PACK LIGHTLY

THE LIVING MAYA HIGHLANDS, VOLCANO COUNTRY

Guatemala

Colonial Antigua under three volcanoes, the villages of Lake Atitlan, the jungle temples of Tikal, and an overnight climb toward an erupting cone, at the lowest daily cost in the region.

p.7 Why Guatemala reads as the most culturally alive country in Central America, and how to travel it

p.15 The Acatenango overnight trek, watching Fuego erupt across the saddle, and whether you are fit for it

p.27 What 28 dollars a day actually buys, and where the money goes on a highland trip

37 PAGES USD PRICES VISA-FREE FOR US AND EU EDITION 2026.07

Start here

the shape of a Guatemala trip, what it costs, what to sort first


VOLCAN DE AGUA ABOVE COLONIAL ANTIGUA

Guatemala is Central America's cultural heart and its best-value trip, built around the living Maya highlands. Most visits anchor on three set-pieces: colonial Antigua under its volcanoes, the village-ringed Lake Atitlan, and the jungle temples of Tikal in the far north. Around them run the volcano treks, the highland markets, and the Q'eqchi' pools of Semuc Champey. It is a country that rewards slowing down: chicken-bus rides, Spanish-school weeks, and market mornings. Seven days covers the three headline stops. Ten to fourteen adds the highlands, the volcanoes, and a jungle river or two.

The shape of a trip

Land at Guatemala City, transfer straight to Antigua, and start there. Antigua for colonial streets and volcano treks, Atitlan for the lake villages, then either fly north to Flores for Tikal or loop through the western highlands. Semuc Champey and the Verapaces are the add-on for longer trips. Tourist shuttles link the main stops; a short flight saves the long haul to Tikal.

What a day costs

Guatemala is the cheapest country in this region. Budget travel runs near 28 USD a day: hostel dorms, market meals, and chicken buses or shared shuttles. Midrange sits around 70 with a private room, restaurant meals, and one tour or trek. Antigua and Atitlan cost a little more than the rest. The full receipt is on page 27.

Sort before you fly

US and EU citizens need no visa for tourism up to 90 days under the CA-4 agreement, shared with Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. No vaccines are required for entry. Book the airport transfer to Antigua in advance; skip the capital itself. Page 18 covers the fast facts that trip up first-timers.


LAKE ATITLAN RINGED BY ITS VOLCANOES


TEMPLE IV RISING OVER THE TIKAL CANOPY

HOW THE LINKS WORK

Some booking links earn Pack Lightly a commission, at no extra cost to you. Full disclosure is on the last page.

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01

The country

The trip on one page, the scorecard, and what makes Guatemala tick: a living Maya culture, a wall of volcanoes, and the lowest daily cost in the region.

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Your trip on one page

10 days recommended · 28 to 180 USD/day · best Nov to Apr

The classic Guatemala loop runs the three headline stops, then flies north for the jungle temples. The route below threads Antigua, Lake Atitlan, and Tikal, with a short flight standing in for the long overland haul to the Peten. Shorter trips drop Tikal; longer ones add the western highlands and Semuc Champey.

THE HIGHLAND LOOP

Antigua — day 1-3
3h shuttle
Lake Atitlan — day 4-6
back to city
Chichicastenango — day 7
1h flight
Flores and Tikal — day 8-9
fly home
Guatemala City — day 10

BUDGET PER DAY

Budget	28 USD
Midrange	70 USD
Luxury	180 USD

BOOK FIRST

01	Flights into Guatemala City, 6 to 8 weeks out	Aviasales
02	Accommodation, lock Antigua and Atitlan early	Booking.com
03	eSIM, install before departure	Saily

BEST MONTHS

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec

best: dry, clear volcano views
shoulder: green, afternoon rains, fewer crowds
peak rain, wettest trekking

Guatemala at a glance

scores 0-100 · pack-lightly country-comparison data

SCORECARD

Culture	90
Nature	85
Friendliness	85
Budget friendly	80
Active vacation	80
Food and drinks	70

Budget travel	28 USD/day
Mid-range	70 USD/day
Luxury	180 USD/day

CULTURE VOLCANOES RUINS MARKETS BUDGET

source: country-comparison tool, 2026-07

QUICK STATS

Capital	Guatemala City
Language	Spanish, 20+ Mayan
Currency	Quetzal, GTQ
Timezone	Central, UTC-6, no DST
Best months	November to April
Days needed	10 recommended, 6-16 flexible
Power	US plugs, Type A/B, 120V
Tap water	drink bottled or filtered
Tipping	10%, and trek and tour guides

The living Maya highlands

why the culture, not the coast, is the reason to come

Guatemala scores higher on culture than anywhere else in Central America, and it is a living culture, not a ruined one. More than half the country is Indigenous Maya, twenty-plus Mayan languages are still spoken, and market towns wear distinct handwoven traje by village. Add a chain of volcanoes you can climb and the cheapest daily costs in the region, and the trip writes itself: highlands first, jungle second, beaches barely at all. Travel it slowly, by shuttle and chicken bus, and it opens up.

Colonial Antigua

Cobbled streets and ruined convents under three volcanoes, the base for treks, Spanish schools, and the country's most famous Semana Santa processions.

Lake Atitlan

A caldera lake ringed by volcanoes and Maya villages, each with its own character, from party hostels to weaving cooperatives to yoga retreats.

The volcanoes

A wall of cones you can climb, from the short Pacaya lava walk to the overnight Acatenango trek that watches Fuego erupt across the valley.

The jungle and the north

Tikal's temples above the Peten rainforest, the pools of Semuc Champey, and a Caribbean coast at Livingston that feels like another country.



HANDWOVEN TRAJE AT CHICHICASTENANGO MARKET



FUEGO ERUPTING SEEN FROM ACATENANGO CAMP

GO DEEPER

Where Guatemala sits and how the highlands connect on the location and map page, the standout places in the most beautiful places rundown, and a passport-by-passport check on the Visa Checker tool.

02

Where to go

Colonial Antigua, the villages of Lake Atitlan, the jungle temples of Tikal, the western highlands, and the pools of Semuc Champey.

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Semuc Champey and the Verapaces	13

Antigua

colonial · base for 3-4 nights · year round



THE SANTA CATALINA ARCH AND VOLCAN DE AGUA

The colonial old capital and the country's most walkable town, cobbled and low under three volcanoes. Antigua is the base almost everyone starts from: the yellow Santa Catalina arch, ruined baroque convents, coffee farms on the slopes, and the departure point for the Acatenango and Pacaya volcano treks. It is also the main Spanish-school town and the stage for Guatemala's famous Semana Santa processions over alfombras of dyed sawdust. Two nights minimum, more if a trek or a language week is on the list.

Skip: driving here. Antigua is a walkable grid, and cars fight cobbles and one-way streets. Take the shuttle from the airport and go on foot.

Climb to the Cerro de la Cruz viewpoint early, before the haze, for the classic shot of the town under Volcan de Agua.

The Santa Catalina arch

The yellow arch framing Volcan de Agua, the town's signature view.

Ruined convents

Baroque churches shaken by old earthquakes, now open-air ruins to wander.

Volcano trek base

The departure point for the Acatenango overnight and the shorter Pacaya walk.

Semana Santa

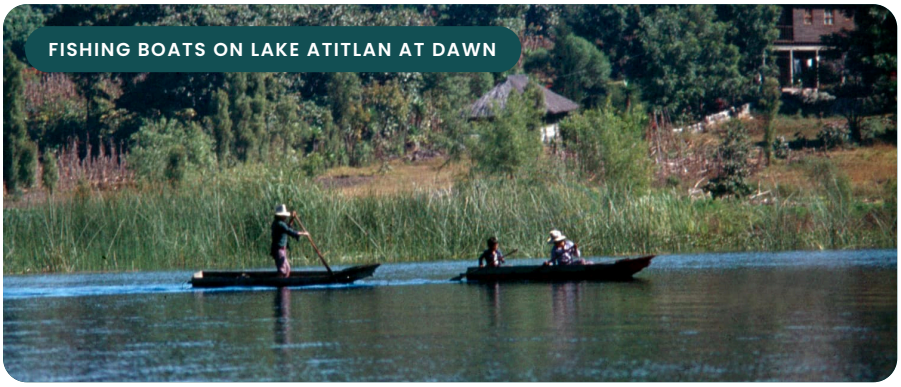
Holy Week processions over sawdust carpets, the biggest event on the calendar.

GO DEEPER

Convents, coffee, and treks in the Antigua write-up, the overnight climb in the Acatenango page, and the lava walk in the Pacaya rundown.

Lake Atitlan and its villages

lake and culture · base for 3-4 nights · year round



FISHING BOATS ON LAKE ATITLAN AT DAWN

A volcanic caldera filled with deep blue water and ringed by Maya villages, each with a wholly different pace. Panajachel is the transport hub and the entry point. Across the water, San Pedro is the backpacker party town, San Marcos the yoga-and-wellness village, San Juan the weaving-cooperative and quiet-arts stop, and Santiago the largest and most traditional Tz'utujil town. Public lancha boats hop between them for a few quetzales. Pick a base by the pace you want and day-trip the rest.

Take the public lancha, not a private boat. It circles the villages all day for a few quetzales; agree the fare before you board.

Afternoon wind, the Xocomil, kicks up chop by early afternoon. Cross the lake in the morning for the calmest ride.

Panajachel

The transport hub and market street, the gateway to every other village.

San Pedro and San Marcos

The party-and-Spanish-school town and the yoga-and-wellness village, side by side.

San Juan La Laguna

Weaving cooperatives, natural-dye workshops, and a quieter, arts-focused pace.

Santiago Atitlan

The largest and most traditional Tz'utujil town, and the shrine of Maximon.

KEEP READING The lake hub in the Panajachel write-up, the traditional town in the Santiago Atitlan page, and the weaving village in the San Juan La Laguna rundown.

photo: Wikimedia Commons

Tikal and the Peten jungle

Maya ruins · base for 1-2 nights · year round



TEMPLE I ABOVE THE GRAND PLAZA AT TIKAL

In the far north, the Peten lowlands hold the greatest Maya site in the country: Tikal, its steep temples breaking above a rainforest canopy loud with howler monkeys and toucans. It is a long way from the highlands, so most travelers fly to Flores, the pretty island town on Lake Peten Itza, and day-trip in. A sunrise entry puts you on Temple IV as the forest wakes. One full day covers the main plazas; two lets you add the smaller Yaxha site nearby.

Fly to Flores rather than take the overnight bus. The flight from Guatemala City is under an hour; the bus is a punishing ten-plus.

The sunrise tour is worth the early alarm for the wildlife and the light, but the mist often hides the far temples. Go for the atmosphere.

Tikal

The great Maya city, steep temples above a canopy of monkeys and toucans.

Temple IV at sunrise

The tallest temple, the classic dawn viewpoint over the forest and the plazas.

Flores

The colorful island town on Lake Peten Itza, the base for a Tikal visit.

Yaxha

A quieter lakeside ruin nearby, best at sunset from the top of its temples.

THE FULL PICTURE

The temples and sunrise tour in the Tikal write-up, the island base in the Flores page, and the national parks in the national parks rundown.

The western highlands

markets and mountains · base for 2-3 nights · dry season best


THE CHICHICASTENANGO MARKET STEPS

Beyond the lake, the western highlands are the deepest, most traditional part of the country and the least touristed. Chichicastenango holds the largest Indigenous market in Central America, thickest on Thursdays and Sundays. Quetzaltenango, known as Xela, is the second city and the base for the Santa Maria volcano and hot springs. Further north, Nebaj in the Ixil Triangle and the mountain town of Todos Santos Cuchumatan keep Maya highland life at its most intact. This is slow, high, cold-at-night travel for those with time.

Time Chichicastenango for a Thursday or Sunday. On other days the famous market is a fraction of its full size.

Pack a warm layer. The highlands sit above 2,000 metres and drop cold after dark, even in the dry season.

Chichicastenango

The largest Indigenous market in the region, best on Thursday and Sunday.

Quetzaltenango (Xela)

The second city, base for the Santa Maria volcano and Fuentes Georginas springs.

Nebaj and the Ixil

The Ixil Triangle, deep Maya highland culture and cloud-forest treks.

Todos Santos Cuchumatan

A remote mountain town in the Cuchumatanes, traje worn daily by the Mam Maya.

READ ON The great market in the Chichicastenango write-up, the second city in the Quetzaltenango page, and the Ixil heartland in the Nebaj rundown.

Semuc Champey and the Verapaces

jungle pools · base for 2 nights · dry season best



THE TURQUOISE TERRACED POOLS OF SEMUC CHAMPEY

In the humid Alta Verapaz, a natural limestone bridge holds a staircase of turquoise pools above a river that vanishes underneath: Semuc Champey, one of the most striking natural sights in the country. The base is the small Q'eqchi' Maya town of Lanquin, reached by a long, rough shuttle from the highlands, with river-cave candle tours and inner-tubing on the way. Coban is the regional hub and a cloud-forest gateway. This is a detour for travelers with time, and the road in is the price of admission.

Skip Semuc on a short trip. The shuttle in from Antigua or the lake is a long, bumpy haul; it earns its place only with spare days.

The pools hold their color best in the dry season. Heavy rain upstream can turn them murky for a day or two.

Semuc Champey

The terraced turquoise pools over a hidden river, the region's headline sight.

Lanquin caves

Candle-lit river-cave tours and bat flights at dusk, the base-town add-on.

Coban

The Alta Verapaz hub, coffee and cardamom country and a cloud-forest gateway.

Rio Dulce and Livingston

A jungle river to the Caribbean and the Garifuna town at its mouth, further east.

KEEP READING The pools and caves in the Semuc Champey write-up, the base town in the Lanquin page, and the Caribbean town in the Livingston rundown.

03

What to do

The two things Guatemala does better than its neighbors: climbing an erupting volcano, and stepping into a living Maya market. Then the food and the fast facts.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Volcano trekking 15

Maya markets and textiles 16

Food: the market plates 17

Fast facts before you fly 18

Volcano trekking

the Guatemala signature · half day to overnight · dry season

Few countries put an active volcano within a day's reach, and Guatemala has a whole chain of them. The trips range from a gentle afternoon on Pacaya to the punishing overnight climb of Acatenango, where the payoff is a front-row seat to Fuego erupting across the saddle. Match the trek to your fitness, book with a reputable operator, and pack for cold: the summits sit high and freeze after dark.

Acatenango overnight

The headline trek: a hard six-hour climb to a high camp, an overnight at altitude, and Fuego erupting across the valley through the night. Serious effort, huge reward.

Pacaya half-day

The accessible one: a short walk up a smaller active cone from Antigua, sometimes to cooling lava fields, marshmallows roasted on the vents included.

Santa Maria and Tajumulco

From Xela, the dawn climb of Santa Maria over the Santiaguito lava dome, and Tajumulco, the highest point in Central America, as an overnight.

Know before you go

Acatenango is genuinely demanding at altitude and cold at camp. Go with a reputable outfitter that provides gear, not the cheapest tout, and train first.

Book the Acatenango trek with an operator that supplies proper cold-weather gear and tents. The summit freezes and the wind bites through cheap kit.

Go in the dry season for the clearest eruption views. The wet months bury the summits in cloud and cancel more nights.

TREKKERS AT THE ACATENANGO HIGH CAMP



COOLING LAVA ON THE SLOPES OF PACAYA

ON THE WEBSITE

The overnight climb in the Acatenango guide, and the country's peaks ranked in the mountains and volcanoes rundown.

Maya markets and textiles

the living culture · markets and workshops · year round

The highlands run on markets, and the markets are the clearest window into living Maya culture. Each village weaves a distinct traje, so a market is a field guide to who came from where, told in color and pattern. Beyond buying, the weaving cooperatives around Lake Atitlan open the whole process, from backstrap loom to natural dye, for anyone who wants to understand what they are looking at.

Chichicastenango market

The largest in Central America, thickest on Thursdays and Sundays, a maze of textiles, masks, produce, and the incense-filled Santo Tomas church steps.

Weaving cooperatives

In San Juan La Laguna and around the lake, women's cooperatives show the backstrap loom and natural dyes, and sell direct without the middleman.

Reading the traje

The huipil blouse and its patterns identify a wearer's village and community. Buy with respect, and ask before photographing people in dress.

Maximon and folk faith

In Santiago Atitlan and Zunil, the folk saint Maximon receives cigars and liquor, a blend of Maya and Catholic ritual worth seeing respectfully.

Buy from the weaver or the cooperative, not the reseller. It pays the maker directly and the piece comes with its real story.

Always ask before photographing people, especially in traditional dress or at ceremonies. Many prefer not to be photographed at all.



A BACKSTRAP LOOM AT A LAKE COOPERATIVE

STACKED TEXTILES AT A HIGHLAND MARKET

Food: the market plates

Maya stews and market snacks · 1 to 13 USD a plate

Guatemalan food is built on maize, beans, and slow Maya stews, eaten best at market comedores rather than restaurants. It is hearty and cheap, with regional specialties worth seeking and a coffee culture to match, since much of the country's crop is grown on the volcano slopes. Prices below are per plate, market stall to comedor.



Pepian

USD 6-13 · the national dish

A dark, toasted-seed and chili stew over chicken or beef, the country's oldest signature plate.



Kak'ik

USD 6-13 · Alta Verapaz

A fiery Q'eqchi' Maya turkey soup, spiced with achiote and chili, from the Coban region.

TAMALES

Tamales

USD 1-3 · weekend staple

Steamed masa parcels in banana leaf, the Saturday-night and holiday standard across the country.



Chiles rellenos

USD 2-4 · street

Stuffed peppers battered and served in a bun, a cheap and filling street-corner meal.

TOSTADAS

Tostadas

USD 1-2 · market snack

Crisp tortillas topped with guacamole, black beans, or salsa, the classic market-stall bite.



Highland coffee

the volcano crop

Grown on the volcano slopes around Antigua and Coban, best drunk at the source.

ON THE WEBSITE

The full dish list with prices in the food and drinks rundown, and what a full day of eating costs in the budget breakdown.

Fast facts before you fly

eight things that trip up first-time visitors

WORTH KNOWING BEFORE DAY ONE

- [ ] US and EU citizens get 90 days visa-free under the CA-4 agreement, shared with Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua.
- [ ] Skip Guatemala City. Transfer straight from the airport to Antigua, about an hour, and start the trip there.
- [ ] Carry quetzales in cash. Markets, chicken buses, and lakeside villages rarely take cards, and ATMs thin out fast.
- [ ] Drink bottled or filtered water, teeth included. Reputable places use purified water and ice.
- [ ] Pack a warm layer. The highlands sit high and drop cold after dark, and volcano camps freeze.
- [ ] Take tourist shuttles between the main stops. They are safer and simpler than night chicken buses.
- [ ] Fly to Flores for Tikal rather than take the overnight bus. The flight is under an hour; the bus is brutal.
- [ ] Learn some Spanish, or take a week of it. English is thin outside the tourist towns, and it opens the highlands.

source: pack-lightly Guatemala tips dataset, captured 2026-07

04

Routes and itineraries

The highland loop on the map, a tight seven-day version of the three headline stops, a two-week version that adds the highlands and Semuc, and the tours worth booking.

IN THIS CHAPTER

The highland loop, mapped	20
7 days: Antigua, Atitlan, Tikal	21
14 days: add the highlands and Semuc	22
Tours worth booking	23

The highland loop, mapped

the three headline stops, with a flight north to Tikal

The core route stays compact in the western highlands, then jumps north by air for the jungle. Start in Antigua, shuttle to Lake Atitlan, loop back through Chichicastenango, then fly from Guatemala City to Flores for Tikal. The western highlands and Semuc Champey extend the loop for longer trips. Tourist shuttles handle every overland leg below.



THE LEGS

- [ ] Guatemala City airport to Antigua: 1h transfer
- [ ] Antigua to Lake Atitlan (Panajachel): 3h shuttle
- [ ] Atitlan to Chichicastenango: 1h30 shuttle
- [ ] Guatemala City to Flores: 1h flight, versus 10h+ overnight bus
- [ ] Antigua to Lanquin for Semuc Champey: 8h shuttle, longer trips only

7 days: Antigua, Atitlan, Tikal

the three headline stops, one flight north

The tightest trip that still hits all three set-pieces: colonial Antigua, the lake villages, and the jungle temples, with a volcano trek folded into the Antigua days. It leans on shuttles and one short flight to keep the driving down. Book the Acatenango trek and the Tikal sunrise tour ahead.

1	**Antigua** day 1-2	Colonial streets, ruined convents, Cerro de la Cruz viewpoint, and a Pacaya afternoon.
2	**Lake Atitlan** day 3-4	Shuttle to the lake, lancha-hop the villages, a weaving cooperative and a swim.
3	**Chichicastenango** day 5	Time it for the Thursday or Sunday market, then back toward Guatemala City.
4	**Flores and Tikal** day 6	Fly north, sunrise or morning tour of Tikal, an evening on the Flores island.
5	**Fly out** day 7	Flight back to the capital, connect to the international departure.

WORTH A READ

The week mapped stop by stop in the 7 day itinerary. The two-week version that adds the highlands and Semuc follows on the next page.

14 days: add the highlands and Semuc

the full loop, deeper into the culture and the pools

The complete version, for two weeks or more. It keeps the three headline stops but adds the Acatenango overnight, the deeper western highlands around Xela, and the long detour to the turquoise pools of Semuc Champey. This is the slow, cultural version of the country.

1	**Antigua and Acatenango** day 1-4	The colonial town, coffee farms, and the overnight Acatenango volcano trek.
2	**Lake Atitlan** day 5-7	Base on the lake, hop the villages, a weaving workshop and a lakeside hike.
3	**Xela and Chichicastenango** day 8-9	The second city, hot springs, and the great highland market on a market day.
4	**Semuc Champey** day 10-11	The long shuttle to Lanquin, the turquoise pools, and a candle-lit river cave.
5	**Flores and Tikal** day 12-13	North to the Peten, the great temples, and an evening on the Flores island.
6	**Fly home** day 14	Flight back to the capital and the international departure.

KEEP READING

The two-week route stop by stop in the 14 day itinerary, and the full hub for every region in this guide at pack-lightly.com/guatemala.

Tours worth booking

top-rated local operators, filtered to group trips, sorted toward backpacker prices

A few set-pieces here are worth locking ahead, mostly the volcano treks and the sunrise ruins. The cards below fill in from live, top-rated group tours once the tour data runs. Match them to the route on the previous pages.

WHAT TO BOOK AHEAD

- [ ] The Acatenango overnight trek, with a reputable gear-providing operator
- [ ] The Pacaya half-day walk from Antigua
- [ ] The Tikal sunrise or early-morning tour from Flores
- [ ] Lake Atitlan village and weaving-cooperative day tours
- [ ] Semuc Champey pools and Lanquin cave trips
- [ ] Guatemala City airport to Antigua private transfers

Live Viator tours load here once the tour data runs. Prices captured at build time, ratings from verified bookings. Some links earn Pack Lightly a commission at no extra cost.

05

When to go

The land of eternal spring stays mild all year at altitude, so the split is dry-season clarity against green-season rain, and how it hits the volcano views.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Weather, dry season, rainy season 25

Weather, dry season, rainy season

mild year round at altitude · the split is rain and clarity

The highlands earn the nickname land of eternal spring: mild days and cool nights all year at altitude, hotter in the Peten lowlands and on the coast. The real split is rain. November through April is the dry season, with the clearest volcano views and the best trekking. The green season runs May through October, with afternoon downpours and the heaviest rain in September and October, when the roads to places like Semuc get rough.

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec

best: Nov–Apr, dry, clear volcano views

shoulder: May–Aug, green, afternoon rains, fewer crowds

wettest: Sep–Oct, heavy rain, rough roads

source: pack-lightly best-travel-time dataset, captured 2026-07

Best: Nov–Apr

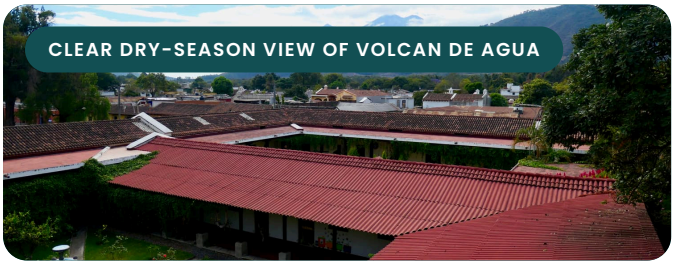
Dry, clear skies, and the best chance of a cloud-free eruption view from Acatenango. Peak season and prices.

Shoulder: May–Aug

Green and lush with afternoon downpours that clear, fewer tourists, and lower prices. Mornings are often bright.

Wettest: Sep–Oct

The heaviest rain, cloud on the volcanoes, and rough roads to Semuc. Time treks around the forecast.



CLEAR DRY-SEASON VIEW OF VOLCAN DE AGUA

GREEN-SEASON CLOUD OVER THE HIGHLANDS

06

Practical

What a day costs on the cheapest trip in the region, what to pack for altitude and jungle, and where to sleep across the highlands.

IN THIS CHAPTER

What a day really costs 27

Packing checklist 28

Where to stay across the highlands 29

What a day really costs

itemised, budget vs midrange · the cheapest trip in the region

Guatemala is the best-value country in Central America, and a careful backpacker travels it for very little. The money goes on the set-piece tours, the Acatenango trek and the Tikal flight, far more than on beds and meals. The two receipts below itemise a full day at each level.

A DAY IN GUATEMALA

* budget *

bed, hostel dorm	8-14
food, market and comedor	7-12
chicken bus or shuttle	3-8
one entry or activity	4-10
drink	1-3
TOTAL / DAY	**25-40 USD**

budget-calculator data, July 2026

A DAY IN GUATEMALA

* midrange *

bed, private room	25-45
food, restaurants	15-25
tourist shuttles	10-20
one tour or trek	20-45
drinks	5-10
TOTAL / DAY	**65-95 USD**

budget-calculator data, July 2026



The big costs are the Acatenango trek and the Tikal flight, not the daily grind. Budget those as one-off line items on top of the day rate.



Chicken buses cost a fraction of tourist shuttles, but the shuttles are safer and simpler. Mix the two by route and time of day.

06

THE FULL BREAKDOWN

Category by category detail in the budget and saving write-up, or run the numbers for your own trip length on the Trip Budget Calculator.

Packing checklist

five groups, for cold highlands and hot jungle in one trip

DOCUMENTS

- [ ] Passport valid six months, plus a proof of onward travel
- [ ] Travel insurance that covers volcano trekking and altitude
- [ ] A card that reimburses ATM fees, plus quetzales in cash
- [ ] Hotel confirmations and any pre-booked trek or Tikal tickets

HEALTH AND SUN

- [ ] High-SPF sunscreen and a hat for altitude sun
- [ ] Insect repellent for the jungle and lowland evenings
- [ ] Oral rehydration salts and a basic stomach remedy
- [ ] Any prescriptions in original packaging and a first aid kit
- [ ] A refillable filter bottle, the water is not safe from the tap

CLOTHING

- [ ] Warm layers, a fleece and a down or insulated jacket for the volcano camp
- [ ] Broken-in hiking boots for Acatenango and highland trails
- [ ] Light layers for the hot Peten jungle and the coast
- [ ] A rain layer for the green season and mountain weather
- [ ] Modest cover for churches, markets, and villages

TECH

- [ ] No adapter needed, US Type A/B plugs, 120V
- [ ] A local eSIM or roaming plan set before departure
- [ ] Headlamp for the Acatenango pre-dawn and cave tours
- [ ] Portable battery for long shuttle and trek days

TREK AND TRAIL

- [ ] Warm gloves and a beanie for the volcano summit
- [ ] A daypack and a reusable water bladder for the climb
- [ ] Quick-dry clothes for the Semuc pools and cave tubing
- [ ] Blister plasters and trekking socks for the long ascents

GO DEEPER The full packing list at the packing list page, and what to wear where in the dress code write-up.

Where to stay across the highlands

getting around · shuttles and lanchas, no rental car needed

Guatemala travels best without a car. Tourist shuttles link Antigua, the lake, and the highland towns door to door; public lanchas hop the villages of Atitlan; and a cheap domestic flight saves the brutal overland haul to Tikal. Chicken buses are the local, colorful, and very cheap option for shorter hops in daylight. Base in Antigua and on the lake for the core trip, and add the highlands or Semuc with extra days. Book Antigua and Atitlan stays early in high season and around Semana Santa.

Antigua

The colonial base for treks, Spanish schools, and the first nights of any trip. See what a room costs around town, or find the dorm scene through Hostelworld.

Lake Atitlan

Base in Panajachel for transport, or a village for the pace you want. Live prices around the lake, and Hostelworld in San Pedro for the budget end.

Flores (Tikal base)

The island town on Lake Peten Itza, the launch point for the Tikal temples. Check what a room costs on the island or browse Hostelworld.

Xela or Lanquin

The western highlands base and the Semuc Champey jump-off, for longer trips. See Quetzaltenango prices, or check Lanquin live.

Hostels, guesthouses, and lake lodges across the highlands, with free cancellation while plans are still moving.

Find Stays on Booking.com

07

Safe and smart

The tourist trail runs friendly and easy. The real risks are the capital, night travel, and the altitude, not the country score.

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Staying safe

the tourist trail is friendly; the capital and night travel need care

The tourist trail, Antigua, Lake Atitlan, the highland markets, and Tikal, runs friendly and easy, and Guatemalans are welcoming to travelers. The country score is dragged down by Guatemala City, which most visitors skip entirely, and by rural areas well off the route. The practical risks for travelers are petty theft, night road travel, and the volcano trek itself. Take tourist shuttles over night buses, keep valuables low-key, and use reputable trek operators.

Skip Guatemala City

The capital carries most of the country's risk and little to see for visitors. Transfer straight through it to Antigua on arrival and departure.

Travel by day

Take tourist shuttles over night chicken buses, and fly to Tikal rather than take the overnight road. Most risk sits in night overland travel.

The volcano and altitude

Acatenango is a real physical challenge at altitude and cold at camp. Go with a reputable operator, and do not push a summit if you feel altitude sickness.

Petty theft and scams

Keep valuables discreet on buses and at markets, agree fares before boarding, and use ATMs inside banks by day. Standard traveler sense covers it.

A TOURIST SHUTTLE ON THE ANTIGUA ROAD

A GUIDED GROUP ON THE ACATENANGO TRAIL

07

CHECK BEFORE YOU GO

Current conditions by area on the Travel Safety Map tool, required jabs in the vaccinations write-up, and coverage options in the budget and saving page.

Do and do not

five to follow, five to avoid

DO

Start in Antigua, not the capital

Transfer straight from the airport. Antigua is the walkable, safe, low base for the whole trip.

DO NOT

Take the overnight bus to Tikal

Fly to Flores instead. The flight is under an hour; the road is a brutal ten-plus at night.

DO

Book Acatenango with real gear

Use an operator that supplies tents and cold-weather kit. The summit freezes hard at night.

DO NOT

Underestimate the altitude

Acatenango tops 3,900 metres. Acclimatise, hydrate, and turn back if altitude sickness hits.

DO

Time the markets right

Chichicastenango peaks Thursday and Sunday. Plan the highland loop around a market day.

DO NOT

Photograph people without asking

Especially in traditional dress or at ceremonies. Many prefer not to be photographed at all.

DO

Buy textiles from the weaver

The cooperatives pay the maker directly and the piece comes with its real story.

DO NOT

Drink the tap water

Bottled or filtered only, teeth included. Carry a filter bottle to cut the plastic.

DO

Carry quetzales in small notes

Markets, buses, and villages are cash worlds. ATMs thin out fast off the main route.

DO NOT

Rush Semuc on a short trip

The shuttle in is a long, rough haul. Save it for a two-week trip with time to spare.

08

Tools and reference

The live tools this guide draws from, the questions readers ask most, and where every number in this edition comes from.

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A note on the links in this guide 37

Take the live tools with you

scan to open · data updates after this PDF was printed

This guide is a snapshot; the tools behind it keep updating. Scan a code or type the short URL, each one preloaded with the same Guatemala data this guide was built from.



Trip Budget Calculator

Guatemala: 28 USD/day budget, 70 midrange, 180 luxury.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/budget-calculator/



Packing List Generator

A custom list for cold volcano camps and hot jungle in one trip.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/packing-list-generator/



Best Time to Travel

Best: November to April. Month by month weather for 140+ countries.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/best-travel-time-worldmap/



Travel Safety Map

Current conditions by area, before routing through Guatemala City.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/travel-safety-map/

Frequently asked questions

the eight questions that come up most

The short answers to what readers ask before booking. Longer detail on each sits in the matching chapter.

Is Guatemala safe to travel?

The tourist trail, Antigua, Atitlan, the highlands, and Tikal, is friendly and easy. Skip Guatemala City, travel by day, and use reputable operators.

Do I need a visa?

US and EU citizens get 90 days visa-free under the CA-4 agreement, shared with Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua.

How fit do I need to be for Acatenango?

Fit enough for a hard six-hour climb to 3,900 metres with a pack. Train first, acclimatise, and pick an operator with good gear and porter options.

How many days do I need?

Seven for the three headline stops, ten to fourteen to add the western highlands, the Acatenango trek, and Semuc Champey.

Can I drink the tap water?

No. Drink bottled or filtered water, teeth included. A filter bottle cuts the cost and the plastic.

Do I need a car?

No. Tourist shuttles, public lanchas, and a cheap flight to Tikal cover the whole trip. Chicken buses handle short daytime hops.

Is it really that cheap?

Yes, the cheapest in the region. Budget from 28 USD a day. The big costs are the Acatenango trek and the Tikal flight, not the daily grind.

When is the best time to visit?

November to April for dry weather and clear volcano views. September and October are the wettest, with rough roads to Semuc.

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Tour data and prices: Viator Partner API, captured July 2026. Author portrait and brand marks: Pack Lightly.

A note on the links in this guide

disclosure and sources · why this guide is free



WRITTEN BY

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Founder of Pack Lightly. Performance marketing background, data led travel research. Every number in this guide is verified against a source listed below; if a price moves more than 15 percent, the next edition flags it.

This guide is free because some of the booking links inside it are affiliate links. When a reader books a stay, a flight, or an eSIM through one of those links, the merchant pays Pack Lightly. The reader pays the same price either way.

The pick comes before the partner. A base, a trek, or a transport option is chosen for the trip it makes, and where a partner link exists for it that link is used; where none does, the plain link still points there. The commission funds the guide, it does not choose for it.

Questions, corrections, or a place you tested that belongs in the next edition: write to hello@pack-lightly.com.

Partners linked in this edition: **Aviasales** · **Booking.com** · **Saily** · **Hostelworld** · **Stay22** · **GetYourGuide** · via **Travelpayouts**

SOURCES USED IN THIS EDITION

1. Budget figures: pack-lightly budget-calculator dataset, captured July 2026.
2. Country scores and vacation type tags: pack-lightly country-comparison tool, captured 2026-07.
3. Seasonal weather bands: pack-lightly best-travel-time dataset, captured 2026-07.
4. Food prices: pack-lightly local food and drinks dataset for Guatemala, captured 2026-07.
5. Pack Lightly Guatemala cluster pages, retrieved 2026-07: the hub · budget · food · best places.

What changed in edition 2026.07: first release on the v2 design standard for Guatemala. Not covered here: extended Pacific surf-coast routes, cross-border Copan trips, dedicated Spanish-school planning.