpensive Restaurant \$3.36
Domestic Beer (0.5 litre draught) \$2.72
Coke/Pepsi (0.33 litre bottle) \$0.84
Water (0.33 litre bottle) \$1.21

(Prices quoted in US Dollar)

Passports and Visas

All nationalities require a full passport that must be valid for 6 months beyond the intended length of stay. It is your responsibility to have the correct personal documents and to obtain your own visa, if one is necessary, in accordance with the regulations of the country you are to visit. The information offered below is to help you with that process. We are not responsible for the actions of local immigration and customs officials, whether at points of entry or otherwise, and any subsequent effects.

For stays of up to 90 days, citizens of the European Union, the USA, Australia and New Zealand are not required to hold a visa when visiting for tourist purposes only. All other nationalities should consult their nearest Guatemala Embassy or High Commission.

Cultural Considerations

Greetings

Pleasantries are taken seriously in Guatemala, as many native Guatemalans are raised to greet strangers formally. It is simply polite to always say “Buenos Días” upon entering a building or when meeting somebody, and to say “con permiso” when leaving or passing someone.

You should address people in the polite “usted” form, and show additional respect for older people. If you know the person then it is customary to shake hands or kiss in greetings. Any kind of conversation is usually preceded by small talk, and being able to speak at least basic Spanish will get you a long way with the locals and demonstrate your keenness to fit in.

Saying “no”

A Latino always wants to help you and it's considered impolite to say ‘no’ or ‘I don't know’. Whatever you ask, always expect to get an answer, even if it is not correct. The best thing to do is to ask three different people the same questions and if you always get the same answer it's probably right!

Taboos

Latinos are not used to discussing ‘sensitive’ subjects with strangers (a stranger is anyone who is not family or they haven't known for ten years). Only discuss religion, politics and money with your teacher (or if the other person brings it up in conversation and you feel comfortable with this). Although nosiness is common, certain subjects are taboo, for example: abortion, casual sex, social politics, etc. Listen first to get used to the norms.

Social Hierarchy

The family is hugely important to Guatemalans. It is common for three generations of families to be living together under the same roof. It is a way to increase the household income and to help one another. As you would expect, older people are treated with great respect. Women are traditionally responsible for bringing up the children, although this has begun to change in recent years. Men are still very proud of their machismo and view whistling at women as a compliment. Ladies, take it in your stride. You may be subjected to catcalls and the best way to deal with these is simply to ignore them! Dress more formally than you would normally or even wear a wedding ring and talk about your husband (unfortunately men tend to have more respect for your husband than they do for you.)

Religion

The dominant religions in Guatemala are Catholicism, Pentecostal and Mayan- Christianity infusions.

Clothing

It is important to remember, especially for female travellers, that the kinds of clothes you feel comfortable wearing in your own country may not be an acceptable form of dress in Latin America. Short skirts for example, will invite unwanted attention. Just use your common sense and adapt your style in accordance with your surroundings.

On certain projects, you should avoid wearing shorts, flip-flops, tank tops, and so on. Cover up for your own safety, and in respect of the local culture and customs.

With the warm climate and humidity, we advise that you pack a selection of lightweight layerable clothing. As the evenings can get quite cool, a jumper or jacket is advisable. Always bear in mind the activities you will be doing when you are packing, both at the project and socially.

Smoking, Alcohol and Drugs

Smoking and drinking is acceptable in Guatemala, and readily available. However, please respect other volunteers. Smoking is not permissible in volunteer apartments or the host families' homes. Drinking is only permissible in moderation and must not impact on your volunteer work during the week. While we want you to have fun in your free time, antisocial behaviour will not be tolerated at the project.

It is absolutely forbidden to bring drugs into Guatemala. Always keep an eye on your luggage while travelling. Never bring anyone else's luggage through customs. If you get caught there is little chance that you will walk away without punishment. As in most countries, Guatemala has very strict rules when it comes to the possession of drugs. All drugs, including "soft" drugs like marijuana, are ILLEGAL. Please do NOT use any illegal substances whilst travelling – it is not worth the risk and is not acceptable at the project.

Tipping

It is customary to tip 10% in restaurants and hotels generally add 10% tourist tax on top of the Value Added Tax.

Vaccinations & Health

Travel health can often be something people forget about before going away, but a little preparation and knowledge can go a long way to help you stay fit and healthy while abroad. The risks to your health whilst travelling will vary depending on your general health and the type of activities you are going to be partaking in and the length of your stay.

Since we are not medically qualified, it is recommended that you consult with your Doctor or a recognised Travel Medical Advisory Service who will assess your particular health risks before recommending vaccines and/or anti-malarial tablets and advising you on what precautions you should take.

Safety

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Crime is endemic throughout Guatemala and particularly bad in certain areas, which we advise you avoid. As crime is mostly gang related, it tends to be focused on businessmen and residents rather than tourists, but, of course, it is still better to be safe than sorry.

Petty crime is more of a problem for tourists, so keep an eye on your things, especially in crowded and particularly tourist-orientated areas.

Violent crime is on the increase in Guatemala, so it is advisable to not drive at night, especially on the highways between tourist destinations e.g. from the airport into Guatemala City, from Flores to Tikal, as tourists have been intercepted en route to their destinations. Particularly in Guatemala City you should be extra vigilant if you are going out after dark. Woman travellers should especially take care. Here is a general list of precautions:

Avoid walking alone, especially at night

Avoid driving at night

Don't carry all your valuables

Make sure your luggage is locked when you are travelling on buses and so on

Walking trails around/ to Lago de Atitlan and Volcan Agua are notorious spots for robberies against tourists. Get on an organised tour or go in a big group if you want to walk in these places.

This information is not supposed to scare you or put you off, it is just to make sure that you are informed and can take the appropriate precautions where necessary.

We advise that you check your government's advice before travelling abroad. For UK, American and Australian customers please see the relevant links below;

UK: www.fco.gov.uk

USA: www.travel.state.gov

Australia: www.smartraveller.gov.au

ATM Theft

It is very likely that you will need to withdraw cash at some point during your travels. Please be cautious when withdrawing money from an ATM and ensure that you are vigilant of other people near the ATM, especially those that offer unsolicited assistance if your card is detained. It has been recognised that individuals are operating unlawful withdrawals by placing 'traps' in ATMs whereby personal bank cards are being detained, causing the victim to believe their card transaction has not been completed, and leaving their bank card in the ATM which is then later retrieved by the thief. To avoid this it is advised that you withdraw cash inside the bank at the counter. You will need your passport and driving licence and they will direct you to the teller to obtain your funds. It is more time consuming than using the ATM, but is the most secure way of withdrawing money.

Food & Drink

Guatemala is not a country famous for its gastronomic delights and in the more touristy areas you will be able to find all the regulars - Italian, American, Asian and so on. Traditionally lunch is the big meal of the day and most eateries offer a two or three-course offer at a lower price. Dinner prices tend to be a bit more expensive. Breakfast Guatemalan style features tortillas, eggs and beans but if this doesn't appeal you will be able to find something a little more suitable in the tourist areas!

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Proper Guatemalan food is Mayan Cuisine, which features maize, in the form of tortillas and beans rather a lot. Other than Mayan, there is also latino food, which has a slightly more Western edge to it; meat stews and meat broths tend to be really tasty. Look out for typical Caribbean food on the east coast.

You should not drink tap water (including ice) unless it's boiled or bottled. Remember, most fruit juices are made with un-boiled water.

Be careful around dairy products and milk. Hamburger meat is not always safe. Make sure that uncooked vegetables are cleaned with purified water or peeled. Be careful with seafood and avoid undercooked meat. Remember, it's always better to be safe than sorry.

Remember to let us know before you depart if you have any special dietary requirements.

Drinks

All the normal soft drinks are available and popular throughout Guatemala. The locals also drink a flavoured water drink called 'Refresco', if you felt that way inclined. Decent coffee may be quite difficult to come across, but is becoming easier to find in the tourist resorts. Try a Licuado, a fruit drink made from milk or water (be careful with the water one!) for something a bit different.

Alcohol-wise, bypass the Guatemalan wine for a cheap bottle of the Chilean variety. Unless you want to get plastered, avoid the aguardiente, a local and lethal sugarcane spirit. Rum could be a satisfactory alternative. Beer is widely available and there is a small range to choose from.

Public Holidays

To view a list of the public holidays for Guatemala, please see the link below:

www.timeanddate.com/holidays/guatemala/

When planning your trip, you should be aware of the major national holidays celebrated throughout the country. Many schools, government offices, stores and banks are closed on National Holidays. Please note that there may be slight date variations for some of the holidays each year and that the list is not exhaustive.

Weather

Guatemala's climate remains warm and pleasant for most of the year. The Pacific and the Caribbean coast both get quite hot and humid, with a cool sea breeze to stop things from getting too balmy. The rainy season falls between May and October with most of the showers occurring in the afternoons. Altitude controls the climate somewhat, meaning that the low-lying jungle areas are hot and humid all year round, whereas the higher areas including Antigua and Guatemala City have a more comfortable climate that gets cooler at night.

Time

Guatemalan time is six hours behind GMT.

Electricity

In Guatemala the electric system is 120 Volts and frequency 60 Hertz. If your device does not accept this voltage you will need to bring a converter.

Outlets in Guatemala generally accept 3 types of plug:



Flat blade plug



Two parallel flat pins with ground pin



V-shaped flat prongs

Trip Note Disclaimer

The information contained in this trip note has been compiled with great care and is provided in good faith. Any itinerary featured is correct at time of release. However, our itineraries may change as we make improvements that result from travellers' comments, our own research or from time to time as a result of recommended travel advice.

You can rest assured that it is always our goal to provide you with the most rewarding trip and experience ever!

Our Details

If you have any questions about this trip please do not hesitate to contact us and we'll be happy to answer them.

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