



FromHouses toHomes
De maisons à foyers

GUIDE TO VOLUNTEERING WITH FROM HOUSES TO HOMES CANADA/DE MAISONS A FOYERS CANADA IN GUATEMALA

We are very excited that you have chosen to volunteer with our organization!! We believe you are embarking on one of the greatest experiences of your life. To quote a past volunteer, *"It is the hardest work you will ever love."*

This short guide includes information about your volunteer week with From Houses to Homes Canada in Guatemala and some tips for making your adventure easy, safe, and more fun.

1- Volunteer Group Donations

From Houses to Homes Canada is able to do important work because of the support from our volunteers. All volunteers ages 14 and over making a trip to build a home are required to make a volunteer donation of at \$500.00. It is a CRA requirement that volunteers wanting a deductible tax receipt for their travel and accommodation must make this volunteer donation to the organization as proof that it is in fact a humanitarian trip and not merely a holiday. Groups traveling to Guatemala to build a home must ensure that they have raised and donated the costs of the house build to From Houses to Homes Canada so that funds can be transferred and materials arranged prior to their arrival.

2- Arriving at the Guatemala International Airport in Guatemala City

- Customs

Please be sure to fill out the customs form provided by the flight attendants while still on board. The flight attendants will help you with any questions you may have. It'll make your exit through Customs a lot smoother. However, if you do forget to take a form, don't worry! There are tables with more forms and pens in several locations in the airport as you head to the Customs Area. After you pass through the passport control booth, you will proceed to baggage claim. Every passenger must complete a form even when traveling with someone from the same household.

- Transportation from Airport

Once you clear customs, exit the airport. If you have provided us with your arrival times, a driver will be waiting for you with a sign that says FROM HOUSES TO HOMES or De CASAS A HOGARES.

Forgot to book transportation?

If you cannot find your driver or you have not made plans for a pick-up, go back into the airport and book transportation just before the airport exit. Never accept unsolicited rides outside the airport. Let the driver know the name and address of your hotel and he will drop you off at your door.

3- Changing Currency

- Prior to trip

You may want to inform your bank know you are traveling to Guatemala prior to your departure! When you give them the dates that you will be in Guatemala we suggest you add a day or two at the beginning and end of your trip in case of travel delays.

- Quick Facts

The currency in Guatemala is called Quetzales (pronounced: ket-za-lays), also referred to as "Q" for short.

The exchange rate has been running around 7.0-7.4 Q per \$1USD.

- Withdrawing Money

Airport-Avoid exchanging money at the airport. You will be approached by people at the numerous money exchange booths as you head to the Customs area. The airport exchange rates are extremely expensive. Change only a minimum amount at the airport if necessary. If you have made transportation arrangements with FHTH you will not need Quetzales until after you are settled in to your hotel/hostel or family stay. However, a thank you to the driver in the form of a tip is always appreciated.

Banks- Hard currency can be exchanged at any bank in and around Antigua. And fortunately, banks are open 7 days a week! You must have your passport and another form of photo ID when exchanging money at the bank.

ATMS- This is the most preferred method. ATMS are located all around the city, it will not be difficult for you to find one. Here you'll be able to withdrawal cash from your checking account directly.

Can I just use my debit/credit cards? Most places will take your Canadian credit cards, but not all. Make yourself aware of any extra fees they may charge. We recommend always having some Q in your possession.

What about US dollars? Some restaurants and hotels in Antigua will take US dollars but the exchange rates may be considerably lower.

4- Health Care Considerations

- Consult your doctor before your trip:
 - Check with your MD about necessary immunizations.
 - Make sure you have an updated Tetanus shot
 - Make sure you know how your health insurance works outside Canada.

Some travelers consider the benefits of travel insurance as part of your Guatemala travel planning. There are insurance plans available that cover theft, loss or medical problems. You can do some research of different plans online prior to your trip.

For those traveling from the Renfrew County, there is a travel clinic at Aikenheads Pharmacy in Renfrew. Appointments can be made on line.

- Clinics

There are many health care facilities and pharmacies located around Antigua that can prescribe you medication as needed. If you encounter any health issues while on the work site, inform the FHTH builders working with you immediately. They will be able to make arrangements for transportation to the most appropriate facility!

Hermano Pedro Hospital is a private medical facility in Antigua. There are additional hospitals in Guatemala City approximately 1 hour drive from Antigua.

5- A Word About Safety

Just like areas in every city, Guatemala has its places that you are advised not to go to. With that said, Antigua is considered one of the *safest* cities in Guatemala. However, like in any city, it is still important to be careful.

Here are some tips:

- Always be aware of your surroundings, especially at night.
- Do not carry large sums of cash or valuables.
- Bring a color copy of your passport and keep it separate from the original
- Use reputable travel agencies to book travel around the country.

As in any foreign country, be respectful of the culture and local customs.

6- House Building Information

We will reach out to your group leader prior to your trip with instructions for where to meet Monday morning. Volunteers are taken to and from the worksite by the staff of de Casas a Hogares. Most communities we work in are within 30-40 minutes of Antigua. The workday usually ends at approximately 4pm.

You will build under the supervision of masons employed by De Casa a Hogares. While some of the builders are quite proficient in English, most only speak a little English. However, they are all very eager to practice. It's even a great opportunity for you to practice your Spanish as well!

Notes about the worksite:

- Lunch—you will need to bring lunch to the worksite each day. You can purchase pre-made sandwiches at several restaurants around Central Park. Café Condesa and Sobe Rico are some favorites! Or you can make your own lunch. La Bodegona is a grocery store, about three blocks away from the Park. If you are staying with a host family, they may pack you a lunch.

- Water—Filtered bottled water is provided at the worksite. Please bring a reusable bottle you can refill. Do not drink any water that the family may offer you; as it is most likely contaminated.
- Ice Cream—Often times there is an ice cream truck that comes through the town. Although it may sound refreshing, we suggest you do not eat it as it is made from unfiltered water.
- Do not eat any raw vegetables.

*** The family you are building for may offer to prepare you a meal or offer you a drink. Please be careful with what you eat and only drink the bottled water we provide for you on the worksite. If you have any hesitations, ask one of the builders if it is something you can eat. You can purchase sealed bottled water at the grocery store.

The building schedule is as follows:

Monday: Dig foundation and build a row of blocks.

Tuesday /Wednesday: Build 6 rows of block each day.

Thursday morning: This is an easier build day, so we take all volunteers to visit Escuela Kemna'oj, the school built and operated by From Houses to Homes Guatemala. When you return to the worksite, the task for the day will be to pour the floor.

Friday morning: While volunteers are painting the inside and outside of the home, our men will install the door, window, and roof. A dedication ceremony will be held at noon when you will present the keys to your family's new home.

7- What to bring for the week of building

Clothing

- Work clothes—anything you are comfortable in and not afraid to get dirty or get paint or concrete on.
 - Workout clothes, cargo shorts/capris
 - Short sleeve t-shirts
- Light jacket or sweater or sweatshirt
- Poncho or light rain coat

- Comfortable close-toed shoes for walking and working (avoid sandals, we recommend sneakers or boots)
- Waterproof work gloves (very important)

When you're not working, everyday dress is very casual.

You can have your laundry done during your stay. There are numerous wash/dry/fold laundries in Antigua and many hotels provide this service.

Other items not to forget

- Backpack or other bag to carry your stuff to the worksite or on daytrips
- Sunscreen
- Sunglasses
- Purell or other non-water antibacterial soap
- Travel toilet paper for the worksite - please note toilet paper does not get flushed; this is a very important septic issue. There will be trashcans next to the toilet.
- Bug Spray with DEET
- Reusable water bottle

Additional Information

Guatemala Climate: Guatemala is known for its “eternal spring” climate. While it may be warm or hot during the day, the temperature does drop at night.

Rainy season in Guatemala runs from May—October, so we advise that you don't leave home without a rain coat or poncho.

Electricity: Outlets are just like ours! No need to pack adapters 😊

Recreational Excursions: If you're looking to plan a trip around the area, past volunteers recommend the following guides.

- Elizabeth Bell Tours <http://www.aroundantigua.com/travel/antiguatours.htm>
- O.X. Outdoor Excursions <http://www.oxexpeditions.com>

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