

COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT GUATEMALA

- *How Do I Change Money in Guatemala?*
- *What's the weather like? Are there a lot of bugs?*
- *Can I Bring My Laptop? What is the Electrical Current?*
- *What if I Get Sick? Is There a Doctor or Hospital Nearby?*
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How Do I Change Money in Guatemala?

There will be a bank at the airport when you arrive, offering the standard exchange rate on your American dollars. (Currently around 8 Quetzales to the dollar.) If your flight arrives late at night, you can use an ATM at the airport.

There are no ATM's or banks in San Marcos, so I encourage you to get the money you need at the outset of your trip. Each of your hotels should have a safe where you can leave money and your passport if you choose. If you find yourself needing additional cash over the course of the week, you can make a quick trip to the village of San Pedro, or take the boat to Panajachel. If you bring Travelers checks, they should be American Express only. Credit cards are not used in the village of San Marcos.

What's the weather like? Are there a lot of bugs?

Lake Atitlan is not in the tropics. Malaria is nonexistent here. One of the many great things about the region of Lake Atitlan is: almost no bugs, though once in a blue moon, I do see a scorpion, and though these are not the lethal kind, you definitely want to avoid getting stung by one. One thing you will probably see now and then is a spider. They are harmless, but I like to mention this in advance. At night, the trees and the sky sparkle with fireflies.

The weather in February will be warm and sunny every day—no almost certainly no rain, and once again great swimming. In the evenings, you will want a sweater or shawl, particularly since we hold some of our student readings under a palapa outdoors.

Can I Bring My Laptop? What is the Electrical Current?

Yes, by all means bring your laptop. Just lock it in your room when you go out. I also recommend that instead of carrying around a computer bag, you use a simple backpack. More on security issues below.

Current is the same as back in the U.S. You should bring an adapter to plug a three-prong cord into a two-prong socket however.

What if I Get Sick? Is There a Doctor or Hospital Nearby?

Santiago, about 45 minutes away, has a doctor and a small hospital, run by Americans. San Marcos is a very health-conscious place, but the orientation in the village is definitely towards preventive medicine and alternative healing. There is a doctor in a nearby village, and the Clinica Naturista in the village is led by an American nurse, but the nearest hospital that I would want to go to would be in Antigua. A number of people with health problems have joined us over the years, but we do ask that you let us know if you have a special issue.

Is There Internet Connection? How About Telephone Calls to the U.S.?

The village of San Marcos has several Internet cafes. The service is definitely slow. I always encourage writers who come to the lake to use the week as a break from email, as much as possible—a time to write stories and essays and poems instead of email. There will be a phone available at our daily gathering spot to call the U.S. or receive calls and messages.

For \$45, we can purchase a Guatemalan cell phone for you and load it with enough minutes for 30-45 minutes of calling time to the US.

How Much Money Should I Bring?

Tuition to the workshop is all-inclusive, with the following exceptions:

- Taxi to your hotel in Antigua (if you don't share a cab): \$25-35.
- Dinners: depending on your choices, \$5 - \$15 each
- Tips for helpers
- Extra drinks: Those who would like cocktails in town, or additional wine, will need to purchase those from the hotel or in the village.
- Healing Work: You should know that the village of San Marcos offers a vast range of alternative healing and massage practitioners. A ninety-minute massage will cost \$30-35. Most other treatments are similarly priced.
- Internet: \$2 an hour.
- Phone: around a dollar a minute without your own cell phone.
- Shopping budget: Your costs there can go from \$4 for a pound of freshly picked and roasted local coffee or chocolate to a couple hundred dollars, if you want to fill your suitcase with textiles.

What Should I Bring?

If you decide to attend the workshop, you'll be getting a letter from me shortly before your departure, with a checklist of what you'll need. (Short answer: very little, though you will need a flashlight. This village does not have many streetlights.) One bag should be plenty.

Is Guatemala Safe? What About Robbery?

When you tell your friends you're coming to Guatemala, many may express concern that it's a dangerous country, and if you go to the U.S. State Department website, you will see that Guatemala is still one of those countries in which a travel advisory is in place.

Guatemala earned its reputation during the thirty years of brutal internal war, in which tens of thousands of indigenous people were massacred by the military. In the years since the 1996 signing of the Peace Accords, though the mass killings ended, the country has struggled with corrupt leaders and gang violence. Nothing unique to Guatemala there, I'd say.

Certainly parts of Guatemala City are unsafe. There have also been robberies on the highways and back roads around the countryside—and we are not taking you on any of those roads during nighttime hours.

Here at Lake Atitlan, I'd describe concerns about robbery as no different from what you'd expect in any country where there is great poverty intersecting with the appearance of tourist wealth. The vast majority of the Mayan people in this village are a peaceful, enormously friendly and trustworthy group who would return a hundred quetzal note they found in the pocket of your jeans (as has happened to me) when they were doing your laundry.

But of course it makes sense to lock up your belongings when you go out, and not to flaunt expensive jewelry or cameras. I recommend that women attending the workshop carry a backpack or a shoulder bag (and you'll find many beautiful ones for sale here) rather than a big American pocketbook.

I am happy to tell you that nobody who has attended one of my workshops has ever been a victim of physical violence.

Non-Profit Projects Our Workshop Supports in the Village

A part of the proceeds from workshop always goes to worthwhile projects and groups in the village of San Marcos La Laguna and to Santiago. But in a much larger sense, the very fact of your attending this workshop is providing the best possible kind of help to the Mayan indigenous community: by bringing jobs and interested, concerned tourists to an area experienced much hardship in recent decades.

With a few exceptions, perhaps, I recognize that those of you who attend the Lake Atitlan Workshop are coming here to work on your writing and not to learn about the Mayan people or to assist in environmental cleanup. But for those who are interested, we always provide opportunities to find out about worthwhile projects around the village.

A word here on poverty in Guatemala: While good nutrition is an issue here, you will not be coming to a place where families go hungry. But no question, people in the village have very little in the way of material possessions or comforts. As difficult as this is for middle class Americans to see and accept, what you are also likely to witness, as you watch the children here, is their joyfulness and capacity to find fun in very small things. They don't have toys, but they tenderly care for babies and old people and pay attention to birds and plants. Little boys in the

village roll hoops and catch fish at dawn. Girls help their mothers make the tortillas. One thing I hardly ever hear in this community is the sound of an infant or child crying.

In so many ways, coming to San Marcos may feel to you like visiting another planet. And that's part of what makes the experience such a rich and valuable one for me and for those who join me at the workshop. After seven years of living part time on Lake Atitlan, I'd describe this as a place in which substantial physical hardship co-exists with a wealth of natural beauty and a kind of peacefulness and appreciation for the small gifts of life, among the indigenous population, seldom encountered in our own busy and stressful lives.

One thing I always ask of participants at my workshops which should not involve any expense: If you are not using your full two-suitcase luggage allotment, it would be terrific if you can bring down a bag of used clothing, particularly sneakers for kids. Some students bring down one or two pairs; others collect them from friends or buy up a pile of shoes at the Goodwill and come with ten pairs or more.

Every year we have a giant shoe giveaway in town. It's one of the great things about living in this little village that it's a small enough place for your actions to really make a difference. So, the month after the workshop, it's easy for me to spot the effect of your time here. Children whose toes used to be sticking out of their sneakers can be seen jumping around in used but still-good Nikes. For a child here, shoes are among the few possessions that matter.