The Great Guatemalan Challenge
Jan. 5-12, 2014

More than a vacation.
Introduction

More than a vacation, the Great Guatemalan Challenge is an affordable, off-the-grid adventure for the spiritually minded traveler. Over eight days in January, we’ll find ourselves hiking an active volcano, exploring Spanish and Mayan villages, sleeping in bunks and beds in awesome hostels and mountain lodges, and coming together as a group as we navigate the challenges of backpacking in a foreign country. Along the way, we’ll meet with community leaders devoted to alleviating poverty in some of Guatemala’s poorest communities, and though we’ll be traveling as a group, there will be plenty of alone time for prayer, reflection, journaling and just plain rest as we all take in the meaning of our experiences. The trip is limited to 10 participants.

For this trip to be a success, you’ll need an open mind, a positive attitude, moderate physical fitness, a willingness to step outside of your comfort zone and roll with the unexpected. You must be 21 or older and possess an ability to work well in a team atmosphere.

This is no resort getaway! So leave your cell phone and fancy camera at home, and come on an adventure that will likely leave none of us unchanged.

Packing List

Everything you bring on this trip must fit in a backpack. Feel free to check your backpack in when we arrive at the airport. You will then pick it up when we land in Guatemala City. (Delta allows one free checked bag per person.) Alternatively, you can carry your backpack on the flight, but in this case you’ll have to ensure your bag is carry-on size and that you meet the 3-1-1 rule set by TSA.

Guatemala’s electrical outlets meet United States standards. So if you bring a battery charger or something similar, it should work.

Suggested Packing List (including what you wear to the airport)

- Passport and $250 (minimum) for food during the trip
- Xerox copy of your passport (in case you lose your original while abroad)
- Spending money if you plan to buy souvenirs or other things
- Any medications you’re taking and any medical supplies you’ll need (for example, an inhaler)
- Flight confirmation paperwork
- Driver’s license (just for ID)
- Money/passport belt (the kind that goes under your clothes)
- Cheap watch
- Sneakers or hiking boots

- Flip flops or sandals
- Two pairs of long pants
- Two pairs of shorts
- Belt
- Three t-shirts or tank tops
- One sweater/sweatshirt and one hoodie (clothes you can layer, so you don’t need a big coat)
- Light windbreaker or raincoat (just one of those garbage bag type raincoats would be fine)
- Six pairs of underwear, six pairs of socks, one pair of long underwear
- Winter hat and summer hat (for protection from sun)
- Garbage bag for dirty laundry
- Swimsuit, sun glasses — plenty of sunscreen
- Soap, shampoo, toiletries (toothbrush, paste, razor, shaving cream)
- Bath towel
- Small flashlight or headlamp
- Small padlock
- Reusable water bottle (we’ll have access to bottled water throughout the trip)
- Notebook and a few pens
- Pocket-sized camera (a digital pocket camera)
- Bug spray
- A few energy snacks (power bars or equivalent in case you run low on energy during a hike)
- A book for downtime in the hostel/lodge

What to Leave at Home

- Sleeping bag
- Suitcase (you’ll need a backpack)
- Expensive jewelry
- Expensive watch
- Winter coat
- Anything with military or government or otherwise controversial symbolism on it (including camouflage pants, shorts, hats)
Here's the plan, and while it's been methodically organized, we might find ourselves making small changes to it as the trip unfolds. This is Central America, after all. Local festivals (which we'll try to attend) and organized protests (which we won't), along with the weather, are just a few of the factors that might cause us to change it up a bit, all in an attempt to offer you a meaningful, safe adventure.

**Sunday, Jan. 5**
We'll catch the sunrise flight from Buffalo to Guatemala City by way of Atlanta, then hop a bus to the Spanish colonial city of Antigua, where we'll stay for three nights at a backpacker favorite, El Hostal. Dormitory sleeping arrangements, breakfast and wifi included.

**Monday, Jan. 6**
A local guide will take us on a morning walk of Antigua, including stops at City Hall Palace, the Palace of the Captain's General, and the Cathedral and its ruins. The tour will focus on the city's history, culture and restoration efforts. In the afternoon, you'll be free to explore the city in smaller groups, visit the churches and shops, exchange money, and just stretch your travel legs. We'll all meet back at the hostel for dinner, so a stop at one of Antigua's many markets is essential.

**Tuesday, Jan. 7**
By way of private shuttle, we'll spend the morning visiting nearby villages, including the museum at the Convent/Archbishop's Palace in San Juan del Obispo, daily life in San Pedro las Huertas, and the Mayan town of San Antonio Aguas Calientes, known for its authentic Mayan textiles. In the afternoon, we'll hike the lush forest and mystical moonscape of Pacaya, an active volcano that rises to an elevation of 8,373 feet. If we're lucky, we'll have a chance to roast marshmallows over rocks heated by...
underground lava and experience incredible “above the clouds” views of the surrounding highlands. Be advised: Pacaya is a 2.5-hour (roundtrip), Class II hike; at times, the steep ascent will require you to use your hands to steady yourself.

**Wednesday, Jan. 8**
We’ll make the three-hour journey from Antigua to Lake Atitlan by private shuttle, hop a boat to Tzununa, a remote Mayan village on the northern shore and settle into the beautiful Lomas de Tzununa by noon. You’ll have the afternoon to yourself. Double occupancy sleeping arrangements and Internet available.

**Thursday, Jan. 9**
After a briefing on Tzununa, one of the poorest communities on Lake Atitlan, we’ll be led on a walking tour of the village by one of its primary benefactors, Thierry Delrue, a retired UNICEF officer who was part of the team responsible for implementing the UN Peace Accord in Guatemala after the civil war. Thierry and his wife, Maria Castells-Arrosa, continue to support primary education for the children of Tzununa through fundraising, construction and liaison work with other organizations. In the afternoon, we’ll hop a boat with Thierry to the other side of the lake and hike through the Mayan villages of San Juan and San Pablo and the ever-gringo San Pedro la Laguna.

**Friday, Jan. 10**
Led by Thierry or Maria, we’ll spend the morning hiking to the remote Mayan village of Santa Cruz la Laguna, enjoying panoramic views of Lake Atitlan along the way. We’ll stop for lunch and some downtime in Santa Cruz before beginning the hike back. Be advised: This is a four-hour (roundtrip), Class II hike that includes sections of mountainous terrain with steep vertical drops. This hike requires concentration and, at times, you will need to use your hands to steady yourself.

**Saturday, Jan. 11**
We’ll make the three-hour journey from Lake Atitlan back to Antigua by private shuttle and settle in at Earth Lodge, a mountain ecolodge that doubles as an avocado farm. In the afternoon, we’ll hike to the nearby Guatemalan village of El Hato and learn about the various educational initiatives underway to improve the lives of El Hato’s children. Dormitory and double occupancy sleeping arrangements and Internet available.

**Sunday, Jan. 12**
We’ll say goodbye to Earth Lodge in the early morning and catch a shuttle to the airport in Guatemala City for our flight back to the States, hopefully with the smell of campfire still on our clothes.