



Pura Vida Ministries

*Creating a brighter future
for children in Guatemala*

Work Trip Orientation

Introduction

"Travel with a purpose" is a good way to describe what our international work trips are all about. The emphasis of these trips is on developing and maintaining relationships with local communities and sharing our time and resources with our partners in Guatemala.

Pura Vida Mission and Philosophy

The mission of Pura Vida is to partner with communities in Guatemala in a meaningful, respectful, and long term way to create sustainable change on their terms.

- We believe in giving a hand up, not a handout.
- We encourage self-sufficiency and avoid creating dependency.
- We strive for mutually empowering relationships where all sides learn and benefit.

Some excellent guidelines for approaching work like this are encapsulated by Robert D. Lupton's "Oath for Compassionate Service": [Lupton, Robert D. *Toxic Charity*. 1st ed., HarperCollins, 2011]

- *Never do for the poor what they have (or could have) the capacity to do for themselves.*
- *Limit one-way giving to emergency situations.*
- *Strive to empower the poor through employment, lending, and investing, using grants sparingly to reinforce achievements.*
- *Subordinate self-interests to the needs of those being served.*
- *Listen closely to those you seek to help, especially to what is not being said – unspoken feelings may contain essential clues to effective service.*
- *Above all, do no harm.*

Long Term Projects

Pura Vida asks the local communities to identify the needs -- we simply partner with them where we can. Once projects are started, we see them through to the end. You can be sure that the project you work on will not become a "ruin," but will be finished and maintained by other teams and the local workforce. Pura Vida is deeply involved in the local community as well, and always hires local labor to teach and work alongside our teams.

Teams typically work on construction projects for needy families and communities. Our teams interact with the local population in ways that tourists cannot, taking advantage of relationships with local leadership built over the last few years. Meaningful contact between cultures is beneficial to both sides, and is a highlight of these trips for most participants.



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Cultural Considerations

Standard of Living

The standard of living in Guatemala is among the lowest in Central America and even perhaps the Western Hemisphere. At least 60% of the country survives on less than \$2 per day. Unemployment is high, and poor nutrition and health care is common.

Behavior

Overall, we are striving to present a responsible and caring image as representatives of our culture and the United States. To that end, we must do our best to live according to the local standards of conduct.

- In the rural areas of Guatemala drinking in moderation is not the norm; either one drinks to excess or not at all. Tobacco use is virtually unknown in the rural areas, and smoking is prohibited by most local evangelical churches. It is important for us to set an appropriate example. For these reasons **alcoholic beverages and tobacco may not be used during the working portion of the trip**. We should also refrain from casual conversation about drugs and alcohol.
- Team members should not use profanity, as it may be the only English our Guatemalan hosts may be familiar with. They will not be impressed.
- In Guatemala, as elsewhere, "please" and "thank you" ("por favor" and "gracias") go a long way. A smile helps as well.
- We must remember to show respect at all times. Be sure not to make jokes at the expense of the local food, accommodations, practices, or people.

Dress

Dressing inappropriately is one of the easiest ways to offend our hosts. The people of the Quiché region are very conservative in dress. We need to dress and act accordingly. Our goal is to show respect for the local culture, and not stand out more than we already do.

Avoid tight and exposing clothing, and any clothes that peg you as tourists (shorts, loud shirts, fanny packs, etc.). Loose, comfortable clothing works well, along with some sturdy shoes. As well, conspicuous displays of wealth will gain you unwanted attention. Dress down, and leave expensive watches and jewelry at home.

In rural Guatemala, generally only little boys wear shorts. The mountain climate is cool, and our hosts dress warmly and modestly. Bring comfortable pants instead of shorts.



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Safety

The safety and well-being of our teams is something that Pura Vida takes very seriously. Rural Guatemala is a fairly safe place as long as commonsense precautions are observed:

- Travel during daylight hours in groups.
- Be extremely alert when crossing streets on foot. Drivers will not slow down for a careless pedestrian.
- Watch your luggage closely, especially in Guatemala City and Antigua. Fanny packs are a favorite target of thieves, and are not recommended.
- Avoid wearing jewelry and expensive-looking watches.
- Don't display large amounts of cash in the open.
- In the market at Chichicastenango, pickpockets are common and quite good. Keep your wallet close to the body, under your clothes. As a rule, don't bring anything into the market you would mind losing

We are blessed to have a team of local contacts who keep us well informed while we are in Guatemala. Occasionally, protests and road blocks have required our teams to alter their schedules, but this has been a rare occurrence. If an issue arises that could possibly affect our teams, we monitor the situation closely in order to work around any potential delays.

Gifts

Our focus in Guatemala is on serving and relationship building. While it is a natural impulse to give things away, we've seen that this can:

- reinforce a top-down relationship based on our relative wealth;
- create an environment of expectation and cause dependency;
- foster dishonest relationships;
- cause resentment when gifts are distributed unequally

We want relationships to be built through working side by side with the local community. As a frequent team member once said, "I don't want my relationship with a child to be a box of crayons." Your presence and friendship is the best gift you can give.

Please do not make promises to local people concerning your return to Guatemala, help for their families, or anything else. They remember these promises, and notice if they are not fulfilled. Our goal is to build trust, and even well-intentioned promises can detract from that when broken.



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Children

It is not recommended to photograph or interact closely with children outside our work sites. Per the U.S. State Department, "Avoid close contact with children, including taking their photographs, in rural areas with predominantly indigenous populations. Such contact can be viewed with deep alarm, and may provoke panic and violence."

Photography

The colorful dress of the indigenous Maya may tempt you to photography, but you should always ask first. Adults are especially sensitive to being photographed. At the work site and the orphanage almost everyone will be happy to be photographed, especially the children. At the same time, remember that the trip is not a photo safari but a chance to interact closely with new friends. Rule of thumb: unless someone asks you to take their photo, ask them before doing so.

Food & Water

The staple diet in the highlands consists of beans, rice, and corn tortillas. At the hotel in Chichicastenango we will eat food that is substantially better than that of the local population. Still, portions may be smaller than what you are used to, so you may want to bring some snacks. Food at our hotels is prepared sanitarilly, and only purified water is used.

Food and Beverage Guidelines

Safe	Risky
Bottled water with seal unbroken; ask for "agua pura" in a restaurant	Tap water
Soft drinks in bottles or cans	Drinks with ice; blended drinks
Fruits/vegetables you peel yourself: Bananas, oranges, avocados (wash first if possible)	Fruit smoothies; any non-peelable fruit unless you have sanitized it; lettuce; berries
Chips in a small bag: Tortrix, Doritos, etc.	Chips from a large bag that everyone has put their hands into
Name-brand ice cream bars in wrapper	Hand-dipped ice cream
Fast food such as McDonalds, Pollo Campero	Any street food: fried chicken, fries, etc.



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More advice:

- Use bottled water for brushing your teeth.
- Don't waste food or water. Both are precious commodities in the local communities.
- Avoid publicly criticizing or joking about the local food.

Sanitation

Always wash your hands before eating. If water is not available use alcohol-based wipes or antibacterial gel. This is especially important after participating in activities with large groups of small children.

You should never put toilet paper into any toilet in Guatemala. Use the trash can next to the toilet to deposit toilet paper or any other things that you need to dispose of.

Money

The local currency in Guatemala is the Quetzal (pronounced "ket-zall"). The exchange rate is roughly \$1 to 7.6 Quetzales. You can change money at the hotel or at banks in Guatemala City and Chichicastenango.

- Dollar bills are useful for exchanging as long as there are absolutely no tears in the bills and no extraneous marks. A torn or marked bill is almost impossible to exchange in Guatemala. \$20 bills are the easiest to exchange – bills of larger or smaller denominations can be difficult to exchange.
- Some U.S. banks will deliver Quetzales directly to your home for a fee, although the exchange rate will not be as favorable as it is in Guatemala.
- There is an ATM in the *Dispensa* supermarket Chichicastenango which is fairly dependable.
- Never use an ATM which is accessible after hours.
- Don't count on being able to use a credit card to make purchases.
- We do not recommend travelers cheques since they can be problematic and time-consuming to cash.

Electricity

Guatemala is on the same current as the U.S., and they use the same 2-prong outlets we do. Note that 3-prong outlets are not generally available. Power outages and surges are common in the rural areas, so do not leave anything expensive plugged in for too long.



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Preparing for your trip

Conditions are fairly primitive, and even simple things can be difficult and frustrating. Be prepared to be flexible! Patience is also a virtue here. Lodging will be basic, but flush toilets and hot showers will be available. Potable water will be provided for the team at the hotel and work sites.

The highlands of Guatemala are stunningly beautiful, and the weather is usually cool and sunny year-round in the Highlands. Be prepared for heat and rain, however. The people of Guatemala are very friendly and welcoming, but we must be careful to observe their cultural boundaries. Take some time to familiarize yourself with some of the cultural and social differences in rural Guatemala.

Important considerations:

- **U.S. citizens traveling to Guatemala need a passport valid for at least 6 months after their return date.** If you don't have a valid passport, you should apply for one immediately. Passport processing can take 10 to 12 weeks. We recommend getting your passport at least 6 months prior to your trip to minimize possible complications. You can apply for or renew your passport at most U.S. Post Offices with an appointment.
- Immunizations for Tetanus, Hepatitis A, Typhoid, and COVID are [recommended by the CDC](#).
- **Consult the CDC or your health care professional regarding all possible health risks in the areas where the team will be serving.**
- Pack enough in your carry-on so you can survive a few days without your checked luggage (see important restrictions).
- Learn a little Spanish! It makes the trip a lot more fun.

What NOT to bring:

- **Things to give away in Guatemala.** Our focus in Guatemala is on serving and relationship building. Giveaways can harm those efforts.
- **Things to leave behind in Guatemala.** If an item of clothing isn't nice enough for you to keep, a Guatemalan probably isn't going to want it either. Leaving your clothes at the hotel at the end of the trip can make our culture seem incredibly wasteful. Pack it in, pack it out.
- **Phones and other electronic devices.** Expensive gadgets flaunt our relative wealth, and can negatively impact the group experience.



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Packing List:

Required	Strongly Recommended	Optional, but helpful
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● valid passport 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● water bottle (1-liter) ● personal medications in original containers ● rain jacket ● sweater / fleece ● socks & underwear ● for construction teams: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ sturdy shoes ○ work gloves ○ work pants ○ long-sleeved shirts ○ safety glasses/goggles ● sunglasses, sunscreen ● earplugs ● toothbrush, etc. ● roll of toilet paper ● alarm clock ● small flashlight ● US Dollars/credit-ATM card ● dress clothes (If attending a formal ceremony) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● aspirin / ibuprofen ● Azithromycin / Cipro ● Pepto-Bismol tablets ● Imodium AD tablets ● spare glasses/contacts ● journal/notebook/pen ● insect repellent ● soap & shampoo ● copy of driver's license and passport (both are helpful if your passport is lost)
<p>If staying in basic accommodation:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● lightweight sleeping bag ● small pillow ● shower shoes/sandals 	



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Packing Guidelines

- **Checked bags are not included in the trip price.** We encourage you to pack light and take advantage of your carry-on allowance.
- If you do check a bag, be sure to store nothing of value in the external pockets of checked baggage. Bury small, portable valuables deep in the luggage (i.e., your Leatherman multi-tool, etc.) so that they cannot be easily extracted by opportunistic baggage handlers.
- Weigh your checked baggage before leaving home – bags may not exceed 50 pounds. The airlines are getting stricter about this, and repacking your bag on the fly can be stressful.
- Your carry-on should contain enough so that you can survive for a night without your checked luggage. On most trips we will not be able to unload checked luggage the first night, so you'll need to be able to go with what's in your carry-on. This strategy also pays off when checked luggage is lost by the airline.
- Remember the **3-1-1 rule** for liquids in your carry-on luggage:
 - Each bottle containing liquid must be **3.4 ounces** (100ml) or less.
 - All bottles containing liquid must be able to fit in **one** quart-sized, clear, plastic, zip-top bag.
 - Common travel items that must comply with the 3-1-1 liquids rule include toothpaste, shampoo, conditioner, mouthwash and lotion.
 - There are no restrictions on liquids in your checked luggage – if in doubt, pack them there. See the TSA website (www.tsa.gov) for more details on current carry-on restrictions.



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Making the most of your trip to Guatemala

We've organized over one hundred trips to Guatemala since 2002. We've talked with participants and reviewed hundreds of post-trip surveys. Out of that comes the following list of "Best Practices" for maximizing your experience in Guatemala. We think you'll get more out of your trip if you give these items some thoughtful consideration.

Be flexible

In the developing world, even simple things can be difficult and frustrating. Guatemala is no different. Things happen in their own time. Roads can close unexpectedly; traffic jams may appear out of nowhere; supplies can arrive late; hot water may suddenly become ice water; ice water may become no water; electricity may fail; weather can force a change in planned activities.

The extensive planning put into these trips helps prevent total chaos. Unexpected circumstances will always come up, though. We ask that you put patience at the top of your list of virtues during the trip.

Take photos respectfully

Guatemala is a beautiful country, and there may be nothing prettier than a Guatemalan girl in the traditional Mayan dress. That said, we need to be careful with our photography. The Mayan culture shares some of the same distrust of photography as our own Native Americans.

Photographing someone you don't know pretty can reduce them to the status of scenery. Imagine if someone walked up to your home or office, snapped a photo of you, and then left. That's the same thing we do when we unthinkingly photograph a Guatemalan woman washing clothes or an old man in the market.

Photo guidelines:

- Put the camera away for the first few days of the trip in order to concentrate on getting to know the area and the people.
- Ask for permission before photographing people.
- Do not photograph soldiers, security guards, or police.
- If your trip has dedicated photographers on board, let them do most of the work. They'll be able to work more discreetly to get better quality photos.



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Speak some Spanish

If you only know 3 words of Spanish, use them! If you don't know any Spanish, take an hour or two before your trip to learn some basic phrases. Even a bare minimum of faltering Spanish can really open doors with people in Guatemala. If you've taken Spanish in high school or college, don't be afraid to use it. The Guatemalan people are incredibly gracious with those who are trying to speak their language.

Keep a journal

Things happen fast on these trips, and the sensory overload can be overwhelming. On a single day you may visit a local family, tour a school, work with locals in a construction project, and try a new Guatemalan dish. Many of our trip participants have kept a journal to help remember and make sense of the day's events. Journals can be better than even photos in this respect.

Unplug!

Why spend time and money to physically be in Guatemala if mentally you're still back at home? A trip to Guatemala is a unique opportunity to unplug, slow down, and experience life in a place where a "social network" is a group of kids playing soccer on a dusty street or women making tortillas in the market.

With that in mind, we recommend that you not bring or use devices such as smartphones, tablets, or laptops during the trip. We have seen them inhibit the unique formation of community that occurs during these trips. You will miss much of the depth of the trip if you are busy with your device. Being in Guatemala is a great chance to be legitimately offline -- tell your boss and friends you'll be out of touch for a week.

Other good reasons for unplugging:

- A modern smartphone costs about the same as 6 months wages for the people in whose communities we will be visiting and working. In such an environment it's inappropriate to call attention to our relative wealth.
- The possibility of theft is high.
- Roaming with a US phone in Guatemala can cost up to \$2.99/minute.

We will give you phone numbers where we can be contacted during the week. We will also have a phone you can use to make calls home. You will also have access to public computers or Internet cafes if you need to send email.



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More Information

Tax Deductibility of Travel Expenses

IRS Publication 526 (Charitable Contributions) states:

You can claim a charitable contribution deduction for travel expenses necessarily incurred while you are away from home performing services for a charitable organization only if there is no significant element of personal pleasure, recreation, or vacation in such travel. This applies whether you pay the expenses directly or indirectly. You are paying the expenses indirectly if you make a payment to the charitable organization and the organization pays for your travel expenses. The deduction will not be denied simply because you enjoy providing services to the charitable organization.

Refund Policy

Since your payments towards travel expenses are receipted as donations, they cannot be refunded unless the entire trip is canceled, and then only under specific circumstances. If you are concerned about this, you may want to consider buying trip cancellation insurance.

Linking your Frequent Flier account

If you would like to link your frequent flier account to your group ticket prior to check-in, we can do so during ticketing, but only if the following is true:

- You provide your frequent flier account number on your trip application.
- **The name on your passport must match the name on your frequent flier account.** The only exception is with the presence of a prefix (Mr, Ms, etc).

If this is not the case, you will need to provide your frequent flier number during the group check-in process to receive mileage credit and other status benefits (if applicable).

Group Airfares

Group airfares make these trips possible. These airfares allow us to hold seats early in the planning process at a guaranteed base fare. This gives groups time to recruit members and cancel excess seats later.

The experience of flying on a group airfare is almost indistinguishable from that of a standard ticket. You will still earn frequent flier miles if registered with the airline, and you may even get better seating depending on the airline status of your fellow team members.



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Self Ticketing

In some rare circumstances it may be necessary for certain team members to book their own travel. If you plan on self-ticketing, please be aware of the following restrictions:

- Individual tickets are generally less flexible than group tickets in the event changes are needed or the trip is canceled.
- You should fly into Guatemala on the same flights as the rest of the team, especially if this is your first trip there. This is because:
 - Guatemala City can be overwhelming for the first-time visitor, and the airport is safer in the context of a group.
 - The group cannot wait for self-ticketed passengers to arrive.
- If you are not able to book travel on the same flights as the group but are experienced traveling in the developing world, you should opt to arrive in Guatemala City well before the group.
- If you select flights different from the group, you may be responsible for ground transportation for airport pickup and drop-off.
- In the event that the team is delayed on arrival to Guatemala, you may need to make transportation arrangements for getting to the evening's lodging.

Checked Bags

Checked bags are not included in the trip price. Please check with your airline for the cost of checking a bag.

One last thing...

Although our projects are the tangible goals of the trip, the really crucial tasks are interacting with the local people, sharing our faith as well as our resources. As Americans we tend to get single-mindedly focused on the work. Remember to step back and slow down. Life has a different pace in Guatemala.



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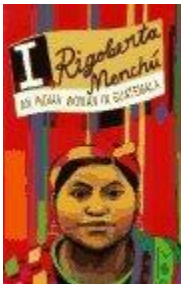
Recommended Reading

For more insight on the Pura Vida approach and the culture and history of the highlands of Guatemala, we recommend the following books:



[Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help \(And How to Reverse It\)](#)

A provocative read recommended for those interested in working towards sustainable solutions to difficult problems both in the developing world and at home.



[I Rigoberta Menchú](#)

Although there is controversy over the historical accuracy of this book, it unquestionably provides valuable insight into the culture of the Quiché people.