

THINGS TO KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Season: The paddling season is from June to January, but varies according to region. The rainiest months are September and October. On the Pacific side, June is usually good and July and August are okay. Mid-November through January is reserved for the northern mountains and jungles. When it rains, it pours. One simple rule usually suffices to avoid trouble: Put-in early. Most heavy rains start late in the afternoon.

¿Habla español? A basic familiarity with Spanish is essential if you're traveling on Guatemalan back roads. But there's no need to be intimidated; Guatemalans are very tolerant of errors. Consider spending your first week in Guatemala taking advantage of the country's famous and cheap Spanish schools. If you're already fluent don't think you can communicate with everyone: The first language for most rural Guatemalans is one of 20 Mayan dialects.

Shuttles: Don't bother bringing your own shuttle driver; you can find one easily in any small town. Ask at the hotels for a trusted friend or family member.

Don't drink the water: Most Guatemalan rivers are polluted to some extent by agricultural chemicals and untreated sewage. Noseplugs and earplugs are prudent precautions.

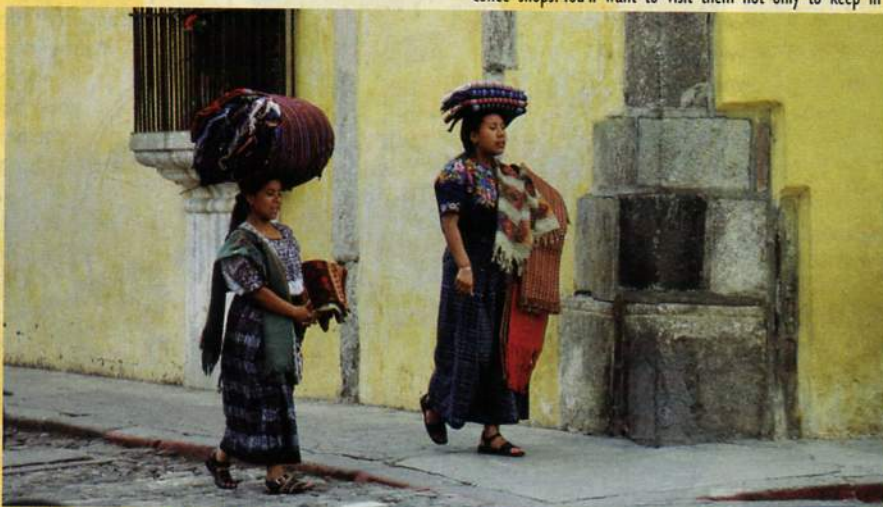
Put away your river knife: Guatemala is a poor country with serious social problems

and a violent recent past. The two most common crimes are gang violence and commuter bus robberies. Fortunately tourists are not overly targeted, and the countryside is relatively safe. Safeguarding your car and valuables will be your main concern, so don't leave your car unattended at the take-out or park overnight on city streets.

Café anyone? Guatemala is famous for its coffee, but Internet cafes vastly outnumber the coffee shops. You'll want to visit them not only to keep in touch with home, but with the flows. A number of on-line gauges exist for rivers in Guatemala and neighboring countries, brought to you courtesy of the USGS. Check them out at <http://pr.water.usgs.gov>.

Getting around: You'll either fly or drive down from the States (three days from Texas). Car rental and gas prices are marginally higher than in the United States. If you have more time and energy than money, consider bussing it. The busses are cheap and always have place above or below for your kayak. Almost anywhere you need to go is on a bus route, and if it's not, there will be a shared pickup truck going your way.

Local contacts: Currently there are no guided kayak tours in Guatemala, or local clubs. Visiting kayakers can contact me directly for more information (GregSchwendinger@yahoo.com). Rafters, or those looking for raft support, can try Maya Expeditions (www.mayaexpeditions.com) or Guatemala Unlimited (www.guatemalaunlimited.com), both founded by expatriate gringo guides.



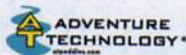
KAYAKS AND CULTURE GUATEMALA'S INDIGENOUS CULTURE AUGMENTS THE RIVER EXPERIENCE.

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